



MY BEST SHOT

by Lisa Ross

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THE MYSTERY OF SLEEPY LOS PENASQUITOS LAGOON: ED NAVARRO FIRED

A political purge, potential courtroom drama, charges of racism and a lagoon—the stuff of 1942 Los Angeles and the infamous Sleepy Lagoon mystery when 300 Chicano kids were rounded up and 12 falsely convicted of a murder that was never solved.

Except that the lagoon is Los Penasquitos Lagoon, and the subject of controversy is the normally low-key State Parks and Recreation Supervisor Ed Navarro and the time was last Friday.

The sudden transfer of Navarro, a political appointee, from his command post home at Torrey Pines State Park to the state Gulag—a civil service desk job in Sacramento—by State Parks chief Rusty Areias, left community and environmental activists scratching heads and shaking in their boots, and the Chicano Federation lodging accusations of racism.

Many activists believe Navarro's transfer had more to do with his positions, which usually side with environmentalists, on several controversial city projects impacting Los Penasquitos Lagoon, including a proposed state coast highway widening project, the future of Sorrento Valley Road, the Carmel Valley Road enhancement project and in the past, preservation of Carmel Mountain.

But, the Chicano Federation and Navarro believe that as only one of two Latino Park Supervisors in the 265-park system, prejudice within the State Parks department played a role in his impending departure as well. A fifteen year veteran on the job, he survived the draconian job cuts during the bleak early 1990's budget crunch that also led to serious deterioration of the park system.

That he was removed without explanation has fueled a general belief among community leaders who have worked with him that the transfer is politically based, and many think the culprit lurks within the City of San Diego Manager's office, engineers who want to widen the coast highway bridge over Los Penasquitos Lagoon to three lanes.

This wouldn't be the first time friction with city staff culminated in a transfer.

The flamboyant Torrey Pines Park Ranger Robert Wahl,

who often testified at City Council hearings packing a gun, was transferred to Old Town after years of annoying city staff members and officials with high decibel fights over conservation issues. But, Wahl's style couldn't be more opposite to that of the even mannered play-it-by-the-book Navarro.

As superintendent for 16 state parks from Carlsbad to the Mexican border, Navarro has navigated through many a land-mined landscape. He's negotiated leases with business owners like powerhouse Diane Powers at the state's most visited park, Old Town, turned back an attempt by Jenny Craig, Inc. and the city to build a parking lot in Torrey Pines State Park and dealt with a cobweb of government jurisdictions in the Tijuana River Valley—plenty of tinder for a political purge.

The transfer couldn't happen at a worse time for those struggling to preserve Los Penasquitos Lagoon. Plans to widen the coast highway bridge are moving forward, a decision will soon have to be made about the future of Sorrento Valley Road, and the Carmel Valley Road Enhancement project is in final stages of approvals.

Navarro has offered to take jurisdiction over Sorrento Valley Road abutting the lagoon, if the city resists pressure from Sorrento Valley business interests and does not reopen it—a similar offer to manage Carmel Mountain was central in the successful battle to save 300 acres from development. And, and he has been reticent to sign permission slips that would provide a bulldozer staging area to start bridge construction on the coast until the new city council has a chance to rethink plans to include an ill-advised third lane.

No one can deny that Los Penasquitos Lagoon, one of a diminishing number of state owned wetlands, is a sick puppy because of increasing urban runoff and siltation, and Navarro's departure isn't sitting well among people who count on his coastal expertise and sensibilities. His replacement has spent the past eight years managing Anza-Borrego Desert State Park, an entirely different habitat, political mix and jurisdictional stew.

As a regional parks supervisor, Ed Navarro serves at the pleasure of the Governor, and so no explanation need be given for why and at whose behest, on February 8, such a good friend of Los Penasquitos Lagoon will be sent packing to Sacramento. But, environmentalists, Latinos and members of the Torrey Pines Planning Group want to know who, with what weapon and in