

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The creation of the San Diego River Park is an unprecedented opportunity to take the first steps toward reconnecting the San Diego region with its namesake waterway. The experience of nature and city will be joined together in the San Diego River Park system, creating a natural corridor within the urban milieu. Like San Diego's other great parks-- Balboa, Mission Trails and Mission Bay—the San Diego River Park will provide a natural day-to-day life of the city: a place of the city rather than a place apart from the city. The City of San Diego is at the forefront of the River Park effort, with guidance from the San Diego River Park Foundation and support from the San Diego River Coalition, the San Diego River Conservancy, the San Diego River Park Alliance, and the people and members of interested organizations who live within the watershed. The San Diego River Park Master Plan envisions a waterway that is healthy, accessible to the public and active with wildlife. The plan provides guidance on how the San Diego River can reassert itself as the focus of the river valley and become an asset to the community.

1.1 MASTER PLAN ORIGINS

The San Diego River is severely altered and constrained by mining, flood control and increasing development pressure. Commercial, residential and industrial uses have expanded in the valley floor, encroaching on the river's edge. Although mining activities are being phased out of the river valley, flood control and development pressure remain constant issues. These conflicting needs in the river valley have not only compromised the integrity of the river and the wildlife habitat it supports, but also the value of the river as a community resource.

The establishment of the San Diego River Park can reverse this trend; it will return the river to the people, and integrate the river valley into the life and landscape of San Diego.

KEY PLAYERS

San Diego River Park Foundation

The Foundation is a 501 (c) (3) non-profit organization that is the host and chair of the San Diego River Coalition meetings. It acts in the capacity of a resource to the numerous groups working to establish the San Diego River Park and to the community in general. It is a central repository and clearinghouse for information and maintains the www.sandiegoriver.org website.

San Diego River Coalition

The mission of the San Diego River Coalition is to preserve and enhance the San Diego River, its watershed, and its natural, cultural, and recreational resources. This coalition of non-governmental organizations acts as the Citizens' Advisory Committee for the San Diego River Park. The coalition holds public meetings to discuss progress and potential projects with many of the governmental and quasi-governmental entities working on river issues with active citizen participation.

As the water and the rich alluvial floodplain drew the Kumeyaay people to the valley thousands of years ago, a healthy riparian environment interspersed with trails, parks and open space, all united by a flowing, clean river, will draw the people of the San Diego region back to the river.

The river park will be composed of a string of parks linked by open space, pathways, and green corridors: a multi-layered system that will serve a variety of needs, offering recreational, environmental and habitat benefits. This system of interconnected parks has proven successful across the nation, such as Minneapolis' Chain of Lakes, Boston's Emerald Necklace and Esplanade, and Denver's Park and Parkway system.

The San Diego River Park includes design guidelines that seek to highlight San Diego's coastal location by enhancing the ocean edge that has historically defined the city and extending this character inland, transitioning to the upland character of Mission Trails Regional Park. As the plan is implemented, people will be able to see and interpret the river's natural transitions as it flows from mountain to canyon to ocean, making the river processes visible and accessible to all visitors. For the plan's vision to be fully implemented, attention must be given to areas beyond the bounds of the city and this study area so that the health of the entire watershed system, including the canyons and creeks that are tributaries to the San Diego River, is addressed. The efforts to clean the river and create habitat connectivity and trail continuity must consider all of the areas that link to it and all waters that flow into it.

The creation of the San Diego River Park is the culmination of many years of effort, discussion by dedicated members of surrounding communities and governmental and quasi-governmental organizations. The concept of preserving the river valley as a dedicated and protected open space first generated discussion in 1975 when Kevin Lynch published 'Temporary Paradise, A Look at the Special Landscape of the San Diego Region'.

San Diego River Conservancy

The conservancy's nine-member governing board consists of both state and local representatives. The board's diversity reflects its commitment to conserve an area of statewide significance. The San Diego River Conservancy is one of nine California conservancies. It was established by California Legislature (AB 2156, Kehoe) to preserve, restore, and enhance the San Diego River Area. The conservancy is an independent, non-regulatory organization within the Resource Agency and maintains the www.sdrc.ca.gov web site.

San Diego River Park Alliance (Inactive)

Formed and chaired by Mayor Dick Murphy, this organization addressed policy issues relative to the establishment of the San Diego River Park. Members of the alliance included local, state and federal elected officials, the Executive Director of the San Diego River Park Foundation, and Helix Water District, which has significant land holdings along the San Diego River.

