

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Adoption of the San Diego River Park Master Plan presents 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 Park, Mission Trails Regional Park and Mission Bay Park -- the San Diego River Park will provide another great natural park for the city: a place of the city rather than a place apart from the city. And like other regional river parks -- the San Dieguito, the Otay Valley and the Tijuana -- the San Diego River Park will provide a refuge for nature and people. The City of San Diego is at the forefront of this 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 inhabited with wildlife. The plan provides guidance on how the San Diego River can be reasserted 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 development. Commercial, residential and industrial uses have expanded on the valley floor, encroaching into 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 uses have not only compromised the integrity of the river and the wildlife habitat it supports, but also its value as a community resource.

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.

The establishment of the San Diego River Park can reverse this trend; by returning the river to the people and integrating the river valley into the life and landscape of San Diego. As the water and the rich alluvial floodplain drew the people to the valley thousands of years ago, a healthy riparian environment interspersed with trails, parks and open space, united by a flowing, clean river, will draw 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 Master Plan 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 authors' 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, City of San Diego Mayor Dick Murphy formed and chaired the San Diego River Park Alliance to provide a government organization to promote the establishment of the San Diego River Park. Members of the Alliance included local, state, and federal elected officials. As a starting point, the Alliance recommended preparation of a San Diego River Park master plan which the San Diego City Council subsequently authorized for the river within its jurisdiction. At the same time 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. As 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.



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.

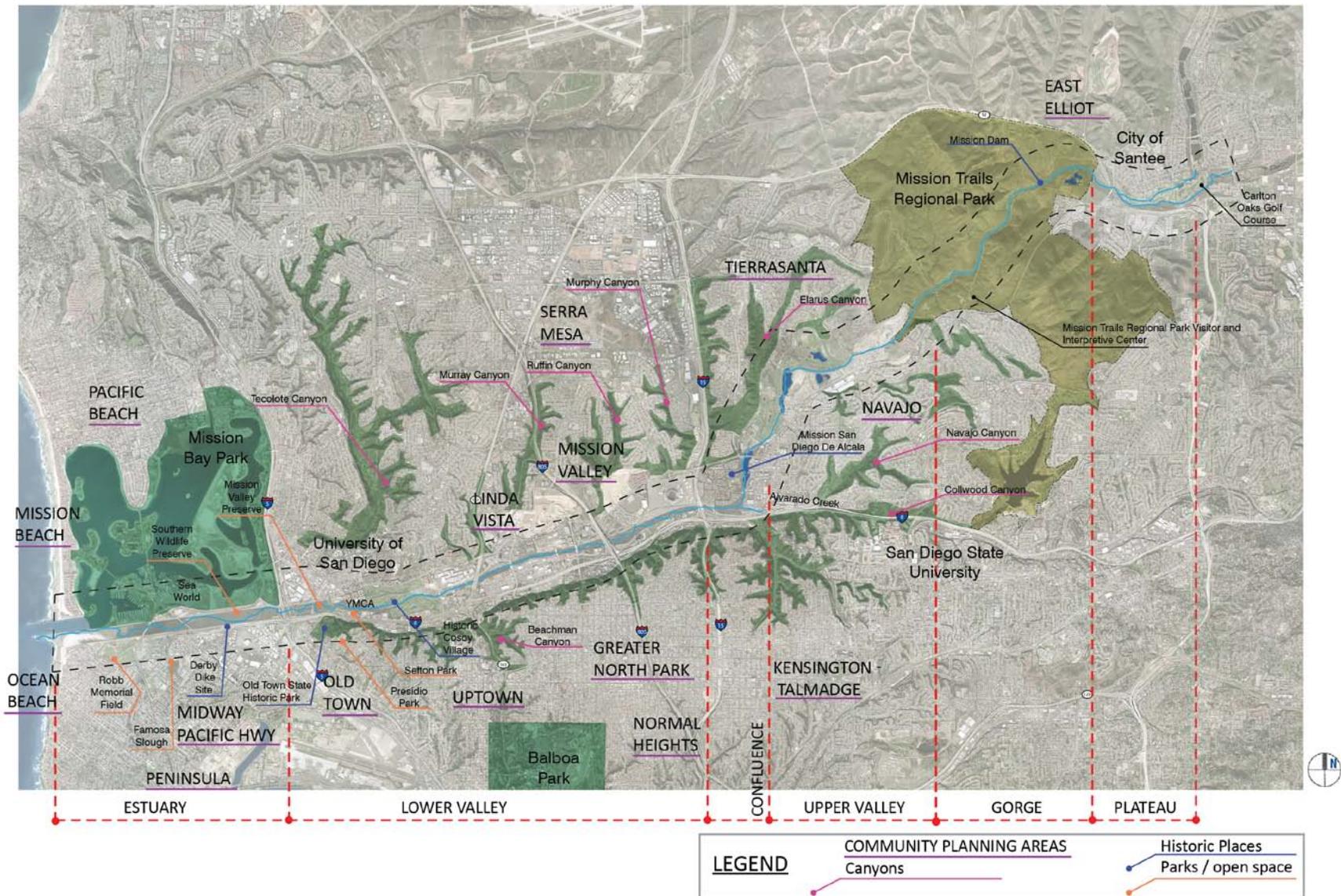


Figure 2. City of San Diego Context

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 City of San Diego jurisdiction. 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 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. These public meetings and public workshops invited broader community input confirming key issues, exploring planning options and drafting recommendations.



