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## [The Past is the Future at San Pedro's White Point Nature Preserve](http://www.kcet.org/news/the_back_forty/commentary/concrete-and-chaparral/the-past-is-the-future-at-san-pedros-white-point-nature-preserve.html)

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by [Elson Trinidad](#)

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Coastal sage scrub plants cover the hillside at White Point Nature Preserve in San Pedro. | Photo: Elson Trinidad

The Palos Verdes Peninsula not only forms the most distinctive feature of L.A. County's coastline, but it offers one of the most stunning views in all of California, from cliffs to coves to breathtaking vistas of Santa Catalina Island and the setting sun.

But the inland side of the road possesses its own natural beauty as well. At the extreme southwesternmost point of the city of Los Angeles, in western San Pedro at Paseo Del Mar and the southern end of Western Avenue, lies the [White Point Nature Preserve \(http://www.pvplc.org/lands/whitepoint.asp\)](http://www.pvplc.org/lands/whitepoint.asp), a 102-acre plot of land that appears as an empty, vacant parcel to the uninitiated, but serves as a quiet, natural respite from the urban world.

The preserve, owned by [the City of Los Angeles as a public park \(http://www.laparks.org/dos/parks/facility/whitePointPk.htm\)](http://www.laparks.org/dos/parks/facility/whitePointPk.htm) and managed by the [Palos Verdes Peninsula Land Conservancy \(http://www.pvplc.org/index.asp\)](http://www.pvplc.org/index.asp), is crisscrossed by easy hiking trails, popular with locals and their canine companions. But dogs aren't the only animals welcome there. California grey squirrels, lizards, snakes (most of which are harmless), insects, and local and migratory birds call this preserve their home, or at the very least their temporary stopover.

The land on which the preserve sits on has quite a history of its own. For nearly 5,000 years it served as the food gathering grounds for Southern California's native Tongva (a.k.a. Gabrieleño) people, until it became grazing land in the 19th century for Spanish-era Rancho San Pedro and later part of the Sepulveda family's Rancho de los Palos Verdes. Starting in the 1890s, the land supported the abalone fishing industry run primarily by Japanese immigrants, who lived in the surrounding area for half a century, later establishing farms there until their internment at the start of World War II. In the next decade, it became part of the Cold War defense system as the location of the LA-43 Nike anti-aircraft missile launch site (the remnants still visible at the preserve today) until its de-commission in the 1970s.



Remnants of the decommissioned Nike missile launch site are still visible at San Pedro's White Point Nature Preserve. | Photo: Elson Trinidad

For two decades, the land lay vacant until a community effort to preserve the parcel into a more natural state. With the former missile base transformed into an open space habitat, swords were beaten into plowshares, so to speak, and the preserve was dedicated in 1999.

The preserve is not just important for aesthetic or recreational purposes, but to protect and rebuild the coastal sage scrub environment which complemented California's shoreline regions for millennia, until its virtual obliteration by human development within the past two-plus centuries. With only five percent of California's coastal sage scrub habitat still intact, it is the state's most endangered ecosystem.

It's perhaps fitting – and rather just – that the land, formerly part of the 95 percent of lost coastal sage scrub due to human intervention, joins the protected remainder due to the work of human hands. Volunteers have re-created the coastal sage scrub environment (with plants grown from local propagules) through plantings within the past 20 years.



Students from Alliance Cindy & Bill Simon Technology Academy High School in Watts volunteer to plant 200 native shrubs and grasses at White Point Nature Preserve. | Photo: Elson Trinidad

And the effort to restore the area's natural flora continues. Last weekend, around 40 students from [Alliance Cindy & Bill Simon Technology Academy High School](http://www.simontechnology.org/) (<http://www.simontechnology.org/>) in Watts volunteered their time on a Saturday morning to plant some 200 Black Sage, Purple Sage, Buckwheat, Deer Grass, [Toyon](http://www.kcet.org/news/the_back_forty/commentary/concrete-and-chaparral/deck-the-hills-with-boughs-of-california-holly.html) ([http://www.kcet.org/news/the\\_back\\_forty/commentary/concrete-and-chaparral/deck-the-hills-with-boughs-of-california-holly.html](http://www.kcet.org/news/the_back_forty/commentary/concrete-and-chaparral/deck-the-hills-with-boughs-of-california-holly.html)), Coyote Brush, and other natives on the grounds of the preserve.

