

San Diego River Park



San Diego River Park City of San Diego Draft Master Plan

Prepared for the City of San Diego
Park and Recreation Department



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Mission Trails Regional Park: Where the river flows through the gorge

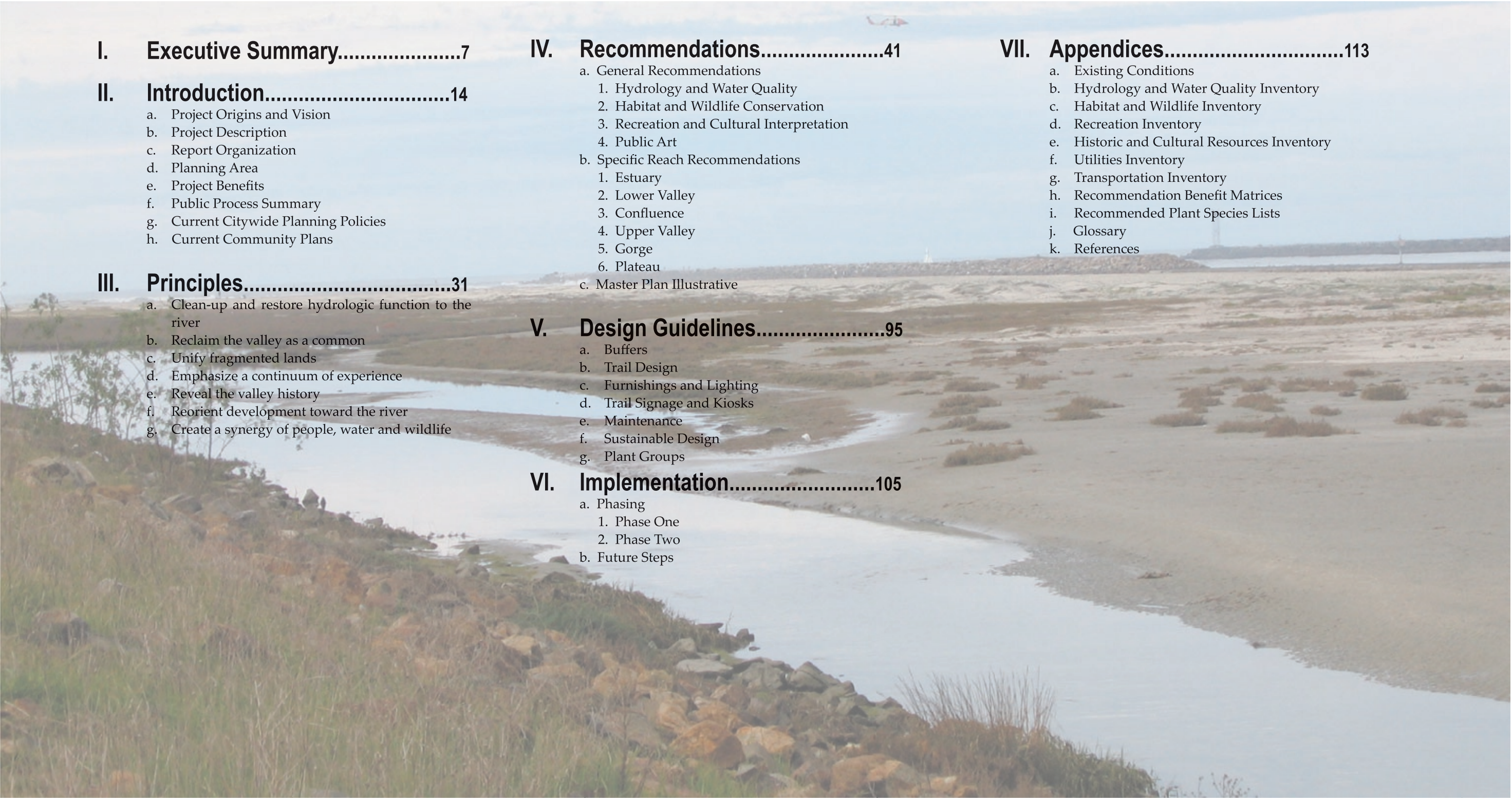


The river is a hidden treasure within Mission Valley



Ocean Beach: Where the river meets the ocean

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Executive Summary

The San Diego River has long been a source of life and vitality in the San Diego region. The water and the rich alluvial floodplain drew the Kumeyaay people to the valley ten thousand years ago. As recently as the 1950's, the San Diego River valley provided green relief from the surrounding urban environment as a rich agricultural plain that offered a place for a quiet stroll or leisurely bicycle ride.

