

Executive Summary

The Sacramento River Public Recreation Access Study was conducted to assess existing and potential public recreation uses, access, needs, and opportunities along California's Sacramento River in a 100-mile-long, four-county study area located between Red Bluff and Colusa. The study was funded by a CALFED grant (97NO2) awarded jointly to The Nature Conservancy, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), the California Wildlife Conservation Board, and the California Department of Fish and Game. The goals of the study were 1) to identify and characterize existing public access opportunities and needs associated with public recreation facilities and infrastructure throughout the study area, and 2) to identify and make recommendations for future public recreation access opportunities and management programs throughout the study area, with special consideration of five "focus sites" that were acquired with CALFED funding. The five focus sites were the Gunhill, Rx Ranch, and Ward tracts recently acquired by The Nature Conservancy, and the Dead Man's Reach and Capay units owned by USFWS as part of the Sacramento River National Wildlife Refuge.

The study was conducted by reviewing and analyzing existing recreation and demographic data and reports for the study area and by conducting assessments of site facilities. The study also included a series of interviews and meetings that were held with land managers, law enforcement personnel, and interest groups working in or using the study area, and two public meetings that were held in the study area in the fall of 2002.

The Sacramento River is a large dynamic, alluvial river that drains much of northern California and serves as a water source for millions of acres of farmland and millions of people throughout the state. Much of the extensive wildlife-rich riparian forest and other habitats that existed in the river's floodplain for thousands of years were replaced with agricultural crops over the past 150 years as the Sacramento Valley became one of the most productive agricultural areas in the world. With the loss of over 90% of riparian wetland habitats statewide during that time period, came a corresponding impact to the wildlife that depended on it. The hydrology and dynamic meander pattern of the Sacramento River in the study area, however, still support fragmented but important riparian forest, grassland, and wetland communities. These communities, along with the river, provide important habitats for remaining populations of migratory birds, reptiles, amphibians, mammals, and fish.

The U.S. government, the State of California, and private conservation organizations have identified the Sacramento River Conservation Area as a priority for the preservation and restoration of wildlife habitat. Public and private holdings now total over 18,500 acres of land in conservation ownership. Additionally, there are several private recreation-oriented resorts that occupy 44 acres of land. As natural habitat along the river is restored and more lands become publicly owned, public interest and opportunities for recreation use of this area will grow. While

the various agencies and non-profit entities that own properties along the river have primarily acquired these lands for habitat conservation purposes, they recognize public recreation use as an important component of their conservation objectives.

Key Issues and Findings

The results of this study and analysis of previous studies indicate substantial public interest in natural areas. Potentially attractive recreation uses along the Sacramento River include: trail hiking, walking, hunting and fishing, camping, wildlife viewing, nature study, picnicking, boating, beach activities, attending outdoor cultural events, and visiting museums and historic sites. Regional trends indicate a continued interest in the traditional recreation activities of boating, fishing, and hunting. Additionally, other uses such as bird watching, wildlife viewing, and other nature observation activities are expected to increase 65% over the next 40 years.

Some of the key suggestions and needs identified during the course of this study focused on the need to:

- improve the condition of boat ramps and other access points;
- provide more outreach, including handouts, kiosks, and visitor centers;
- provide maps and signage to assist in finding river access and services and to reduce trespassing;
- increase the number of facilities and amenities such as trails, picnicking and camping facilities, especially in the southern portion of the study area;
- provide recreation opportunities for the diversity of ethnic groups (primarily Caucasian and Hispanic) and interests in the study area;
- minimize conflicts between different recreation uses (e.g., boating vs. bird watching, hunting vs. hiking or fishing);
- increase coordination among land managers to improve the value of the recreation opportunities within the study area by planning together and sharing resources and expertise;
- improve coordination among law enforcement and resource agencies with regard to public safety services, including coordination for large annual recreation events;

- plan for the expected substantial population growth in the study area and region over the next decades; and
- coordinate public recreation access planning among the resource agencies, non-profit land trusts, private entities, local landowners, recreation users and other stakeholders in the study area to optimize results and minimize conflicts.

Recommendations

A number of recommendations were made based on the study. They are detailed in Chapter 7 of this document. They include *general recommendations for recreation access and amenities*, *focus site recommendations*, and *general recommendations for management coordination and law enforcement support programs*. Key recommendations from the study are listed below.

