

# Sketches

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# SAN DIEGO AUDUBON



**2017: Environment Under Threat**

*A San Diego Audubon Roundtable Considers Election Consequences*

# 2017: Environment Under Threat

Several members of the San Diego Audubon Board of Directors and staff officially met on December 2, 2016 to share thoughts on the serious challenges to environmental protections posed by the recent elections. This article, composed by our Director of Conservation Rebecca Schwartz Lesberg, is in large measure a distillation of elements of that discussion. Our intent here is to initiate an on-going dialogue with all of our friends and members concerning these critical issues, which we believe must lead to concerted action.

***“Conservation is a great moral issue, for it involves the patriotic duty of insuring the safety and continuance of the nation.”***

Theodore Roosevelt, Republican President of the United States 1901-1909, from speech delivered at Osawatomie, Kansas, on August 31, 1910

Today’s environmental scholars look to the Lacey Act of 1900, signed into law by President McKinley, as the first piece of national legislation aimed at conserving America’s wildlife. Theodore Roosevelt protected over 230 million acres of public land during his presidency. It was under Dwight D. Eisenhower that the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge received its first protections by the federal government. In the 1970s, Richard Nixon signed the Clean Air Act, Clean Water Act, and Endangered Species Act, and spearheaded the development of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Not only are these actions considered cornerstones of natural resources protection in the United States, each of these men were members of the U.S. Republican Party. For most of U.S. history, conservation has not had a party. Nor should it.

Responsibly stewarding our natural resources need not be exclusive to any party platform. But as the Roosevelt, Nixon, and even Reagan Republicans give way to the climate-science deniers and pro-drilling ethos of some of today’s GOP, the outcome of November’s election has left many wondering how the environment will fare under this new administration. And as inauguration day draws near, we still have more questions than answers.

It is not obvious what the president-elect’s true policy on environmental issues will be. On December 5th, he spoke with Al Gore in a meeting that the former Vice President called “very productive.” Just two days later, the presidential transition team announced Scott Pruitt (darling child of the fossil fuel industry) as the top pick to head the Environmental Protection Agency.

One thing is certain: while this election may have been a mandate for a seat at the table by those left behind in the economic recovery, it was not a mandate to undo environmental legislation that has protected America’s lands and its resources for generations.

Nevertheless, the incoming administration has stated it intends to roll back much of the conservation successes of the previous decades. While we do not yet know which of these protections the president-elect will target and in what order, unfortunately much can be done with little or no legislative oversight. Examples include reversing the Roadless Rule (which prevents new road construction on nearly 60 million acres of National Forest Service land), lifting moratoriums on offshore oil drilling, and gutting fuel efficiency regulations set by the federal government (the so-called “CAFE Standards”). Though these actions take place in Washington, if completed they will have serious impacts on our region. For example, the City of San Diego’s Climate Action Plan, which calls for eliminating half of all greenhouse gas emissions in the

City, relies on certain portions of the CAFE Standards to achieve its goals. If the Standards are rolled back, San Diego’s emissions targets cannot be reached in full. Similarly, our Cleveland National Forest has over 17,000 acres of “Inventoried Roadless Area” where the current Roadless Rule prevents more construction. If rescinded, protections for pristine habitat in the Cleveland Forest could disappear and our local watersheds would be seriously degraded.

While these executive actions could have lasting impacts, meaningfully dismantling landmark environmental legislation would be much more difficult. Laws like the Clean Air Act, Clean Water Act, and Endangered Species Act are cumbersome pieces of legislation that would take hard work and many years to destroy. Even President Obama’s Clean Power Plan, firmly in the cross hairs of the new administration, is now law and cannot be reversed without legislative action.

That doesn’t mean they’re not at risk.

One of the easiest ways to render environmental protections irrelevant is by failing to fund the entities charged with carrying them out. It is now even more urgent to watch congressional budget packages closely to make sure the EPA, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and other agencies receive the funding they require.

Of similar urgency are those battles whose losses would be irreversible by a subsequent administration. Most notable among those are resource extraction, endangered species protections, and public lands. Broken legislation can be fixed. Oil shale cannot be unfracked, extinction cannot be reversed, and once sold, threatened habitat cannot be protected. The incoming administration has already made clear plans to ease restrictions on drilling, logging, and mining. There have also been suggestions of “returning” federal lands to the states (thus opening them up for sale to the private sector) and proposals to streamline developers’ permits for “taking” endangered species (which if done inappropriately, can drive animals to extinction).

In no uncertain terms, these actions cannot go unchecked. But the question is, “What can we do?”