Since then, the river has suffered under the region's increasing development pressure. Commercial, residential and even industrial uses have expanded into the Valley, pushing ever closer to water's edge. Extensive mining operations have excavated the river bed for sand and gravel. The proximity of development threatens the integrity of both the river and the wildlife habitat it supports.

The river and the land uses adjacent to it are disconnected; the river is no longer the focus of the communities through which it flows. A strong movement, led by the San Diego River Park Alliance and the San Diego River Park Foundation, seeks to reverse this condition and restore a symbiotic relationship between the river and surrounding communities. This grass roots effort seeks to create a river-long park, stretching from the San Diego River headwaters near Julian to the Pacific Ocean at Mission Bay.

A New Vision

Creating the San Diego River Park requires a new and innovative vision. This vision must form a comprehensive and integrated approach to addressing physical needs such as improving water quality and river health, expanding wildlife habitat, as well as harder-to-quantify social and cultural opportunities such as revealing the river's rich history and bringing people to the river.

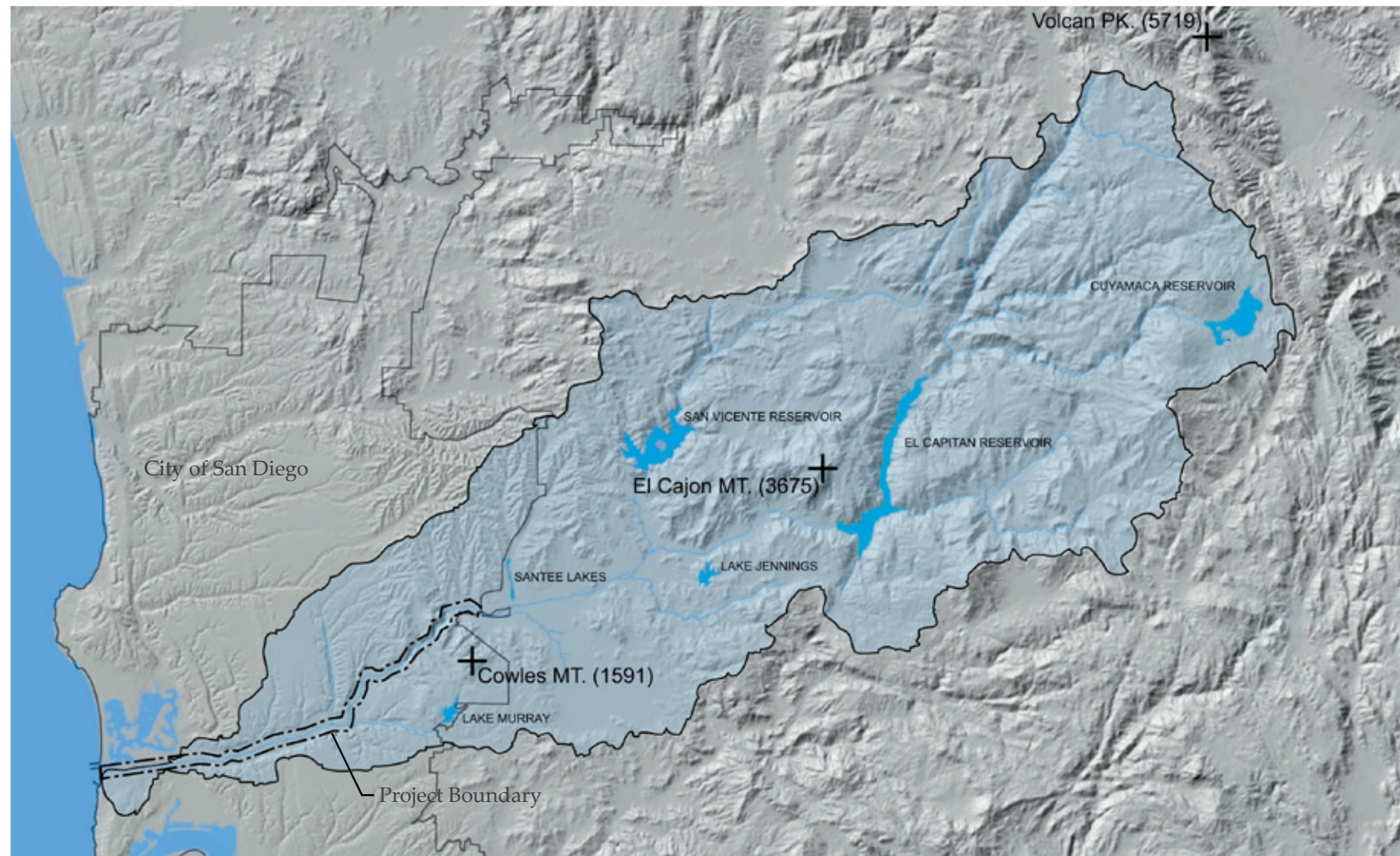
Understanding the physical needs and the social and cultural potentials demands a thorough knowledge of the region's physiographic origins, the current condition of the river, and the human and natural forces that have shaped it. It is essential to understand these elements in the context of the entire watershed system of the river, including the canyons and creeks that tributary to it. Any effort to clean the river, create habitat connectivity and trail continuity must extend beyond the bounds of this study area and the City of San Diego. Creating the San Diego River Park will produce a diverse, dynamic and balanced network of natural habitat and recreation spaces that are interwoven with adjacent neighborhoods and the river valley, but that also reaches into the canyons and uplands that are linked to it.



