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White Point Nature Center opens today

By Donna Littlejohn Staff Writer

Posted: 05/20/2010 07:00:49 PM PDT



The White Point Nature Preserve in San Pedro is opening its new nature and education center. The building is housed in a former military building and features interpretive displays on the history and preservation of the area. Education director Kristina Ellis discusses the displays in the new center. (Steve McCrank/Staff Photographer)

Gradually, they are making their way back - the songbirds, the hawks and the endangered gnatcatcher, all drawn by a hillside now bursting with California's indigenous coastal flora.

Ten years after the land was declared protected open space, San Pedro's White Point Nature Preserve is beginning to mature. The purple sage, wildflowers and grasslands that once covered the land are thriving once again.

And this week, the preserve's long-awaited centerpiece will debut: an education and nature center that offers interactive exhibits that tell the story of the 102-acre site in pictures, words, video and artifacts.

"This will be wonderful," said Veralee Bassler, who was involved with the nature preserve from the beginning and will join other key players today at a private preview of the new center. "It provides a focus point for the project."

The public grand opening will be from 10 a.m. to noon Saturday.

The center has been several years in the making and provides the historic and natural interpretation - along with signage throughout the property - that pulls it all together.

Housed in a redesigned and colorfully painted 1,100-square-foot Cold War-era military building, the center will be open three days a week - from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Wednesday, Saturday and Sunday - and is expected to draw schoolchildren and adults alike who want to learn more about the plants and history of the sprawling ocean-view preserve.

"Open spaces and natural areas in Southern California are just incredibly rare," said Andrea Vona, director of the Palos Verdes Peninsula Land Conservancy that manages the preserve and has coordinated the project. "It's a piece of our heritage as Angelinos."

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Beginning with the end of the Pleistocene era 12,000 years ago, the exhibit traces the history of the White Point and adjacent Royal Palms properties.

Ranch land gave way to a military base during World War II and the



The White Point Nature Preserve in San Pedro is housed in a former military building and features interpretive displays on the history and preservation of the area. (Steve McCrank/Staff Photographer)

Cold War. And from 1978 on, the property sat vacant and fenced off from the public. The city of Los Angeles approved plans to turn it into a nature preserve, with the master plan in place by 2000 and work beginning two years later.

The property's history is a fascinating glimpse into the state's heritage and growth.

"It's had so many incarnations," said Kristina Ellis, director of education programs for the conservancy. "It's a story that has to be told."

The education center sits near the front of the preserve, which is located on the north side of Paseo del Mar between Weymouth and Western avenues. The structure was once used to assemble missile heads.

More than a year was needed to rehabilitate the



Education director Kristina Ellis, left, and Andrea Vona, right, of the Palos Verdes Peninsula Land Conservancy, discuss the new center from within. An abalone display about the former thriving industry at Royal Palms is to the right. (Steve McCrank/Staff Photographer)

building, followed by another year to create the exhibits.

Funding and collaboration came from the Alcola Foundation, the city's Department of Recreation and Parks and an advisory board that includes more than 25 professors from eight universities along with community researchers.

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Many of the exhibits are interactive, giving students a chance to "dig" in a dirt pit for archeological finds that would have been on the property, call up information on a monitor from a roof-top weather station and even play a board game to learn about the land's flora, fauna and history.

A mural created by Robert Reid, muralist for the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles, highlights the various plants and species likely found on the land in prehistoric times.

A lab table on wheels can be taken outdoors for special classes.

"We're going to do a lot of hands-on education," Ellis said, noting that the preserve will offer public, private and homeschool children the opportunity to learn about California's ecosystem.

The exhibits also tell visitors about the rancheros where the Dominguez and Sepulveda families raised cattle, sheep and horses, and about the Japanese-American community that harvested abalone on the adjacent Royal Palms site.

Included is a video-taped living-history interview with Sumiko Seo Seki who was born at White Point where her parents had a farm that grew cucumbers, squash, green beans, olives and tomatoes.

On April 1, 1943, they were forced to evacuate

along with the other Japanese-American farmers and were sent to Santa Anita and later to Jerome, Ark.

"I was born there in 1924 and my parents came there in 1913 when there were cactus and coyotes," said Seki, now a Long Beach resident. "They had to clear the rocks away" to set up farming on the land that was then owned by Ramon Sepulveda.

Seki will be among special guests at the center's opening.

"There is a strong cultural story and we really wanted to tie that story to the land," Ellis said.

"It really is a microcosm of California," Vona said.

The process to restore the land to its natural state is nearing completion, with wildflower grasslands including purple sage, bush sunflower and goldenbush now planted across the hillside.

As a result, flocks of meadowlarks, the endangered gnatcatcher and a burrowing owl are now seen on the property.

Trails and interpretive signs dot the preserve and a parking lot is available. Restrooms and a kitchenette are included in the nature center building, which also will be made available for community meeting space.

Work will be ongoing at the preserve and

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volunteers and donations are always sought.

"As anyone knows who's ever had a garden, you're never done," Vona said.

Bassler, who raised her children across the street from White Point before she and her husband relocated to Palm Springs three years ago, said she's eager to see the nature center.

"I was on the steering committee when the whole thing first started," she said. "We met every week to come up with the plans.

"Since the inception, the idea was to try to keep the land open and to restore the native plants. I do think it's one of the more worthy things I've done. ... It's been a total transformation."

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Want to go?

What: Grand opening of White Point Nature Education Center

Where: White Point Nature Preserve, on Paseo del Mar between Western and Weymouth avenues in San Pedro

When: 10 a.m. to noon Saturday

Information: 310-541-7613; www.pvplc.org/

Regular hours for the center will be from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Wednesdays, Saturdays and Sundays.

The Palos Verdes Peninsula Land Conservancy will lead a nature walk through the property from 9 a.m. to noon June 12 and will conduct its homes tour fundraiser for the preserve on June 13.

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