

eacNews

Environmental Action Committee of West Marin

information, updates, involvement • spring 2002 • EAC, Box 609, Pt Reyes Station 94956

Non-native cordgrasses spread in Bay, Lagoon, Esteros

Alien threat to West Marin estuaries

Several aggressive species of non-native cordgrass have recently appeared for the first time in Tomales Bay, Drake's Estero and Bolinas Lagoon. This is an alarming development because experience elsewhere shows that alien cordgrasses spread rapidly in marshes, displace native species, reduce habitat for native wildlife. (including the endangered California clapper rail and salt marsh harvest mouse), increase sedimentation, and clog flood and navigation channels.

Cordgrasses are aquatic members of the grass family, whose leaves were once used in making cordage. There is only one species native to the West Coast, California cordgrass or *Spartina foliosa*. Even this native species, however, was not known in West Marin until fifteen years ago, since when its population has exploded. Those bright green clumps of vegetation spreading year by year in Tomales Bay, Limantour and Drake's Estero, and Bolinas Lagoon are California cordgrass. This explosion may be part of a natural cycle of marsh development, but the cycle has been accelerated by human activities that have influenced physical factors (like sedimentation and warmer surface water temperature) that favor Callifornia cordgrass.

Much more worrisome than the rapid spread of the native cordgrass, however, is the recent discovery of alien cordgrass populations in West Marin. Until three years ago, our estuaries were thought to be free of the invasive cordgrass species that plague San Francisco Bay and five other West Coast estuaries. But in April 1999, botanists from the California Coastal Conservancy's Invasive Spartina Project (ISP) identified three mature plants of Dense-flowered cordgrass (*S. densiflora*) near the Hog Island Oyster Company at Mar-

shall Cove. The plants were removed at once, but in October 2001, on a routine follow-up visit, ISP botanists found several more mature plants and more than 60 seedlings of *S. densiflora* in the same location. Again, all were removed.

ISP quickly organized a *Spartina* identification workshop, attended by EAC, followed by a complete survey of survey Tomales Bay and Walker Creek by local

biologists and land managers. That survey turned up two more populations of Dense-flowered cordgrass, at Tom's Point and Tomasini Point. They were immediately removed.

Then, in November, an alert National Park biologist noticed a single plant of Smooth cordgrass (*S. alterniflora*) while kayaking in Bolinas Lagoon. The following month, a hiker reported a strange plant in Drake's Estero, which also proved to be *S. alterniflora*.

No one knows how the aliens are

getting here. *Spartina* seeds can travel long distances on the tides or with migrating birds. They may have come via oyster spat imported from Puget Sound, which has been invaded by both English cordgrass (*S. anglica*) and *S. alterniflora*, or Humboldt Bay, where 87% of the salt marsh is now occupied by *S. densiflora*. Or they may have been carried here from other estuaries on kayaks, boots, or field equipment.

However they got here, the alien cordgrasses are aggressive and able to out-compete their native cousin. Of special concern is *S. alterniflora*, which hybridizes easily with *S. foliosa* to produce plants that have a longer growing season, produce more flowers, set more seeds, have a higher germination rate and have less rigorous habitat requirements

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Digging out the roots of *Spartina densiflora* at Marshall Cove

photo: Invasive spartina

Safe and affordable housing

The EAH affordable housing project in Point Reyes is designed to keep both its surface run-off and its wastewater on the project site. This formidable engineering task is necessitated by Point Reyes Station's lack of a drainage system. EAC worked hard to ensure that the project's highly unusual engineering would not endanger the on-site wetlands, Lagunitas Creek, or the nearby public and private drinking water wells. Our criticisms were sometimes interpreted as opposition. We felt just the opposite: that constructive criticism is a way to discover and solve potential problems in advance so that this affordable housing could go ahead.