San Diego River Park Master Plan 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. To be comprehensive, the Master Plan must consider the adjacent areas of influence including the adjacent canyons and open spaces. Tecolote Canyon, Murphy Canyon, Murray Canyon, Ruffin Canyon, Alvarado Canyon and Navajo Canyon are all areas that offer significant potential to substantially improve connections between the canyons and the San Diego River.

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 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 a 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.

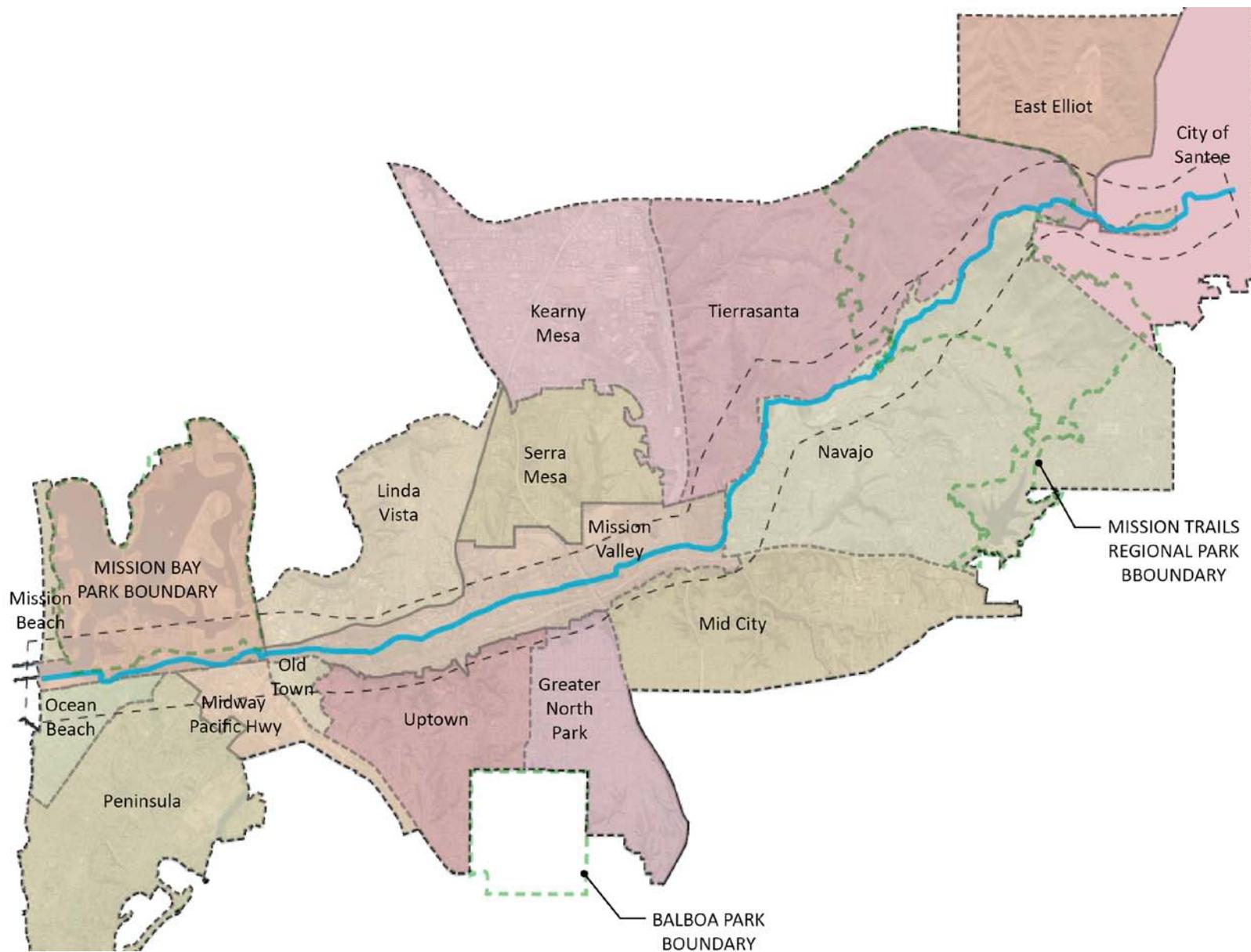
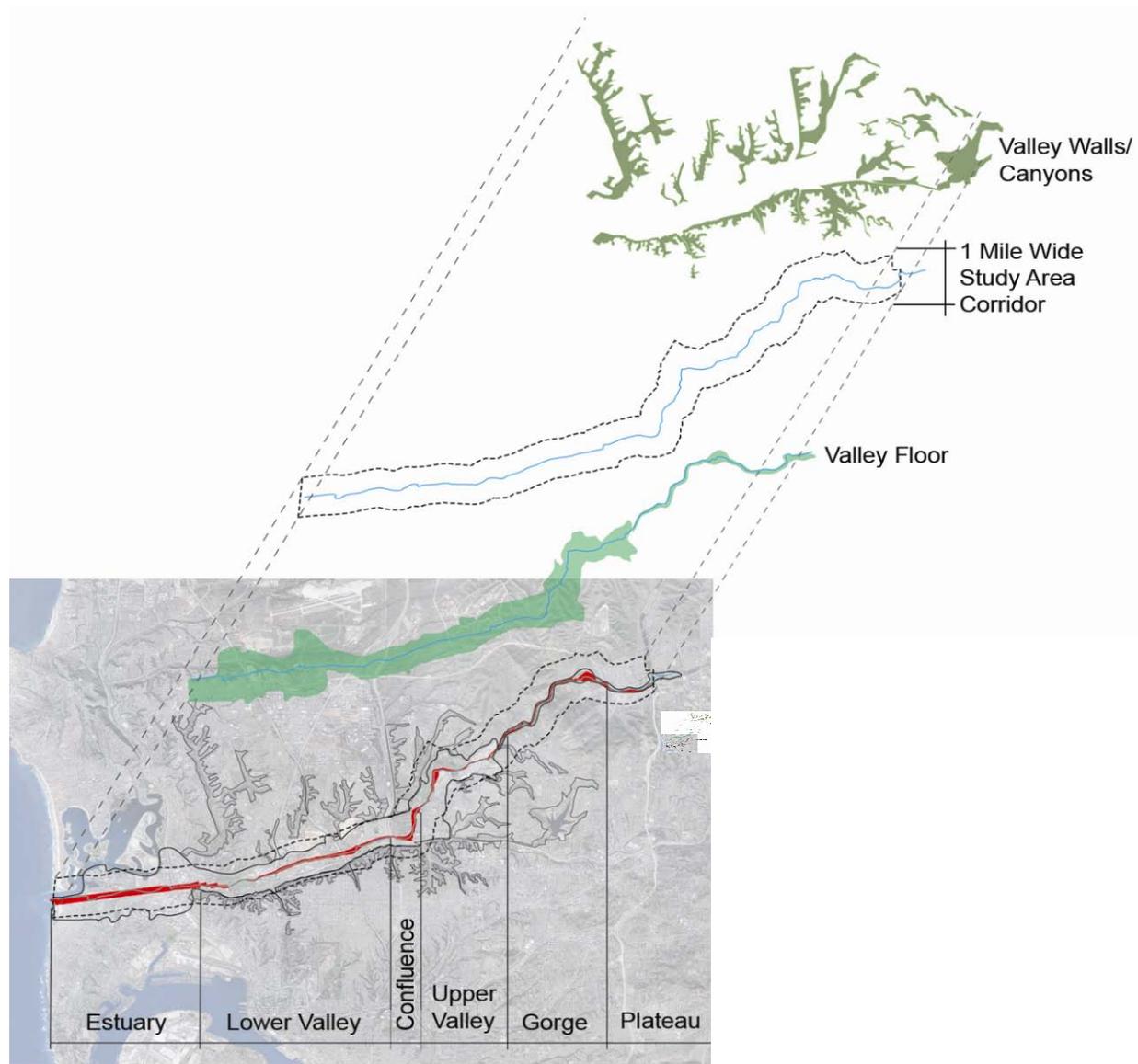