This report reflected the author's observations of the regional landscape and laid the groundwork to begin thinking of a long-term vision and plan for the river valley.

In 2001, The San Diego River Park Foundation was formed to coordinate the efforts of the many community groups and other organizations dedicated to the San Diego River and to work toward making the San Diego River Park a reality. A community-based, grassroots non-profit organization, the foundation provides organizational and financial support for projects that will help to establish this river park. The foundation works with local groups to encourage stewardship of the riparian environment and supports projects that will restore and enhance the river, provide community facilities, and create opportunities for citizens to learn about the rich history of the San Diego River Valley. Additional background information is provided in Appendix A.



Select Committee on Parks & River Restoration (Inactive)

Chaired by Assembly Member Christine Kehoe, this group included other members of the California Assembly interested in park and river issues. The Committee studied how the State of California could best assist with issues related to the San Diego River.

San Diego River Watershed Workgroup

A County-led workgroup, this body includes interested individuals, organizations, and agencies who are working to develop a management plan for the San Diego River Watershed. Although the workgroup's efforts are separate and distinct from the San Diego River Park, this group will incorporate the San Diego River Park into its plans.

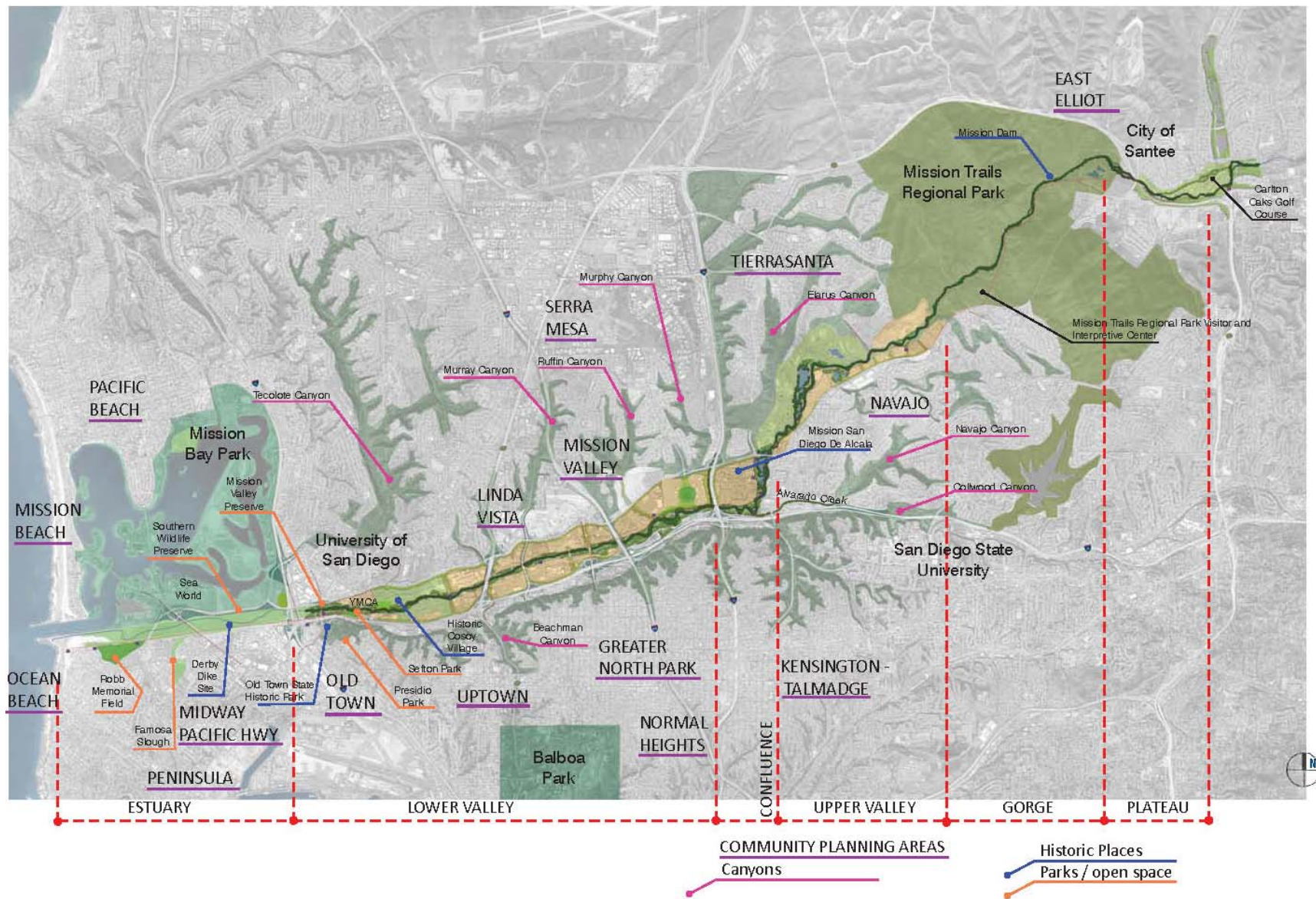


Figure 1. City of San Diego Context

1.2 MASTER PLAN PLANNING PROCESS AND PUBLIC INPUT

The City of San Diego initiated a nine-month study in 2003 to prepare a master plan for the San Diego River within the San Diego city limits. An important goal of the planning process was to engage the public and build upon the momentum and enthusiasm generated by the Conceptual Plan that was prepared in 2001 by the public and graduate students from California State Polytechnic University at Pomona. Central to this Master Plan effort were monthly meetings and workshops with the San Diego River Coalition; these meetings were advertised and open to the public and well-attended by community members. In addition, two public workshops and two public meetings invited broader community input confirming key issues, exploring planning options and drafting recommendations. Additional background information on the public input process is included as Appendix A.



Citizen Advisory Committee Public Workshop

1.3 PLANNING AREA

The master plan focuses on the 17.5-mile section of the San Diego River within the boundaries of the City of San Diego extending from the Pacific Ocean to the city limits shared with the City of Santee. The planning area is defined as a corridor extending one-half mile on each side of the river for the entire 17.5 miles. This corridor is consistent with the planning area defined by the San Diego River Conservancy to where state funding can be applied. However, the area of interest and influence extends well beyond this one-mile corridor. To be comprehensive, the master plan must consider the adjacent areas of influence. The planning area relates to the topography of the river valley, its adjacent canyons and the remaining open space of the uplands. Tecolote Canyon, Murphy Canyon, Murray Canyon, Ruffin Canyon, Alvarado Canyon and Navajo Canyon are areas that offer significant potential to substantially improve connections between the canyons and the San Diego River Valley.

The planning area contains two major parks, Mission Bay Park and Mission Trails Regional Park. These resource-based parks have significance not only to the city, but to the region and beyond, and can be linked by the San Diego River Park. The resulting context is an urban river corridor framed by the natural estuary of Mission Bay Park and the natural upland character of Mission Trails Regional Park.

One of the great challenges of creating the San Diego River Park lies in the fact that much of the land along the river is in private ownership. It is critical that efforts are made to work with the owners of these properties to open the river corridor to public access, either through acquisition of key parcels, or by establishing public access easements, and in turn, create or increase economic value for their private property. The river floodway, the area that has historically experienced periodic flooding, is of particular importance as it provides water quality buffer, habitat, and recreational space. Additionally, a large amount of land adjacent to the river lies within highway, street and utility rights-of-way. This land, often considered 'left-over' and factored out of the overall landscape equation, offers further opportunities to increase habitat and landscape connections.