According to Adrienne Mohan, stewardship associate at the Palos Verdes Peninsula Land Conservancy, the student planting effort is part of an Audubon Society [Toyota TogetherGreen](http://www.togethergreen.org/grants/grant/empowering-los-angeles-youth-save-endangered-species) (<http://www.togethergreen.org/grants/grant/empowering-los-angeles-youth-save-endangered-species>) grant that was awarded to the Conservancy to offset pollution from the nearby Port of Los Angeles.

"We want them to learn what it takes to sustain a habitat with native plants," said Kristi McLaughlin, an economy and government teacher at Simon Technology Academy.

Suddenly, my question is interrupted by a group of students pointing towards a native California grey squirrel that suddenly darted over a small mound.

"They don't get to see much of anything in Watts," McLaughlin added. "This is something new for them. Most of them have never done anything like this before. It's a Saturday, they weren't required to come, but they all jumped in."

The students, all of Latino heritage, who live in South L.A., not only diligently and carefully planted native flora from one- and fifteen- gallon pots, but they seemed to have fun doing it. Four girls danced in a circle, shovels still in hand, around a newly-planted Coyote Brush in the ground, presumably as a light-hearted way to celebrate their effort.

With Governor Brown having recently declared a [drought](http://www.kcet.org/news/define/rewild/agencies/brown-suspends-environmental-law-in-drought-declaration.html) (<http://www.kcet.org/news/define/rewild/agencies/brown-suspends-environmental-law-in-drought-declaration.html>) in California, another teacher used that as a teaching moment for the students.

"They get to experience [drought], rather than just reading about it in a book," said biology teacher Frederick Carr, whose pupils comprise of around half of the student volunteers from Simon Technology Academy. "I demonstrated to them how dry the dirt is, and what effect it's having on the plants, and how hard the root system works. This is experiential learning, one of the best ways to learn. It's easier to teach them the concept later on."



A student volunteer from Alliance Cindy & Bill Simon Technology Academy High School holds a grasshopper he discovered inside a Deer Grass plant. | Photo: Elson Trinidad

The learning experience had already made an impression on the students. For 9th grader Anthony Lopez, a student of McLaughlin's, appreciating the people, plants, and wildlife that lived here before us was his big takeaway. The first-time gardener also got to plant three natives. Eleventh grader Ana Mercado, a student in Mr. Carr's AP class, thought of the planting as hard, but rewarding work. "Planting native plants makes a difference in the community," she said.

After the planting was done and all tools stored away, the students were treated to a brown bag lunch at nearby Royal Palms County Beach, just across the street. They also walked down to the surf, where many of them kicked off their shoes and waded knee-deep in the waves on this unusually hot winter's day. But all worries of drought, classwork, and the realities of life on the streets of South L.A. mattered nothing to them right now, as discovery and diversion became their world, at least for half an hour.

The Simon Technology Academy students plan to return in March to do some watering and plant maintenance.

After the school bus whisked the students back to Watts, I explored some more of the preserve, which was no less abuzz with activity. The preserve's nature center hosted a well-patronized native plant sale, which the Conservancy grows in their own nursery. A garter snake slithering under the shrubbery outside the nature center (which has a whiteboard posted outside that lists recent wildlife sightings) attracted curious onlookers of all ages. On my hike back to my car, I heard the high-pitched chirps of [hummingbirds](http://www.kcet.org/news/the_back_forty/commentary/concrete-and-chaparral/my-neighbor-the-hummingbird.html) ([http://www.kcet.org/news/the\\_back\\_forty/commentary/concrete-and-chaparral/my-neighbor-the-hummingbird.html](http://www.kcet.org/news/the_back_forty/commentary/concrete-and-chaparral/my-neighbor-the-hummingbird.html)), and heard some unseen critters scurry around under the bushes.

I looked back towards the sea to briefly savor both the ocean view and the almost paradoxical sight of the Nike missile facility, and passed an informational marker summarizing the colorful history of the preserve's land and its many uses over the years.

And then I reflected on the work of the student volunteers: Youth, representing our future, are creating their future by restoring the natural past.



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Elson Trinidad is the Filipino kid who grew up listening to black music in an Armenian neighborhood where people spoke Spanish and ate Thai food. [MORE](#)  
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