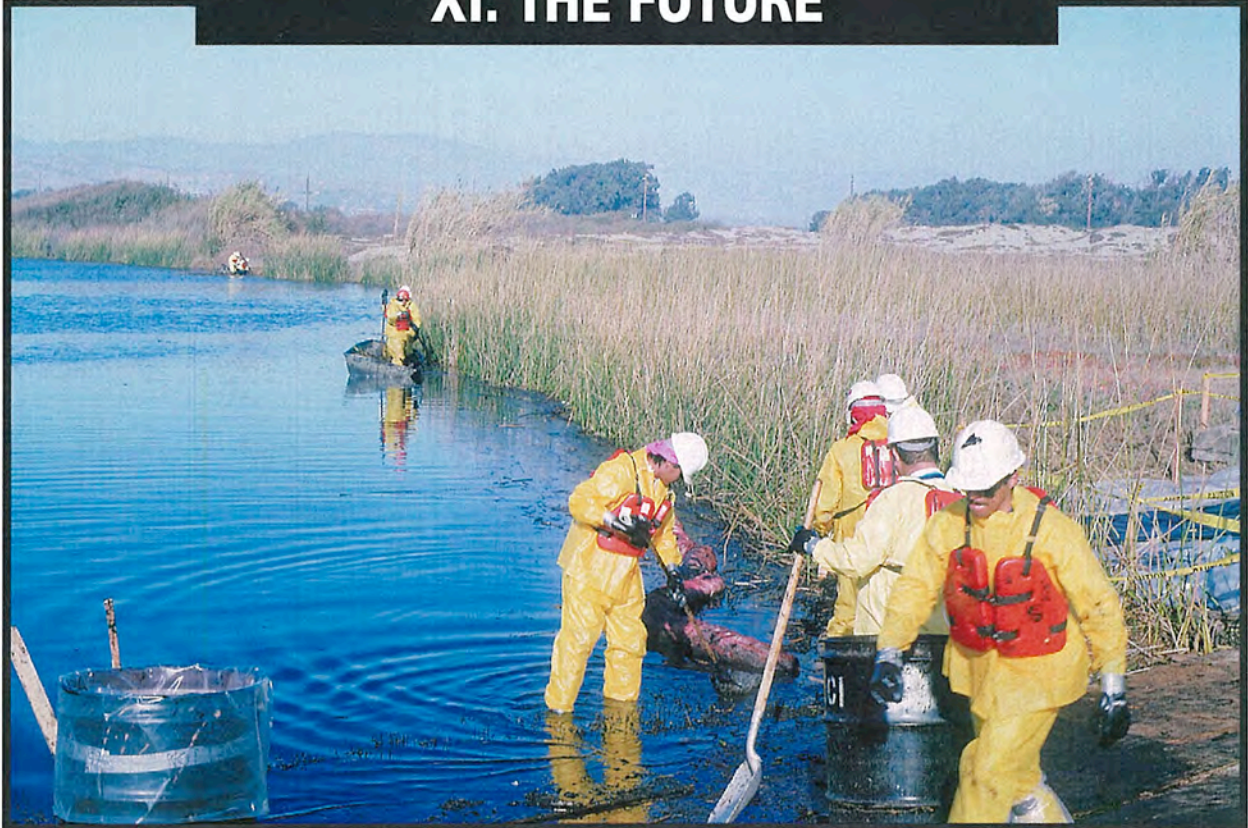


XI. THE FUTURE



California, Ventura County: McGrath Lake
(oil spill clean up, January 1994)

THE FUTURE

Wayne R. Ferren Jr.¹, Peggy L. Fiedler², Robert A. Leidy³

God is in the details.

Miles van der Rohe
Bauhaus
ca 1940

Although we began our endeavor with a relatively simple classification in mind, and what seemed at the time an extensive preliminary list of wetland types, in our journey through a large part of California and through the process of this three-year study, we have arrived at one indisputable conclusion: an accurate representation of the State's wetland resources cannot be prepared without sufficient detail to capture the range of parameters that contribute to the formation of these resources.

