

[Print Page](#)

Friday, January 26, 2007 Last modified: *Thursday, January 25, 2007 10:39 AM PST*

Ballona Wetlands: Conservation Authority rangers take steps to protect the wetlands and educate the public

BY VINCE ECHAVARIA

Only about two months into her job of patrolling the Ballona Wetlands, Jewel Johnson sees her role as being as much about educating the public on the importance of the wetlands as it is about protecting the land.

Johnson, a senior ranger with the Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority, is one of five rangers who have recently been assigned the responsibility of monitoring the 600-acre wetlands, between Marina del Rey and Westchester/Playa del Rey.

While a main focus of the Conservation Authority rangers is to help secure the state-owned property and prevent mistreatment of the ecological reserve, Johnson says they are also working to educate the public about the need to restore the environmentally "sensitive area."

"I see my job as being an educator," said Johnson, who worked as a ranger for ten years before starting the job at Ballona. "Some people look at this as an empty lot. Our role is to show them that this is a reserve and why it's important to restore it."

The rangers have begun patrolling the Ballona Wetlands property to help deal with some of the more immediate security issues in the area while a long-range restoration plan for the wetlands is being developed.

One of the main issues the rangers are currently facing is trying to make contact with homeless people who have been setting up camps in various parts of the wetlands and find alternative shelters for them.

Jack Liebster, project manager for the California Coastal Conservancy, agrees with Johnson that the rangers can help educate people about the wetlands, in addition to counteracting unauthorized activity there.

"The big thing that the rangers bring is not only security but interpretive education skills," Liebster said.

The California Department of Fish and Game, which owns about 540 acres of the property, and the California Coastal Conservancy are among several agencies that are working on a restoration plan for the coastal wetland habitat.

The plan, known as the Ballona Wetlands Enhancement Project, is intended to restore and enhance a variety of native habitats on the site, according to the Coastal Conservancy, which is leading the restoration planning.

The project also aims to provide for public access and recreational opportunities at the wetlands.

"There's a lot of potential there," said Brad Henderson, an environmental scientist with the Department of Fish and Game, referring to the restoration efforts at Ballona. "The goal is to not only maximize the biological values but also the public values of Ballona."

The agencies involved in the ongoing restoration plan have also developed an interim management plan for the area that focuses on stewardship, land management and public access, Henderson said.

As part of the interim plan, the Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority rangers have been assigned to prevent the various forms of "resource damage" at Ballona, including off-road vehicles driving through the area, illegal camping and the dumping of soil along the property, he said.

"The immediate need is to stop the resource damage that is happening out there," Henderson said.

Many of the problems have been ongoing for several years, but the dumping of soil on the wetland property seems to have recently escalated, he said.

Liebster encourages anyone who witnesses incidents of illegal dumping of soil on the property to notify the Conservation Authority rangers at (310) 456-7049.

Besides the issues of soil dumping, Johnson said the main problems the rangers are dealing with are related to dog owners

allowing their pets to roam unleashed and homeless camps being set up throughout the wetlands.

Johnson said the rangers are currently working on finding alternative shelters for the transients and notifying them that they must leave because they are not allowed to set up camp on the ecological reserve.

The rangers were planning to start notifying the homeless Wednesday, January 24th, that they need to vacate the property within two weeks, but the rangers are also trying to ensure that the homeless are accommodated, Johnson said.

"All we can do is give them options," Johnson said. "We're not trying to be the bad guys, but we have a reserve here and they can't be here without permission. It goes for everybody."

To help relocate the transients, the rangers have contacted local social service organizations, including the OPCC Access Center in Santa Monica, the St. Joseph Center in Venice and the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority, Johnson said.

There are over 30 camps throughout the Ballona Wetlands property, which is divided into three areas — two within the jurisdiction of the Los Angeles Police Department Pacific Division and one within the jurisdiction of the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department, she said.

The largest number of camps are concentrated in Area C, which is bounded by Culver Boulevard and the Marina Freeway and includes the Playa Vista Little League fields.

The area has been a popular spot for the homeless camps due to its "easy access," she said.

The various types of trees, such as pepper trees, in the area are also popular setup sites for camps because of the "good coverage" they provide, making the sites difficult to notice, Johnson said.

While some of the camps are temporary, others appear to have been in the area for years, she said, pointing to one camp that contained a pile of bicycle parts and various household items inside a large tarp.

In patrolling the areas, rangers have found trash and even hypodermic needles, causing concern because of the close proximity to the Little League fields, Johnson said.

Although the rangers may not be able to completely eradicate the problems of mistreatment at the wetlands, they are confident that their presence will improve the situation, she said.

"Having the presence always helps the situation," Johnson said.

Henderson agreed, adding that he has already noticed a drop in many of the problems since the rangers have been on the job.

"It's already better out there," Henderson said.