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South Bay Edition

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**Reversing the Sands of Time;
Environment: In an attempt to re-create a long-gone coastal prairie, workers and volunteers begin planting native grasses on a patch of the El Segundo dunes.**

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In the early 1800s, the coastal land near what is now Los Angeles International Airport consisted of thousands of acres of prairie land sprawled against the eastern side of a massive sand dune system.

The now-disappeared prairie was home to coyotes and king snakes and had deep depressions that filled with water during the rainy season. When the water dried up every spring, the prairie became a lush meadow complete with toads, butterflies and colorful wildflowers.

Today, scientist Rudi Mattoni, manager of the state-funded El Segundo Sand Dunes Restoration Project, is trying to resuscitate a piece of that prairie--on 23 acres of dust and weeds under the airport's flight path.

On Sunday, Mattoni and his staff, along with several dozen volunteers, cleared and planted six acres with stipa grass seedlings, the prairie's mainstay. They are planning to finish planting the rest of the land with stipa grass in the next several weeks.

But if Mattoni needed to be reminded of the difficulties of restoring a fragile ecosystem amid development, he didn't need to wait long. First, the planting was briefly held up for security reasons while a plane carrying Philippine President Fidel V. Ramos prepared for takeoff on an LAX runway.

Then, later that night, vandals riding in vehicles broke into the restoration area for the second time in a week, causing an estimated \$25,000 in damage to equipment, seedlings and habitat.

Although the freshly planted prairie was undisturbed, the vandals destroyed about one-third of the stipa grass seedlings still in the plant nursery. They drove over fragile sand dunes containing food plants for the endangered El Segundo blue butterfly and scattered thousands of seeds that Mattoni had hoped to cultivate for the next planting season.

"Upsetting? Oh my God! It puts us back," Mattoni said Tuesday. "What was done is not irreparable, but the horror is you sit here worrying it's going to happen again."

Mattoni and his crew immediately went to work to fix what was broken and replace what was lost. Despite the setbacks, they remain determined to restore as much of the coastal prairie as they can, so that this unique ecosystem is not lost to future generations.

"What's remarkable about this coastal prairie is that it was the only one like it in the area," Mattoni said. "It is a very important part of our natural heritage. The prairie was Los Angeles. It's as great a value as any work of art."

That sentiment was shared by many of the 70 or so volunteers, including more than two dozen teen-agers from ecology clubs at local high schools, who gathered Sunday morning on the barren flatland off Pershing Drive and World Way West in El Segundo.

The volunteers, who included members of Rhapsody in Green, a nonprofit conservation group that helps restore Los Angeles' natural environment, were given a choice of raking, planting or watering duties.

The hoped-for coastal prairie is being re-created on a portion of a 300-acre lot that LAX bought in the mid-1960s for airport expansion. The property once held 800 homes. Today, about 200 acres of it is a preserve for the endangered El Segundo blue butterfly, which is unique to the area. City officials plan to convert the other 100 acres into a recreational area to support the preserve.

Mattoni, who works under a contract with the city of Los Angeles' Environmental Affairs Department, is restoring the dunes and prairie with a \$430,000 grant from the state Resources Agency.

The 23-acre prairie restoration site, enclosed by a chain-link fence, is framed by contrasts. To the south are rolling sand dunes offering breathtaking ocean views. To the east, across Pershing Drive, is the edge of the Los Angeles International Airport, offering an unbroken vista of concrete and asphalt.

The volunteers worked as jets roared overhead, often making conversation impossible. Elvira Gonzalez, 37, seemed unruffled by the deafening air traffic. The Carson mother, dressed in a baseball cap and blue jeans, methodically planted a new seedling every few minutes.

"I like to help," Gonzales said as she paced off the three steps to her next planting spot. Using a spade, she got on her hands and knees and dug a generous hole in the ground. Patting the earth with her hands, she created a cradle of freshly tilled soil for the little seedling.

"We never re-create anything. We just use and use and use," Gonzalez said. "Here, we are trying to create something that we are going to be able to see later."

Raking a clearing for Gonzalez was Warren Walker, 51, of Ladera Heights. Walker, a senior analyst at the RAND Corp. in Santa Monica, said he and his 13-year-old daughter, Hannah, have been volunteering for Rhapsody in Green for the past several months.

"First of all, I think Hannah would like it because she likes plants

and animals," he said. "And it's something for us to do together and to be out in a beautiful part of the city."

Hannah, who spent the day helping supervise the other volunteers, agreed. "I like doing community work and meeting new people and having fun with my dad," she said.

A few minutes later, Hannah's fun was put on hold when an airport police officer informed the group they would have to move while the Philippine president's airplane prepared for takeoff.

The volunteers got into their cars and drove up a road to the ocean side of the dunes, where Mattoni spoke to them about the coastal prairie they were trying to restore.

"It's not endangered. It's extinct. And we're trying to bring it back," Mattoni said. "We'll never be able to make it what it once was . . . but at least, by getting in the stipa bunch grasses, we'll give it a start."

The volunteers then offered to pull up some ice plant--non-native vegetation introduced to the area by developers in the early '50s--on the sand dunes overlooking the ocean. Half an hour later, airport police officers used a loudspeaker to announce that Ramos' plane had safely taken off.

By that time, many volunteers had to leave to meet other obligations.

One was Mike Laskavy, 33, an advertising manager who had driven from Sun Valley to help plant and water the stipa grass seedlings.

"Something like this really cuts into our time," Laskavy sighed as he headed toward his car. "It's going to take a long time to get this done, so every hour we have counts."

PHOTO: Volunteers work on El Segundo dunes restoration project as a jetliner takes off from nearby LAX.

PHOTOGRAPHER: SUZANNE STATES / For The Times

PHOTO: Stipa grass seedlings were planted on about six acres.

PHOTO: Kelly Rausch, left, plants grass seedling; above, volunteers carry away underbrush.

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