As our chapter looks ahead, we must remember Audubon is a unique brand of environmentalism. Our network crosses party lines from Portland, Oregon to Fairhope, Alabama. Party is not our platform, conservation is. There are Democrats, Independents, and Republicans in our ranks and who agree with our message. With conservation in mind, we are bracing for the challenges we know are coming by engaging closely with Audubon offices at the state and national level. As they, and other non-profits with an ear on D.C.



Lesser Goldfinch feeding on thistles, by Karen Straus



Fledged Peregrines over Torrey Pines Beach, by Karen Straus

*“To lose the chance to see frigate-birds soaring in circles above the storm, or a file of pelicans winging their way homeward across the crimson afterglow of the sunset, or a myriad of terns flashing in the bright light of midday as they hover in a shifting maze above the beach – why, the loss is like the loss of a gallery of the masterpieces of the artists of old time.”*

Theodore Roosevelt

politics, let us know where and when these challenges arise, we’ll pass that information directly to our chapter members and outline concrete actions you can take to respond. It’s time to be nimble and responsive as the true intentions of the next administration come into focus.

We must also work even harder to find common ground with uncommon allies. We might not know the president-elect’s true position on climate change, but we do know his goals on job growth. It’s our responsibility to help him achieve those goals through the millions of good-paying jobs that can be developed in the renewable energy sector. We don’t know how hard this administration will work to defund the US Fish and Wildlife Service, Army Corps of Engineers, and the EPA, but we do know that building developers rely on timely issuance of permits in order to complete their projects. And we might not know where offshore drilling will be proposed, but we do know the economic burden of oil spills on fishermen. In our messaging and our advocacy, we must make a clear case for how our priorities achieve broader goals.

We also need to remember that when it comes to the environment, Californians and San Diegans have never waited for Washington to act first. It’s almost always been the other way. Nothing about that changes now. Many decisions that impact our environment are made at the local, regional, and state level. The focus during the last eight years has been on top-down approaches to environmental protection. We now need to work harder from the bottom up by focusing on emerging threats to regional wildlife and habitats.

For those of us looking for more action than “Call your congressperson”, engaging in local issues is one of the best ways

to make sure our environment is safeguarded throughout the incoming administration.

In San Diego County, one of the biggest threats to the environment is inappropriate land use. Back country development can destroy habitat corridors and kill native species. Be vigilant in defending our County’s General Plan from big money developers who seek to use a loophole that allows projects to move forward if they’re approved by the voters. Keep your eyes open for paid signature gatherers petitioning to put development projects on the ballot. Chances are they’re not trying to give voters a voice; they’re trying to bypass the California Environmental Quality Act.

Climate adaptation must also be a priority. Climate change is real and we are seeing its effects through sustained drought, fires, and changes in the timing of bird migrations and flowers blooming (referred to as “phenology”). As we push Washington to minimize the magnitude of climate change, we must work locally to adapt to its effects. That means protecting corridors in our uplands that allow wildlife to move and leaving adequate buffers between our open spaces and developed areas.

To help us, look to San Diego’s Multiple Species Conservation Program, which was developed to preserve a network of habitat and open space throughout our county. We must push our cities to complete this preserve system and fully implement its adaptive management efforts, taking into account recent science about how our endangered species are actually using these preserves (like the Golden Eagles in South County that avoid development at much longer distances than previously thought).

And finally, we need to protect and restore our region’s wetlands and waterways to make sure that we have clean, healthy water for wildlife to thrive and San Diegans to swim, fish, and play in. Our North County lagoons are a crown jewel in Southern California’s coastal conservation efforts. San Diego Audubon is working to restore similar habitat in Mission Bay, where the former 4000-acre wetland complex has been reduced to less than 60 acres in favor of development and hotels.

Through ReWild Mission Bay we have a once-in-a-lifetime chance to protect and restore a portion of San Diego’s once wild coastline. By showing up and being heard, you can help make sure our region’s natural resources are best positioned to face what the future holds.

There is a difficult road ahead and we must be clear-eyed in knowing that there will be losses. These losses may be profound and their effects long lasting. We must expose the impacts those losses have on the public and hold the responsible elected officials accountable. Your voice and your vote hold the key to safeguarding our environment for future generations.

From all of us at San Diego Audubon, we thank you for your membership, your support, and your dedication to protecting birds, other wildlife, and their habitats.

### *Join the Conversation – and Engage in Action*

San Diego Audubon will continue to be an inclusive, diverse, science-based organization working to conserve our region’s biodiversity so our communities and wildlife can thrive. Moving forward, we will send periodic “Action Alerts” to our membership with ways you can make a difference. We ask that you take action on these issues and help protect our environment through the immense power of an engaged, grassroots network. To sign up for these alerts, email [conservation@sandiegoaudubon.org](mailto:conservation@sandiegoaudubon.org)