Figure 3 - Community Planning Areas

The Master Plan divides the San Diego River Park into six reaches, based upon topographic characteristics and river condition. These reaches include the Estuary (extending from the Pacific Ocean to the I-5), the Lower Valley (I-5 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 (east of Mission Trails Regional Park to the city's boundary with the City of Santee). There are issues and recommendations that are shared by all of the reaches, as well as those specific to each individual reach.

Within each of the six reaches, the Master Plan provides design guidelines for two specific planning areas referred to as the "River Corridor Area" and the "River Influence Area". The design guidelines focus on site planning, architecture and landscape architecture.



Master Planning Area

1.4 MASTER PLAN BENEFITS

San Diego's urban form is defined by the relationship between the built environment and 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, urban runoff 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 along the river 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 along the river, 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 along the river 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 that can affect property values, such as age, square footage, and condition of structures/buildings. 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 a 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 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. 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.

2.0 VISION AND PRINCIPLES

A successful planning process demands the communication of a common vision and principles, not just recommended actions, to guide decision-making and implementation. A unified vision is essential to guide current and future planning efforts, in order to ensure that the master plan can respond to and accommodate changing conditions.

Key to the success of the San Diego River Park is to build a synergy that best serves the entire river valley and its many inhabitants, including people, animals and plants. Each of these inhabitants have a place within the multi-faceted system that is the river valley, and the San Diego River Park must be designed for and welcome all of them. The river system today is very much out of balance; water quality is severely degraded, the river pattern is constrained by culverts and channelization, the land is fragmented by different land uses, and the development has turned its back to the river.

Creating a synergy for the river requires a shift in the balance toward recovery, protection, preservation and prevention of further degradation. Re-establishing the health of the river and the habitats that adjoin it is essential to creating the San Diego River Park. There are places where development is appropriate and places where undeveloped land may best serve the broader community as open space. There are places that are essential to establishing habitat continuity, and others that are essential to linking pathways and recreation. The potential of the river park to serve as an educational tool unites all of these different places. Such delineations must be made fairly and equitably. A balanced San Diego River Park will satisfy these diverse concerns.

