

SAN DIEGO RIVER CONSERVANCY'S STRATEGIC PLAN UPDATE (2024-2028)

APPROVED ON FEBRUARY 7, 2024

Strategic Plan Overview

The purpose of this Five-Year Strategic Plan (Strategic Plan) is to provide a high-level vision to direct the work of the San Diego River Conservancy (Conservancy) consistent with the goals of the San Diego River Conservancy Act for the period 2024-2028. The Strategic Plan defines priorities for the Conservancy to implement its enabling legislation and support other state initiatives.

This Update builds upon the six program areas identified in the Conservancy's previous Strategic Plan Update (2018-2023): (1) Conserve Land Within the San Diego River Watershed; (2) Support and Encourage Recreation and Education; (3) Preserve and Restore Natural Resources; (4) Protect and Preserve Cultural and Historical Resources; (5) Enhance Water Quality and Natural Flood Conveyance; and (6) Expand the Conservancy's Capacity and Public Outreach. This Strategic Plan provides a framework for selecting, funding and developing conservation projects within the Conservancy's six program areas. The Conservancy seeks to avoid duplicating programs established by other agencies and to focus on the Conservancy's distinctive role within the State.

Planning Process

To assist with this Strategic Plan, the Conservancy engaged San Diego Canyonlands to assist with public outreach. Canyonlands surveyed over 200 community members, including key stakeholders, agency leaders, land managers, environmental and land use professionals, community benefit organization leaders, community activists, and others for their perspective on the role and efficacy of the Conservancy as they relate to the Conservancy's six program areas.

Community members voiced support for projects that are *multi-benefit* (i.e., projects that support multiple Strategic Plan program areas), that contribute to regional *climate and fire resilience*, and that support outdoor recreation and *equitable access* to nature. Additionally, opportunities were identified to utilize the Conservancy's existing network of relationships to amplify its public outreach and deliver messaging to a wider audience.

Conservancy staff and Canyonlands also considered new data on climate change impacts, mitigation opportunities, water quality challenges, and community needs as well as evolving conservation priorities from the State of California consistent with the statutory obligations of the Conservancy in drafting this Update.

Implement Approved Plans

The Conservancy is in a unique position as a state agency operating at the local level supporting regional conservation planning. Through this Strategic Plan, the Conservancy continues to prioritize and identify projects that align with larger statewide objectives. The Conservancy also leverages regionally approved plans to ensure its efforts are both impactful and sustainable.

The Strategic Plan implements broader conservation and climate change adaptation strategies contained in several state plans; see references under Documents reviewed on page 6. The Plan is consistent with and supports the California Natural Resources Agency's key initiatives, including (1) Pathways to 30x30, (2) Outdoors for All, (3) Protecting Biodiversity, (4) Climate Resilience, and (5) Nature-Based Solutions by investing in California's public lands and natural, cultural, tribal and historical resources. The language used to describe the Conservancy's goals and objectives mirrors language from these plans to ensure that the Conservancy stays true to its course.

Overall, the Strategic Plan is a testament to the Conservancy's commitment to its mission, enabling the Conservancy to contribute to healthy ecosystems in San Diego. This vision sets a clear direction for the future, and through its implementation, the Conservancy will continue to make meaningful and lasting impacts on the environment and the communities it serves.

Conservancy Programs Areas

Program 1: Conserve Land Within the San Diego River Watershed

- This objective directly implements the initiatives of the Natural Resources Agency's Pathways to 30x30, Outdoors for All, Protecting Biodiversity, Climate Resilience

Identify Key Watershed Properties for Acquisition

- Explore land acquisition opportunities with public agencies and other partners
 - Identify opportunities with current and potential partners
 - Identify available local, state and federal grant funding
- Conserve additional acres
 - Prioritize opportunities that support multiple Conservancy objectives
 - Identify conservation easements to protect and provide access to public lands
 - Identify land acquisitions that would increase habitat connectivity, wildlife corridors, and improve floodplain management
 - Identify type(s) of habitat to target, especially those that provide multiple benefits to ecosystem services and further conservation opportunities

Program 2: Support and Encourage Recreation and Education

- This objective directly implements the initiatives of the Natural Resources Agency's Pathways to 30x30, and Outdoors for All.

