

NCCP — a new approach to saving species

By Jeanne Clark

Photographs © Bruce Farnsworth

California's famous landscape, which is coveted by so many people, is also vital wildlife habitat that is disappearing at an alarming rate.

California has lost more than 90 percent of its coastal wetlands to development. Only two percent of its cottonwood and willow riparian forest remains.

Federal and state government have listed more than 320 threatened or endangered plant and animal species in California, most of which are at risk due to lack of habitat. An additional 2,350 species are already candidates for federal listing. The potential listing of more species, continued habitat loss

and an absence of forward-looking planning have put species protection and land development on a collision course.

Governor Pete Wilson talked about this "environmental box canyon" at a July 1993 Endangered Species Act hearing in Woodland, where he said, "I have always believed that after our people, our environment is California's greatest asset — an asset to invest in and enrich, not to deplete and destroy. I have also long believed that we can have both economic opportunity and environmental protection. For that to occur, we need laws that inspire collaboration, not confrontation; laws

that inspire people to cooperate, not litigate."

Wilson was referring, in part, to a key element of his "Resourceful California" conservation agenda — the state's Natural Communities Conservation Planning (NCCP) program. Established in 1991 by Assembly Bill 2172, this innovative program encourages federal, state and local partnerships to protect plant and wildlife populations — and the habitats upon which they depend — while allowing for appropriate economic development.

The NCCP concept has won national praise from U.S. Interior

Secretary Bruce Babbitt who said, "The only effective way to protect endangered species is to plan ahead to conserve the ecosystems upon which they depend...This [NCCP] may become an example of what must be done across the country if we are to avoid the environmental and economic train wrecks we've seen in the last decade."

What is NCCP?

Through local planning, the NCCP program aims to protect wildlife and habitat *before* the landscape becomes so fragmented or degraded by development that the listing of individual species is required. Instead of saving small, unconnected parcels of habitat for just one species at a time, which occurs under the current system, agencies, local jurisdictions, conservation interests, and people with projects work cooperatively to develop plans that consider broad landscapes or "ecosystems" and the needs of many species. This broad "landscape" management approach keeps all of

the elements and interactions of an ecosystem intact. It benefits scores of species, not just those that are threatened or endangered.

For this to occur, partners cooperate in the program development and, by mutual consent, crucial habitat areas are set aside and may not be developed. Partners work cooperatively to study and develop conservation plans for these "reserve" areas. In exchange for setting aside land as wildlife habitat, the process fosters economic growth by allowing development in other areas — an approach praised by developers, landowners, planners and others who have been frustrated and thwarted by the land use restrictions and uncertainty that accompany formal listing of species.

"Each of these stakeholders can see the wisdom and greater flexibility in taking the initiative to make voluntary commitments to ecosystem management and conservation in order to avoid or forestall the prospect of more formal listings and even greater land use restrictions," says Fish and Game Director Boyd Gibbons. This translates

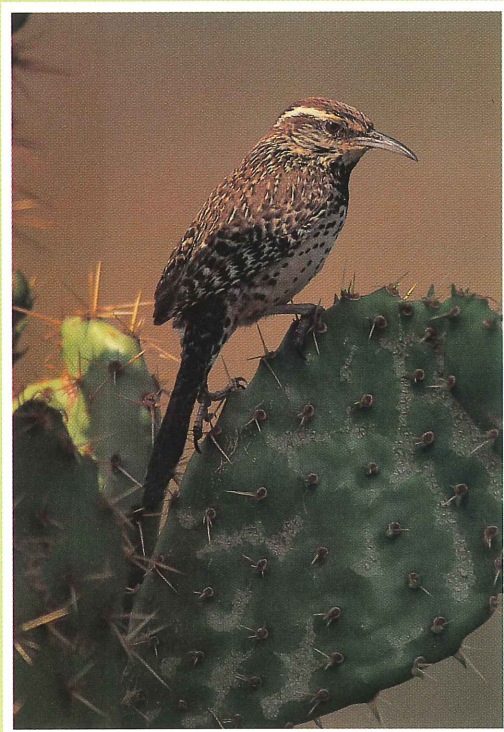
into better working relationships, a factor important to California Department of Fish and Game personnel who are responsible for day-to-day program management.