2.1 VISION

RECLAIM THE VALLEY AS A COMMON, A SYNERGY OF WATER, WILDLIFE AND PEOPLE

As recently as the 1950's, sections of the San Diego River were composed of farmlands and open pastures. As the land uses changed from agriculture to shopping malls and offices, open space and a sense of a vast river valley were lost. Creating the San Diego River Park offers the potential to again have the river corridor be a place that all residents of the city can come to enjoy and experience the river, nature and each other. By seeking to create open space along the river and to restore the river's riparian integrity, people can be reconnected with nature, and a distinct and identifiable river park can be created.

Key to establishing a river park identity is defining an appropriate space. The river park must be wide enough to support the natural landscape, which includes the water and adjacent habitats, and provide common space for people to use.

Building upon the 2001 Conceptual Plan and discussions with the adjacent communities, the following five principles were identified at the public meetings and workshops. These principles express the essential elements of the San Diego River Park vision, address the role of the river park in the city and in the region, and serve as a guide against which all future development proposals should be tested.

These five principles will guide ecological, social, cultural, and economic development of the San Diego River Park:

- Principle One: Restore and maintain a healthy river system**
- Principle Two: Unify fragmented lands and habitats**
- Principle Three: Create a connected continuum, with a sequence of unique places and experiences**
- Principle Four: Reveal the river valley history**
- Principle Five: Reorient development toward the river to create value and opportunities for people to embrace the river**



Mission Trails Regional Park offers opportunities to access, to view and to learn about the San Diego River, the natural environment and the history of the region



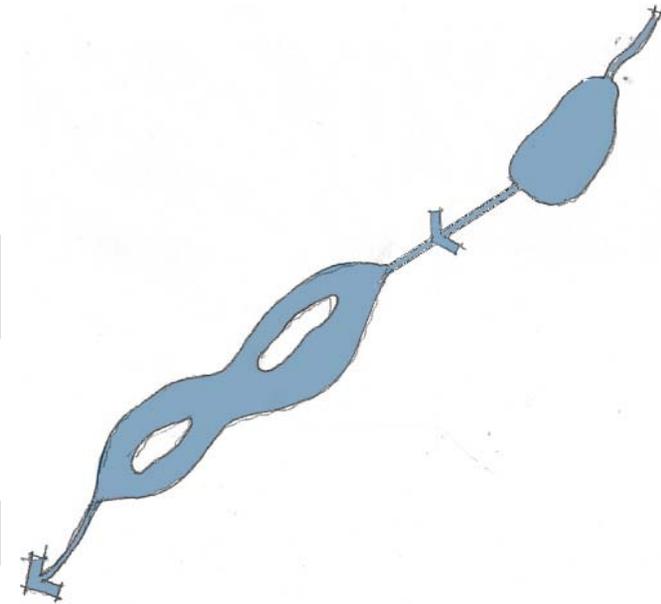
A free flowing San Diego River offers a healthier habitat for plants, wildlife and people

2.2 PRINCIPLE ONE:

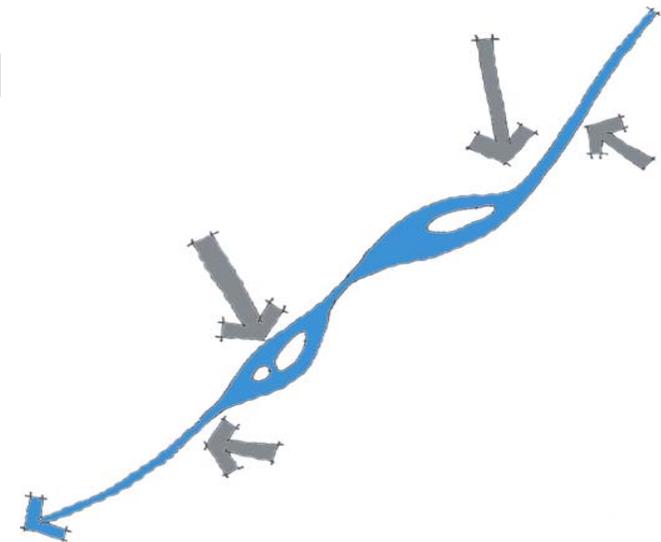
RESTORE AND MAINTAIN A HEALTHY RIVER SYSTEM

The San Diego River Park Master Plan seeks to return the San Diego River to a cleaner, healthier condition that showcases a natural California river within the city's urban setting that invites people to experience a riparian environment. A healthy San Diego River will become the symbol and embodiment of the river's natural character. The creation of the San Diego River Park in the City of San Diego will not lead to a cleaner river on its own. The river is impacted along its entire length and the entire watershed must be considered, as the impacts of inland sources of pollutants impair water quality downstream and in coastal environments many miles away. To restore the San Diego River to a healthy condition, specific benchmarks must be met:

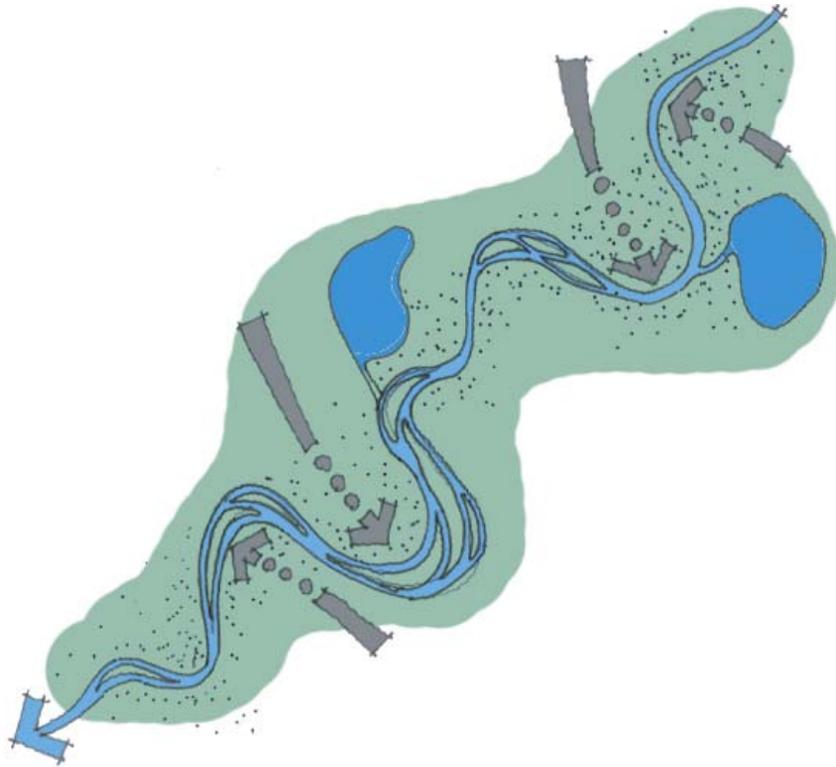
- It should be free of obstacles and flowing to the Pacific Ocean.
- It should be meandering, braided and free of ponds.
- It should be bordered with native riparian vegetation that provides habitat for wildlife and the potential for filtration of urban runoff.
- It should be free of litter and solid waste should be properly managed.



Today the river is channelized and impeded by ponds



Urban run-off flows directly into the river



Re-contour the channel to increase the river's length and meander, expand the groundwater recharge area, separate ponds from the River, and filter urban run-off before it reaches the river.



Free flowing



Meandering



Bordered by vegetation

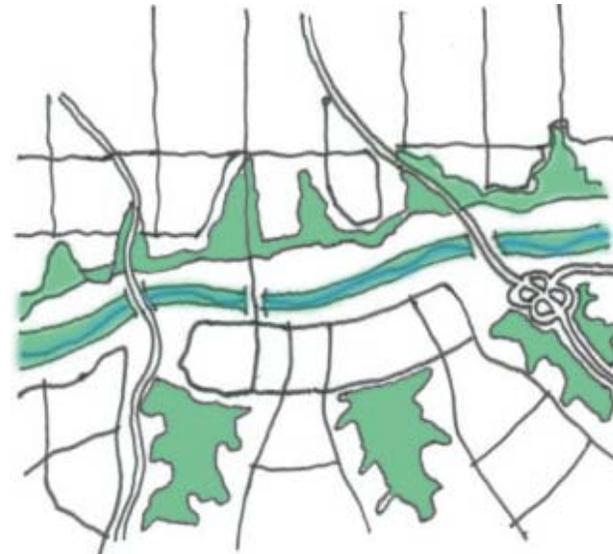
2.3 PRINCIPLE TWO:

UNIFY FRAGMENTED LANDS AND HABITATS

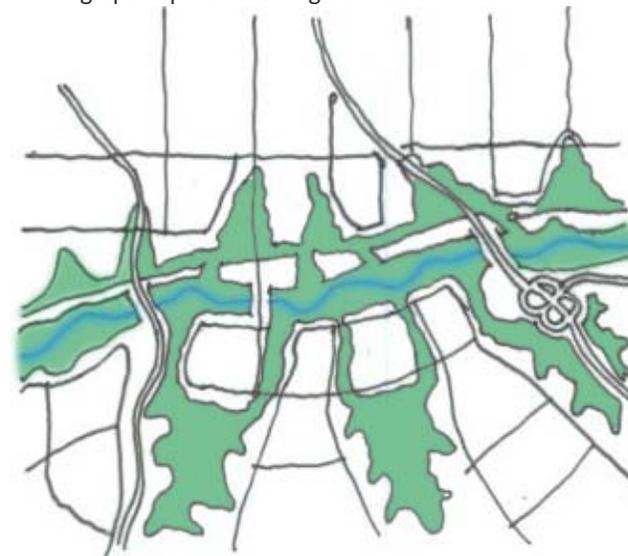
The San Diego River Park Master Plan seeks to create a unified native riparian corridor along the river, a continuum of native plant communities from riparian to upland in the canyons, and to accomplish connectivity on three primary levels: 1) Linear connectivity along the river allows animals, energy and nutrients to move more freely and extensively throughout the landscape system; 2) Lateral connectivity between the river and adjacent upland habitat areas reducing habitat fragmentation allows a natural progression of habitat types; 3) and Tributary connectivity between the river and its tributaries is vital to the health of the river, measured in water quality, and the health of the surrounding habitat.

