

Conservation Fellowship

Escondido
Creek
Conservancy



2018-19



“You can’t go back and change the beginning, but you can start where you are and change the ending.”

— C.S. Lewis

Grape Day
Park

Photo By Richard Murphy

Re-imagining Grape Day Park and the Escondido Creek Flood Control Channel

The Conservancy has a big vision: to help make the City of Escondido and—in particular—the six-mile Escondido Creek concrete flood control corridor, a community where people socialize at creekside restaurants and safely recreate along tree and plant-filled parks with their families and friends.

In the 1950s and 1960s, putting creeks in concrete flood control channels helped create opportunities for cities to develop, as rainwater was quickly diverted downstream. Although this controlled flooding, many flood control channels became the equivalent of alleyways, visually degrading neighborhoods as they became littered with trash and prone to crime. Sadly, areas along the Escondido Creek flood control channel have some of the highest crime rates in the city.

The Conservancy is working with the City of Escondido, the Escondido Chamber of Commerce, and other partners to re-imagine Escondido Creek as a place matching this vision. To kick off the re-imagining, in 2017 the Conservancy was awarded a \$355,000 grant from the State of California to create a design for a more natural creek in Grape Day Park. With these funds, the Conservancy has hired engineers, biologists and economists who will help us incorporate the very best science into a new vision that simultaneously advances a healthy environment, community, and economy.

Early Conceptual Rendering



Engaging Escondido's Next Leaders in the Future of the Watershed

Restoring the Escondido Creek flood control channel into a lively and vibrant place for people and nature will take time. People of all ages, especially young people and families residing near the creek, must be engaged to make this a reality.

Accordingly, the Conservancy has created a new program of Conservation Fellows where young people from communities adjacent to the creek are participating in the Grape Day Park restoration project. The Conservation Fellows are getting real-life experience as they attend meetings and undertake their own complementary research projects.

We want the Conservation Fellows to be inspired by nature, as we are. Thanks to generous donations from two local foundations, the Conservancy has been taking the Fellows on adventures including hikes, visits to the Elfin Forest Interpretive Center, and even a class to create art in nature. We hope to continue the Conservation Fellows program in the years ahead so that additional young people from Escondido can have an experience in nature that could spark a career and life dedicated to science or conservation.



“Through my Conservation Fellowship project, I hope to inspire local restaurants to help reduce pollution in our creek by switching from single-use plastics to less harmful alternatives. I’ve come to learn that just one person can make a difference in their community and it’s been great to meet other people my age who are also willing to make an impact.”

— Mayra, Conservation Fellow,
Escondido High School



Plaza Del Arroyo

The first fieldtrip for the Conservation Fellows was to our pollinator garden in downtown Escondido, Plaza Del Arroyo. The pocket park was founded in 2014 with the pollinator garden being added in 2017. Our hope with this garden is to inspire a more natural Escondido Creek and creek trail. The Fellows were able to witness how even the small area of native habitat could bring Monarch butterflies, hummingbirds, and other pollinator species into the heart of the city. Unfortunately, not everyone has come to appreciate the wildlife habitat we've created. Litter and graffiti are a frequent problem at the garden and the Fellows put on their gloves and helped pick up trash left behind in the garden.