This kind of anticipatory planning is not part of the Endangered Species Act (ESA). In its present form, the protections afforded by ESA are only available *after* a species is designated threatened or endangered by extinction. But it is important to note that NCCP is not an alternative to the ESA. The ESA remains as a strong protector of plants and animals whose existence reaches the crisis stage.

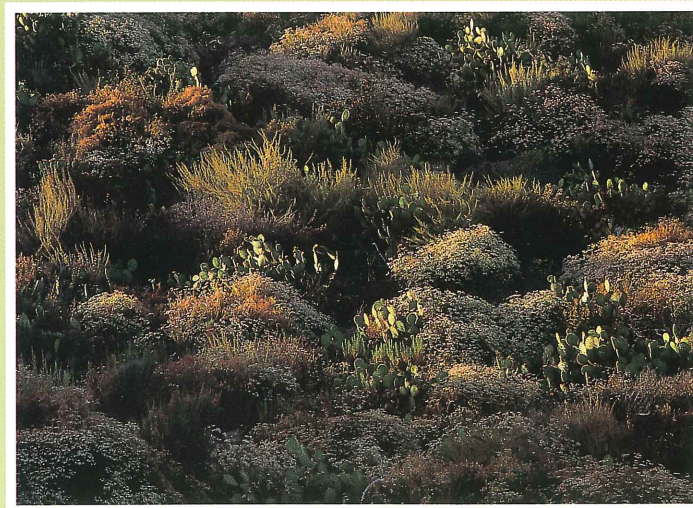
NCCP partnerships are effective in part because participants have an incentive to find mutually agreeable solutions to natural resource and development conflicts before a crisis occurs.

Coastal sage scrub: state's first NCCP project

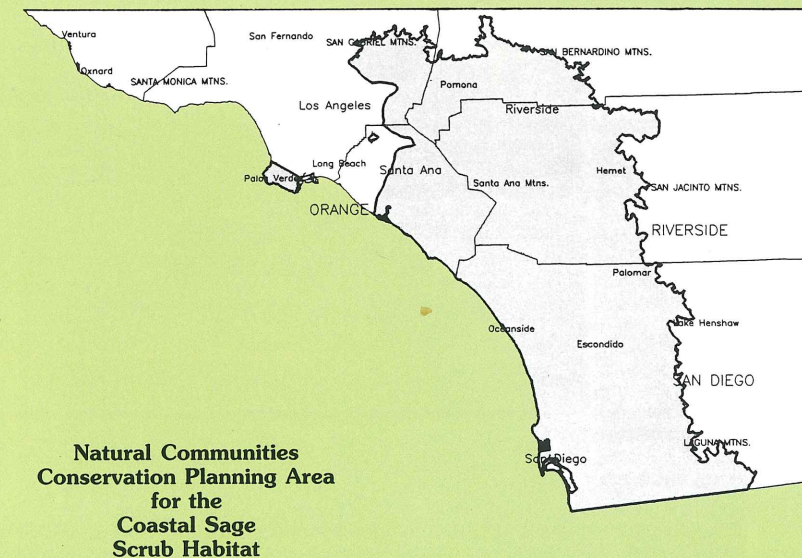
The state's first NCCP effort, initiated in 1992 as a pilot program, focuses on southern California's



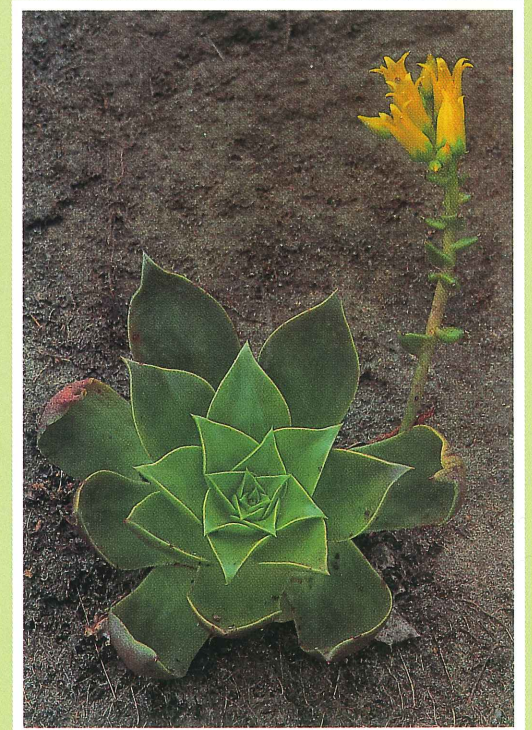
Coastal California gnatcatcher.



