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# Happy Valentine's Day, Santa Clara River

Environmentalists are mad and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is getting sued

by Stacey Wiebe

**SANTA CLARITA** — A group of environmentalists joined forces in Santa Clarita Tuesday to send a giant, litigation-wrapped Valentine to the Santa Clara River.

As the sound of passing traffic on bordering Interstate 5 whizzed past, representatives from the Wishtoyo Foundation-Ventura Coastkeeper, Friends of the Santa Clara River and the Center for Biological Diversity gathered near a section of dry Santa Clara riverbed to announce that the three organizations are suing the United States Army Corps of Engineers for permitting practices that have allegedly damaged and continue to damage the river.

Representatives from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers could not be reached for comment.

"This is about acknowledging the truth," said Teresa Savaikie, a coordinator for the Santa Clara River Alliance, on Tuesday. "In short, the Army Corps of Engineers destroys all that makes a river a river ... This is Southern California's last major, living river — home to more than a dozen rare and endangered species."

The corps of engineers is responsible for issuing specific types of construction permits. One of the corps' operating principles is to seek "ways and means to assess



Flanked by environmentalists, Mati Waiya, executive director of the Wishtoyo Foundation, speaks about his ancestral ties to the Santa Clara River.

and mitigate cumulative impacts to the environment; bring systems approaches to the full life cycle of our processes and

work," according to information released by the corp.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers,

Secretary of the Army Francis J. Harvey and Col. Alex Dorstauder, district engineer of the corps' Los Angeles district, are the three defendants listed in the suit, according to the United States District Court for the Central District of California. The suit alleges that the corps has failed to carry out "its statutory duties under the National Environmental Policy Act," and pinpoints alleged problems with the logistics of specific developments.

Mati Waiya, executive director of the Wishtoyo Foundation and Chumash ceremonial leader, is a Native American whose ancestors have long lived in the region. Waiya, who sports long, dark hair and a bone through his nose, performed a blessing near the river after the announcements had been made. "The relationship we've had for thousands of years with this river is what we call history," he said. "It's a moment in our minds, or hearts and our spirits."

The river has also spent more than a moment on a list of American Rivers' Most Endangered Rivers for 2005. Last April, American Rivers, an environmental organization, and its affiliates announced that the river is endangered because of new developments along its edges.

Savaikie noted that the hardening of river banks, which usually entails paving river banks to make way for development, severely retards rivers by altering their flow and disrupting wildlife patterns.

Efforts to change the ways in which policies have shaped development have done little, if nothing, to stop the damage, Waiya said. "For so many years, we tried to get involved with a system of policies and regulations," Waiya said, addressing a crowd of onlookers. "It's almost like broken treaties — and these treaties belong to you ... We shouldn't compromise in the name of making a profit."

Over 95 percent of California's rivers and wetlands have been lost and other valuable cultural resources destroyed, Savaikie said, and the Santa Clara is home to rare fish, plants and animals that once thrived in the Los Angeles, San Gabriel and Santa Ana Rivers — all of which no longer function naturally.

"We watched over the years with great concern as one development after another has been approved," said Ron Bortorff of Friends of the Santa Clara River, who added that permits are required to "dump dirt into the river, harden banks and build homes." Bortorff said larger buffers between new developments and the river are needed if the river stands to maintain any of its natural integrity. "We've often argued for buffers of 500 feet, but typical buffers are more like half of that."

Melanie Winter, founder and executive director of the Los Angeles River Project



Waiya sends the Santa Clara a Valentine

— a project dedicated to restoring the Los Angeles River — said the Santa Clara could share the fate of its Los Angeles counterpart. "Many people who live here moved here to escape the urban nightmare Los Angeles has become — and yet they're sitting back and watching it happen here."

## in brief

### Olivas Adobe gets saved

The History Channel isn't just World War II documentaries anymore. Since 1966, it has given funds to community education and preservation projects with its philanthropic *Save Our History* initiative and, on Jan. 25, the city of Ventura's services department was recognized.

The initiative aims to promote awareness of local history and historical preservation throughout the country. Ventura's \$10,000 grant — the highest possible amount awarded through the program — will fund the aptly-named "Project Adobe Mud-Slingers," giving 30 Anacapa Middle School eighth graders the chance to study early Californian culture while working to preserve a local landmark.

The project will focus on Olivas Adobe, a former ranch developed by Raymundo Olivas in the mid-1800s. It housed the Oliva family — Raymundo, wife Teodora and their 21 children — for half a century and, as a California State Historic Landmark, is now one of the few Gold Rush-era, Monterey-style adobe structures still in existence.

Anacapa students will tend to decaying walls around the structure's perimeter

and learn adobe-patching and mud-plastering as they go. An architect, a preservation specialist and maintenance staff will be on hand to guide students through the restoration process.

Within its first two years, *Save our History* received requests in excess of \$8 million from interested organizations. In the coming year, the initiative will award over \$250,000 to projects nationwide. All funded projects demonstrate a clear relationship to area heritage and an interest in educating local students. Past *Save Our History* projects have produced traveling displays, videos and even books, as was the case with a Baltimore-area student effort to research the Clifton Park neighborhood and its connection to a desegregation movement in the 1960s.

This year's Project Adobe Mud-Slingers is in good company. Other programs around the U.S. include research on the lives of displaced Acadian children in Louisiana, an artistic collaboration with the Santa Fe Opera in New Mexico, and the construction of a traditional Inuit umiak (water vessel) in Cordova, Ala., with a resulting maiden voyage along traditional hunting routes. All projects require the participation of local school children.

For more program information, visit [www.saveourhistory.com](http://www.saveourhistory.com).

— Sandra Sorenson