

Education Strategic Plan

2016-2020

EXECUTIVE
SUMMARY



The **ESCONDIDO CREEK**
Conservancy



Purpose of the Plan

“Plans to protect air and water, wilderness and wildlife are in fact plans to protect man.”

–Stewart Udall

This is the first Education Strategic Plan for The Escondido Creek Conservancy (TECC). The organization began in 1991 and the education program launched in 2009. This Strategic Plan is a **“living” document designed to change and evolve** as new information is gleaned through assessment and used to increase efficiency.

The purpose of the plan is **to add clarity, focus, and guidance** to TECC’s educational programs to **ensure the intended outcomes are achieved**. This plan will guide all of TECC’s education decision-making and programming for the next five years. It was developed in 2015 using a **three-tiered planning body** consisting of an Internal Advisory Committee, a Core Committee, and a Stakeholder Committee.





About the Conservancy



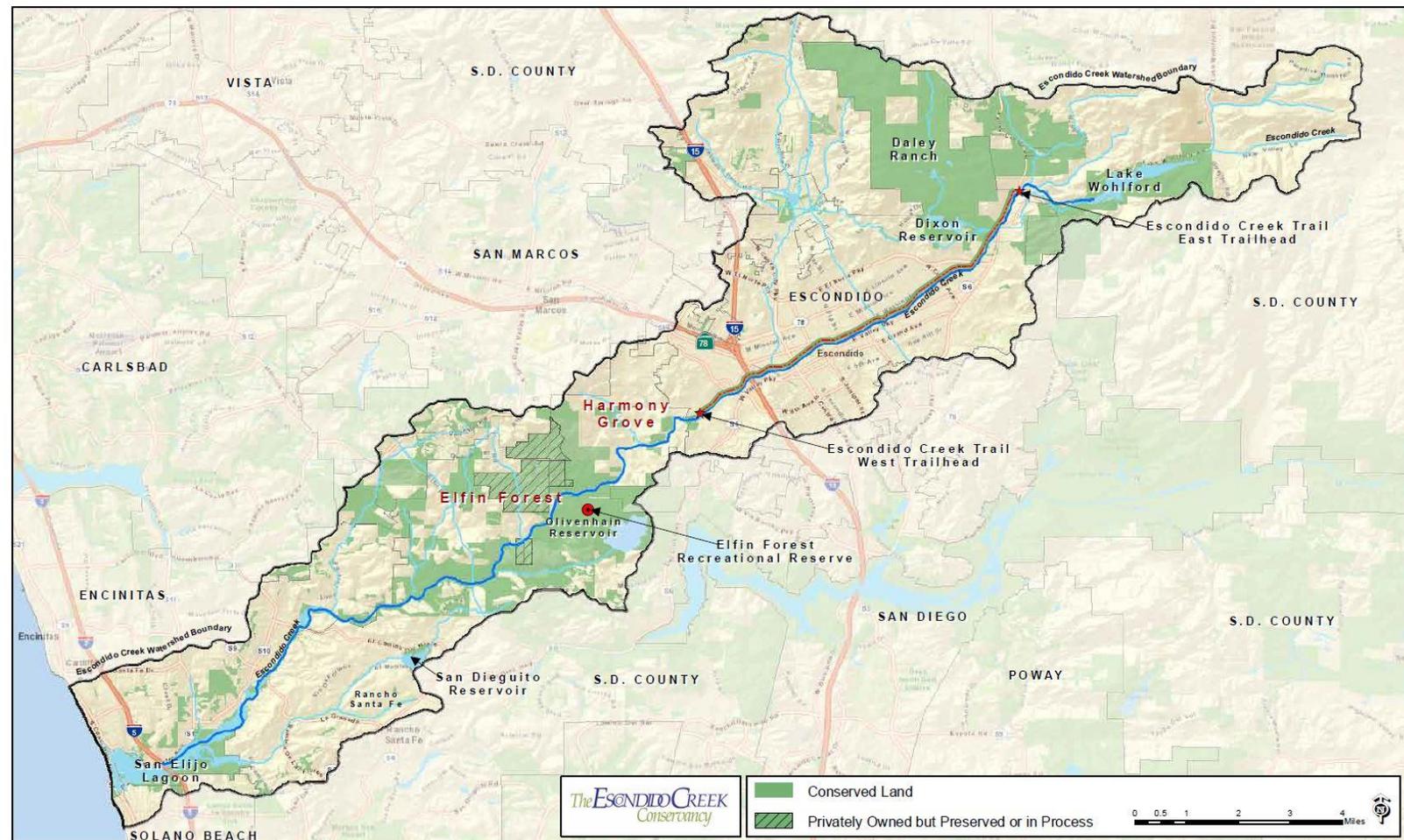
TECC MISSION:

To preserve and restore the Escondido Creek watershed.

TECC VISION:

Through the Conservancy's leadership, the Escondido Creek watershed will become a model of vibrant urban communities and viable natural ecosystems thriving together.





WHERE WE WORK

The Escondido Creek watershed is located in the northern portion of San Diego County. The creek that gives the watershed its name begins at the upper headwaters in Bear Valley above Lake Wohlford and flows more than 26 miles to meet the ocean at San Elijo Lagoon. During that journey it meanders through lush riparian corridors adorned with proud sycamores and twisted majestic coast live oak trees, as well as shade-less urban stretches paved with concrete.

For some watershed residents, the stark, polluted portions of the creek is all they have ever seen of it. To them, the creek may appear to be a concrete ditch with very little to appreciate. Providing a holistic understanding of the watershed, its creek, and its relevance to a healthy ecosystem and our lives is part of the challenge of TECC’s educational programs.



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WHAT WE DO

The Escondido Creek Conservancy **serves the watershed through land acquisition, land management, and environmental education.** We have helped **preserve more than 3,000 acres of habitat** for sensitive and endangered species. We also **provide tens of thousands** of children and adults with educational programming and compatible outdoor recreational opportunities every year.

Why Environmental Education?

San Diego County is **the most biologically-diverse county in the continental U.S.,** but wildlife and the habitats where they live are **under serious threat** due to habitat degradation, species loss, and climate change. Although TECC works tirelessly to preserve land in the Escondido Creek watershed, saving land is only part of the battle. Without environmental stewards who understand, value, and protect the unique biodiversity of the region, threats will always loom. This is why the need for environmental awareness is so critical. **How can we expect future generations to care about our precious natural resources**—to recognize that forests are our planet's lungs, and our creeks and rivers its lifeblood—**without environmental education?**

What is a Watershed?

In part, a watershed is the movement of water from inland out to sea—for example, when rainfall runs off the top of a mountain and forms a river that finally reaches the ocean. But a **watershed is also more than just the water shedding off the topography** as it drops to the sea. A watershed **includes all the plants, animals, and man-made objects** within its region. It is a **living ecosystem.** We can see the **interrelationship of all of nature** in a watershed.



TECC's Education Program



EDUCATION MISSION:

To provide access to environmental education and experiences that foster stewardship of the Escondido Creek watershed and beyond.

EDUCATION VISION:

By cultivating an appreciation for nature locally we will grow, inspire, and galvanize a lifelong generation of stewards to beautify and protect the natural environment within and beyond the Escondido Creek watershed in perpetuity.