In 1916 agriculture was the primary activity in Mission Valley
Source: Mission Valley Historical Society



Mission Valley viewed from Presidio



Regional watershed context

Principles

The following seven principles emerged from discussions with the Citizens' Advisory Committee. These principles form the core of the new vision just described, and are the guiding ideas against which future design and implementation decisions will be measured.

Introduction

Principles

Clean up and restore hydrologic function to the river. 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. The San Diego River Park effort emphasizes a need to protect and improve water quality through a variety of tools. If the water quality continues to deteriorate as it has in the lower reaches of the river, then the vision of a functional River Park will not be realized.

Recommendations

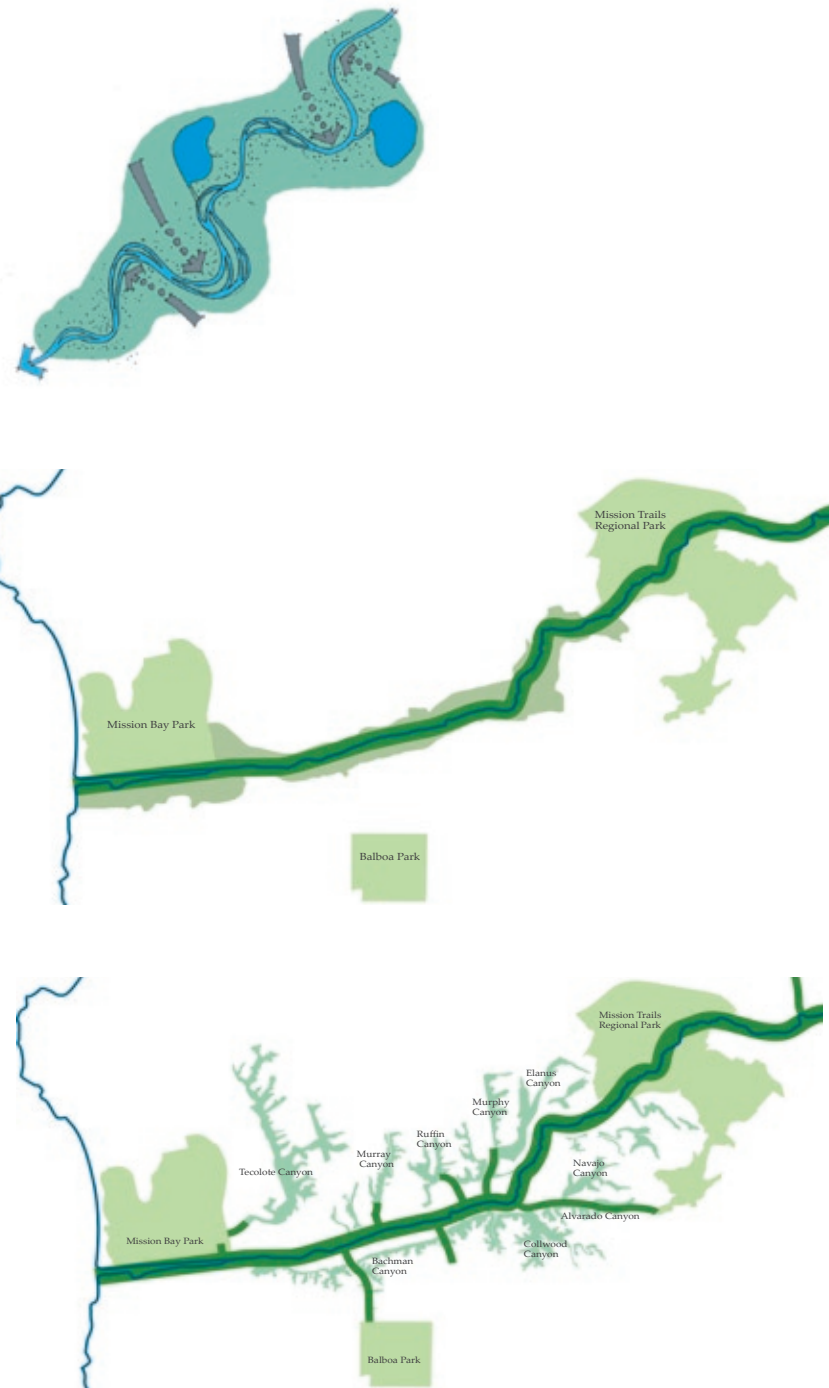
Reclaim the valley as a Common. Today, the river valley is a forgotten place lost behind development. The San Diego River Park offers the chance to recover the river corridor as a place that all San Diego residents and visitors can come to enjoy the experience of nature. By aggregating open land, reclaiming an identifiable river corridor, and restoring the river's riparian integrity, the sense of the valley as a distinct place for people and for wildlife can be re-established.

Design Guidelines

Unify fragmented lands. Significant natural open space remains in the San Diego region but it is largely disconnected. Lack of connectivity limits the land's ability to meet wildlife and human needs, in terms of essential habitat and recreational opportunities. The river corridor can become a major spine connecting these lands, both across the valley and along its length. These connections will also reinforce the visual and real sense of the valley by expanding native plant communities.