Healthy and continuous native plant communities are essential to encouraging the movement and inhabitation of wildlife. Today, the canyons, undeveloped steep slopes and upland spaces provide significant refuge for wildlife. Connecting these lands with the river valley creates the potential for wildlife movement between uplands and the river. Therefore, the extent to which these uplands remain undeveloped is of benefit to the river park. These corridors should be of sufficient width to encourage the presence of a variety of bird and animal species, and contribute to reducing the existing condition that isolates most canyons from the river.

An important step to enhance connectivity is to integrate both “infrastructure” and “ecostructure” of natural habitat. Infrastructure encompasses such services as transportation, utilities, and storm water, while the term ecostructure encompasses rivers, vegetation, wildlife corridors and habitat.



Existing open spaces are fragmented

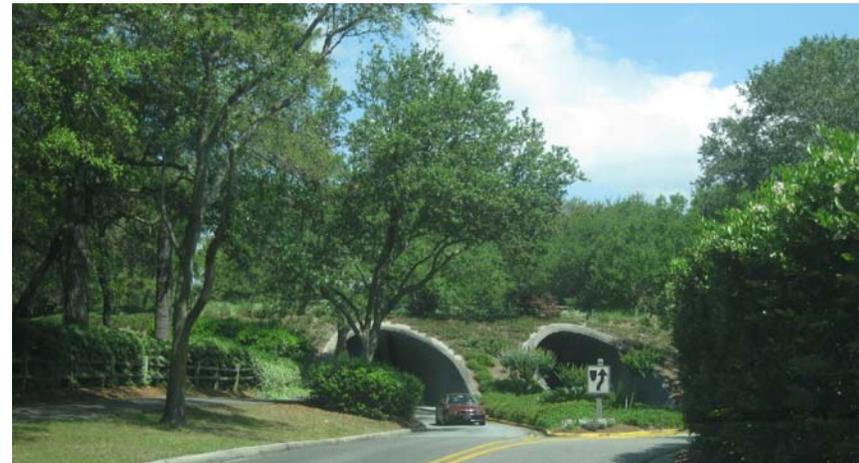


Link parks, open spaces and trails along the river and canyons with the river valley

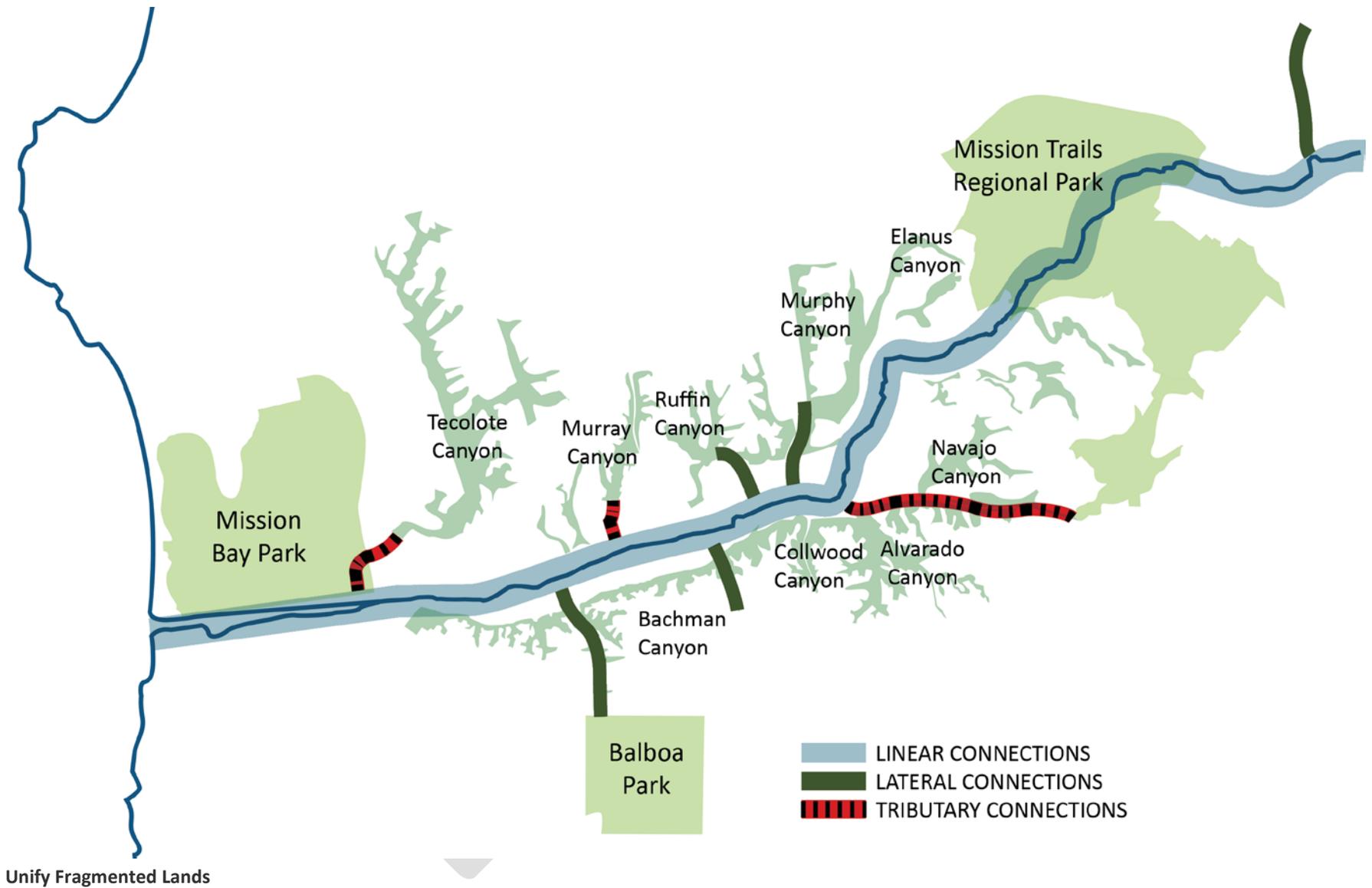
To be included in this ecostructure designation, lands must meet two or more of the following conditions: 1) be located within the San Diego River watershed; 2) be part of the river corridor/floodway (as identified in the reach sections of this document); and/or 3) be a functioning natural habitat, designated park, open space or be protected by an easement. Generally, areas that meet more than one of these conditions are undevelopable because they flood regularly, present steep side slopes and canyons, or are areas designated for recreation or conservation. These areas have been identified as biologically significant and incorporated into the San Diego's Multiple Species Conservation Program (MSCP) Subarea Plan.



