



BACKGROUND

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Can L.A. Survive?

*Our region's fragile environmental balance
demands changes in the way we live.*

By William Deverell and D.J. Waldie

Is Los Angeles sustainable? It depends.

The city, like many in the semiarid West, is poised on an exceedingly narrow environmental ledge. It's maintained there by elaborately engineered systems to import water, manage flood protection, move goods and make daily life predictably ordinary. A major earthquake, a prolonged drought or (paradoxically) an era of increased flooding would sweep the city and the region into chaos. It could take a trillion dollars, after the worst of these environmental disasters, to put L.A. back together again.

Catastrophic earthquakes, fires, floods and droughts have ravaged the Los Angeles basin before. On the scale of thousands of years, they're bound to happen again; we just don't know when.

What we do know, thanks to new scientific studies and increasing sophistication in interpreting their data, is a great deal more about the fragile environment of Los Angeles and the complex ways the environment has been shaped to answer the demands of our collective desires. The natural history of L.A. contains monsters – like the floods of 1914 that turned the southern half of the county into a vast, shallow lake – but it also contains all of us, uneasy figures in the landscape, trying to become native to our place.

It doesn't help to pretend – and it's mostly pretending – that California's Native Americans lived in undisturbed harmony with the environment. They put a lighter footprint on the landscape, but native peoples were still people, behaving as people always do. When conditions harshened, it appears that they took the stress out on one another – the bow and arrow, a relatively late arrival here, exacted a hard toll on the limbs and bodies of native peoples as they tried to fit themselves into natural systems that their presence irrevocably altered.

Just as unhelpful is easy contempt for L.A. as the “capital of sprawl.” Angelenos have always tried – and always failed – to balance competing metaphors of “opportunity” and “livability” to improve on the nature they've found. The rough compromise they worked out, beginning in the 1880s was mostly rows of suburban houses on a grid of streets extending to the limits of a region that now is just about built out. You might just call Los Angeles our ruined paradise and our home.

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Page 2 of 3

If we're to make Los Angeles sustainable, one thing we must do better is connect with the region's remaining nature with the home we've made. We have incomparable beaches and mountains, but they're separated from poor, urban neighborhoods by an inadequate and wearying public transit system. Schools in urban neighborhoods stand empty through too many hours of the week, their asphalt playgrounds baking in the sun. Homeowners struggle to maintain landscapes better suited to the English Midlands, where the annual rainfall averages about 30 inches. (The average in Los Angeles is less than half that). The city of Los Angeles imports water from Northern California and the Colorado River at significant environmental cost and flushes treated wastewater out to sea along with nearly all the runoff from winter rains.

There are better models. On the southeast side of the county, for example, 37% of the water that recharges municipal wells comes from reclaimed wastewater, and nearly 30% comes from capturing and reusing rainfall. And there are other signs that hopeful things are happening throughout the country. The Taylor Yard State Park along the Los Angeles River is being developed, with benefits for the neglected river environment as well as downtown neighborhoods. Then there's the new 32-acre Cornfield State Park, jutting into Chinatown nearby, where a collaborative process with community members has begun laying out a plan for this new open space.

The 52-mile Los Angeles River greenway project, linking the river, new state parks and the Arroyo Seco with bike and walking trails is moving forward (although more slowly than most had hoped). Environmental repair of the Arroyo Seco got a boost from the recent ArroyoFest that closed the Pasadena Freeway and let walkers and cyclists travel the historic corridor from Pasadena to downtown. A project for a Los Angeles heritage trail, connecting all these sites and more than a dozen other "places of memory" in downtown and East Los Angeles, is being vigorously advocated.

Every bit adds up.

The Los Angeles Unified School District has some \$8 billion for the construction of new schools and the repair of existing facilities. When its building program is completed, the LAUSD will manage 2,250 acres of open space and nearly 1,000 schools, one of the largest chunks in the basin's watershed under a single agency's jurisdiction. Those schools can be made into neighborhood centers, teaching both kids and their parents, providing social services and making green fields for play and environmental remediation. The district has already pledged to pull up asphalt where it now shrouds existing playgrounds. Demonstration projects have shown how capturing on-site runoff, planting trees and other greening strategies at schools improve neighborhood environments. A project aimed at bringing such greening techniques to 4.4 square miles of residential and industrial neighborhoods has begun in the Sun Valley watershed of the San Fernando Valley with the support of the county Public Works Department.

What seemed distantly idealistic five years ago – revitalizing the L.A. River, making the asphalt and concrete of school grounds more permeable, building parks downtown – is becoming more commonplace. It's not nearly enough, however, to make Los Angeles as environmentally sustainable as it could be. It will take countywide changes in construction codes to set standards for tree planting, require street and alley designs with permeable paving and limit the extent of asphalt surfaces in parking lots. It will take the initiative of city councils to create many more small-scale parks, with the goal of putting some form of green open space with no more than half a mile's walk from every Los Angeles home. It will require showing skeptical NIMBYs – as Pasadena is doing – that higher-density infill housing merits their support. It will require greater flexibility from the community stakeholders, better land use coordination among cities and with

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Page 3 of 3

the county, and more participation by L.A.'s scientific and academic communities. It will need, as everything word does, a certain amount of utopian aspiration.

Most of all, making a sustainable future will take money and a lot of it, money that cities and the county won't have any time soon given the state budget problems. Unless the Legislature restores to local governments the economic resources with which local environmental goals can be realized, the state's dysfunctional system of finance will remain the principal roadblock to problem solving.

A sustainable Los Angeles would be a city and a region that met current human needs and the needs of the environment in ways that are just, economically efficient, grounded in history and based on the best available science without compromising either the welfare or the dreams of future generations. There are no perfect solutions, of course; only better approximations.

People in Los Angeles who contemplate the "connectedness" of natural systems may find some answers to the sustainability challenge in citizen planners, citizen foresters and even citizen historians. Ordinary people in L.A. are provoking extraordinary changes. Angelenos who remove thirsty lawns and plant drought tolerant vegetation reduce dependence on imported water. When they engage public agencies like the county's Watershed Management division, they change decades-old practices that ignored sustainable use. When they know the history of L.A.'s environmental struggles, they see how neighborhood interests connect to the larger community.

Last month, the Haynes Foundation brought together geologists and developers, historians and city officials, archeologists and the executives of non-profit organizations to discuss the region's future. Their analyses were often encouraging and sometimes frightening. But one thing became clear from the discussion: To nurture the environmental future of Los Angeles and make us more native to our place, the first need is a healthy ecology of hope.

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