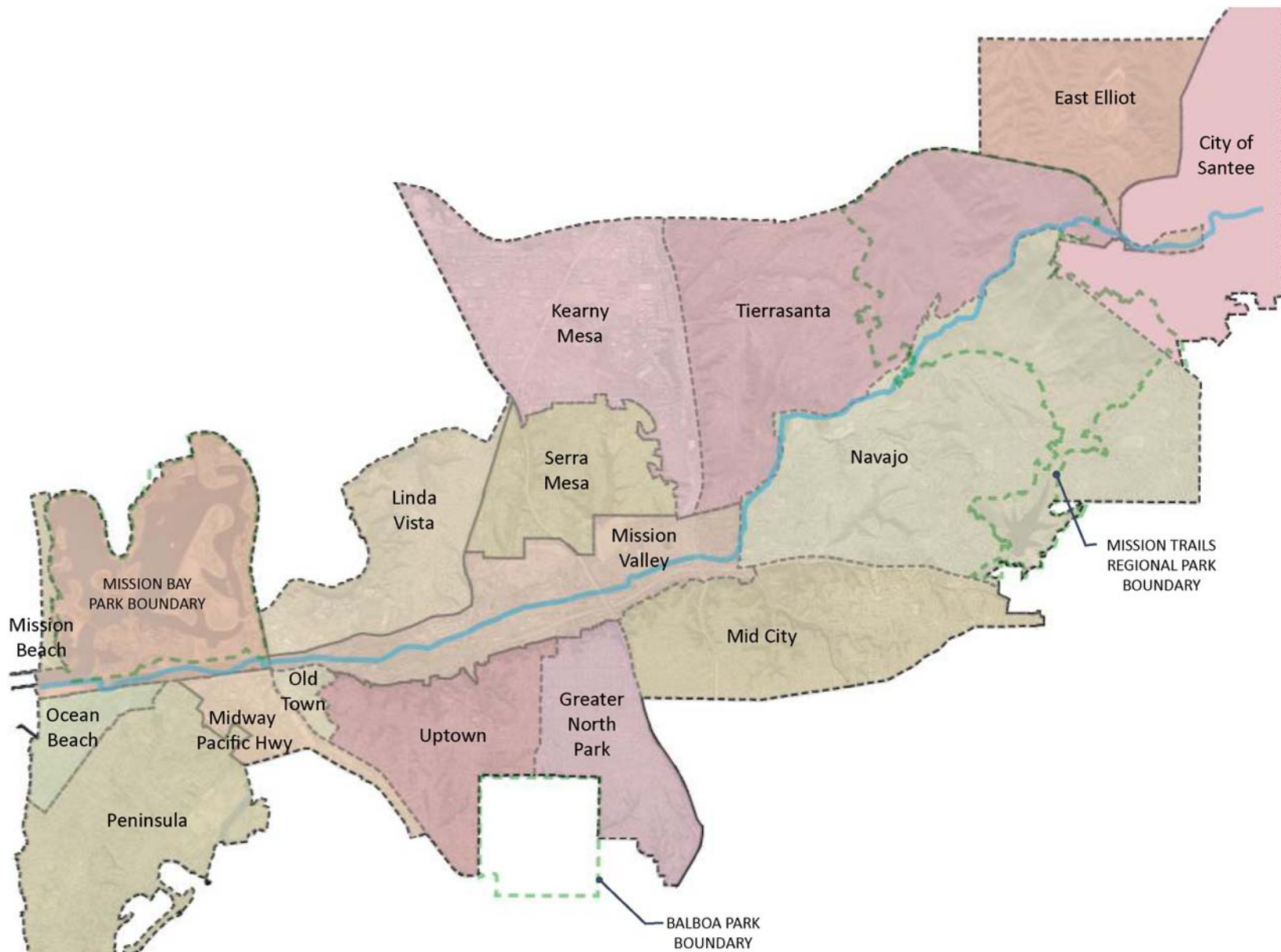
