

Looking north toward Trestles Beach, the famous surfing spot at San Onofre State Park, long ago “inaccessible” because it was on Camp Pendleton, the Marine Corp. training base. Today, for a modest entrance fee, the park is open to surfers, beach-goers and campers.

Photo by David Ohman

BROKEN PROMISES: EXTENDING THE 241 TOLL ROAD SOUTH
The storm clouds surrounding the 241 Toll Road extension debate are looking more like storm cells these days — and with good reason.

A Statewide Issue: The proposed Foothill South Toll Road project has inspired public involvement of historic proportions. On February 6, 2008, the California Coastal Commission met in Del Mar to decide the fate of the 241 Toll Road extension from Rancho Santa Margarita to San Clemente. More than 3,000 people, most opposed to the project, attended the 14-hour public hearing, which ended with the Commission handing down a stunning defeat for the project with an 8-2 vote. Earlier in the day, Commission Executive Director Peter Douglas noted to a television reporter that regardless of the decision, someone would take it to the courts. The next day, toll road lawyers did just that.

his issue is not simply about road-building and its inherent costs and inconveniences while under construction. The primary controversy is about the actual path the 16-mile extension will take, and its environmental impacts along the way. The 241 Foothill Toll Road extension will cut through one of the crown jewels in the California State Parks system and run within a half a mile of one of the most famous surfing spots on our coastline: Trestles Beach.

Ronald Reagan, as governor of California, declared the area a state park in 1971. As reported in the past, Republicans and Democrats alike have defended this parkland ever since. How did current Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger go so wrong when he endorsed the project earlier this year?

Broken Promises

Two years ago, Schwarzenegger was against the

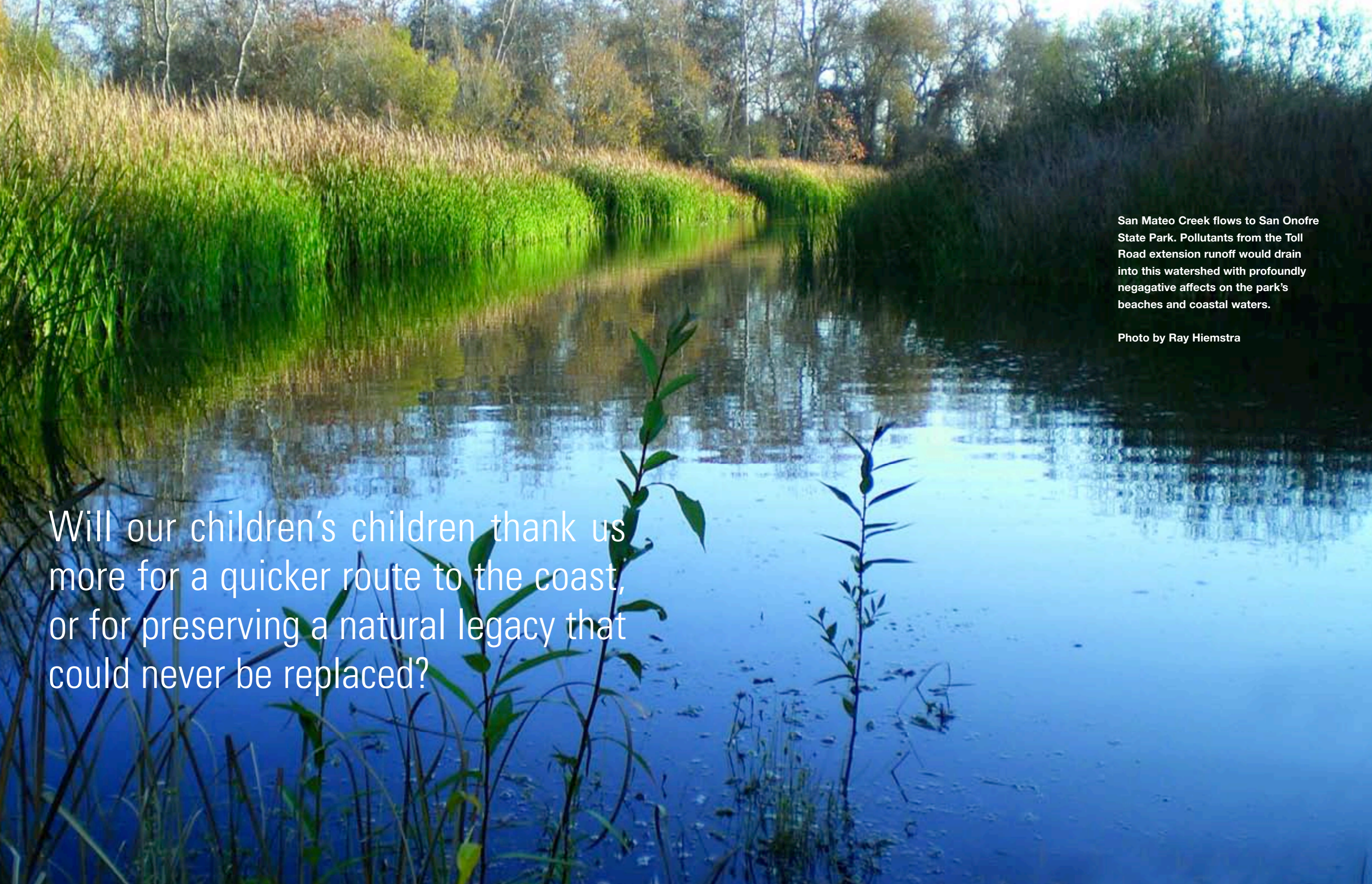
project. His eleventh-hour turnabout this year has prompted many to question his environmental credentials, despite his long history of environmental activism with Terry Tamminen, founder of the Santa Monica Baykeeper.

