

New visions for the Delta -- a national park, perhaps?

Matt Weiser, Sacramento Bee, 3-6-10

The Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta is one of the world's unique landscapes, but unless you own a boat or part of an island, its natural wonders are simply hard to access.

One reason is that the Delta's 1,100 miles of levees are mostly private, and their owners are concerned about public access that may damage levees or cause liability.

As a result, "No Trespassing" signs in recent years have sprouted on levees faster than cattails.

"It's certainly been underappreciated and underutilized as a place," said Matt Kondolf, a professor of landscape architecture at the University of California, Berkeley, who prepared a 2007 study to "re-envision" the Delta. "There's actually tremendous potential for tourism and other kinds of open-space recreation."

A variety of new efforts are under way to tap that potential.

The most ambitious is a purely academic plan to create a national park in the Delta. Developed by John Bass, a professor of landscape architecture at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, it exists only on a Web site he created, deltanationalpark.org.

The plan contains controversial elements, but is intended to be thought-provoking.

Bass proposes a public buyout of the levees to ensure access for recreation.

Flood-resilient housing would be built atop the strongest levees. Some would be tourist accommodations.

Revenue from development would fund park projects, including large setback levees to improve flood protection and riverside habitat where needed, and light-duty ferries to carry hikers and bicyclists between islands.

Farmers would retain ownership of island interiors to continue growing crops, the area's main economic activity.

"This is not about the kind of national park where it's thought of as a wilderness," said Bass, 50, who formerly taught at UC Berkeley and Harvard and has visited the Delta many times.

"To some extent the 'national park' title is a provocation. But why not imagine it as a new kind of national park?"

Already under way is a plan to declare the Delta a "national heritage area." This is a National Park Service status – without the park and its rules.

One of the water bills signed last year by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger charged the Delta Protection Commission, a state agency based in Walnut Grove, with applying to Congress for the designation.

The commission obtained a \$10,000 grant from the National Trust for Historic Preservation to prepare the

proposal. A consultant has been hired, and Executive Director Linda Fiack said the proposal should be complete next year.

If approved, the Delta would become the state's first national heritage area. The designation highlights unique historic or cultural features, and allows a region to use the National Park Service "arrowhead" logo and signage.

"No land uses would change as a result of getting that designation," said Alex Westhoff, a project specialist at the commission who developed the idea while a graduate student at UC Berkeley. "It's not exactly a park in the traditional sense, and we're sort of sensitive about not using that term, because ... people are resistant of designations that have strings attached."

The status would enhance the area's identity as a unique destination, and would provide an official status that could help obtain grant funds for recreation and restoration projects.

Fiack said one option is to limit the designation to the stretch of Sacramento River waterfront towns, from Freeport to Benicia, which have a rich history in farming, transportation and recreation.

Another new project would create a regional trail system.

A 2006 law by Assemblyman Tom Torlakson, D-Antioch, requires the Delta Protection Commission to plan the "Great California Delta Trail." It likely would be a network of trails, and not necessarily limited to hiking and biking. Routes could also serve kayaking and farm tourism.

The commission received a \$100,000 Coastal Conservancy grant to plan the Solano and Contra Costa county portions. It will seek a \$180,000 Caltrans grant for the Sacramento and Yolo county routes. Each county would then have the duty to establish the routes within its boundaries.

The water laws adopted last year also created the Delta Stewardship Council to manage restoration in the 740,000-acre estuary. The only local government member will be whoever holds the chairman's seat on the Delta Protection Commission.

Sacramento County Supervisor Don Nottoli was named chairman last week by his peers on the commission, thus becoming the first member of the new council.

"It is good that the Delta is getting this attention and is not just seen as a conduit for moving water," he said. "If we respect people's concerns, if the Delta is seen for the special place it is, it can be a positive."