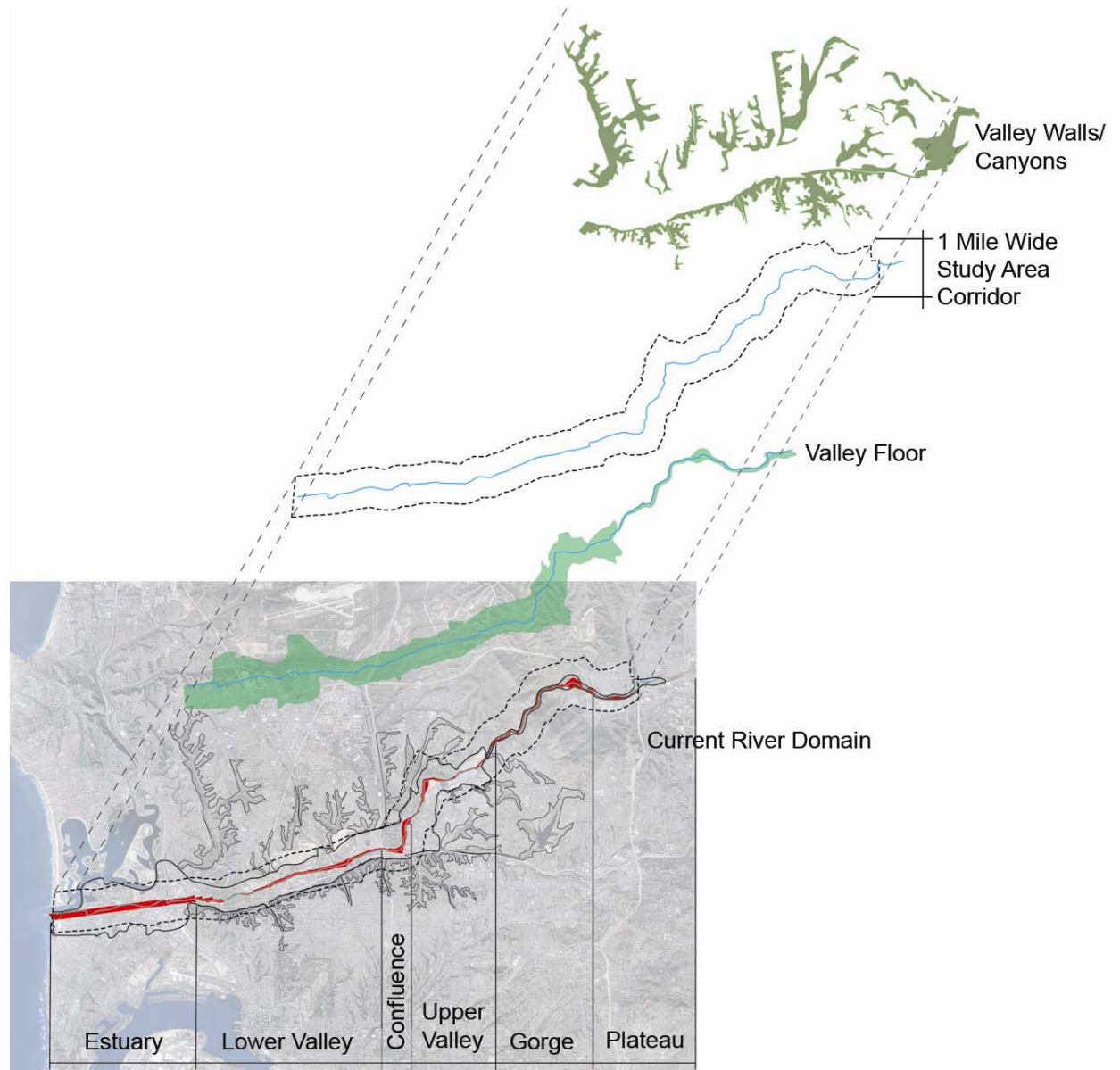