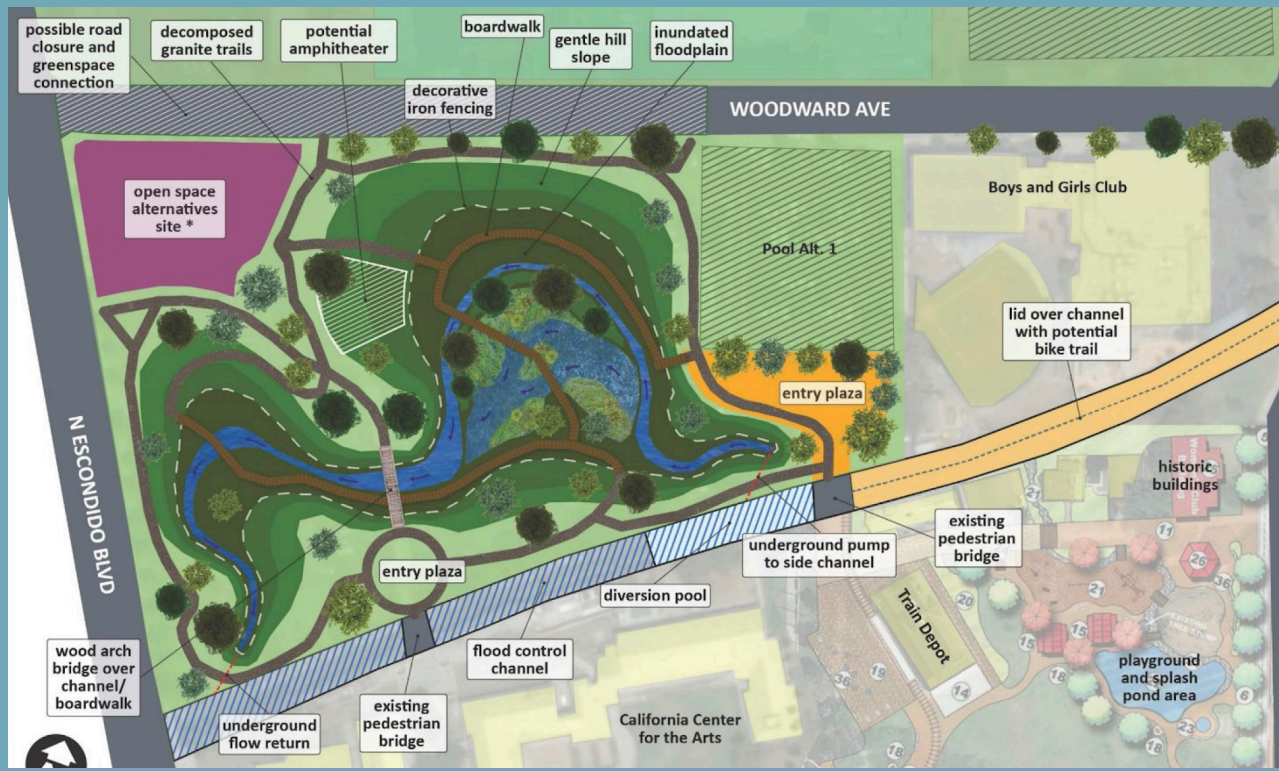


Grape Day Park

After cleaning up the garden, the Fellows got to explore Grape Day Park and journal about their perceptions of nature in and out of the City of Escondido. Together, we discussed the hidden treasures of Escondido, the challenges our city faces, and the value nature can bring to us all.



“My biggest takeaway is that Escondido can be beautiful... I'd never really thought of Escondido as more than a dirty town.”



Preliminary design of the flood control enhancement at Grape Day Park.

Park Within A Park

“The Ditch,” “The Sewer,” “The Homeless Highway”... we’ve heard them all. Within the City of Escondido, the concrete flood channel functions well to carry flood waters, but it also contributes to higher pollution and increased water temperatures, making it uninhabitable for some species downstream. Fortunately, on August 8th key city planners and managers from the City of Escondido, hydrologists, biologists, and economists joined our Conservation Fellows to kick off the planning process. Their input was instrumental to the success of this project, as their communities will be directly affected by this redesign study.

In December, we received our economic study and a preliminary design that modeled the most effective way to enhance the channel. The project’s success also relies on the channel maintaining its current role of controlling flood waters while enhancing the local ecology, surrounding communities, and nearby businesses. Since there is little room to work within this area, removing the concrete or widening the channel were not viable options. Instead the plan demonstrates a pump that would bring water into an inundated floodplain that would cool the water, filter pollutants, and recharge the groundwater—creating a new park within Grape Day Park that would provide recreational opportunities for local residents.



Fellows Mayra, Sophie, and Paola at their first planning meeting.

“I’ve loved every part of this program—especially getting to know others who are passionate about our city and the environment.”

- Paola

Fellows and contracted specialists gather at potential restoration site.



Exploring Inland

The Conservation Fellows joined us on a number of hikes around the Escondido Creek watershed including Elfin Forest Recreational Reserve, Bottle Peak, MJM Ranch, and Los Cielos Preserve. Not only were they able to get a sense of their surroundings, they also learned about native plants, invasive species, and watershed health.

Seeing the creek in its natural state was of utmost importance for our Fellows to participate in the restoration of the concrete flood control channel. The Fellows were also able to get hands-on by removing invasive species and learning different data collection methods. They learned how to make written observations, make digital observations through iNaturalist, and collect visual data with drones.



Fellows standing on collapsed road obstructing the flow of Escondido

“My favorite part has been the hikes we went on. They really helped me learn about all the different species. I’ve noticed that I feel a lot more connected to nature in everyday life.”



Fellows crossing Escondido Creek



Jocelyn proudly removing invasive fennel





Mayra scales down a cliff ledge at Dixon Lake, Escondido



Fellows hiking to their first rock climbing excursion

Overnight Camping at Dixon Lake

For the overnight camping excursion, The Escondido Creek Conservancy partnered with Outdoor Outreach to create an experience full of fun, nature, and critical thinking at Dixon Lake and Daley Ranch.