Identify Opportunities

- Prioritize multi-benefit opportunities that combine local community nature access with passive and nature-oriented recreation, habitat restoration and protection, and nature education and interpretation
- Support projects that reduce the barrier to public access for people with disabilities
- Identify opportunities of low-cost/no-cost nature access
- Support other regional trails that connect communities and expand access
- Support trails and recreational access in the least sensitive areas to minimize impacts to sensitive species and native habitats

Complete the San Diego River Trail

- Collaborate with partners to make the trail real, safe, visible and educational
- Incorporate trail facilities and amenities
- Continue development of connections to the San Diego River Trail including state, regional and local parks and open space, linkages to adjacent communities, access to public transportation, ball fields, golf courses, and other recreational amenities
- Accommodate multiple user types (pedestrian, bicyclist and equestrian)

Program 3: Preserve and Restore Natural Resources

- This objective directly implements the initiatives of the Natural Resources Agency's Pathways to 30x30, Protecting Biodiversity, Climate Resilience and Nature-based Solutions

Land Restoration and Vegetation Management

- Continue to restore natural lands within the watershed
 - Increase habitat connectivity and wildlife corridors
 - Increase wildlife habitat for nesting and foraging opportunities
 - Support studies to monitor endangered, threatened and sensitive wildlife species
- Continue invasive non-native plant removal program to enhance native species
 - Enter into partnership agreements for work under Conservancy permits
 - Maintain a watershed-wide suite of permits for use by other organizations
 - Continue annual monitoring and reporting to regulatory agencies
- Coordinate with existing and adopted plans

- Support San Diego City's and County's Multiple Species Conservation Program
 - Protect biodiversity of native species
 - Preserve threatened and endangered species
- Collaborate with United States Department of Agriculture - Forest Service, Cleveland National Forest, state and local agencies, and colleges and universities to support forest resilience
- Support Wildfire and Forest resilience projects
 - Improve fire resiliency through invasive plant species removal and vegetation management
 - Support projects to reduce the risk of wildfires in the wildland urban interface and rural areas
 - Support Fire Safe Councils
 - Develop relationships with rural fire stations
 - Support reforestation and enhance oak woodlands
- Nature-Based Solutions
 - Use sustainable land management practices to protect and restore natural and degraded ecosystems
 - Address social and economic challenges by integrating traditional ecological knowledge and science
 - Collaborate with stakeholders to restore healthy ecosystems and build resilience

Multi-Benefit and Climate Resiliency Restoration Projects

California is already experiencing the impacts of increasing temperature, including rising sea level, loss of native habitats, excessive heat, extreme storm events, flooding, and intense wildfires. The impacts of climate change pose an unparalleled threat to local resources, which calls for immediate action. In the next 5 years, the Conservancy will work with stakeholders to support projects that address a changing climate.

- Identify and pursue projects that mitigate climate change and its impacts in the watershed
- Improve climate resilience of communities (reducing risks from increased temperatures, flooding, wildfire, salt water intrusion, and other climate change impacts)
- Help restore the historic footprint of riparian systems
 - Recover habitat areas lost to erosion
 - Expand the area covered by climate-resilient, carbon-sequestering native trees including oaks, sycamores, cottonwoods, and willows
 - Improve water quality through upstream sediment capture and stormwater filtration
 - Improve local ecosystem services including heat island reduction, improved air quality, and access to nature for all
- Support green infrastructure projects that positively impact adjacent lands including, but not limited to, the following:

- De-channelization projects
- Natural infiltration and bioretention basins
- Trash booms preventing deposition of debris into natural areas
- Streambed bioengineering with low-impact and biological grade controls
- Restore river floodplains, tributaries, and historical flumes
 - Improve flood management by supporting land acquisition and restoration of historical floodplains

Program 4: Protect and Preserve Cultural and Historical Resources

Expand partnerships to preserve and provide access to cultural and historical resources, and build on educational efforts

- Collaborate with Tribes whose ancestral lands are within the Conservancy's service areas
- Collaborate with the Kumeyaay Diegueño Land Conservancy
- Update Tribal Consultation Policy
- Attend Tribal Council meetings or other Tribal leadership meetings
- Connect with the Southern California Tribal Chairman's Association
- Support State-level designation of Cultural Districts and federal National Heritage Areas to protect cultural, tribal and historical resources
- Support the Federal Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (1990) and California's Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act 2010
- Seek opportunities to restore ownership and co-management opportunities with local tribes indigenous to the San Diego area.