So, if the project goes through, what will be lost? No one seems to know for sure. The road would force the abandonment of about 60 percent of San Onofre State Park, according to California State Parks Foundation estimates. The preferred alignment also cuts through the Doña O'Neill Land Conservancy, which was set aside in 1990 as mitigation for a development project. Critical habitat for 11 threatened and endangered species would be degraded. The impacts of construction, and subsequent highway runoff would spill into the San Mateo Creek Watershed. Scientists are mixed on the impacts the road would have on the surf at Trestles Beach, a secluded and pristine surf spot known the world over.

One of the most popular surf spots at San Onofre State Park is known as "Old Man's" owing to the relatively gentle, rolling waves that frequent this reef break

Photo by David Ohman





San Mateo Creek flows to San Onofre State Park. Pollutants from the Toll Road extension runoff would drain into this watershed with profoundly negative affects on the park's beaches and coastal waters.

Photo by Ray Hiemstra

Will our children's children thank us more for a quicker route to the coast, or for preserving a natural legacy that could never be replaced?



This map illustrates the negative impact the toll road extension will have, not only on San Onofre State Park, but also on the land adjacent to the toll road leading toward the proposed I-5 connection

Opponents say the potential benefits of the toll road, if ever realized, would not be enough to mitigate the permanent environmental and cultural losses from the project. Southern California has a long history of building freeways with the justification of relieving gridlock, only to find it has paved the way for more development and more traffic. As fast as you can say “off-ramp,” developers invariably scope out new opportunities for residential and commercial projects even before the first load of freeway concrete is poured.

What will happen to Cristianitos & San Mateo Creeks?

This is our main concern at Orange County Coastkeeper. In addition to our advocacy work as a part of the Save San Onofre Coalition, Coastkeeper has focused on water quality issues raised by this project. We do not consider the sand filters and detention basins proposed by the Transportation Corridor Agency (TCA) to be acceptable measures to protect water quality — these are not the best technologies available, which we believe should be required to protect a state park.

The TCA has yet to collect any water samples from these creeks, normally the first step in protecting water quality. In order to document the current water quality conditions, Coastkeeper spent the past year collecting samples from Cristianitos and San Mateo Creeks. With the results of our water monitoring efforts, we will establish baseline data for these creeks. This baseline data will play a crucial role in understanding the potential effects of the toll road on surrounding watersheds.

The legal and political battles go on...

After the Coastal Commission’s denial of the Foothill South Toll Road project, the Transportation Corridor Agency (TCA) swiftly appealed the Commission’s decision to the U.S. Secretary of Commerce, their last chance for approval. A public hearing planned for July 2008 was cancelled amidst fears that 10,000 attendees would flood the UCI Bren Events Center, and to date the Department of Commerce has not rescheduled.

In the meantime, several permits and approvals are still on the table, or have yet to be submitted by TCA. The proposed route recently received two per-

mit approvals: U.S. Fish & Wildlife Services concluded that the road would not significantly impact threatened or endangered species; and the California Department of Fish & Game reached an agreement with TCA to mitigate for lost habitat. On the other hand, California’s Attorney General Bill Lockyer and the Native American Heritage Commission each filed separate lawsuits against TCA, and Coastkeeper signed onto a lawsuit to dispute the Biological Opinion set forth by Fish & Wildlife Services. Though both sides of the toll road debate have seen victories, this war will not end anytime soon.

Leaving a legacy

Underlying the toll road debate is one simple premise: A state park is no place to build a freeway. Our park system was put in place to protect the quality of life for future generations. We want our grandchildren to be able to enjoy nature as we do. We want them to experience the natural landscape. Will our children’s children thank us more for a quicker route to the coast, or for preserving a natural legacy that could never be replaced?

There are alternatives to the toll road extension that should be examined. First and foremost is the need to establish jobs in the areas where people live. Until we do that, there will be no end to this type of ongoing conflict. Public transportation is another option that must be looked at to meet the growing demands of a growing population. The toll road extension is a Band-Aid approach to a situation that without real solutions will only get worse.

Orange County Coastkeeper urges both sides to look beyond today’s solutions and make plans for what is needed tomorrow. California’s irreplaceable state parks are among its greatest assets. Let’s not forsake this coastal jewel for a quick fix to an ongoing problem.

Publisher’s Note: As Orange County Coastkeeper seeks an alternative to the 241 Toll Road extension, we would greatly appreciate your opinions on this critical and complex matter.

To submit your input and to stay informed on the toll road project, please visit our website at: www.coastkeeper.org.