The many efforts to provide a framework within which to organize a classification of the State's wetlands have failed to include enough information to distinguish differences among the many types. The result has been a serious under-representation of wetland resources. Much detail has been given to upland vegetation throughout the State, with many classifications of the types of grasslands, chaparral, coastal sage scrub, oak woodlands, and coniferous forests. At the same time, wetlands have been grouped largely into a few broad categories: "freshwater", "salt water", and "alkali" marshes; "riparian" systems; and "vernal pools". Thus California continues to lose its natural wetland heritage, perhaps in part because we have seriously underestimated the richness of wetland types and their associated ecosystem functions and socio-economic values.

¹Department of Biological Sciences, University of California, Santa Barbara, CA 93106

²Department of Biology, San Francisco State University, San Francisco, CA 94132

³U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, IX, 75 Hawthorne St., San Francisco 94105 and
Department of Wildlife and Fisheries Conservation, University of California, Davis 95616

THE FUTURE

We have been driven to complete this project in part because we are concerned for the future of California's wetlands, and in particular for those along the coast and in the coastal watersheds of Central and Southern California. The continuing rapid urbanization of this region will necessitate continued fragmentation, isolation, and even loss of wetlands in spite of the various federal, state, and local legislation and policies we have in place to protect them. One important tool to assist in the conservation of the region's wetlands is a wide base of knowledge on the importance of wetlands at all levels. Such knowledge will give us the ability to articulate accurately the need to protect, and when possible, to restore or recreate them.

Recent endeavors to study, restore, purchase, or protect wetlands by: (1) federal regulatory and resource agencies such as the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, U.S. Forest Service, and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers; (2) California state agencies and institutions such as the State Coastal Conservancy, California Coastal Commission, State Lands Commission, Department of Fish and Game, Department of Parks and Recreation, and University of California; (2) cities such as Carpinteria and organizations including the "National Audubon Society", "The Nature Conservancy", "Campaign to Save California Wetlands", "Surf Riders Association", "Urban Creeks Council"; and, (3) numerous local groups such as "Friends of the Ventura River", "Santa Margarita River Foundation", "Land Trust for Santa Barbara County", and the "Goleta Slough Ecosystem Management Committee" have contributed toward a new public interest in the importance of wetlands and the need to work actively for their conservation.

Successful conservation of California's wetland heritage, however, will depend on the compilation of details that enable us to identify the multitude of wetland types found in the state. Our track record on wetland conservation to date is abysmal, as has been cited throughout this report. (There is not much more to lose when 90% of something is gone!) Although we may never know much about the wetland resources that have been lost, there are opportunities to conserve the riches that remain. Extensive inventory of all wetland types and documentation of their ecosystem functions are vital. Unique and vulnerable examples in particular need to be identified and protected. Furthermore, a framework with which to demonstrate wetland characteristics and relationships is needed that is sufficiently detailed to achieve the identification of the integrity and salient features of an enormous range of wetland types.

With the great quantity of new information on wetlands being published at a national scale, and with the many alternatives to identification and classification of wetland types and their functions, we express hope that enough coordination will take place to establish standards by which at least regional priorities for wetland study and conservation can be initiated. We suggest several

key opportunities that users of this volume could seize:

1. field test this methodology and thus identify potential gaps in its flexibility so as to provide suggestions for its improvement;
2. conduct inventories and mapping of wetlands throughout the study region in a coordinated effort to identify and conserve the diversity of wetlands and wetland resources in central and southern California coastal watersheds;
3. classify wetlands at disturbed sites and restored sites to monitor the temporal change of particular wetlands as demonstration of the need for flexibility when interpreting wetlands in a Mediterranean climate; and,
4. develop workshops on wetland classification, mapping, and functional assessment to broaden the participation and understanding of wetland inventory, conservation, and restoration.

Fifteen years ago Cowardin et al. presented a nationwide framework that continues today as the single best method for classifying wetlands. Regionalization of this effort has begun in the American West because many important features of western wetlands were not covered with sufficient detail in previous efforts to be able to identify the richness of our wetland types. We encourage others to continue this regionalization, and we offer our effort as a test to categorize the wetlands by a modified Cowardin et al. approach, with an emphasis on hydrogeomorphic information that may help establish a method to differentiate wetlands on detailed physical as well as biological attributes. In the end, the future of the region's wetlands may be in our ability to discern the details of their form and function, as well as their beauty.