Coastal sage scrub habitat.



△ NCCP Area
△ County Lines



Laguna Beach live-forever.

coastal sage scrub community. High land values and pressures for development in this southern plant community underscore what has become a typical conflict between the need for multi-species protection and the desire for urban growth and economic development.

More than 60 percent of the state's southern coastal sage scrub has been lost to development. Barely 400,000 acres remain in a region encompassing Orange, Los Angeles, Riverside, San Bernardino and San Diego counties. This low-lying bushy plant community supports the coastal California gnatcatcher, which was federally-listed in March 1993.

NCCP could not prevent its listing but it did provide an innovative option for responding to the listing. More importantly, it may forestall the necessity of listing some of the more than 40 plant and wildlife species dependent on coastal sage scrub that are now federal candidates for listing.

Ordinarily, development of gnatcatcher habitat would be severely restricted under ESA rules. To accom-

modate the forward-thinking protections afforded through NCCP's cooperative local planning process, during a December 1993 visit with southern California developers, environmentalists, and agency representatives U.S. Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt announced the adoption of a new "special rule" crafted so that land-use activities addressed in approved NCCP plans do not violate Section 9 of the ESA.

"Our goal here is simple," said Babbitt. "We want to conserve a threatened ecosystem and provide a clear course for economic development... This partnership between government - at all levels - and the private sector says emphatically, 'We can do it! We can protect the environment and build around rapidly disappearing unique habitat areas.'"

According to Resources Secretary Douglas Wheeler, the announcement of the special rule represents an important step in making the federal government a full partner in a cooperative ecosystem management program that reaches across bureau-

cratic boundaries.

These novel efforts have not escaped the notice of editors and environmental writers. A Los Angeles Times article praised Babbitt's move to "put conservation of the tiny [gnatcatcher] into the hands of cities, counties, and the Wilson Administration rather than under the rigid control of the Endangered Species Act."

An Orange County Register editorial applauded the state for finding "viable alternatives to the copious, controversial, and often too-late species-by-species listing of endangered wildlife."

This coverage and national support from Secretary Babbitt are adding impetus to the state's pilot project. About 40 landowners or developers and 30 local governments have enrolled in the NCCP program and agree to work cooperatively toward the development of subregional NCCPs.

During the planning period, the enrolled jurisdictions have agreed not to approve any land use projects that would hamper the establishment of

NCCPs. Both landowners and jurisdictions also consented to participate in scientific surveys and to develop a long-term Natural Community Conservation Plan for their region.

Says Monica Florian, a vice president of the Irvine Company, "This is reinventing the way we all do business."

Many developers, landowners and planners applaud NCCP's coordinated, locally-based planning process because it dramatically consolidates what has been a cumbersome, time-consuming, expensive and frustrating bureaucratic permit process.

The first plans should be completed in San Diego and Orange counties during 1994 and will serve as models for others. People from throughout the state and the nation are closely watching these first efforts, hopeful that they demonstrate that "win-win" situations are possible for all of the partners, that serious environmental protection and reasonable economic development can coexist. 🐾

Jeanne Clark has written for a number of Department of Fish and Game publications.

