



Chipping Concrete, Finding Water

A NEW GREENWAY,
WITH STREAM, IN TUJUNGA WASH

MUCH OF THE LOS ANGELES watershed was buried under concrete in the 1950s, when the freeways opened orange groves to development and the Los Angeles River and its major tributaries were turned into flood control channels engineered to rush water to the ocean at maximum speed. Water that used to feed the aquifers was lost in transit, but back then, few people worried: more could always be imported from the north.

Now, however, in the face of climate change, water quality concerns, and expectations of drought, a movement is afoot to capture as much as possible of the streamflow and rainwater in the county for use in projects that would mitigate pollution while also replenishing depleted groundwater supplies.

A unique new park and greenway, with a natural-looking stream, was opened on November 7, 2007, in the Valley Glen neighborhood of Los Angeles. It runs a mile along both sides of the Tujunga Wash Flood Control Channel, between Vanowen Street and Oxnard Avenue. Each side of the greenway is 65 feet

wide; the rectangular channel in the middle is about the same. The Tujunga Greenway and Stream Restoration Project, created by Los Angeles County and the Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority (MRCA) and funded by \$7 million from bond acts and other public sources, could well become a model for others.

On an overcast winter day, Anne Canright and I parked on Vanowen, entered through a handsome wrought-iron gate (by Brett Gladstone, who designed most of the gateworks on the Los Angeles River), and strolled along a gravel path, with the fenced vertical bank of the channel to our left, and to our right a friendly little stream. The shallow stream meandered over small stones and gravel, flanked by young alders, cottonwoods, ferns, salvias, and other greenery. Interpretive signs at the trail explained that the stream is fed by water diverted from the channel through a half-mile-long pipe. As the water flows through the greenway, it is filtered and cleaned by sand, gravel, and tree roots. Some percolates into the ground, the rest is

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The new stream runs past young trees beside the path, which is mostly gravel.

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returned to the flood control channel via another pipe.

Before the flood control channel was built, Tujunga Wash had contributed to the 40-square-mile San Fernando Valley Aquifer. Since the early 1950s, it had been emptying straight into the Los Angeles River. Now, through this new stream, it is again helping to retain water in the ground. According to the MRCA, in a year with average rainfall, 325,000 gallons a day are expected to flow through, as much as is used by the average four-person family in a year.

Soon we were met by three MRCA staff members, Barbara Romero, director of urban pro-

grams, Elizabeth Jordan, project manager for the greenway, and Dash Stolarz, director of public affairs. “Almost everything here is native,” Romero told us. “We’re trying to create a natural system in an unnatural area by letting plants compete.” Some won’t make it, but that’s part of the restoration process. So are changes in the stream, which was built six feet wide, but has expanded to eight feet in some spots. The water is having its way.

Some compromises have proved necessary: at the Oxnard end of the greenway, we came upon a lawn on the other side of the channel. Originally this area had been seeded with native meadow grass, but “it was dead in two weeks,” said Jordan. Ulysses S. Grant High School is across the way and this area gets a lot of use. “So we tried to make it green, and as rugged as we could.” Nor did the fine wood surface on the nearby picnic table survive unscathed for long. As we passed, rangers were at work removing graffiti. Maintenance will be an ongoing concern.

Before the first piece of concrete was broken for the greenway, five years of planning were required and many neighborhood meetings had been held. Many of the local residents are people of modest means. Among older inhabitants, a good number are of Armenian descent, Jordan said, while many of the younger people are Hispanic. As in many other Los Angeles neighborhoods, they have too few parks to enjoy. This greenway cannot provide playing fields but it offers some green space, a place to relax, exercise, and learn about local trees and plants—even while the pleasant new stream supplements the groundwater.

Before leaving, we crossed Vanowen to look at the flood control channel on the other side, with flat, bare, and bleak banks—a blight on the neighborhood. That’s how the site of the greenway looked not long ago. The Los Angeles Flood Control District manages 500 miles of open channels. We had seen the first of what could be many greenways.

“My father asked me what I do and I said I’m in sales,” said Jordan. “I’m selling the idea that parks and greenways provide multiple benefits.”

Meanwhile, upstream in the Tujunga Wash, a much larger water retention project is being planned. Throughout the watershed, other encouraging steps are being taken. Coast & Ocean will report on these in upcoming issues. ■

Top: Before the greenway was built, this mile of the Tujunga Wash Flood Control channel looked like its other 499 or so miles. It was flat, flanked by concrete and gravel, and barren.

Bottom: A closer view of the stream