The final design protects the wetlands by creating an attractive open space at the center of the project. However, it has become apparent that there are still some unresolved questions about the wastewater and surface run-off the project will generate. A key factor is that project engineers made projections without taking into account the historical wide variations in West Marin's annual rainfall, which affects both the septic capacity of the site and the nitrate concentration in groundwater that supplies North Marin's Water District wells. Even ignoring that date, project engineers found that nitrate concentrations will exceed the legal limit for drinking water. at the nearest wells.

We also learned at the eleventh hour that the Regional Water Quality Control Board, which we believed had signed off on the project, had not yet reviewed it, due to a failure of communication between the Regional Board and the County. When the Regional Board did finally look at the project, it too was concerned by the wastewater and nitrate problems.

Knowing that the project's complex financing required that the project receive approval from the Board of Supervisors by March 19 at the latest, we did not ask the Supervisors to reject the project. Instead, we made the point that serious issues remained to be settled and that a design that works for the site may require flexibility on issues that EAH has considered nonnegotiable, such as the setting aside of the commercial parcel as a potential future failsafe leachfield area. We continue to hope and expect that the very serious issues raised by the Regional Board, ourselves and others, including the Point Reyes Station Village Association, can and will be satisfactorily resolved. Much depends on the Regional Board's exercising its approval power conscientiously and not approving the project until all these questions are resolved. That way, the Point Reyes Affordable Housing will solve a local problem without causing another. ■

EAC BYLAWS REVISED

The Board has revised and simplified EAC's bylaws. The membership will be asked to ratify the changes at the June 28 annual meeting. Members are welcome to stop by the office and look over the new, improved bylaws.

Writing and nature: a poet's view

From Robert Hass's testimony to the Board of Supervisors on February 5. The Board agreed with EAC that the three illegal writer's studios overlooking the Giacomini wetland on the Point Reyes Mesa bluff should be removed.

I'm a writer, I grew up in Marin County, I'm a long time Inverness resident, a professor at UC Berkeley, and an environmental activist. I served as Poet Laureate of the United States from 1995 to 1997. Forgive me for trotting out my resume but I've seen some of the letters written to the supervisors by some of the writers who have visited and worked at Mesa Refuge, and I thought it might be useful to you to hear from a writer who hasn't stayed there, who knows the region, and has some record of commitment to its preservation.

I honor the idea of the refuge. It was an extraordinarily generous gesture. It's brought some very gifted people to our town, including at least one very good friend of mine. I'm sure they are grateful to the refuge for support of their work--writers are always grateful for support of their work--and that their impulse to defend the location of the sheds is based on that gratitude. But in truth their gratitude is not the relevant issue. The argument that the sheds should be left where they are because the writers who worked in them were inspired while they were there isn't very helpful.

I'm sure I'd be inspired if someone built a shed on the lip of the Grand Canyon and invited me to work there. It might even be terrific for my work. But it would be unfortunate for the environment. Writers are often the worst offenders in this way, wanting the state of mind produced by solitude and so intruding on places whose main value is that no one has intruded on them.

There is, I am afraid, something fundamentally silly about saying that encroaching on the habitat where wild creatures mate and nest and raise their young is really just fine because that encroachment allowed the writers the solitude to write about protecting nature. Protecting nature begins with protecting nature. That ought to be inspiration enough, I would think. So I hope a way can be found to enforce the rules and not to reward retroactive applications for buildings that are presented as *faits accomplis*. As you know that was the way with building in West Marin for far too long and it is important for the Supervisors to be tough about it because getting people to honor building compacts, community development plans and zoning regulations has been a long struggle.

I don't know whether it's tragic or comic that so many gifted people who share so many of the same values have found themselves at odds in this way. I hope in your political wisdom you can find a way to honor their shared values while you insure that the fragile life on that bluff, the riparian life along the creek, the waters of the marsh and its creatures come first.

