

# Concerning Wildlife Habitat Loss

Frank Mock

January 25, 2015

A few weeks ago I noticed a hole dug in the corner of the back yard. The hole is from a ground squirrel who has taken up residence at the edge of our herb garden. This squirrel, who my daughter named Chip, is a busy fellow. He is constantly expanding his tunnel throwing loads of dirt on to the nearby herbs. He has almost completely destroyed the spearmint and the lemon balm is in jeopardy. Frequently, I move the mounds of dirt away from the herbs only to come back hours later to find a fresh dirt pile in its place. Why do I put up with this squirrel? Why not get rid of the animal? I grew up on a farm in northern California tending to and caring for animals. I love nature and have always had a deep appreciation for the animal species that share this Earth with us. It pains me to see animals displaced due to human development. Protecting wildlife habitat is paramount in my mind. I believe humans have a responsibility to strike a balance between new home building and the preservation of wildlife habitat. Unfortunately, not all people share this point of view. Suburban sprawl is relentless and unforgiving to the animals whose habitat has been taken away. Today, in the San Francisco bay area, suburban sprawl is an unstoppable beast. My wife and I purchased our new house a little over a year ago. Our neighborhood is brand new, so it wasn't that long ago that the land our neighborhood is on was home to Chip's relatives and other animals. I feel obligated to share our land with Chip and his family. By removing this animal, I would be no better than the greedy developers who transformed this land.

Why does this part of California have so much active human development? Mostly because computers and related technologies are advancing faster than grandma can peel an apple. Many of the fields and hills of the

northern California east Bay Area were once owned by ranchers or farmers. Today the active ranches or farms are few and far between. Instead, much of the land that cattle or sheep once grazed upon are now owned by the city governments or housing developers. The valley at the lower SF Bay Area was once dubbed The Valley of the Hearts Delight, due to the abundance of fruit orchards that once graced this part of California. Today it is called Silicon Valley and many of this worlds high tech companies call it home. In the last twenty years, the computer industry has boomed. The San Francisco bay area is a hot spot for jobs related to this industry. There is a high demand for high tech talent here. Most bay area companies are hiring people from over seas from such places as India and China to fill the need for skilled professionals. Do we really have a shortage of American college educated professionals? Maybe, but I'm sure the Bay Area technology companies benefit somehow by hiring from over seas. However, this article is not about the need for immigration reform, but about how all the people moving to the bay area are causing a huge demand for housing which is causing many animals to be displaced. I realize this is a problem that most people ignore or fail to see. Surely most people think this is a laughable matter and quickly dismiss this issue as a necessary evil to keep the engine of forward economic progress running.

Today, in the outer east Bay Area houses are going up seemingly over night. The housing market is hot and has been so for some time. Even in late 2008 when the economy went down the toilet, the Bay Area housing market suffered much less than markets of other parts of the country. Greedy home builders squeeze as many houses on to a plot of land as they can, usually with a few small parks sprinkled between neighborhoods so kids can play soccer or fly a kite. The fields that were once home to deer, turkey, rabbits, owls and hawks are being covered with homes for humans. Unfortunately, little or no consideration is given to the animals who are being forced out. I have had Great Horned owls perch on my roof top at dusk, egrets eyeball my fountain hunting for breakfast and wild turkey walk down the side walk in front of my home. I have seen big, beautiful deer struck by a cars and I'm finding it increasingly common to read in the news about mountain lions in neighborhoods. These animals are searching for food in the places they used to before people encroached on their land. My problem is with the local governments and home builders who make little or no accommodations for

the displaced wildlife.

There are a number of Bay Area regional parks that support wildlife, but obviously not enough considering all the wildlife I see roaming or soaring above the newly developed neighborhoods of the East Bay. Should city or county governments require developers to allocate a percentage of the land they acquire as wildlife supporting regional parks? I think so. This seems unlikely though since this means less tax dollars for the city or county whose boundaries encompass the land. Most newly developing cities love the influx of people since each new family equates to more tax dollars to help meet their governments ambitious goals.

With land being so valuable to home builders in this part of California, how do we accommodate the displaced animals and keep the developers happy? Surely, imposing new wildlife friendly legislation upon developers would have a negative impact on their bottom line and likely drive up the cost of housing. The answer I believe, is to have a cooperative agreement between wildlife management, city/county government and developers to re-define what a new housing community is. The current model seems to be the same as it was in the fifties, but with a dash more greed sprinkled into the equation (anybody notice that the size of back yards have shrunk over the years?). Only developers that follow this new model and pledge to make a real effort to strike a balance between human living space and wildlife space should be allowed to build. I read a sign on a local garbage truck the other day that stated - "Our landfills provide over 17,000 acres of wildlife habitat". I don't think allocating our old landfills to wildlife is the solution to this problem. However, I'm sure if the eggheads in charge take this problem seriously and are proactive about it, a solution can be found. This new housing community model will likely come at a cost of either higher taxes, Mello-Roos for the new communities or simply higher housing cost. Just like anything else in America's current green revolution, if you want to make a positive change for the environment be prepared to pay for it. The good feeling one gets knowing that they are doing their part to help protect the environment usually out weighs the inconvenience incurred.

So does Chip and his family still live in the backyard? No. Unfortunately, Chip's tunnel also went in to the neighbors yard as well. The neighbors were not so understanding. They placed a trap at the entrance to the tunnel and we haven't seen Chip and family since. The mindset of my neighbors seems to be the norm. Some people may be animal lovers, but not care to share their space with wildlife, especially those that tunnel. Usually only when the population of a wildlife species is dangerously low does any action get taken. At the rate of current human development, in the decades to come (maybe not in my life time) people will start to see a need to protect the remaining wildlife. Why not be proactive about the situation and take action now. I challenge each growing city to set a precedence and work on creating the aforementioned new housing community model. California is a hub for innovation; so I would like to believe that if it will happen, it will happen here.



Chip