Figure 2 - Community Planning Areas

The master plan divides the San Diego River Park into six subsections, or reaches, based upon topographic characteristics and river condition. These reaches include the Estuary (extending from the ocean to the Mission Valley Preserve), the Lower Valley (extending east to I-15 and including Qualcomm Stadium site), the Confluence (from I-15 to Friars Road Bridge, where Alvarado and Murphy Creeks merge with the San Diego River), the Upper Valley (extending from Friars Road Bridge to Mission Trails Regional Park), the Gorge (within Mission Trails Regional Park), and the Plateau (upstream and east of Mission Trails Regional Park to the city's boundary with the City of Santee). There are issues and potentials that are shared by all of the reaches, as well as those specific to each individual reach.



Master Planning Area

1.4 MASTER PLAN BENEFITS

San Diego's urban form is defined by the relationship between its canyons, mesas, rivers and the ocean. The San Diego River Park will engage the ocean's edge and draw it inland to emphasize the large-scale role and function of the river. Much as Central Park defines New York City, the combined power of the river valley, its tributaries and the coastal beaches define San Diego and should be a part of the daily experience of the residents and visitors. The San Diego River Park will provide benefits for both residents and visitors. Benefits can be measured through the environmental, social and cultural, and economic value added to a community.

1.4.1 ENVIRONMENTAL BENEFITS

The environmental benefits added by improvements to the river can be measured by the degree to which the improvements add to the sustainability of the river corridor. Within this master plan the following environmental benefits focus on:

Creating a Healthy River System

Historically an ephemeral waterway, the river volume varied significantly from seasonal flooding to negligible flow. Human activities, such as impounding, flow diversion, mining, and flood control, have altered this pattern and created a channelized, perennial waterway. The San Diego River Park planning effort seeks to identify viable patterns appropriate to each reach that will improve water quality, sediment transport, and ground water recharge, while also expanding riparian habitat. The value of the river and the River Park is dependent on its water quality.