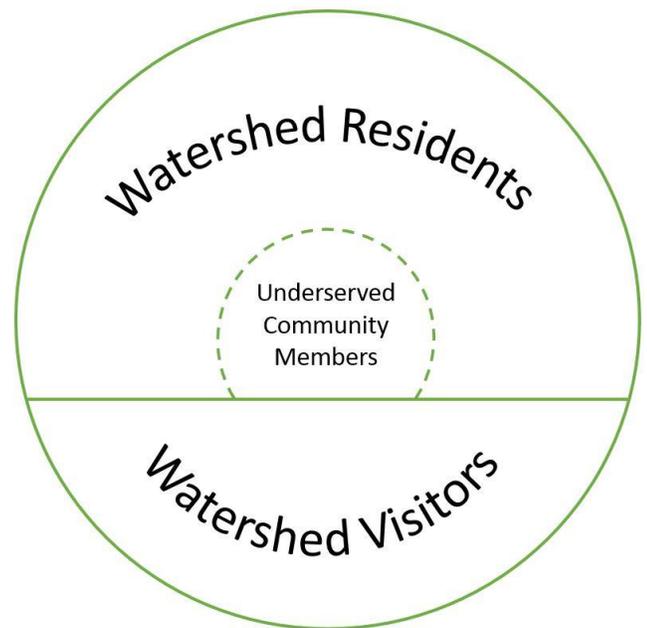


WHO WE SERVE

TECC's education programs primarily serve **two groups: Escondido Creek watershed residents and visitors.**

Because TECC does not have the resources to wholly serve everyone within these target groups, **special priority is given to:**

- (1) underserved residents/local schools of the watershed, followed by...**
- (2) all other residents/local school groups, and then...**
- (3) all other visitors to the watershed.**



WHAT WE TEACH

TECC's educational programs may focus on and/or include the following subjects:

- Biology
- Climate Change
- Conservation Biology
- Environmental Conservation
- Land Management
- Local Geology
- Local Geography
- Local Habitats and Ecology
- Local Native Americans
- Native Plants
- Native Wildlife
- Nature Appreciation
- Outdoor Recreation
- Sustainability
- Watersheds
- Water Conservation



How We Teach

TECC's teaching methods are intended to optimize our small size and limited resources to attain lasting positive impacts. **We provide multiple programs targeted at a variety of age groups**—from nature-based fieldtrips for school children to captivating presentations for adults. This gives individuals the opportunity to receive **a number of engaging experiences at various stages in their life**. And because we know our time with our audience is brief, we use a teaching method called **inquiry-based learning** that **cultivates curious minds and encourages participants to continue learning about nature independently**.

In addition to nature-based curricula, participants come to realize the important role they play in the health of our watershed through two other key inquiry-based learning programs:

PROJECT-BASED LEARNING: partnerships in which participants gain knowledge and skills by working with staff/volunteers to investigate and respond to real-life questions, problems, or challenges facing the watershed or the Conservancy. This includes K-12 and college-level environmental research projects, and student-designed projects focusing on vital environmental questions.

SERVICE LEARNING PROJECTS: participants perform meaningful community service in alignment with TECC's mission as part of an educational experience. Examples include habitat restoration, creek clean-ups, the collection of biological data, and other projects solving watershed-related issues.



THREE PRIMARY CHALLENGES

Barriers to Nature Appreciation

- ❗ Limited access to natural areas for residents of low-income communities
- ❗ Access to transportation
- ❗ Language barriers



TECC Capacity

- ❗ Limited human resources
- ❗ Limited funds
- ❗ Educational programming needs prioritization and further focus



Public Utilization of TECC Programs

- ❗ The public is not aware of all the programs and services TECC offers



All of these challenges are addressed by the goals of the Education Strategic Plan



Goals

Goal 1: Optimize TECC's small size to achieve the largest impact possible

With limited financial and human resources, TECC must act strategically to achieve optimum performance. This will require monitoring and evaluating all current and future TECC programs, conducting surveys and needs assessments internally and in the community, detecting where the gaps are, and ensuring that we effectively reach the people who will benefit the most from environmental education.



Goal 2: Foster stewardship among students from formal education institutions located within or in close proximity to the Escondido Creek watershed



TECC currently provides curricula for local schools and plans to improve and expand these efforts, as well as create new ones. This goal aims to increase a sense of belonging and understanding of the watershed to engender student stewardship. Our approach to achieving this is through engaging, relevant, inquiry-based lessons that adhere to educational standards, connect to each student's life, and that build upon—and are linked back to—what has been and will be learned.

