

W. Reed

Subject: Press Conf -- Valley Press article

Leaders support first Endangered Species Day in AV

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LANCASTER - Today marks the nation's first Endangered Species Day, and a dozen Valley leaders honored the event a day early by gathering for a discussion under the sun Wednesday at the Prime Desert Woodland Preserve.

The group, which included those interested in politics as well as those interested in preservation, was brought together by the Antelope Valley Conservancy, a relatively young nonprofit organization, dedicated to obtaining and maintaining land for public interest.

"Species preservation begins with habitat preservation," said Wendy Reed, executive director of the conservancy, as she stood amid more than 100 acres of desert wildlife in the heart of Lancaster. "We are at a point where we can preserve some of the real treasures of our biological world."

The U.S. Senate on April 6 unanimously passed a resolution designating May 11 as "Endangered Species Day," set aside to raise awareness of the more than 1,500 species worldwide on the threatened and endangered list.

Several of those critters are common locally. Posters on display Wednesday depicted the Mohave ground squirrel and desert tortoise, which are endangered, and the burrowing owl, which is considered a "species of concern."

The key to keeping these species alive is setting aside open land as protected habitats, Reed said as she introduced Wednesday's speakers.

In his turn at the microphone, Lancaster City Councilman Ron Smith said the city is considering creating a burrowing owl preserve.

"We're looking at 500 acres out by the Poppy Reserve," he said, adding that the city is using biological surveys to catalog wildlife in potential preserve areas.

That announcement came four months after Royal Investors Inc. bulldozed a burrowing owl habitat near 40th Street West and Avenue K.

It later came to light that the city had failed to submit a map of the proposed development to the State Clearinghouse, which has authority over all development projects in California and disseminates information about the environmental impact of those projects.

In February, area birdwatchers spoke at council meetings regarding the issue, and the council voted to revoke the approval of plans for the proposed 116 homes. In March, city planners discussed forming a local land trust to control mitigation fees and manage areas for conservation.

"We've really taken a lead here in the Valley on being wise stewards of our environment," Smith said

Wednesday.

According to Mickey Long, regional park superintendent and natural areas administrator for Los Angeles County Parks, 12 wildlife sanctuaries throughout the Antelope Valley attest to that statement, as do 18 natural areas and 17 nature centers.

Fish and Game biologist Scott Harris said focusing on preserving land now is important before the Valley is saturated with development.

"Money can often be better spent preserving the habitat that is left than bringing back species sliding toward extinction," Harris said.

He said the word endangered has various definitions. Although species on the official list enjoy legal protection, many plants and animals are "endangered" in the colloquial sense, threatened as large habitats are wiped out by incoming housing and agricultural developments.

The bottom line is many plants and animals seldom are given a second thought unless the public gets involved, he said.

"I haven't heard of a lot of people speaking out (in the Valley) until the last few years," Harris said. "What usually happens is an area will be bulldozed, and then people will look around and say, 'What happened?' "

For details about the Antelope Valley Conservancy, visit www.avconservancy.org.

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