

Students and faculty take a tour of Coyote Creek watershed

by [Sonya Herrera](#) Apr 2, 2015 1:36 am Tags: [alan leventhal](#), [Chris Jones](#), [committee for green foothills](#), [Coyote Creek](#), [Elizabeth Sarmiento](#), [jerry smith](#), [katherine oven](#)



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Faculty and students joined community leaders on a tour of the Coyote Creek watershed on Saturday, March 21.

The event was organized by the Committee for Green Foothills organization, whose stated mission is to “protect the open spaces, farmlands and natural resources of San Mateo and Santa Clara counties.”

According to San Jose State alumna Elizabeth Sarmiento, the organization’s program coordinator, the committee began planning the Coyote Creek tour in September.

“The Committee for Green Foothills plans a watershed tour every year,” Sarmiento said. “It’s one of the signature events.”

This year’s tour had about 80 attendees and featured speakers from a variety of backgrounds. Attendees were transported via double-decker bus to four locations along the Coyote Creek

watershed: Anderson Dam and Ogier Ponds, both located in Morgan Hill, and Hellyer County Park and Tully Community Branch Library, located in San Jose.

Katherine Oven, deputy operating officer in the Water Utility Division of the Santa Clara Water District, spoke to tourgoers during the bus ride to Anderson Dam. Oven discussed the need to repair the dam, which feeds water to Coyote Creek and accounts for about 25 percent of the Santa Clara Valley's annual water use.

"What we have to do is fix the embankment," Oven said, "so that in the event of a large earthquake, you're not going to have so much shaking embankment would slump down."

Currently, the dam is limited to be filled at only two-thirds of its full capacity, due to the unstable layer of sand and gravel at its base. At a time when less water is being imported to the Valley from the Sierras due to California's historic drought, Oven said it's crucial to remove this limitation on the dam's capacity.

"We are trying to make sure that all of our local dams and reservoirs are filled to the best extent possible based on local rainfall, so that they can help supply the water to this population," Oven said.

Santa Clara Valley's human population is not the only one in need of water. At Ogier Ponds, biological sciences professor Jerry Smith spoke of how Coyote Creek's complex "plumbing" makes it difficult for steelhead trout to complete their migration to the ocean.

According to Smith, Anderson Reservoir contains multiple ports from which to drain and release water. For reasons related to treatment and safety, water that is to be released into Coyote Creek is drawn from ports closer to the reservoir's surface. This surface water, which is warmer than that drawn from the bottom of the reservoir, results in a warmer habitat for the fish in the creek.

"When the water temperature is warm, then the fish metabolic rate goes up," Smith said. "They need more food, and the place to get that more food is in the fast water."

However, the Coyote Creek watershed is mostly flat, requiring a large output of water from the dam in order to increase the speed of the creek's flow.

"The slope in Coyote Creek is 0.3 percent," Smith said. "Most pool tables are about the same. And so the fast water ... is actually very scarce."

As a result, the trout do not get enough to eat.

In addition to starvation, young steelhead trout are threatened by the population of largemouth and spotted bass residing in Ogier Ponds. Smith said these bass are "the ISIS of the fish world."

"It's (as) suitable habitat as it would be for Boy Scouts living in northern Iraq," Smith said. "You might tolerate the temperature, but it's a hostile environment."

Smith said improving the survival rate of steelhead in Coyote Creek requires pumping more water and altering the creek's structure to exclude Ogier Ponds. Smith said that given budget and water constraints, completing this task is not simple.

"It's going to take collaboration and a source of money to get the channel back where it belongs," Smith said.

At Hellyer Park, anthropology lecturer Alan Leventhal shared with tourgoers the history of the Muwekma Ohlone tribe. This population of California Indians has roots in the San Francisco Bay Area and ancestry linked to Mission Dolores, Santa Clara and San Jose. Muwekma settlements included areas around Coyote Creek, which they call “Mayyan Rummey.”

Leventhal’s work with the tribe began in 1980 when some SJSU students introduced him to a woman claiming to be an Ohlone Indian.

“I reached for the quintessential authority, the quintessential tome on California Indians written by Alfred Kroeber,” Leventhal said. The section on Ohlone said the group was “extinct, for all practical purposes are concerned.”

Kroeber’s notes caused Leventhal to doubt the woman’s story.

“I said to this woman, ‘You must be from some other tribe,’ ” Leventhal said. “And she put her hands on her hips, she said ‘I beg to differ with you and Dr. Kroeber. I am an Ohlone Indian, my mother’s an Ohlone Indian. She was born 1911 and was baptized at Mission San Jose as an Indian.’ ”

From that point on, Leventhal helped the Muwekma learn more about the tribe’s history and genealogy. At a 1983 excavation of a construction site in Scotts Valley, Leventhal and other researchers discovered artifacts dating as far back as 12,000 years.

“It is the oldest site in the Bay Area ... before there was a San Francisco Bay,” Leventhal said.

Several more speakers followed Leventhal, and at 4:30 p.m. the watershed tour ended. Chris Jones, a San Francisco State University senior environmental studies major, said he thought the number of speakers was a bit excessive.

“There’s only so much you can say about the natural environment; it’s mostly about being immersed in it, seeing it for yourself,” Jones said.

Not being from San Jose, Jones was unfamiliar with the areas visited during the tour.

“I don’t know anything about Anderson (Dam), other than what I’ve read on Wikipedia,” Jones said. “So that would’ve been cool if we were allowed to walk down into the dam and see a bit more than just standing in the parking lot like we were doing.”

Sarmiento said the event’s planning and implementation cost about \$10,000. Because of their high cost, such tours are usually only held once a year. However, she said “if the community is interested, we could plan another one.”

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