Wildfires didn't harm NCCP program

Sixteen southern California wildfires burned in six counties, destroying an estimated 167,000 acres of mixed habitats. This includes 24,000 acres of coastal sage scrub and scrub/grasslands that were home to coastal California gnatcatchers, coastal cactus wrens, orange-throated whiptails, and scores of other species. Researchers estimate that 159 pairs of gnatcatchers and 407 pairs of cactus wrens were lost to the fires. Both populations

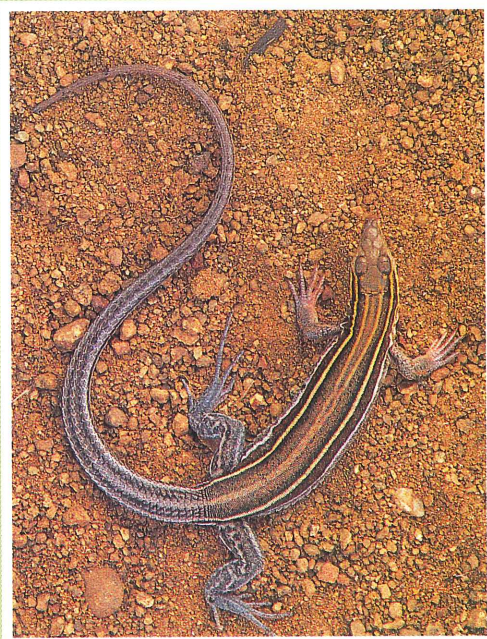
are expected to recover.

"Despite this loss, state and federal biologists believe this will not harm the NCCP program and anticipate only short-term effects on local wildlife," says Larry Eng, the department's NCCP program manager. "The coastal sage scrub community evolved with fire and has adapted to it. In the long run, fires will revitalize the soil, stimulate new growth and help open up some of the older, dense stands.

"... California's Natural Communities Conservation Planning program is a promising model... Using these agreed-upon standards, local governments have flexibility in designing reserves and can factor in local needs."

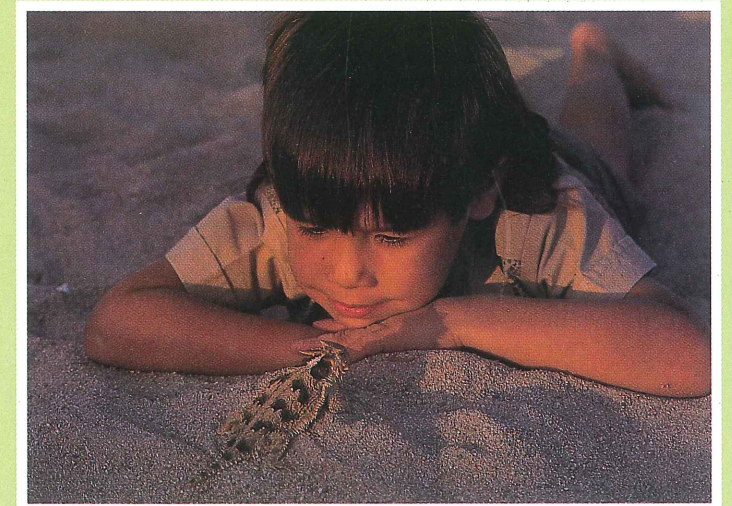
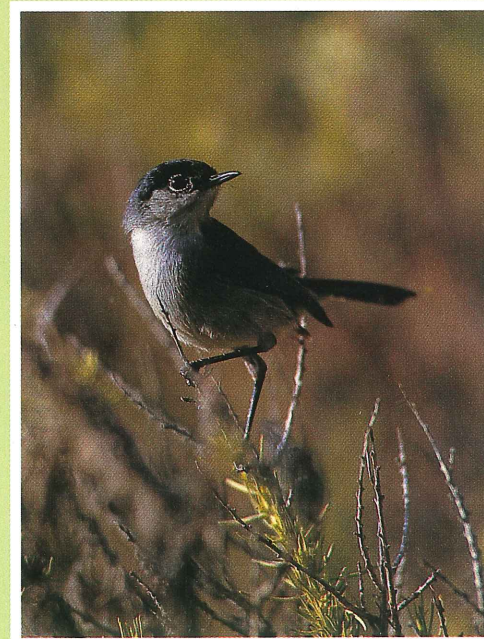
Dan Silver, Coordinator, Endangered Habitats League

Orange-throated whiptail, resident of coastal sage scrub.



Fish and Game biologist shows habitat to visitors.

Coastal California gnatcatcher.



Young Californian studies San Diego horned lizard.