Reconnect Existing Habitats

The wildlife habitats within the river valley are disconnected, impaired and isolated from upland habitat. The San Diego River Park provides a strategy to reconnect existing habitat within and across the river valley. By reconnecting wildlife habitat, the ecological health of this system can be improved. To be successful, much of the habitat must remain protected; a balance must be found between protecting this fragile system and allowing access that educates river valley visitors about the wildlife and habitat of the river valley.

1.4.2 SOCIAL AND CULTURAL BENEFITS

The social and cultural benefits of well-designed projects within the river valley add to the recreational, scenic and image-making value of the site. This master plan provides for the following social and cultural benefits:

Linkages

The San Diego River Park will unify the city. Every neighborhood in and adjacent to the river valley should connect to the San Diego River Park, linking each of these neighborhoods to the city's other great parks and to each other. In addition, developed parks are proposed within the river valley, offering an even larger spectrum of experiences to park users. The river park will also connect isolated pockets of development along the - river with established neighborhoods, knitting the valley as a whole and cultivating a river valley identity.

A New Identity

The San Diego River Park's most significant benefit may be its ability to create a new way to see the city. By linking two of the area's richest natural and recreational resources, Mission Bay Park and Mission Trails Regional Park, the San Diego River Park will offer a new way to recreate and move within the city. The San Diego River Park stands to become as vital a resource as the city's other great parks. Together with these two existing parks, the San Diego River Park will create a distinctive and identifiable park infrastructure which will become a source of pride and contribute to a new identity for the city.



2001 Platte River Corridor "before" - Denver, CO
Contaminated industrial land separated the City from the river



2003 Platte River Corridor "after" - Denver, CO

River Education

A majority of the native habitat within the river valley is out of sight and out of reach of humans, and is therefore disconnected from the daily experience of San Diego visitors and residents. The creation of the San Diego River Park offers many opportunities to educate communities about the river's natural systems and its historic significance. Many community groups are already involved in this effort; the process of creating the San Diego River Park increases the opportunities for these groups to become engaged with improving these resources by increasing visibility, access and awareness.

Schools and universities can also benefit from the first-hand experience of using the San Diego River as an outdoor classroom. By engaging Scripps Institution of Oceanography, San Diego State University, the University of San Diego and other institutions, a science-based coalition can be created that can study the river and build upon each others' work in the river valley, and give input to the park's design and management.

1.4.3 ECONOMIC BENEFITS

The economic benefits added by improvements to the built environment can be rated by evaluating their contribution to the business, sales and tourism tax revenues, and financial return on privately-funded projects. Within this master plan the following economic benefits focus on:



Fox River Corridor through the city of Waukesha, WI
The project relates specifically to a bike and pedestrian trail system along the Fox River and a future community park



The Iowa River Corridor provides a framework of quality open space and a unique identity for the University of Iowa where open space along the river is used as an outdoor classroom

Property Value adjacent to Open Space and the Reorientation of Development to the River

The effect on property values of a location near a park or open space has been the subject of several studies. Statistical analyses have been a common method of attempting to measure this effect. These analyses attempt to isolate the effect of open space from other variables which can affect property values, such as age, square footage, and condition of homes. Isolating the effect of open space can be difficult and results have been varied. Nevertheless, many studies have revealed increases in property values in instances where the property is located near or adjacent to open spaces. The effects of proximity to open space are not simply quantified; many studies have found the potential for an increase in property value depends upon the characteristics of the open space and the orientation of surrounding properties. Property value increases are likely to be highest near:

- Development that incorporates a park or open space as a primary amenity rather than “left-over” space
- Development that is designed to frame views of a park or open space
- Open space with recreation amenities and limited vehicular access
- Open Space that incorporates views of the river
- Open space with effective maintenance, surveillance and security

By creating the San Diego River Park and improving the condition of the river's health, property values will be enhanced. The river park will become an asset that will leverage higher quality design, land uses and development in the future. There are a number of sites along the river that are isolated from the adjacent neighborhoods. The river park will give these properties an identity within the valley and will encourage redevelopment with an orientation to the river.

There will be direct benefits to the city from the river park with the increase in property values and property tax revenues, and from the increase in pedestrian/tourist activity in the river valley. Further benefit should be anticipated by an increase in private reinvestment in the river park corridor by providing a variety of amenities, such as enhanced views, open space preservation, and access to convenient recreation opportunities. The value of these amenities to the public can be reflected in increased real property values and increased marketability for property located near the river park. Developers recognize these values and typically incorporate parks and open space into planning, design, and marketing of new and redeveloped properties.