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Pasadena's One Arroyo: Urban park or natural treasure?

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In 1911 Teddy Roosevelt, after a horseback ride through the Arroyo Seco, declared that "this arroyo would make one of the greatest parks in the world." Those oft quoted words have supported multiple, and occasionally conflicting, visions for the Arroyo Seco.

But it is fairly clear what Roosevelt meant. On an earlier, 1903 Pasadena visit, after his celebrated Yosemite camping trip with naturalist and author John Muir, Roosevelt declared his support to Pasadena Mayor William H. Vedder for the movement to keep the Arroyo Seco as a natural park: "Oh, Mr. Mayor, don't let them spoil that! Just keep it as it is."

Roosevelt's plea has, of course, been significantly and long honored in the breach — the central Arroyo Seco now accommodates a wide range of recreational, educational and commercial activities. It is an iconic destination for Pasadenaans, surrounding communities, and, during Rose Bowl events, nationwide and global visitors. Pasadena would indeed be a very different, less rich city without the development in the central Arroyo Seco.

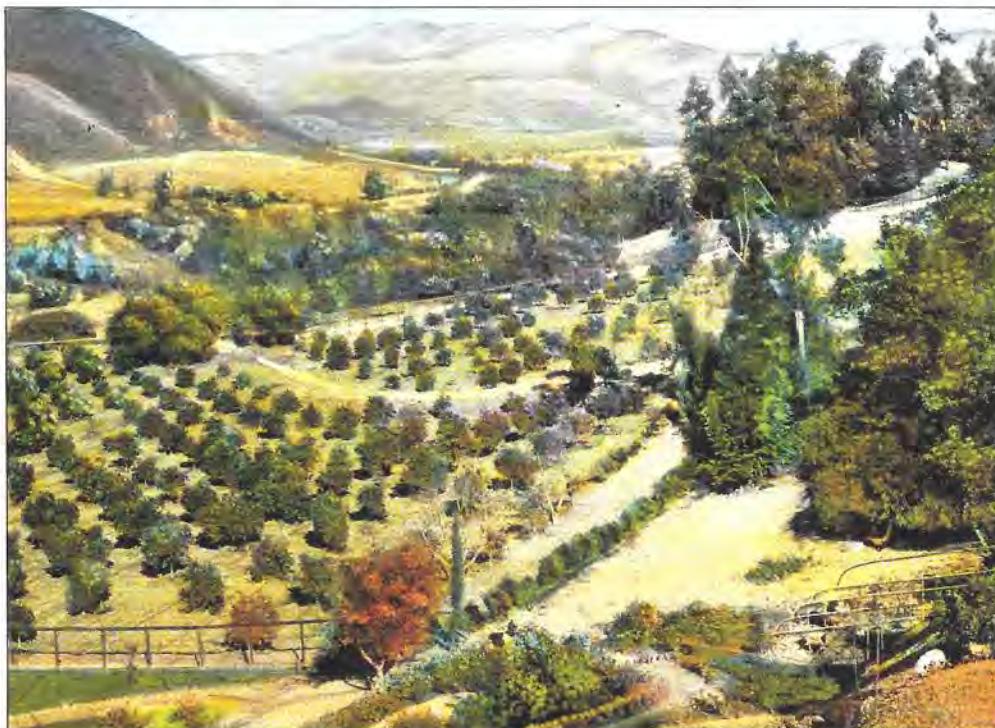
Despite those changes, the arroyo still serves critical functions as a stream corridor and vital wildlife habitat linkage. With notable exceptions, arroyo segments above and below the busy central section have not been extensively modified, and retain important natural qualities and habitat values. These

segments feature rustic trails, scenic views and less intensive human use, reminding all today of what Teddy Roosevelt saw in the preservation of natural values in the arroyo.

Many previous studies and plans for the Pasadena arroyo preceded the current One Arroyo process. In 2003, the city adopted the Arroyo Seco Master Plan, a number of watershed and ecological restoration plans remain unfunded, and a 2012 Urban Land Institute report recommended both integrated governance of the Arroyo — through a separate non-profit entity — as well as funding for and retention of its natural values.

The One Arroyo study was launched in 2017 in a speech by Mayor Terry Tornek. Reliant only in part on past studies and plans, it was conceived as a way to unify Pasadena's three arroyo segments, to bring the many arroyo uses and groups under more integrated city management, and to fund the backlog of neglected maintenance and restoration actions, as well as new projects envisioned for the arroyo.

The Arroyo Advisory Group (AAG) was formed, comprising a cross section of prominent Pasadenaans. Aided by an urban park consulting firm selected by the Rose Bowl Operating Company and city management, the AAG's principal recommendation was that Pasadena's three arroyo segments be linked with an end to end trail — initiated by two new pilot projects that would widen and add amenities (parking, bathrooms, rest areas) to a portion of existing trails at a cost of \$6.2 million. The AAG's work was completed by a City Council vote supporting its recommendations. This led to the creation of



An early postcard view looking northwest from the site of the former Vista del Arroyo Hotel and Bungalows, now the home of the Richard H. Chambers U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit, several years before the Colorado Street bridge was built. Orchards and fences had already changed the original environment.

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the One Arroyo Foundation, a fund-raising entity intended to carry forward with the AAG program.

While the need for private funding to restore and maintain the arroyo is apparent and long standing, and the desirability of a connected trail through the arroyo is an excellent idea, the approach taken by the AAG and its progeny, the One Arroyo Foundation, is questionable, given better options.

The support for expensive trail renovations that introduce urban amenities to more natural areas — bathrooms, more parking, bridges, and benches — seems to openly contravene the purpose and functionality of the existing rustic trail system that is compatible with natural and habitat values.

What seems compatible with the original vision are the many significant priorities that are currently unfunded. These include

connecting interruptions in the existing trail system, doing a better job of maintaining the arroyo's natural areas to prevent disastrous fires, and ensuring that the Hahamonga portion of the arroyo is returned to a state that supports wildlife and recreation. Maintaining what exists and building new things in a manner compatible with the natural Arroyo segments should be paramount.

Perhaps most important, the AAG did not deal in any effective way with arroyo governance issues. Nor does the foundation seem to have governance in its portfolio. Almost 30 user groups claim access to and — sometimes exclusive use of — portions of the arroyo. Many of these organizations have a long history of using the arroyo, and their usage is often under the aegis of different city agencies and subject to various contractual and leasing arrangements that do not seem consistent and up to date.

Whether these groups operate in the public interest and whether their use is subject to reasonable fees for and limitations on their use are among the questions that require the supervision and administration of a single entity devoted only to the best interests of the arroyo as a whole. This was recommended by the impartial Urban Land Institute study as a central necessity.

Lastly, despite efforts to encourage public involvement in the AAG, the process was largely led by and focused on the recommendations of urban park consultants and central arroyo interests. Both the AAG and the foundation's charter include retention and maintenance of the natural values of the arroyo, but One Arroyo seems, troublingly, to be headed toward alterations that might attract private funding, but fundamentally alter the things that so impressed President Roosevelt and continue to attract people today seeking respite from the urban environment.