



ENVIRONMENTAL INSIGHT

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PARTNERS IN HABITAT PRESERVATION: PSOMAS/BONTERRA CONSULTING

Some people saw Upper Chiquita Canyon as a perfect spot for homes, a golf course and a clubhouse. Others saw it as critical habitat for the threatened songbird known as the coastal California gnatcatcher. In the 1990s, there was a moment when the future use of Upper Chiquita Canyon could have gone either way.



Biologist Ann Johnston still remembers sitting at her desk, looking at physical plans for the development in Upper Chiquita Canyon. She saw the golf holes laid out, the position of the clubhouse and the roads winding between.

Back then, Johnston was helping the Transportation Corridor Agencies (TCA) secure environmental approvals and permits – from agencies such as the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the California Department of Fish and Wildlife – to construct The Toll Roads. At the time, TCA was working on the portion of the 241 Toll Road from Antonio Parkway to Oso Parkway near Rancho Santa Margarita. Construction had to be balanced with conservation of habitat and open space. “It was the perfect time for TCA to step in and preserve Upper Chiquita Canyon,” Johnston said.

Golf courses make pretty landscapes for humans, but don’t provide much habitat for birds like the California gnatcatcher. The small blue-grey songbird nests in coastal sage scrub, the naturally occurring landscape in Upper Chiquita Canyon. Low shrubby plants including California sagebrush, California buckwheat and white sage provide ideal natural nesting spots that protect the small bird and its offspring from predators.

In 1996, TCA bought the parcel from a housing developer. At the time, a spokesperson for the developer told the *Orange County Business Journal* they had been planning 200 homes and a 36-hole golf course for the area. TCA’s purchase meant the golf course plans would be shelved permanently and the land would be restored and preserved as open space for future generations. Today, it serves as an important wildlife corridor and supports significant populations of coastal California gnatcatchers, coastal cactus wrens and many other plant and wildlife species.



Johnston’s work with TCA stretches back to her first unpaid internship, when she was just out of college. A resident of Huntington Beach since the age of two, Johnston remembers helping write the original environmental documents and conducting field surveys to locate coastal California gnatcatchers for the 241 Toll Road’s biological studies.

Years later, she’s still hooked on the work. She has built a career in environmental consulting, working for both public and private sector clients. But projects related to The Toll Roads have remained a constant thread throughout her career, as she moved on to help found BonTerra Consulting, a woman-owned firm. The firm was later purchased by Psomas in 2014.

Twenty years later, the preservation and restoration of Upper Chiquita Canyon remains one of the projects she is most proud to have been involved in. A big part of that is her memory of TCA’s diligence and willingness to go the extra mile in its environmental planning.

“We needed good science to get to the end zone and TCA really spent the time and effort to make sure they had the best science,” she said. She recalls how TCA would survey a large swath of habitat around the proposed road’s alignment through canyons and ridges. While there are no hard-and-fast guidelines for how much land to survey, TCA would typically survey an area one half-mile wide along an alignment to provide engineers guidance on habitats to avoid, often at significant cost to TCA.

Decades later, enough time has passed that people forget about the efforts required to guarantee the future of Upper Chiquita Canyon. What remains is a jewel of open space and the pride of those involved in the preservation and restoration work. Of Upper Chiquita Canyon, Johnston said, “TCA did everything right.”



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TheTollRoads.com

The Toll Roads (State Routes 73, 133, 241 and 261 in Orange County, California) are property of the state, maintained by Caltrans and operated by the Transportation Corridor Agencies, a government agency created by the state legislature in 1986.