

Why The Bay Matters
by
Will Travis
Executive Director
San Francisco Bay Conservation and Development Commission
presented at the
State of the Bay Symposium
League of Women Voters of the Bay Area
Oakland, California
January 27, 2006

I've been asked to explain why San Francisco Bay matters. Even though a lot of work has gone into making a scientific case for why the Bay matters as an environmental resource, it turns out that's hard to do. We don't draw the water we drink from the Bay. Except for herring, there aren't enough fish left in the Bay to support a commercial fishery. The water isn't warm enough to swim in on a regular basis. And the ships that ply the Bay can do so whether the water is clean or dirty. Wetlands are wonderful, but we've already destroyed most of what we had, and global warming may flood what's left along with those we're restoring.

Together, the Bay and Delta make up the largest estuary on the west coast of the American continent. A regular inflow of fresh water is essential to the health of any estuary. But the lion's share of the water that nature would like to put into the Bay ends up irrigating cotton in the Central Valley and filling swimming pools in Southern California. Epic political battles continue to be waged over who gets how much water in California. It appears unlikely that the Bay will emerge victorious in this water war any time soon.

The Bay is also the most urbanized estuary in the United States. Some seven million people live in our region--all of them uphill from the Bay. Gravity happens, so much of what flows off our roads, parking lots, farms and lawns becomes a witch's brew which finds its way to the Bay where it joins the so-called "legacy contaminants" buried under the Bay mud.

Clearly, the abuse that has been bestowed upon the Bay adds urgency to the demand that we protect what remains of this vast estuarine system and that we redouble our efforts to take advantage of every opportunity we can find to enhance and restore the Bay's resources. But, tragically, we have to admit that the primary environmental value of the Bay is what it once was and what it can become in the future--not what it is now.

So maybe it's best not to look to environmental science for an explanation of why the Bay is important. That may not be as big a problem as it might seem because science wasn't the driving force for protecting the Bay. Sylvia McLaughlin, one of the founders of Save the Bay, once said, "We didn't save the Bay to improve water quality or protect wetlands. We saved it because we had never seen anything so beautiful." In short, the Bay was saved because it's pretty.

At first that may sound trivial. After all, beauty is ephemeral. It has no price. But, in fact, the Bay's beauty does have value. A house with a view of the Bay costs more than one without a Bay view. You pay a premium price for a hotel room facing the Bay. People will spend more for

a mediocre dinner in a restaurant overlooking the Bay than for a sensational meal in a restaurant that's not on the waterfront.

A beautiful Bay is, indeed, an economic asset. In fact, many believe that the decision to save the Bay in 1965 laid the foundation for the economic prosperity our region has enjoyed over the past four decades. The Bay Area depends on bright, well-educated, innovative workers to make our knowledge-based economy hum. In competing with other regions for these workers our employers don't pay appreciably higher salaries even though their workers face outrageous housing costs, have to endure terrible traffic congestion and have to tolerate so-so public schools. Yet the workers continue to move here and stay here. Why? Because the Bay Area is a terrific place to live. We enjoy a sensational quality of life, a lot of which comes from the abundant, beautiful and healthy natural resources, like the Bay.

The Bay provides many other economic benefits. It is the highway for the new ferries that are lacing our waterfront communities together. The Bay is essential to our flourishing maritime industry. The Bay is the equivalent of a national park in our front yard where we can sail, swim, fish, kayak and play. And while not all the tourists who come to the City by the Bay leave their hearts in San Francisco, they do leave a lot of their money here.

The Bay is our region's most valuable economic resource. But I believe the Bay matters most not because of its scientific, environmental or economic value, but because of a role it plays that is more subtle, yet far more profound. In many ways, the Bay's greatest importance is its spiritual value.

The Bay is the heart, soul and essence of our region. The Bay gives our region its name and creates the sense of place which defines the community where we live. The Bay is our Eiffel Tower, our El Capitan, our Big Ben. It is the visual icon which gives our region its identity as a place different from everywhere else.

The fact that the Bay still exists is a living tribute to the three visionary women who started the Save the Bay movement half a century ago. By its very existence, the Bay is a testimonial to the spirit of American democracy.

The Bay is our connection to the global environment inland of the Delta and beyond the Golden Gate. The water in the Bay may have fallen as snow in the Sierra Nevada, washed over a waterfall in the southern Cascades, begun as a rain squall that spoiled an afternoon picnic of a family from Los Angeles or lapped the feet of a kid walking on a beach in Japan.

The Bay is a stopping point on the Pacific Flyway for the wild birds on their long migration between the Arctic and South America. The skies over the Bay are also enlivened by man-made birds carrying passengers between the rest of the world and our region.

The Bay is a stage where an engineering and global economic drama plays every day. Giant container ships sail into the Bay and make their way beneath majestic bridges to ports where their cargo is unloaded by machines out of Star Wars and placed on mile-long trains that head off toward the Sierra Nevada carrying goods from China to Wal-Marts across America.

The Bay is a library filled with the writings of Jack London, Dashiell Hammet and Herb Caen. In another part of this library the filled flatlands around the shoreline remind us that for over a century we treated the Bay like ordinary real estate. The wetlands which are emerging where the Bay was once diked for salt ponds represent redemption from our past sins and offer

hope for a better future. Thus, the Bay is both a book of history and a hymnal. It provides both a chilling record of our past mistakes, and offers inspiration to guide us in the future.

The islands that punctuate the Bay tell a story rich in texture, intrigue and inspiration. In the past, they were used for prisons, lighthouses, immigration centers, military outposts, hunting clubs and farms. Today they are wildlife refuges, villages, parks and hotels. And tomorrow they promise to become whole new communities, destination resorts and wilderness sanctuaries.

Many of us live in beautiful communities where we can gaze down upon the Bay from our homes. But even if we can't see the Bay, it finds us. On summer days when Sacramento is sweltering, the Bay engages in a meteorological magic that envelopes some of us in fog and provides natural air conditioning for the rest of us.

When you're on a small sailboat in the middle of the Bay and the winds are high and the night is dark, you are in a wilderness that is about as far from civilization as you can get. But when, on a warm, sunny afternoon, you're sitting behind third base at the ballpark whose name keeps changing, and you're watching the drama on the Bay beyond the outfield, and you've skipped out of work to come to the game, and you've taken the streetcar to the game, and you're going home on the ferry, AND the Giants are winning, you are experiencing the best of everything civilization has to offer.

For over a century the Bay was ringed with military bases filled with ships, planes, tanks, troops and sailors. Today, the Bay plays a more limited role in the defense of America. But the Bay is still one of the things that makes America worth defending.

The Bay may matter for environmental, scientific and economic reasons. But most of all, the Bay is important because it defines who we are, where we live, and why we are here. Without the Bay, the Bay Area would be just like everywhere else. And that, more than anything else, is why San Francisco Bay matters.