



Bay Area Monitor

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Bay Trail Strides into 25th Year

By Alec MacDonald

What's a more impressive landmark: 25 years or 335 miles? This July, the San Francisco Bay Trail will have reached both.

A quarter century under development, the expansive route now stands two-thirds complete, having accrued a total mileage that could get you from San Jose to Los Angeles, but with much nicer views. The pedestrian and bicycle pathway connects scenic spots along the shoreline of San Francisco and San Pablo bays, with the aim of eventually forming a continuous ring around the water. Once the project attains its final length of 500 miles, it will wind its way uninterrupted through all nine of the region's counties, linking together 47 cities and providing access to beaches, marinas, parks, and countless other points of interest.

With so many major stretches now in place, filling in the rest has become a campaign of increments. Some of the project's most recent steps forward have been made in Richmond, which already boasts the most Bay Trail miles (32) of any municipality. In April, the city served as venue for both a ceremonial trail groundbreaking at Breuner Marsh and a press conference for the Chevron Corporation's donation of a trail easement along Point Molate. Addressing the crowd at the latter, the Bay Trail Project's Laura Thompson said, "We're counting mile by mile, section by section." The nonprofit organization's project manager elaborated that "we are down to the difficult gaps now. We've done everything



This segment of shoreline along Richmond's Point Molate was recently donated for incorporation into the Bay Trail.

photo by Alec MacDonald

that's easy, we're down to the tough ones, so working together and finding creative ways to complete sections of the trail is really what it's all about."

Thompson later told the *Monitor* that navigating around industrial sites represents one challenge to finishing the project. However, cooperative solutions can allow hikers and heavy machinery to coexist harmoniously — as in Richmond, where one prominent piece of the Bay Trail circumvents a recycling facility and wastewater treatment ponds. According to Thompson, these sorts of arrangements require "striking a balance between providing the public with shoreline access and not impacting operations."

In addition to the work of industry, trail planners must also take care not to disrupt more natural waterfront activities. For years, ecologists have been leading efforts throughout the region to restore tidal wetlands, which the Bay Trail cannot simply plow through. As examples of two such sensitive places, Thompson offered the Napa-Sonoma Marshes and the South Bay Salt Ponds. For these and other locations, a wide range of stakeholders continues to debate strategies for rebuilding and managing habitat. Within their dialogue, how

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to incorporate the Bay Trail remains an open and intricate question.

With respect to related environmental concerns, rising sea levels further complicate the task of implementing the trail. Thompson reported that the project has already experienced the

effects of climate change, with some sections having endured flooding.

She noted that the Bay Area at large needs to prepare for similar inundation, with encroaching waters threatening all manner of coastal infrastructure, such as highways, schools, and

airports. “The region has some tough decisions to make, and there’s a lot of discussion going on about that,” she said, adding, “We’re participating in these conversations.” Regardless, she contended, “What we want to do is preserve the Bay Trail in its place along

BLITZING THE BIOME: NATURE LOVERS TEAM UP FOR ECOLOGICAL INVENTORIES

On a recent Saturday morning, small platoons of explorers could be seen poking around the vegetation on the slopes of Mount Tamalpais. Studying the ground intently, they bustled about with clipboards and cameras, occasionally crouching down together into conference over some curiosity or another.

Although acting as volunteers, they had a serious and scientific goal: documenting and collecting plant life within the mountain’s watershed as part of a three-year, 900-species inventory led by the Marin Municipal Water District and the California Academy of Sciences. Recruiting laypeople to the endeavor has allowed coordinators to cover more ground in less time, while still yielding plenty of valid ecological data. And as an added benefit, the project has promoted greater environmental awareness among community members, further encouraging them to embrace stewardship of nature.

Dubbed “bioblitzes” by organizers, these kinds of participatory surveying expeditions have been catching on across the Bay Area. They’ve not only occurred on Mount Tamalpais, but also in places such as Palo Alto’s Baylands Nature Preserve, Oakland’s Lake Merritt, the East Bay Regional Park District’s Sunol Regional Wilderness and Tilden Nature Area, San Mateo’s Laurelwood Park, San Francisco’s McLaren Park and Fort Funston National Park, and several sites within the Golden Gate National Recreation Area.

The California Academy of Sciences has had a hand in many of these bioblitzes, frequently collaborating with the group Nerds for Nature to put them on, often with extra help from local governments and outdoors associations. According to



Volunteers surveying biodiversity on Mount Tamalpais.

photo by Alec MacDonald

the academy’s Alison Young, “These partnerships are a huge part of what makes this successful.”

Another integral piece of the bioblitz puzzle comes from iNaturalist.org, which allows participants to easily upload digital specimen photographs into an online global database. Through this technology, researchers the world over can review the findings of amateur investigators here in the Bay Area. Ultimately, such information sharing should aid in wildlife conservation efforts.

“There’s absolutely no way we can protect things if we don’t know what we have,” Young said. “We really need to know what we have, where it exists, and where to protect it.”

Visit www.calacademy.org/science/citizen_science to learn more.

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the shoreline no matter what happens with sea level rise.” This could mean any number of configurations, like the trail running atop a levee, or along new, closer waterfront edges formed by advancing tides.

With all of the various obstacles facing the project, hugging the coast inseparably the whole way around the Bay just isn't possible, and planners have made some compromises. Thompson explained that a few sections jog inland and tap into an adjacent bicycle network, as in West Oakland, where the route joins Mandela Parkway for a spell.

Reliance on such networks symbolizes how the Bay Trail has in a broader sense enjoyed the backing of bicycle advocates; Thompson listed the region's bicycle coalitions among the invaluable supporters who have helped move the project forward. She also gave credit to outdoor enthusiast groups such as the Sierra Club, Greenbelt Alliance, and the Trails for Richmond Action Committee, along with fiscal sponsors like the California Coastal Conservancy and the Metropolitan Transportation Commission.

Sustaining collaborative relationships with these and other entities should allow the Bay Trail to keep moving forward. Thompson expressed particular satisfaction at having witnessed so many people contribute time, energy, and resources to this cause during her 15-year tenure on the project. Although she estimated that the trail has at least another decade to go before anyone can take a literal victory lap around the finished product, she said, “I have all the faith in those partnerships that we'll see it through to the end.” ❖

Alec MacDonald is the editor of the Bay Area Monitor.

RECENT AND UPCOMING BAY TRAIL SPECIAL EVENTS

April 22 - Exhibition opening of *Walking the Bay Trail: A Photo Journal* by Kurt Schwabe in Oakland City Hall (more online at www.walkingthebaytrail.com).

May 16 - Conferral of the 2014 Planning Landmark Award of Excellence from the northern section of the American Planning Association's California chapter.

May 24 - Release of the first Bay Trail smartphone audio tour at an anniversary celebration by the Rosie the Riveter Visitor Education Center in Richmond.

June 26 - New trail section ribbon-cutting and release of the second Bay Trail smartphone audio tour at Hamilton Wetlands Restoration Project in Novato.

Fall 2014 - Ceremonial opening for a segment of the Carquinez Strait Scenic Loop Trail; release of smartphone audio tours in the South Bay near Alviso and along the Napa River in American Canyon.

For more event information and updates, visit www.baytrail.org/25years.html.