Program 5: Enhance Water Quality and Natural Flood Conveyance

- This objective directly implements of the Natural Resources Agency's Building Climate Resilience initiative

Continue collaboration with the San Diego Regional Water Quality Control Board, as well as other partners and co-permittees on projects or programs consistent with the strategic plans of both agencies, and other water quality plans and goals, particularly:

- Municipal Storm Water Permit
- Support San Diego River's Watershed Monitoring and Assessment Program
- San Diego River Watershed Management Plan
- Support community cleanups and trash collection projects with community-based organizations and non-governmental organizations
- Support San Diego State University's OneWater Center and StreamSense project
- Southern California Wetlands Recovery Project
- International Boundary and Water Commission United States Section

Program 6: Expand the Organization's Capacity and Public Outreach

Increase capacity

- Strengthen current partnerships and develop additional partnerships between the Conservancy and other agencies, K-12 schools, universities, community benefit organizations, and other community stakeholders
- Implement the Memorandum of Understanding with San Diego State University and San Diego State University Research Foundation
- Target under-served communities
 - Identify and pursue projects that address environmental justice, people of color, underserved populations; and Tribal communities
 - Proactive outreach to local community groups to encourage them to apply for grant funding
 - Provide online/in-person workshops to educate community groups on the grant application process and potential project opportunities in their areas
- Coordinate with appropriate jurisdictions on redevelopment projects
- Coordinate with approved master plans and updates, as well as other jurisdictions' planning documents
- Collaborate with partners regarding regulatory and resource issues, and develop a comprehensive approach to obtain additional permits

Expand public outreach

- Provide presentations to communities, professional groups, and under-resourced communities targeted for outreach
- Continue to emphasize grant-funded project signage that indicates the Conservancy's support
 - Require permanent, stand-alone signage at project sites
 - Create and include a required Quick Response (QR) code on posted signs that links back to the Conservancy webpage
- Better utilize website to improve external communications about the Conservancy's work and accomplishments
- Create a social media strategy that leverages partner resources
 - Utilizes the capacity of agency partners and grant-funded partners to promote the Conservancy's programs through social media
 - Require grant-funded partners to make social media posts and send out email or newsletters to feature Conservancy funded projects
 - Require grant-funded partners to link the Conservancy webpage to grant-funded partner websites

Documents reviewed:

- San Diego River Conservancy Act (Pub. Resources Code, §§ 32630-32661)
- The Conservancy's Five-Year Strategic and Infrastructure Plan 2006-2011

- Addendum to the Conservancy's Five-Year Strategic and Infrastructure Plan (2011)
- San Diego River Conservancy's Strategic Plan Update 2012-2017
- San Diego River Conservancy's Strategic Plan Update 2018-2023
- San Diego River Recreational Trail Plan
- San Diego River Conservancy's Climate Change Policy
- Carbon Storage and Sequestration Assessment Report for Four watersheds of San Diego County, California
- San Diego River Conservancy's Tribal Consultation Policy
- San Diego River Watershed Management Area Water Quality Improvement Plan
- California's Water Action Plan
- Safeguarding California - California's Climate Adaption Strategy
- State's Wildlife Action Plan (Department of Fish and Wildlife)
- California's Fourth Climate Change Assessment
- California Wildfire and Forest Resilience Action Plan
- San Diego County's Multiple Species Conservation Program
- San Diego River Park Master Plan – City of San Diego
- Water Quality Control Plan for the San Diego Basin
- Mission Trails Regional Master Plan Update 2019
- San Diego County Fire Protection District's Strategic Plan 2020-2025
- City of San Diego Flood Mitigation Plan