- **Establish a ‘Pine Creek Preserve’, including a nature visitor center and a dynamic river research center:** Establish the ‘Pine Creek Preserve’ on the over 3,800 acres of conservation land held by federal and state agencies and non-profit land trusts in the Pine Creek / Hamilton City area (Exhibit 7-1). The area is now a nearly contiguous dynamic river system complex of exceptional riparian forest, scrub, grassland and riverine wetland habitats, along with lands undergoing restoration. The area offers the opportunity to spotlight the compatibility of conservation and recreation uses in a highly visible and easily accessible location.
- **Establish a small nature interpretive center and trails at Ward Tract:** Consider an interpretive center, trails, and a primitive campground at the Ward tract as an expansion of the Colusa-Sacramento River State Recreation Area. Uses of the site could include outdoor education and environmental stewardship training, fishing, nature observation and other uses consistent with the conservation goals of the site.
- **Establish public information coordination, outreach and planning programs:** The Sacramento River Conservation Area Forum should consider leading and coordinating efforts to establish an information clearinghouse, establish and monitor a river signage program, develop a map and access guide and website, and provide public outreach.
- **Establish a formalized management coordination committee:** The private, local, state, and federal landowner groups and agencies having land with public access opportunities should establish a management coordination committee to share resources and expertise and to coordinate on topics including a shared GIS database, permits, developing cooperative interagency agreements, signage, outreach, public

access and recreation planning, research to improve boat ramps, coordination with law enforcement, and funding of programs.

- **Enhance law enforcement support and coordination:** The local, state and federal agencies with law enforcement roles and responsibilities along the river corridor should coordinate their efforts to develop additional funding and to cooperatively expand their ability to provide needed public safety services.
- **Improve road access:** Consider acquiring new public rights-of-way for road access, especially in the southern portion of the study area.
- **Improve boat access:** Evaluate the need for new and renovated boat facilities; research and evaluate new facility designs; research and review alternative maintenance approaches; streamline permitting; and increase outreach regarding closures and alternative facilities.
- **Consider boat coordinator position:** Consider establishing a “Boating Coordinator” position to coordinate implementation of new boat facilities, channel dredging, maintenance, permitting, signage and other projects needed by all public and private agencies, law enforcement, and public and private facility operators.
- **Establish “Boat Trail”:** Consider establishing a “Boat Trail” system, which includes the study area reach of the Sacramento River, to provide guidance for use by kayaks, canoes, and motorboats, and improved coordination and guidance on camping.
- **Develop and distribute maps and guidebooks:** Develop and distribute maps and brochures or guidebooks with information on the location of public access on the river, directions to the listed sites, road intersections, landmarks, facilities, services and activities available or allowed on different agencies’ lands.
- **Develop multi-agency visitor center, kiosks, and outreach materials:** Develop a multi-agency visitor center and/or kiosks, provide outreach materials, including information on facilities, services, the mission of the landowner, site values and sensitivities, contacts, changes in ownership or management, and new or closed facilities.
- **Provide interpretive signage and observation decks:** Provide nature and cultural interpretive signage and multi-level observation decks to provide an educational component to the visitor experience on public sites with trails, especially those with special environmental significance.

- **Evaluate multi-use trails:** Evaluate the feasibility of multi-use trails on contiguous public land for use by pedestrians, equestrians, and bicycles in areas where use of trails for nature observation and hiking would be consistent with conservation, outreach and other goals for the properties. Potential locations may include the proposed Hamilton City setback levee and the Sacramento River Flood Control project levees.
- **Consider new picnic facilities, campgrounds, and multi-use parks:** Consider new picnic facilities and multi-use river parks by counties or the California Department of Parks and Recreation, to provide group picnic facilities alone or in combination with other amenities.

Conclusions

The Sacramento River between Red Bluff and Colusa continues to be a popular recreation destination within the northern California region. Greater acreage devoted to increasing populations of plant, animal, and aquatic life will likely draw more people to the area, because Californians indicate that the qualities of naturalness are highly attractive as recreation settings. As the population in the region grows, demand for public recreation opportunities will increase greatly, especially for activities such as nature observation, hiking, and picnicking.

There is a gap between the public demand and the current availability for public recreation access facilities in the area, including boat ramps, trails, and other facilities. There is also a great need for public outreach to convey the goals of public agencies in the region as well as the location of public access points along the river. Increased management coordination and law enforcement coordination will be needed to meet current needs and handle current issues such as boat ramp closures and the large annual tubing events, as well as to plan for the anticipated increase in public recreation use of the river in the future. Input from landowners, recreation users and other stakeholders will be needed to support and plan for recreational use along the Sacramento River.

Recreation planning along the Sacramento River needs to strike a balance between recreation use, other human uses, and programs for the protection and restoration of the dynamic Sacramento River ecosystem. In achieving that balance, the community, recreation users, and river ecosystems will flourish.