

# Malibu Lagoon: Three Years After Restoration

Did the highly controversial project, which generated protests and city council sessions that lasted until midnight, accomplish its goals?

By Jimmy Tallal / Special to The Malibu Times - Nov 9, 2016



Nira Lichten / TMT

Last week, Mark Abramson, senior watershed advisor for the Santa Monica Bay Restoration Commission, spoke to the Malibu Garden Club about the Malibu Lagoon's progress three years after a highly controversial \$7 million restoration project. It was one of the few — if not the only — post-project public updates that have been offered, aside from official annual monitoring reports.

Between the summer of 2012 and spring 2013, the Malibu Lagoon underwent a nine-month-long restoration process initiated by the state. The project involved draining 12 acres of wetland near the mouth of Malibu Creek, trapping and relocating wildlife, using heavy equipment to scoop out tons of sediment, remove channels and bridges, reshape the banks, and plant native vegetation. The reconfigured lagoon netted two additional acres of wetlands, resulting in a much larger body of water.

Today, more than three years after restoration, Abramson said the plant diversity is far greater now than it was in 2012. Before the restoration, he said there were only “six kinds of major dominant plants.” During the restoration, the state planted thousands of new plants — 120 different kinds of native plants — that were hand grown at local nurseries. During the last plant survey, done at eight locations, they found “40 species of plants within a 10 meter radius.”

In terms of fish and wildlife, Abramson said the striped mullet is back, and that for the first time ever, they found some steelhead trout hiding in grass just outside of the test area. Invertebrates have “switched from freshwater to marine” species, and the birds are transitioning from urban species to waterfowl species.

“For the first time in 70 years, least terns and snowy plovers are trying to nest,” he reported.

Not everyone was impressed with the results of the restoration.

“I’ve spent 50 years playing in that area, and I know it like the back of my hand,” longtime local Andy Lyon said. “I have pictures showing how beautiful the lagoon was beforehand, now it’s just a big open body of gross water that smells bad.”

In terms of water flow and quality, Abramson noted that when the lagoon’s berm is breached after a rainstorm, allowing the water to flow out into the ocean, the circulation is “incredible.” When the lagoon is closed, “the wind fetch [the effect of wind blowing over water] is amazing,” even helping to circulate water below the surface.

Algae were a big problem before the restoration, but even after, Abramson said there have been “two significant blooms which the wind fetches blew out and dispersed.” In addition, he reported that oxygen levels have been “really good.” State agencies will continue overall monitoring for another two years.

Lyon also offered examples of the lagoon not functioning as intended.

“The lagoon hasn’t breached for quite awhile now, so there’s no tidal influx and the water quality is pretty foul — the lagoon was never meant to hold water,” Lyon said. He added that there doesn’t seem to be any improved circulation, and the breach point is too narrow and wrongly placed.

“As far as the flow and the mechanics, it’s completely off-kilter. When the lagoon opens [breaks through to the ocean], it’ll send a lot of sand toward the Adamson House and the Malibu Pier, and put them in jeopardy,” he said.

“You can see the lagoon water seeping through to the tidepools, and there must be more fertilizer coming through because the rocks are covered with algae. It’s leeching and not breeching — the lagoon is now so wide, that even after a rain, there’s not enough water pressure to break through,” Lyon described. “The fish are trapped in there — the mullet need to go out to the ocean to breed, and the reason they’re jumping is because they’re going crazy.”

The original natural wetlands had been turned into a Caltrans dump during the construction of PCH decades ago and buried in 10 feet of fill. The area was later used for baseball diamonds. A clumsy attempt at restoring the wetlands in 1983, in the days before much was known about wetlands restoration, resulted in a lack of water circulation, oxygen depletion and sediment build-up that threatened fish and wildlife, according to state studies.

The City of Malibu initially supported the project, but in April 2012, after hundreds of activists contended the dredging would destroy a functioning ecosystem, city council

voted to oppose it until an independent study could be performed. However, since the project was being done on state-owned property, even an appeal to the governor did not stop the project.

Despite rosy reports that have come out annually since the lagoon restoration was completed, Lyon summed up what many locals continue to feel about the project.

“The whole thing was a waste of money,” he said.