Bob Hass lives in Inverness and is a member of EAC

Spartina, from page 1

than *S. foliosa*. Moreover, *S. alterniflora* and its hybrids can grow higher up and lower down on mudflats than can the native species, and are much more efficient at trapping sediment. Their spread dramatically speeds the rate at which the estuaries fill with sediment. This not only fundamentally alters the habitat, it also chokes off channels and changes tidal flow patterns

It has been only 25 years since the first non-native cordgrass was introduced to San Francisco Bay (deliberately, as part of a marsh restoration project), but already alien species and their hybrids cover nearly 500 acres in S.F. Bay and have expanded into many other coastal estuaries. A similar invasion occurred more than a century ago in Europe, presenting us with a disturbing vision of what could be in store for us here.

S. alterniflora was introduced into England from North America in the early 19th century and quickly hybridized with the native cordgrass, (*S. maritima*), to produce a new species, *S. anglica*. Within 15 years of its first appearance, *S. anglica* had spread across many thousands of acres on England's

southern coastline, crowded out its parent species, and crossed the English Channel to France. Among the results were a dramatic increase in sedimentation, raising marsh levels by up to 2 inches a year; a loss of the open mudflats that many wading birds depend upon; a significant restriction of navigation channels; and an alteration of tidal action.

If Tomales Bay and other West Marin estuaries are to avoid a similar fate, we must learn to recognize our native cordgrass and distinguish it from alien species. This is not an easy task. While it is easy to learn to recognize cordgrass in general; distinguishing between different species and hybrids requires some expertise. Ultimately, however, we must discover how non-native species are entering our estuaries and cut off their routes. ■

For more information:

EAC has a handy field identification guide, produced by the Invasive Spartina Project, for interested members. To get one, call the EAC office, at 663-9312

The Invasive Spartina Project has an excellent website, www.spartina.org.

How to give to EAC

Big foundations and corporations don't protect West Marin, people who love West Marin do. EAC works full-time to ensure that our environment is not polluted, degraded, or turned into a quasi-rural Disneyland. Our supporters don't necessarily have a lot of money, but there are many ways of giving to EAC. You can give by

- ✓ Renewing your membership each year
- ✓ Becoming an EAC volunteer
- ✓ Making a gift in honor of a friend for a birthday, wedding, or other special occasion
- ✓ Pledging a monthly, quarterly, or annual donation or making a recurring gift via credit card
- ✓ Donating appreciated stock and receive a tax deduction while avoiding capital gains tax.
- ✓ Naming EAC in your will or suggesting memorial gifts to EAC
- ✓ Asking friends and family who visit you here and love West Marin to join EAC.

You don't have to be rich! For a handy brochure on leaving a gift to EAC, call 663-9312. ■

HELLO & GOODBYE

Board changes

As board president in 1996, **Mark Dowie** initiated EAC's effort to have jetskis banned from Tomales Bay and the Marin coast. He vowed to stay on the board until a ban was in place. That happened last October 10 and, true to his word, Mark resigned shortly thereafter. We thank him for his years of service to EAC and take heart from his promise that his formidable Rolodex will continue to be at our disposal!

Sim van der Ryn also has left the board due to the pressures of commuting and conflicts with his many other commitments. However, he has offered to continue to advise and participate in

EAC projects in his areas of expertise.

Mary Anne Flett joined the board in February. She is a biologist with a degree in Animal Behavior from UC Davis. She has worked on listed species, including California clapper rails, red-legged frogs and tiger salamanders. She has also spent many hours in the riparian thickets of Sierra Nevada meadow systems studying willow flycatchers. Her ecological expertise will strengthen EAC, and her familiarity with the California Environmental Quality Act will also help when we try to make our way through the dense thicket of state environmental regulations. Mary Anne lives on the Point Reyes mesa with her hus-

band Andy Brier, owner of Whale of a Deli, and their son Max.

