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Concrete 'river' Eyed As Wildlife Refuge

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LOS ANGELES — The concrete flood-control channel that passes as the Los Angeles River has been the site of gang shootings and Hollywood car chases. It has been eyed as an alternative to clogged freeways. But next up could be its most improbable role yet -- federal wildlife sanctuary.

Conservationists want to apply for millions of federal dollars, use the money to buy up land along the 51-mile urban waterway, and then destroy some of what man has built to get back to nature.

"It's sort of a zany idea for anyone who doesn't know anything about the river except that it's a box channel off the freeway," said Dan Cooper, author of "Important Bird Areas of California." "But those of us who spend a lot of time birding there or biking there, we just know there's a lot to be saved."

The Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy, which is pursuing the idea, hopes to persuade a member of Congress to submit a refuge proposal by the end of the year. It said it has no estimate yet of how much money will be needed.

The first step, however, could be convincing officials and residents the river has the potential to become Los Angeles' version of Central Park.

"Ask people, 'Where in Los Angeles can you see great blue herons and five or six species of ducks?' They'd say, 'You mean the concrete flood control channel? You're crazy,'" Joe Edmiston, executive director of the state-funded conservancy.

The river winds its way from the San Fernando Valley through downtown Los Angeles and south to Long Beach, where it empties into the ocean. Beginning in the 1930s, much of it was paved over to control flooding during the rainy season in the winter. Only three stretches, totaling about 11 miles, still have soft bottoms.

During the dry months, treated sewage cascades past overturned shopping carts and other litter. In winter, the rising water level can be gauged by the plastic grocery bags dangling from trees and bushes.

Hollywood has used its concrete gullies for car chase scenes and drag races in movies such as "Terminator 2: Judgment Day" and "Grease."

Nevertheless, along the stretches that have not been paved over, the banks are shaded by thriving cottonwoods and willows, and herons, egrets and dozens of other birds can be seen picking through the grassy shallows. More than 200 species of birds in all have been spotted along the river.

Consultants who put together a booklet on the proposed refuge surveyed dozens of people who live within a quarter-mile of the waterway, and found that some who live right next to it didn't even know it was a river.

To raise awareness, the conservancy posted signs on bridges reading "Los Angeles River" and featuring the silhouette of a heron. The agency began getting calls almost immediately from people asking where they could find the river.

Supporters hope the project will create additional parkland in Los Angeles, where an estimated 75 percent of children have no park within walking distance of their homes.

At the end of the month, a Los Angeles City Council committee is expected to release a long-term plan for improvements along the 32 miles of river within the city. The plan, which Edmiston sees as compatible with a wildlife refuge, will include the creation of parks, amphitheatres and nature walks.

Among those skeptical of the refuge idea is former state Assemblyman Richard Katz, who once proposed turning the river into a freeway. Katz said the project is worth considering, but "the L.A. River has a long way to go to become a wildlife refuge as opposed to a refuse refuge."

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