Like most canyons, Ruffin Canyon no longer reaches the river valley



Native vegetation surrounding urban infrastructure softens and integrates structures with the natural landscape and provides connective habitat



2.4 PRINCIPLE THREE:

CREATE A CONNECTED CONTINUUM, WITH A SEQUENCE OF UNIQUE PLACES AND EXPERIENCES

The experience of the landscape is diverse, and changes throughout the river valley. A visitor senses the expanse at the estuary and coastline, the rampart of the coastal terrace experienced as one overlooks Mission Valley from the Presidio, the broad river valley stretch through the Navajo community, the constriction of the soaring walls in the gorge and the open vistas of the plateau above Mission Trails Regional Park.

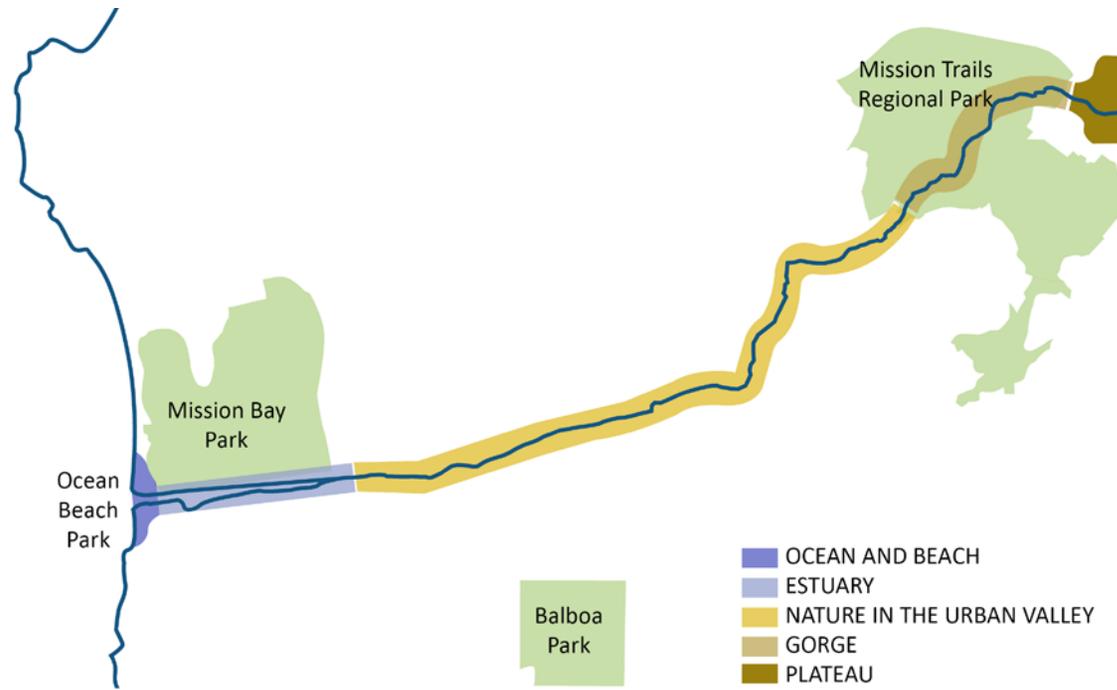
Continuity is essential to engaging users with this kaleidoscope of experience, and it is equally important to express the unique physical and cultural qualities of each reach along the river. A common river pathway system connecting the unique habitats of the river as well as linking to existing and future parks/open space will create a synergy of water, wildlife and people. From the river pathway there should be pathways and trails that link the river park to adjacent neighborhoods and open space areas. These secondary pathways and trails should be visual and physical green connections that connect more people to the ecology, culture and history of the river. As indicated in the preceding principle, undeveloped land within the valley is limited. Land acquisition and open space easements are two ways to rejoin the valley and allow unbroken passage along the river's length.