Our newest board member is **Lynnette Kahn**. Lynnette was raised on an almond farm in the Central Valley town of Escalon, and graduated from University of California at Berkeley with a degree in history. She and her husband Bob moved to West Marin from southern California ten years ago. They live in Marshall, where they operate the Inn on Tomales Bay Bed & Breakfast. Lynnette wears many hats. She is vice-president of the West Marin Chamber of Commerce, which she represents on the Tomales Bay Watershed Council. She is also a member of the East Shore Planning Group. In 2001, she received

Fishy plans

In March, EAC hosted a seminar on Marine Protected Areas. The California Department of Fish and Game (DFG) has embarked on a year-long process to identify areas that should be off-limits to fishing. We brought together 30 scientists, activists, and representatives of the commercial and sports fishing worlds as a first step to coming up with a MPA proposal for the Marin coast. Speakers explained the arcane process DFG has established to choose reserves; how marine reserves have worked in other places; and the current state of the relatively young science of defining reserves to protect fish and to protect fisheries, two not-always-compatible goals. Local fisherperson and enthusiastic EAC member, Tom Baty provided smoked samples of locally important marine species at the end of the meeting.

Among the participants were Ed Ueber of the Gulf of the Farallones National Marine Sanctuary, Bill and Nancy Vogler, owners of Lawson's Landing, commercial fisherman Josh Churchman, National Seashore Chief Ecologist Sarah Allen, Ken Fox of Tomales Bay Association, Bill Sydeman of Point Reyes Bird Observatory, and Professor Louis Botsford, who is conducting a study of potential MPAs for the Point Reyes National Seashore. The group agreed to meet

You make it possible.

Thanks to the generous members who responded to our Fall Appeal and to those who have sent in their 2002 dues. If you haven't yet rejoined for 2002, please do so now! We depend on our members!

\$5000-\$10,000: Anonymous

\$2500-\$4999: Leocha Fund of the Tides Foundation

\$1000-\$2499: Jennifer Altman Foundation, Hathaway Barry, Gordon Bennett, Virginia Davis, John Harrington, Andrew Paul Kurtzig Fund, Nicole Lederer & Lawrence Orr, Kenneth & Doris Roe, Endurance Fund, Bob & Jean Soost, Jack Wright.

\$500-\$999: Anne Baxter, Kris Brown & Scoby Zook, Christa Burgoyne, Constellation Fund of the Tides Foundation, Alfred & Marcelle Holck, Rig Currie & Trish Johnson, Nancy, Milne, Carol & Bill Press, Ron Rosano & Susan Morrow, Ellis & Ann Stephens, Tom Thornley & Robin Nelson

\$250-\$499: Bill Barrett, Robert Bingham & Carol Kearns, Gordon & Wanda Bronson, Susan & Joseph Cerny, Dow & Dian Carpenter, Jules Evens, Tom & Barbara Gaman, Victor & Lorraine Honig, Ted & Diane Johnson, Bill King & Nancy Stephens, Stephen & Gail Martin, Mia Monroe & Stephen Meyer, V Fund of the Tides Foundation, Elizabeth Zarlengo & Gary Ireland

Under \$250: Too many to name. Thank you! ■

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EAC Board

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Coming events

ANNUAL POTLUCK.: 6PM, June 28, Dance Palace, Point Reyes. Great food, great people, great speaker--Ane Carla Rovetta. To reserve a place, call 663-9312.

THE MORNING AFTER: Join EAC and the Park Saturday June 29 to help clean up an old ranch in Olema Valley. Great views; interesting debris. Pizza for lunch courtesy of the Whale of a Deli. RSVP to Kate at 415-389-1828.

eac

Environmental Action Committee of West Marin

P.O. Box 609 • Pt Reyes Station, CA 94946

phone 415-663-9312 • fax 415-663-8014

e-mail: eac@svn.net

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If your name is printed in red, please keep your membership current by paying your 2002 dues as soon as possible. If it's in black, you're up-to-date. Thanks!