The day began with a planning exercise to generate ideas for an Interpretive Center and primitive campground at one of Daley Ranch's historical sites. The fellows were able to collaborate with their peers and local experts for an engaging brainstorming session and present their favorite ideas.

The rest of the weekend included rock climbing, pedal boating, card games, and... washing their own dishes! The fellows also learned how to set up and break down their own tents. Some of the fellows even helped prepare meals.



Fellows enjoying a game of cards before dinner



Fellows enjoy pedal boating at Dixon Lake with Conservancy staff member, Nathan Serrato

Exploring Coastlands



Fellows birdwatching at San Elijo Lagoon



A snowy egret looking for food in the San Elijo Lagoon

“I have more knowledge about my surroundings and I am more aware of the things I can do to help!”

— Paola

To really understand the Escondido Creek watershed and their sense of place, the Fellows were able to see for themselves where the creekwater drains into the ocean. The first coastal excursion brought the fellows to the San Elijo Lagoon with local birding expert, Alison Hiers. The Fellows learned about local birds, aquatic ecosystems, and made their own observations. Afterwards, they all designed their own trail signs to encourage park visitors to respect wildlife.

The students then visited the San Dieguito Lagoon, which is the collection source in our southern neighboring watershed. The students met with local artist, Kerry Campbell, who helped them to express their impressions of nature through watercolor painting. Each left with their own masterpiece and interpretation of the lagoon.



The Fellows creating a life-size mermaid in the sand



Resting after a succesful night hike



Fellows enjoying their day at San Onofre State Beach

Overnight Camping at San Onofre State Beach

The last camping trip began at Carlsbad State Beach where the Fellows took their first-ever surf lesson with our partner Outdoor Outreach! After a few wipeouts, many of the Fellows succesfully “shredded the gnar.”

The caravan then moved on to San Onofre State Beach Campgrounds to set up camp, make dinner, and embark on a night hike to the beach. The stars shone through the partly cloudy sky, and a barn owl greeted the students as we neared the soothing sounds of the waves crashing against the shore.

The following morning, the Fellows packed up camp and hit the beach. There, they enjoyed playing frisbee, jumping waves, and making sand castles before heading home for the weekend.

Mentorships and Collaboration



Each of the Fellows were tasked with focusing in on one area of the Grape Day Park Project and creating a project around it. They paired with a Conservancy staff member to guide them through their research. Collaboration was also encouraged through Project Workdays, which allowed the Fellows to discuss their projects and get ideas from their peers.

Projects



Cameron

Cameron created an informational brochure to educate readers on the Southern California steelhead. After months of research, the final brochure outlines the history of steelhead in Escondido Creek, and the current problems relating to the chanelized portion of the creek. The last page is dedicated to simple actions each individual can take to support the conservation of steelhead trout!

Carolina

Carolina was passionate about engaging youth in local restoration efforts. Most of her time was spent researching and creating a presentation about the Grape Day Park project targeting high school students. She successfully presented her findings at Del Lago Academy in Escondido and was able to get feedback about the project from local youth.



Yovana and Felix

Yovana and Felix collaborated to research trash catchment methods for city drainage systems. After researching the best and most cost-effective methods, they presented their findings to a city official. During the presentation, they happily discovered that their methods would save the city \$60,000 annually in maintenance costs and still keep trash from getting into our oceans.



Michelle

Michelle focused her research on the benefits nature brings to communities. Michelle discovered how nature in urban settings can reduce crime and obesity rates, while improving mental and physical wellness. Michelle then translated her findings into an easy-to-read brochure to educate the public on what the Grape Day Park Project can do for the City of Escondido.



Jocelyn

Jocelyn's project focused on a possible unintended consequence of the Grape Day Park Project: gentrification. After interviewing the project economist and conducting her own research, Jocelyn identified five policies for slowing/preventing gentrification in cities. Though speaking with local council-woman Consuelo Martinez, Jocelyn successfully introduced two new policy ideas to the City of Escondido.





