

CALIFORNIA ENVIROTHON 2009 CURRENT ISSUE
Biodiversity in a Changing World
The Zorro Ranch Company

Background

The Zorro Ranch encompasses 422 square miles of one of the last remaining pristine habitats in California. Zorro is the Spanish word for fox, a species which still occurs on the ranch. It is one of the largest contiguous privately owned properties remaining in the state and is characterized by intact habitats and undisturbed, functioning watersheds, which is increasingly rare.

The Rio de Fuego is the free river that flows through the Ranch. It is an invaluable piece of California's natural heritage and a hotspot of biological diversity at the confluence of four major ecological regions: the Sierra Nevada, Mojave Desert, Coastal Range and the San Joaquin Valley. The Ranch is critical to preserving landscape-scale habitat connectivity in the region and supports significant road less areas (5,000 acres), also increasingly rare in California.

The Ranch supports at least 23 vegetation communities, many of them not well protected in public or private conservation areas, including some of the last remaining grasslands in the southern San Joaquin Valley. It also includes the ancient valley and blue oak woodlands, old growth conifer forests, numerous riparian and wetland habitats, Joshua tree woodlands, spectacular wildflower fields and outstanding native grasslands.

The Ranch provides habitat for a number of species listed as Threatened or Endangered, including the California condor, San Joaquin kit fox, blunt-nosed leopard lizard, San Joaquin antelope squirrel, striped adobe lily, Bakersfield cactus, elderberry longhorn beetle and the Tehachapi slender salamander.

Portions of the Ranch have been designated Important Bird Areas by the Audubon California because of its importance as a foraging area for the California Condor and the large number of Purple Martins nesting in the Ranch's oak woodlands. Moreover, Zorro Ranch has one-third of California's oak species on its lands and supports extensive oak woodlands and oak forests including some of the largest individual oaks in the state. The Ranch also provides important migratory and wintering habitat for numerous bird species, including raptors such as the Golden Eagle, Swainson's Hawks, grassland birds, like the Long-billed Curlew and Mountain Plover, and numerous grasslands species.

Rancho Zorro was established in 1843 through a Mexican land grant. The Pedro Luna family owned the ranch in 1855 and raised cattle. After Pedro's death in 1893, the ranch went to his son, Tomas, and was later sold to a 70-member group of Southern California land developers and investors in 1912. The new owners secured the necessary water entitlements and expanded its cattle ranching operations and farming (almond orchards). Those investors and their heirs would continue to own Zorro Ranch into the 21st century.

The Future of Zorro Ranch

Because of its close proximity to Los Angeles, commercial development of Zorro Ranch had been contemplated since the 1990s. The company of investors (Zorro Ranch Co.) had announced plans for a community consisting of houses, condominiums, a retirement village, and a commercial/industrial center but did not provide a timetable. The CEO of the Zorro Ranch, Hawk Rosales, remained committed to stewardship of the Ranch but also faced intense pressure to develop the land given its extreme value, from his board of directors.

This pressure is increasingly intensifying as four national home builders are seeking a partnership and commitment from the Zorro Ranch Co. to build a 4,000 acre residential community, a commercial plaza to service travelers on the adjacent interstate freeway, a major power plant to serve real estate development, and a deal with a communications company to route fiber optic network throughout the Ranch. The developers are considering damming the Rio del Fuego to provide drinking water to its residents and for landscaping. This is just the beginning for full development of the Ranch.

There are key players intent on protecting and conserving Zorro Ranch for its biodiversity and uniqueness. Individuals and organizations such as Audubon California, the Sierra Club, Natural Resources Defense Council, South Coast Wildlands and the Planning and Conservation League are seeking to preserve this un-fragmented open space and natural habitat from development. State and federal wildlife agencies have also expressed their concerns for the protection of threatened and endangered species and their habitat. Some prominent state and federal legislators are also interested in protecting Zorro Ranch's treasures.

CEO, Hawk Rosales, wants to negotiate a conservation and land use agreement with the environmental community, state and federal agencies, and the developers to identify portions of the Ranch that could proceed with development in an environmentally sensitive way and to identify lands that will be permanently preserved and conserved for wildlife and natural habitat and to establish a long term mechanism to restore and enhance the conserved land.

Scenario

Your team of stakeholders has been convened to negotiate this agreement. Stakeholders include wildlife, forestry, agriculture (cattle), developer/real estate, hydrology, soils, and an environmental group. This agreement should result in the environmental groups not opposing the planned development by allowing for conservation of natural resources, native biodiversity and developed land use of the Zorro Ranch in a timely fashion. Public access to the conserved lands must also be a feature of the agreement and find ways to achieve this. The goal is to decide how best to keep the undeveloped land intact and not fragment the property to ensure connectivity with wildlife corridors and habitat. Sources of funds to protect and restore the conserved land should also be identified.

Questions

1. How can development and its human impact to biodiversity be minimized or mitigated?
2. Explain why biodiversity is important to the economy and communities of Zorro Ranch and why it should be connected
3. Where are there conflicts between biodiversity, the economy and the environment? How can this be managed or mitigated?
4. How would damming the Rio del Fuego affect biodiversity? Can this be done without seriously affecting biodiversity? What other alternatives might there be for a water supply?
5. What range of strategies or tools can be used to help promote and sustain biodiversity?
6. To what extent are different species and different levels of biodiversity worth protecting? Should more effort be placed on one level than another?
7. Can agriculture remain viable in the planned development and with protections for biodiversity?
8. What kind of “give and take” will need to occur among the stakeholders in order to achieve a “win-win” situation?
9. What federal and state fish and wildlife regulations will need to be considered for compliance as the agreement is negotiated?
10. What federal or state grant funds are available to help implement the agreement?
11. Should there be a cap on the population of new residents to avoid adverse impacts to biodiversity and the environment?

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