

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This Management Plan has been prepared to guide Tijuana River National Estuarine Research Reserve (NERR) in fulfilling its mission of estuarine resource protection over the period 1998-2003. This plan also serves as the Comprehensive Management Plan for the Tijuana Slough National Wildlife Refuge that comprises the northern portion of the Research Reserve.

The Tijuana River NERR encompasses approximately 2,521 acres of tidally flushed wetland, riparian, and upland habitats lying immediately north of the U.S. - Mexico border. These lands are owned and managed cooperatively by the California Department of Parks and Recreation (CDPR), U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), the City of San Diego, the County of San Diego, and the U.S. Navy.

The Tijuana River NERR is linked to two federal land preservation networks: the National Estuarine Research Reserve System, administered by the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), and the National Wildlife Refuge System (NWRS), administered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. NERRs are estuarine areas protected and managed through a federal-state cooperative effort for long-term research, education, and interpretation. At Tijuana River NERR, CDPR is NOAA's partner in this state-federal cooperative effort. The Tijuana Slough National Wildlife Refuge, located within the Reserve, is one of 511 units of the National Wildlife Refuge System (NWRS), the nation's largest system of public lands dedicated to the conservation of wildlife resources.

This plan has been prepared using a consensus-based planning process involving the Tijuana River NERR Management Authority, staff members of the operating agencies (CDPR and FWS), and community members. This collaborative process marks an innovation in the preparation of NERR and NWR management plans and reflects the planning agencies' commitment to public and community involvement in decision-making.

## **FIVE-YEAR VISION STATEMENT FOR TRNERR**

The 1998 Management Plan emphasizes the Reserve's international geographic significance as the southwestern-most corner of the United States. The Reserve is a largely undiscovered, biologically diverse open space bordered on all sides by dense urbanized communities in the U.S. and Mexico. Yet the southern end of the Reserve is unwelcoming to visitors. It has been degraded by sewage spills, soil erosion related to road construction, and sedimentation. Recent efforts by several agencies to counter these problems have inspired a shared vision of this area as a welcoming open space for visitors and researchers.

The Five-year Vision Statement for the Tijuana River NERR is:

**To design and implement an improvement plan for the southern end of the Reserve, emphasizing the area of Goat Canyon, that integrates improvements in habitat restoration, resource management, public access, education, law enforcement, research, and monitoring.**

These improvements to the southern arm of the Reserve will reduce negative impacts currently affecting the Reserve's most sensitive core area, the Tijuana Slough NWR.

### **SEAMLESS RESERVE PRINCIPLE**

An overarching principle of this management plan is to implement a "seamless reserve" while maintaining the integrity of each participating agency. This goal will be achieved by integrating and coordinating staffing, facilities, and programs. Programmatic coordination and integration is woven throughout the plan. All programs will address habitat restoration -- the primary emphasis of this next era of Reserve operations. The recreation, research, monitoring, and stewardship programs will also support the habitat restoration goals of the Reserve. The plan provides for the sharing of agency expertise with land stewards and citizens outside the Reserve, upstream in the Tijuana River Valley, and in Mexico to help preserve and improve the watershed.

### **ADMINISTRATIVE FRAMEWORK**

Operational efficiency and financial management of both the FWS and CDPR are critical components of this plan. Staffing objectives of the Management Plan articulate and pursue a more efficient staff structure and improve interagency coordination. The structure of the Management Authority and its advisory committees has also been modified to respond to the agenda of the Management Plan. Priority is given to acquiring the following on-site permanent professional staff positions: a research coordinator, a watershed coordinator, and an office assistant.

### **RESOURCE PROTECTION, MANAGEMENT, AND RESTORATION PROGRAM**

One important goal of this plan is to improve land stewardship. The plan presents a comprehensive proposal to improve land stewardship through law enforcement, large scale habitat restoration, and monitoring human activities within and outside Reserve boundaries that may affect Reserve habitats. The plan recognizes that

since the mid-1980s great progress has been made in the protection and management of NWR lands north of the Tijuana River. The plan guides the operating agencies as they extend increased stewardship and cooperative management to Reserve lands south of the River.

### **RESEARCH AND MONITORING PROGRAM**

The Reserve presents an invaluable site for research and monitoring of natural resources. The plan will improve administration of research activities, broaden participation of research institutions in the Reserve research program, and integrate the monitoring program more fully with Reserve stewardship and educational programs. The plan recognizes that the addition of a research institution to the Management Authority and designation of the Reserve as one of San Diego State University's Auxillary Field Stations will improve the mutually beneficial relationship between the Reserve and research community. The plan also includes applied research within the watershed to address common binational problems.

### **EDUCATION AND INTERPRETATION PROGRAM**

The plan marks a change in course for Tijuana River NERR's education program. This change incorporates and implements NERR system objectives. Basic education programs targeting K-12 throughout the watershed will continue. However, a new emphasis on reaching decisionmakers will be developed to target water developers, public realtors, development funding program managers, public resource managers, land-use planners, and others on both sides of the border. In addition, the educational themes will relate to the broader Reserve goals of habitat restoration. All educational programs will be bilingual.

### **PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT, USE, AND ACCESS PROGRAM**

The Reserve provides unique opportunities for the public to enjoy and appreciate estuarine resources such as tidal wetlands, riparian, and upland habitats. The plan is designed to increase visitor use and outreach at the Reserve, promote wildlife-dependent recreational activities, and encourage other compatible recreational uses. The plan also increases public involvement in Reserve management and promotes volunteerism at the Reserve.

### **FACILITIES DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM**

The current facilities at the Reserve are inadequate to support the essential functions of the Reserve and the anticipated increases in staffing and public use. Increased public involvement in Reserve programs is a plan priority; therefore

increasing accessibility to the Reserve is an integral part of facility, trail design, and other improvements. Additional facility needs include increasing office and storage space at the visitor center and expanding meeting space to accommodate large educational groups.

## **BINATIONAL WATERSHED COORDINATION PROGRAM**

Watershed coordination is a new subject area for this plan update. Located at the terminus of the 1,700-square-mile binational watershed, the Tijuana River NERR is a natural center for many binational concerns relating to natural resources. The Reserve's role in supporting bilingual and cross-border environmental education is well-established and central to the Reserve's continuing mission. The Reserve embraces its international role and strives to improve U.S./Mexico collaborations. Watershed-level planning supports the FWS ecosystem management approach in management of Tijuana Slough NWR.

The plan specifies actions for the coordination of a binational watershed project with special emphasis on the Goat Canyon (also known as the Canyon de los Laureles) subwatershed. This project focuses on erosion and sediment control, and stormwater management. The project will use the Tijuana River Watershed GIS and build upon other important cross-border programs in which the Reserve has participated. With this new initiative, the operating agencies hope to strengthen their understanding of how the Reserve is perceived by people living south of the border, to improve the design of future natural resource projects and environmental education initiatives, to explore other areas of importance to the watershed and the NERR program, and to increase applied research in the watershed.