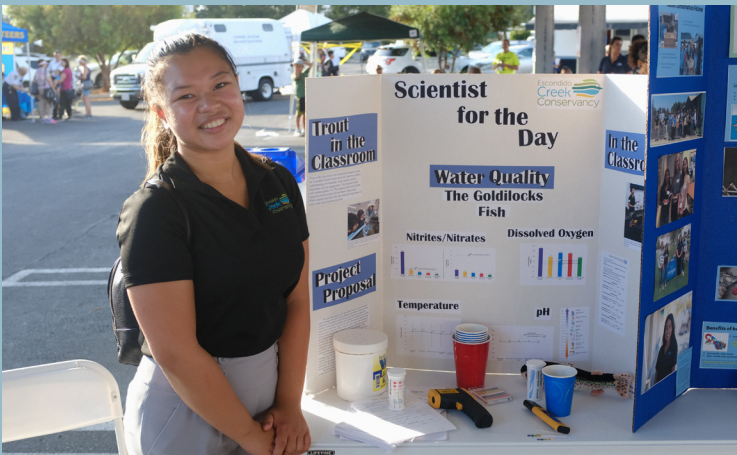
Melissa

Melissa created a ten-minute video that described the benefits of the Grape Day Park Project. She used footage from multiple sources and also shot some original footage for her video. Her goal was to make information on the Grape Day Park Project easy to understand and available for a general audience.



Luis

Luis created a Story Map using Arc GIS online that followed the Conservation Fellows on their outdoor fieldtrips. The Story Map also gives a brief description of the Grape Day Project and tells how each of the Conservation Fellows' projects complement it. Luis's experience with web design made learning the new mapping software easy!



Marikate

Marikate's interest in education inspired her to create new curriculum to help elementary school students understand water quality as it relates to Escondido Creek. Not only did she create this classroom lesson, but she also tried it out with a local Escondido school. The interactive lesson allowed students to test water from the Escondido Creek in their classrooms and investigate which aquatic species could best survive in our local waters.



Lindsey

Lindsey was most interested in gathering feedback from the community about the Grape Day Park Project. Lindsey created a survey to assess the needs of the community and receive feedback about the restoration project. Overall, she discovered that Escondido residents were enthusiastic about more green spaces and supported the idea of a more natural flowing creek behind Grape Day Park.

Mayra

Mayra was moved by how much single-use plastic was present in Escondido Creek and the concrete flood control channel. She researched some of the best alternatives to single-use plastics and even interviewed some local experts. To finish her project, she presented at a Downtown Business Association meeting and encouraged local restaurants to make the switch!



Sophie

Sophie's project inspiration came from the pollinators that thrive in the Conservancy's native pollinator garden in downtown Escondido. Sophie made regular observations of the garden to see what types of pollinator species were using the garden. All the observations, along with photos, were put together in an online blog.



Alexandru

With the perception of crime along the Escondido Creek Bike Trail, Alexandru designed an event that would encourage local youth and families to utilize the creek trail and see that it can be a safe for the public. "Cruisin' Creek Trail," modeled after Escondido's "Cruisin' Grand," would involve bike races and a bike decorating contest. Alex created mock flyers, an event budget, materials list, an itinerary, and gathered the appropriate permits needed for this future event to take place!



Tory

Tory was inspired to create a visual display of the Grape Day Park redesign. He based his visual model off the plans sent by the project's contracted engineers. Tory's plan features a drainage basin, an expanded park, a boardwalk, and even running water through the concrete channel. His model will help the general public visualize and understand the proposed restoration project.





Liam

After learning that active recreation is sometimes discouraged due to the need to protect sensitive species, Liam was interested in helping the mountain biking community find alternative areas to recreate. Liam conducted a survey to assess the needs of the community and found that many showed interest in pumptracks while not as many were interested in lift parks for mountain biking.



Paola and Alejandro

Paola and Alejandro partnered to examine the water quality of Escondido Creek. The pair were able to gather data from the California Environmental Data Exchange Network and run their own tests with the Conservancy's water quality team. The data they collected helped to explain the concrete channel's role in elevated water temperatures and the lack of native fish species living downstream of the channel.

Represented Schools

Cal State San Marcos

High Tech High School

Del Lago Academy

Orange Glen High School

Escondido Charter High School

San Pasqual High School

Escondido High School



Community

Throughout their time with the Conservancy, the Fellows were given many opportunities to get to know and be involved with our community.

The Fellows were given a chance to volunteer and educate the public at a number of events. Many of our Fellows represented the Conservancy at Escondido's Earth Day Festival, Grand Ave Festival, 4th of July Parade, Veteran's Day Festival, and many more! Together, they helped spread information about the Conservancy, our native plants and wildlife, and the Grape Day Park restoration project.

Many of the Fellows found ways of engaging with the community during their time working on their projects. Some interviewed local professionals, some presented in schools, while others surveyed the public for feedback.

The Fellows also displayed their projects at a local community event called National Night Out Against Crime. The Fellows were able to discuss their projects with the community, City Councilmembers, and even the Mayor of Escondido!



Tory shows Escondido Mayor Paul McNamara his 3D Model of the Grape Day Park Project



Marikate demonstrates water quality testing to local students



Thank You!



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