



# Where Does the Water Go?

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## BECOMING WATERSHED STEWARDS

**W**here does our water go, after it runs down the gutter? It drains into San Diego Bay—one of San Diego’s most valuable natural resources and the backdrop for a Zoological Society of San Diego program.

We gave a challenge to local schoolchildren: discover how people’s actions affect San Diego Bay. A consortium of local watershed conservationists and educators, including the San Diego Zoo, the Port of San Diego, and the ECOLIFE Foundation, received a grant from the California Coastal Commission’s Whale Tail Grants Program. With these funds, the San Diego Bay Watershed Stewards Project was born, a joint education, conservation, and restoration program aimed at reducing sources of urban runoff.

About 650 fourth- and fifth-graders from schools throughout the watershed cities participated in the Watershed Stewards Program, learning how they can make a difference—while getting a little local dirt on their hands! The program’s curriculum was fun, informative, and memorable for both students and teachers. By participating in

unique classroom activities, presentations, and discovery stations, students learned about nature’s intricate balance within the watershed, and how the public can affect it. Classroom experiments showed students that no matter where you reside, everyone lives in a watershed and contributes to its health.

The highlight of the program was a visit to a field site, which allowed students to observe the effects of pollution on a natural waterway, Chollas Creek, and help with its restoration. The students played an active role in the monitoring and cleaning of the creek. By participating in wildlife observations and native plant restoration, they gained hands-on experience in making simple, appropriate choices to protect waterways.

Historically, the San Diego Bay’s health was jeopardized as raw sewage and industrial wastes were discharged, untreated, into its waters. Modern environmental laws, coupled with the corporate commitments of the Port industry, have now eliminated industrial sources of water pollution. But now the greatest source of pollution in San Diego Bay is urban runoff from businesses and homes.

Urban runoff is produced when people use more water than they need: over-watered lawns, hosed-down driveways, or excess sprinkler water that enters the gutter. Rain and urban runoff carry littered cigarette butts and bottle caps into the waterways that flow into San Diego Bay.



The California least tern is one of seven endangered species that make their homes around San Diego Bay. The Zoological Society is currently working with the Port of San Diego to protect and restore least tern breeding areas.

Pollution can also be carried through the storm drain system, flowing untreated through underground pipes designed to prevent flooding.

Our bay serves as a spawning ground for many fish species, acts as a key stopping point for birds migrating along the Pacific Flyway, provides critical habitat for seven endangered species, and functions as the discharge point for numerous creeks and rivers. The Zoo is located within the San Diego Bay watershed, the geographic area that drains into San

**After the Watershed Stewards Project's restoration efforts, Chollas Creek provided a second chance for many native plants to grow, like lemonade berry, sage, and monkey flower.**

Diego Bay. This area encompasses 415 square miles and extends more than 50 miles into the Laguna Mountains.

Nearly half the population of San Diego County lives or works in the San Diego Bay watershed, yet many people do not understand how their everyday actions may be affecting waterways around them. Awareness throughout San Diego's communities is a critical factor in improving the bay's water quality.

The San Diego Bay Watershed Stewards Project hopes to build community involvement by motivating students to spread the word to family, friends, and neighbors. Graduates of the program can revisit the waterway they helped transform and share it with their families. We can all benefit from cleaned and restored waterways, and we can all contribute in simple ways. As these students from San Diego learned, even our smallest actions have far-reaching effects. 📄

***About the Port of San Diego:** The Port of San Diego manages San Diego harbor and administers public lands along San Diego Bay. During its 43-year history, the port has taken the lead in a variety of initiatives to enhance the environmental quality of San Diego Bay and its surrounding tidelands, including natural resource management, storm water runoff programs, integrated pest management, environmental education programs, and environmental partnerships with public and private groups.*



**The students of the Watershed Stewards Project took an active, hands-on role in cleaning up around Chollas Creek and planting native species.**



### What can you do to protect the watershed in which you live or work?

- Take a close look when your sprinklers are on. Any excess water will eventually pick up litter and debris in the street and carry it to the nearest storm drain. Turn your sprinklers off when rain is predicted.
- Use car washes that recycle their water. Washing your car in the driveway sends dirty, soapy water into the storm drain system where it affects water quality and wildlife.
- Look into alternative pest control methods, such as the use of beneficial insects and native plants. The toxic chemicals in pesticides remain active in the environment long after they have killed the pests in your yard and cause harm to wildlife downstream.
- Sweep up leaves and trash rather than hosing it into the street.
- Always pick up after your pet. Pet waste carries harmful bacteria that get washed into storm drains from rain or sprinklers. This type of bacteria is a major source of beach closures throughout San Diego County.
- Participate in a beach, creek, or park cleanup and bring your family and friends.