

Petaluma River is vital part of city's identity

Once used to ship cargo and then ignored for decades, the waterway has become a source of pride



Scott Hess

An open space conservation easement along the Petaluma River at Cloudy Bend, above, protects 368 acres of pasture adjacent to the river from ever being developed.

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Petaluma's waterfront is bustling. Restaurants along the banks of the river offer outdoor seating that encourage their patrons to take in the view of the calm water and its wildlife. Residents can be seen walking along the paths that border the river and weave near downtown businesses.

“The smooth, calm nature is great to simply watch and ease one’s mind,” said Tommy Smith, a Petaluma Wetlands docent at Shollenberger Park. “The dramatic shift from flooded water world to exposed bars and mudflats is a slow, methodical yet steadfast and powerful shift that can feel rather rewarding to witness in full, when there is enough time.”

This 13-mile tributary that flows through Petaluma and feeds into San Pablo Bay is in fact not a river, but a tidal slough. It was deemed a river by a 1959 act of Congress, thus enabling it to receive enough federal funding to cover the expensive process of dredging.

Like the city it was named for, the Petaluma River has seen plenty of changes over the years. Though muddy in color, the river is an eye-catching feature that is a point of pride to the people and businesses of Petaluma.

It wasn’t always this way. For decades the river was ignored. No longer used to ship cargo to San Francisco and beyond, the river became a dump site for garbage. Its wildlife deteriorated, leaving the river saddled with neglect. It was a far cry from the busy waterway it had been more than 100 years before.

During the 1970s, Petaluma began to re-evaluate the river’s value and use. The Petaluma Area Chamber of Commerce vowed to improve the river in order to benefit the city’s downtown businesses. The city’s original goal stated, “The river should be a place of activity and a source of open space and vistas for all Petalumans.”

Events like the Petaluma River Festival in the 1980s attracted 10,000 people and became an annual tradition for more than 10 years and helped to promote the value of the river.

“Over the 10 years I have been actively involved with the river, I have seen a growth in appreciation of its natural resources and recreational use,” said David Yearsley, executive director of Friends of the Petaluma River. “The birth of community groups like the Petaluma Wetlands Alliance & Small Craft Center Coalition, as well as the arrival of the Point Reyes Bird Observatory have been a direct result of the city creating opportunities for river appreciation like the trails, docks and parks.”

Friends of the Petaluma River is a non-profit organization that is committed to educating the public about the river. Yearsley and other members of the organization are involved with conserving the river on a daily basis and promoting its importance to the community.

“Friends has worked to bring more of a celebration-themed attitude to the river by highlighting the use of human-powered watercraft on the waterway,” said Smith.

The organization is dedicated to making more information available about the river through various workshops and presentations. Friends of the Petaluma River often collaborates with other organizations to reach a wider audience.

“Events like the Mayor’s Boat Ride, last summer, brought attention to some of the wonderful groups utilizing the Petaluma River for recreation, such as the North Bay Rowing Club, which has many young, active members,” said Smith. “Hopefully, as more children, teenagers, and college students are made aware of the benefits and history surrounding the Petaluma River, more will take an active role in it’s preservation and restoration.”

The river certainly is an asset to Petaluma and its surrounding community. Advocates feel that encouraging children and young adults to appreciate its beauty and resources is an important step to ensuring its conservation in the future.

“I think we need more access facilities and recreational programs that will introduce people to the river’s incredible natural resources,” said Yearsley. “Only by building a culture of appreciation can we hope to ensure the river’s preservation.”

By instilling river appreciation at a young age, future generations of Petalumans will grow up to love the river and the role it has played in shaping the city.

“Kids should have places to play along the river, to have adventures, to get dirty and discover its wonders for themselves,” said Yearsley.

He hopes that all Petalumans can join together to learn more about the river and what it has to offer. Besides being a place to paddle boat, row and fish, the waterway offers an escape from the hustle and bustle of daily life.

“Education about the Petaluma River should continue,” said Smith. “Despite the intense efforts of the wonderful organizations focused on educating the public about our watershed and the importance of wetlands, the power of those words can spread only as far as it can be heard or read. Word of mouth, personal testimony, and frequently revived conversation can help tremendously.”

The river has remained constant throughout Petaluma’s history. Buildings are torn down, making way for new structures. Businesses change, residents move, but the river keeps on flowing.

“Get out and enjoy the trails out at Shollenberger Park, Alman Marsh next to the Sheraton, or the McNear Peninsula near the new bus depot on Copeland and D streets,” Smith said. “Perhaps most importantly, introduce children to the benefits of the river and the wonder of observing wildlife and nature.”

River Facts

- Established as a navigable port in 1851, the Petaluma River was the original method of transportation for goods in many surrounding cities.
- The waterway masquerades as a river, but is actually a 13-mile tidal slough or estuary of San Pablo Bay. Where a river flows, the Petaluma River washes in and out with the tide.
- The river drains a watershed of approximately 32 square miles.

Due to its tidal influences, huge levels of silt build up in the sloughs, making it dangerous for boats to navigate. In 1959, an act of Congress officially retitled the slough a river so it could qualify for federal funding to maintain the necessary dredging.

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