Implementation

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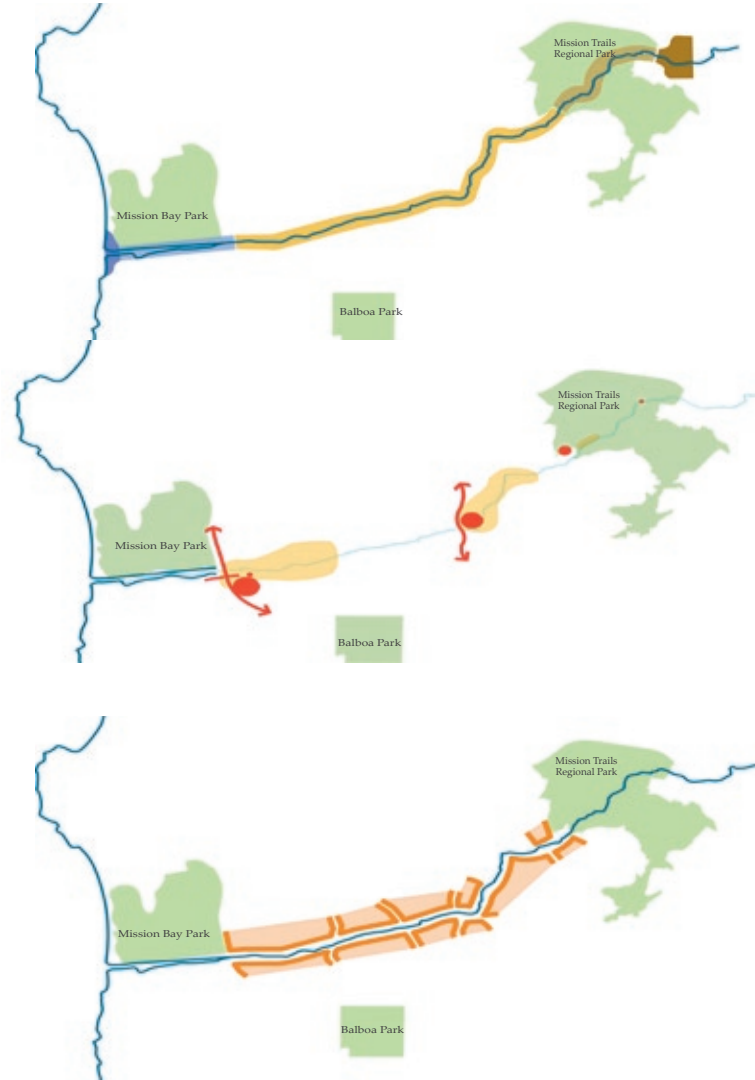


Emphasize a continuum of experience. The valley offers an experience of a landscape that is diverse and changing from valley wall to valley wall and from the ocean to Mission Trails Regional Park. Protecting the distinctive character of each section of the valley must go hand in hand with creating a coherent San Diego River Park experience. Sensitive transitions between landscape types, between natural and urban, valley and upland, and river reach to river reach are the key to creating a sense of continuity throughout the San Diego River Park.

Reveal the valley history. The valley has long been central to the settlement of the region, and its history tells a story of the people and the landscape of San Diego. The San Diego River Park Trail is an opportunity to link these historic and contemporary locations, stimulate public interest, and expand the public’s knowledge of the prehistoric and historic land uses within the valley. Increased public interest will benefit these sites by instilling a sense of responsibility for their preservation and care.

Reorient development toward the river. Today nearly all development within the valley turns its back to the river, deriving little benefit from this important resource. The San Diego River Park can serve as a catalyst for future re-use and inspire new development to seek ways to draw upon and enhance the river character, to create a ‘front door’ to the river. Working with property owners, the San Diego River Park can also promote a different way of thinking about new development and redevelopment, encouraging a ‘river address’ with architecture and landscape that draw upon and contribute to a river valley aesthetic.

Create a synergy of people, water and wildlife. The San Diego River Park will serve a diverse set of needs; these needs will at times be in conflict. To succeed, we must find a balance that best serves the human, ecologic, hydrologic and economic demands in the valley. Taken together each of these interests create a stronger, multi-faceted system that is the river valley. The San Diego River Park must be designed for and welcome all of them.



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Looking Ahead

These seven principles create the basis for a set of comprehensive, concrete recommendations that will make the San Diego River Park a reality. These recommendations range from general over-arching steps that affect the entire river corridor to specific actions that are local and achievable by organized volunteers.

Foremost among them are five key recommendations that will create the critical structure upon which all other pieces of the San Diego River Park will rest.

