

Endangered Watershed

Whole Life Times, September 2, 2004 by James Carsey

If “old Iron Eyes” Cody were around today, he certainly would shed a tear for the Santa Clara River. Southern California’s last natural, free-flowing river is slowly deteriorating, and as a multitude of new housing developments appear on its banks, the plants and animals that call it home are in jeopardy.

Unlike the Los Angeles and San Gabriel rivers, which are almost entirely lined with concrete, the 100-mile-long Santa Clara, which runs from the desert to the ocean, is concrete-lined only in Santa Clarita. The concreting, grading and filling processes associated with building housing developments and roadways are disturbing the ecosystem, increasing downstream erosion and adding to run-off pollution. Flood plains, which are supposed to remain unobstructed, are being exploited. The suburbanization of the river proximity has local environmentalists furious and some biologists extremely worried.

Area environmentalists like Teresa Savaikie partially blame the demise of the Santa Clara on mega housing developments built by Newhall Land. While Newhall’s Web site boasts of commitment to the environment and stewardship of the land, their environmental track record since the 1990s has had some serious infractions: Clean Water Act violations; illegally concreting a portion of a nearby creek and the river; digging up major tributaries; and perhaps the most disturbing, constructing 30-foot electronic noisemakers to scare the endangered songbird, least bell’s vireo, and keep them from nesting on two of its construction sites are just a few of the violations Newhall Land has had to answer to over the years.

“Where do you draw the line in the sand?” asked an impassioned Savaikie as she pointed towards a dried-up riverbed. “This is the last living watershed in Southern California.”

Environmental activists are not the only group that’s concerned. Native Americans of the Chumash Nation have dwelt along its banks for over 12,000 years. Mati Waiya, a Chumash priest and shaman, said the natural resources along the river are of the utmost importance for the survival of his people’s heritage.