

Why “Native” Grasslands?

In the January and March 2007 *Bay Leaf*, and throughout the complementary website documents, we’ve referred to “more native-like” grasslands, but have yet to really describe what we mean by the term or why we use it rather than, for example, “native grassland”.

In reality, both the meaning of the term and the reason for its use are simple to explain, and so we’ll do so briefly in this article.

What do we mean by “more native-like” grasslands?

Our remaining East Bay grasslands have a history that reaches back thousands of years (and much more). They have been subjected to changes of all sorts—daily, seasonal, interannual, and of longer cyclical and irregular periods—of decades, centuries, and millennia in duration. These include changes in climate, soil, biota, human manipulations, even topographic changes, among others.

Until “recently” (i.e., the past couple of hundred years), the local grasslands were composed almost exclusively of locally evolved species of plants and animals—biota like no other in the world, unique to our region (and some species perhaps of neighboring, mostly adjacent regions too) of California.

Not only do we have this ancient heritage of native biota, but we also have an exceptionally rich and diverse assemblage of it. We in the Bay Area are most fortunate in this regard.

The threats to East Bay Area native biodiversity

As fortunate as we may be to have inherited this treasure, we also are one of the primary culprits in bringing about the loss of our East Bay “jewels”, our native grasslands. Why?

Our native grasslands have been subjected to loss of acreage to intensive agriculture, to urban development, to occupation by exotic invasive weedy species, and to loss (caused by man) of various natural ecological “shaping” forces such as traditional fires and herd animals (grazers) under which these grasslands evolved. Thus, because of all these pressures, our current grasslands are mostly dim reflections of their richer historical condition.

The fact that we have any remnants of the native grasslands left to enjoy and to preserve is fortunate. This luxury will not last much longer unless we exert much more focused effort on protecting and improving (dare we say—making more native-like?) our grasslands—degraded as many of them may be at this juncture in time. The opportunity to salvage and improve the native character of our East Bay grasslands is still within reach, we believe, and CNPS urges its membership and the general public to demand a level of effort and allocation of resources sufficient to assure that such a goal can be pursued and achieved.

Why “more native-like”?

Weasel words, you say? Well yes. Our East Bay native grasslands were so diverse, varied, and indeed different from region to region (within the East Bay), and the recent two hundred year history of radical changes brought to these grasslands by modern society, has left us without a good understanding of exactly what was or is a native grassland”. Yes, we do know a lot about what these grasslands were probably composed of, but given the great variation of spatial and species makeup, it’s not a trivial task to know when we “have one”. So rather than getting into fights over “what is ‘native’”, the Conservation Committee of East Bay CNPS wonders if it may be more productive to see if we can simply settle for seeking less abundance of weedy exotics, more abundance of known natively-evolved grasslands species, and to measure in objective (some might say “arbitrary”) ways our progress towards these more relaxed goals.

What do you think? Do our East Bay native grasslands have a future? Is EBCNPS taking too gentle (or impractical, or unscientific) a position on setting a goal of improving the native-like quality of our grasslands? Tell us by email at grasslands@ebcnps.org.

See www.ebcnps.org/conservation/grasslands.html for previous *Bay Leaf* articles and related documents.

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