Return the river to health.
Improve the river pattern and water quality by separating stream flow from ponds and by creating a wider riparian corridor with more meander. Remove invasive, non-native vegetation and plant a diversity of native species to re-establish a range of native plant communities.

Remember the big picture.
Connect the valley to adjacent open space including the beaches, Tecolote, Bachman, Murray, Ruffin, Murphy and Alvarado Canyons and Mission Trails Regional Park to create an ecostructure of a unified native landscape by transforming rights-of-way and creating open space easements.

Build city wide connection.
Establish a continuous trail system from ocean to mountain and canyon to canyon with frequent access to transit, canyons and neighborhoods. Coordinate with Community Plans, the San Diego Bicycle Master Plan and other current planning efforts to develop specific locations for neighborhood connections and route alignments.

Assemble a beautiful infrastructure.
Integrate infrastructure (transportation, utilities, stormwater) and ecostructure (rivers, vegetation, wildlife corridors, habitat) into "beautiful infrastructure" making key ecological and infrastructure functions visible. Partner with public agencies to transform roads, bridges, the trolley, parking lots, culverts, channels and utility easements to be part of a unified landscape, maintaining and enhancing connections between adjacent natural habitats, residential communities, and the San Diego River Park.

Create a sequence of unique places and experiences.
Establish a linked string of parks and open spaces by creating land that is accessible and usable by the public through acquisition of land, easements and partnerships with land owners in key locations. These open spaces will serve a variety of needs providing valuable protected

habitat in some places and access to the river and connection to adjacent development in others. To achieve this it is important to collaborate with and support the Mission Valley Community Plan in particular to identify areas for redevelopment and new development with a river focus and to identify potential land to acquire for parks and open space. As redevelopment occurs, land owners and developers should be engaged in the San Diego River Park planning process to support the creation of places that are mutually beneficial.

This Master Plan presents two sections of additional recommendations. The first of these sections addresses specific issues of hydrology and water quality, habitat and wildlife, recreation and cultural interpretation, and public art. The second section examines the existing condition of each segment, or reach, of the San Diego River within the City, sets goals and makes recommendations for each reach.



Tecolote Canyon



Flowing San Diego River

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Next Steps

This Plan identifies a number of elements and tasks needed to create the San Diego River Park, many of which can begin immediately. Initial implementation hinges on environmental and economic conditions. A Programmatic Environmental Impact Report (PEIR), required by the State of California, must be prepared to analyze the impacts of the Master Plan recommendations and specific projects within the river corridor.

Another essential step is to determine the strategy to implement the River Park within the City. There is currently no single jurisdictional tool by which to accomplish this. The River Park planning area crosses four community planning areas in addition to Mission Bay Park and Mission Trails Regional Park, each of which would require amendment to implement the San Diego River Park Master Plan. Several options are available for incorporating the river park master plan into the City's policies and regulations. Unlike other City park master plans, the adoption and implementation of the master plan is complicated by the fact that most of the subject property is privately owned. The potential options identified to date, which can be combined, are to 1) adopt the master plan to be part of the Progress Guide and General Plan, 2) amend the affected community plans, park plans, and zoning code, and 3) apply an overlay zone. Further analysis is needed to determine the proper course of action.

Analysis of the economic costs and benefits must also be prepared to ensure that the San Diego River Park will be carried through to completion. The economic analysis should include short and long term funding strategies for both capital improvements and long-term operation and maintenance costs. This assessment should also explore the costs and benefits of the Park to the City and to private land owners along the river corridor.

Tremendous commitment and effort on the part of the community, volunteer organizations, individuals, and public officials has brought the concept of the San Diego River Park to this point, but much work remains to bring it to life. In many respects, the San Diego River Park already exists in the minds of the residents of San Diego. One small, quiet step of announcing the river's presence with signs has attracted interest throughout the community. Even larger steps are ahead, and bringing people back to the river will be the next move toward rejoining the City and the River, and toward making the San Diego River Park a part of the urban fabric of the City of San Diego.

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