Goal 3: Foster stewardship among residents of—and visitors to—the Escondido Creek watershed

In addition to working with students from local schools, TECC also provides educational programming for everyone else. Whether you're a resident of the watershed or just a visitor passing through, we offer educational programming and volunteer opportunities such as guided hikes, habitat restorations, creek clean-ups, engaging presentations, and more to help instill a sense of awe, wonder, and appreciation for nature. Enhancing these programs and creating new ones with the specific focus of fostering lifelong habits of environmental stewardship will allow us to make a significant contribution to our watershed.



Goal 4: Ensure that all Escondido Creek watershed residents have the opportunity to experience natural areas within the watershed and participate in TECC's environmental education programs



Even though TECC offers programs and activities for anyone in the watershed, not everyone has access to nature. For example, some inner city Escondido residents are never afforded the opportunity to leave their urban confines and experience the awe of wildlands. The portion of the creek they know is beset with concrete and often litter-strewn, sterile, and besmeared with graffiti. Meanwhile, the creek becomes a verdant wonderland just outside the city limits. How can anyone be expected to value something they haven't experienced? While we serve all visitors and residents in the watershed, TECC gives special priority to underserved communities for this reason. Whether it's procuring transportation for underserved schools to bring their students to a nature preserve, or a TECC representative providing outreach to a school or community, we are determined to tear down the barriers and provide access to environmental education and the joy of nature by every means within our capacity.

Goal 5: Identify and create natural interpretation features within the watershed that enhance the educational experience

By creating monuments and other aesthetic enhancements in a few key watershed locations, we hope to enrich learning and compliment the natural beauty of the landscape.



Goal 6: Develop new partnerships and enhance existing ones within local and neighboring watershed communities to expand connections, benchmark best practices, and achieve a greater impact



San Diego County is endowed with a host of outstanding businesses, educational institutions, and other non-profit organizations. TECC recognizes the tremendous value of partnerships and collaborations with these various agencies. In fact, our educational programming was borne out a remarkable partnership with the Olivenhain Municipal Water District to build an Interpretive Center at the Elfin Forest Recreational Reserve—a building that has served as the hub for the bulk of our programs since 2009. Other key collaborations with organizations like the San Diego Zoo and the San Elijo Lagoon Conservancy have further enabled us to extend our reach and better serve our target audience. Strengthening these bonds and creating new alliances is a key strategic goal toward maximizing our impact.

Goal 7: Ensure adequate staff and volunteers trained to enrich the educational programs

An organization is only as good as the people who help run it. TECC's minimal staff means that we rely heavily on volunteers for support. For example, our Trail Patrol program relies on a corps of dedicated volunteers to help maintain trails and serve as ambassadors of our natural lands. Recruiting ample volunteers, drawing on their skills, and developing their expertise to take on vital roles within the Conservancy not only bolsters the human resources and human capital needed to achieve our mission—it also provides our volunteers with a rewarding experience.



Goal 8: Ensure adequate funding to support environmental education programs



As a non-profit organization, TECC depends on grants and donations to continue our educational programs and keep our watershed healthy, natural, and beautiful. Creating donation opportunities that appeal to grantors and community contributors—as well as implementing strategies for cost recovery—will ensure sustainability.



Conclusion

Each of the goals outlined here align with TECC's core values and bolster our mission. Under this plan, **our education programming will be:**

- **Flexible and adaptive**, learning from all challenges and strides and evolving accordingly;
- **Sustainable**, operating smoothly without resource-related interruptions;
- **Inclusive**, removing socioeconomic barriers and providing access to nature-based experiences for all;
- **Efficient**, leveraging our small size to achieve optimum positive outcomes;
- **Collaborative**, forming traditional and non-traditional partnerships to extend our reach;
- **Action oriented**, resulting in the creation of lifelong environmental stewardship;
- **Exemplary**, serving as an effective model for other conservancies to follow.

As TECC continues to preserve wildlands it is important that we also foster an appreciation for nature. This Strategic Plan serves as a roadmap for environmental education programming that galvanizes the public to value wild places like the land TECC and all our supporters have worked to protect. It is our hope that this document is another step towards expanding the impact of our reach locally, while fostering a conservation ethic with positive global implications.

Collaborators, Partners, & Sponsors



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Conservancy

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