



Photos by Tom Zasadzinski/Daily Bulletin

FIELD WORK: Debbie House, a field tech for the San Bernardino County Museum, examines a California mouse that she trapped in the foothills of Redlands as part of a survey of rodents in the area. **BELOW:** Gerald Braden, a research biologist at the museum, is framed by white sage in the foothills above Rancho Cucamonga.



Sanctuary for rare animals next development victim?

By Ann Griffith
Daily Bulletin

Visit Lytle Creek just north of Fontana and you'll see mountain mahogany, tiny white scale-broom flowers and even a small burrow of a shy San Bernardino kangaroo rat.

It's a peaceful area, not the kind of place you'd consider a battleground. But this little rodent, which makes its home just above

the creek, is endangered. Developers want to build a levee to control the creek in order to build 2,300 homes.

The kangaroo rat is just one of many rare animals that rely on this usually dry riverbed — just off a paved county road — to survive. Officials considering a residential project and other proposals must now weigh these environmental concerns with the needs of

January 17, 1999
Inland Valley Daily Bulletin

business.

"It used to be that if someone came to supervisors with a project, as long as they controlled flooding they could do whatever they wanted," said Supervisor Dennis Hansberger.

Not today.

San Bernardino County politicians and builders face challenges other officials avoided when their towns were built out before the Endangered Species Act passed in 1973.

"Why should it all be on our county or our developers?" said Supervisor Jerry Eaves, who is working on a plan for a large wildlife preserve in the Inland Valley.

If you want to get technical, the combination of loose white gravel in Lytle Creek sustaining a very specific list of rare plants and animals is called Riversidean Alluvial Fan Sage Scrub, or sage scrub on a river.

Move a few hundred yards away and the name changes to just sage scrub. The category's not quite as rare, but some of the same creatures live here and rely on winter flooding from the river.

The pebbles along Lytle Creek have been breaking off the granite face of the San Gabriel Mountains for centuries. The habitat downstream is considered extremely rare by the state Department of Fish and Game. In all, there are only three places it is found in the United States, said San Bernardino County biologist Gerald Braden.

One is the Tujunga Wash northeast of Hansen Dam near Sunland in Los Angeles County. Officials there approved a series of levees to make way for a golf course. The sage scrub plants and animals there are expected to eventually die off.

The other two are in San Bernardino County: Mill Creek near Mentone, where environmentalists say plans for the Seven Oaks Dam eventually will destroy the habitat, and at Lytle Creek.

At one time many of the plants and animals that thrive at the base of the local mountains could be found along all area foothills from Los Angeles County through San Bernardino County all the way to



Photo by Tom Zasadzinski/Daily Bulletin

FIELD STUDY: Debbie House and fellow San Bernardino County Museum field tech Karen Carter examine a pocket mouse they trapped north of Redlands.

the desert.

Now 70 percent of that habitat has been destroyed because areas to the west were developed before a national movement to conserve the plants and animals.

And some of the projects that will affect the remaining habitat in the Inland Valley are moving through the county approval process today.

The Lytle Creek Development Co. project will eventually go before the Planning Commission and the Board of Supervisors, which must decide if it is appropriate to change land use from its current "conservation" designation to homes and light industry. Dates for hearings have not been set.

The project also could destroy one of the county's few surviving habitats for some species of wild birds such as the rare Southwestern willow flycatcher.

The development company did not return calls for comment. On nearby land, county supervisors approved plans to build a Buddhist temple on sage scrub land.

Both projects would set aside some land for endangered species, but in each case it would be on hilly land that couldn't be easily developed anyway. And the San Bernardino kangaroo rat only thrives on flat lands, said Leona Klippstein, a conservationist for Spirit of the Sage Council in Pasadena.

The group filed a lawsuit against the county on Thursday over the Buddhist temple.

In addition to the two projects, developers also plan to build 200 additional homes above Rancho Cucamonga in sage scrub habitat.

There is one idea, however, that could help save some of the habitat: the establishment of large preserves for species currently on state and federal endangered lists. It would even set aside land for plants and animals county biologists think may be listed in the future.

The San Bernardino County Multi-Species Habitat Conservation Plan is backed by nearly all area cities. Supervisors on Tuesday approved \$250,000 to set up the plan.

It will cost even more money to buy land, with cities and the federal government contributing.

Biologists say it may be their only hope at protecting endangered species, which tend to die off on smaller preserves.

Some fear it may not win the support of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which must also approve it. County officials say the federal agency has been capricious in the past in what it will approve and what it won't.

"Saving habitat is one thing; meeting the requirements of (Fish and Wildlife) is something else," said Supervisor Jon Mikels.