Citywide connections will link neighborhoods with the river



The river pathway will link upland and riparian experiences



Emphasize a Continuum of Experience



Ocean Beach Park



Mission Bay Park



Mission Trails Regional Park

2.5 PRINCIPLE FOUR:

REVEAL THE RIVER VALLEY HISTORY

The river valley has long been central to the settlement of the San Diego Region. The presence of water was the impetus for the earliest native people to move into the area. Although much of the evidence of this history has been lost, a number of artifacts and sites remain, and major sites can be found in Mission Trails Regional Park, Presidio Park, Old Town San Diego State Historic Park and Mission San Diego de Alcalá. Some sites have particularly rich and visible histories that can be further interpreted.

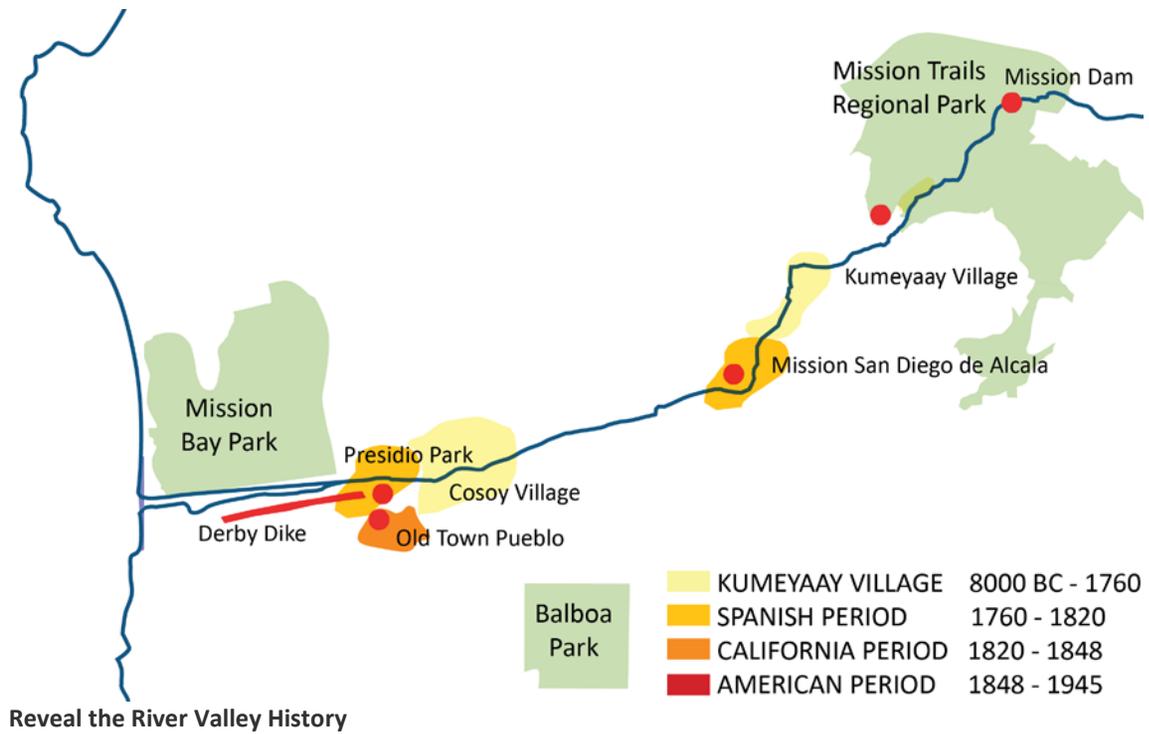
The San Diego River Park is an opportunity to link these locations, stimulate public interest in the river valley's history, and expand the public's knowledge about the prehistoric and historic people and land uses within the valley. Increased public interest and knowledge benefits these sites by instilling a sense of responsibility for their preservation and care. Increased visitor traffic, however, can also have its negative effects and careful evaluation of a site's ability to support visitor traffic is critical prior to opening a site. Some historic sites may be too sensitive to be exposed and should remain closed to the public, but interpretive panels placed along the river pathway should be provided to express the story.



In 1916 agriculture was the primary activity in Mission Valley



Mission San Diego de Alcalá



Derby Dike



Mission Dam



Presidio Park

2.6 PRINCIPLE FIVE:

REORIENT DEVELOPMENT TOWARD THE RIVER TO CREATE VALUE AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR PEOPLE TO EMBRACE THE RIVER

Today, nearly all development turns its back to the river. Parking lots, dumpsters, roads, storage yards and mining operations border the river between Riverwalk Golf Course and Mission Trails Regional Park.

The river park should be treated as a 'front door': an amenity to celebrate. Planning efforts should seek ways to draw the river park character into current uses and capitalize on the exceptional natural beauty. New development should face the river, taking design cues from the colors and materials lining the river, scaling and orienting new buildings to complement, not compete with, the river park. The reorientation of development towards the river park, through placement of cafes and plazas that open up to and capitalize on the river, as well as buildings that provide views of the natural river habitat, will inherently enhance property values.

Focusing on the river should not be limited to riverfront development. Development within the river valley should seek opportunities to connect with the river. These links may be achieved through elements such as sight lines, design elements, materials, or even physical connections.



Reorient Development toward the River



Example of a bridge complimenting the river park



Example of orienting development towards a river