

OVERVIEW

River Assessment Fieldwork Team Report

Connecting our Los Angeles River Watershed Community Through Bioassessment



KEY TAKEAWAYS



ALL AREAS OF THE LA RIVER NEED HELP
Even the more natural sections we monitored were not in excellent health from an ecological standpoint. This includes our tributaries.



LOOKS CAN BE DECEIVING
Just because a stream section's habitat may look healthy, doesn't mean it is biologically healthy. While the most natural areas were the healthiest, the biological indicators did not significantly differ between soft-bottom sections (which tend to look healthier) and fully concretized areas. However, less concrete means there are more near-term opportunities for meaningful ecological restoration and community access.



CONDITIONS CAN CHANGE A LOT EVEN OVER JUST A YEAR
Constant protection, monitoring and vigilance are needed. Community members are an important and underappreciated source of local river knowledge. Their experiences should drive planning efforts.



WE CANNOT REACH A HEALTHY LA RIVER WITHOUT PLANNING FOR THE WATERSHED AS A WHOLE
What happens upstream affects what happens downstream. River revitalization efforts will only fulfill their promise of a healthier LA River by recognizing these interconnections and expanding beyond the 51-mile mainstem to include the tributaries.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Pursue Comprehensive Planning & Governance

- Ensure the entire watershed, including tributaries, are considered in LA River planning efforts and integrated into the LA River Master Plan Update.
- Start a Joint Powers Authority or similar joint management structure to promote coordination between the various agencies and municipalities with LA River oversight.
- Maximize investment in nature-based, multi-benefit stormwater projects in the LA River watershed to reduce flood risk.

Treat The River As A River

- Establish biological objectives as regulatory standards for the LA River and tributaries.
- Treat channelization as an impairment and adopt policies to remove concrete in the river.
- Minimize sediment and vegetation removal in the river and tributaries. Take steps to improve the river ecosystem's resiliency, such as by planting and fostering native plant species.
- Hire ecologists, biologists, and hydrologists to lead river planning and implementation.
- Recognize that the river has legal personhood rights as a living entity.
- Fund and implement the ARBOR study restoration projects.

Unite Community & Ecology

- Make equitable access to healthy blue space a priority in planning processes, including access to the river and tributaries themselves, not just adjacent areas.
- Include Indigenous communities in all conversations, recognizing the importance of Traditional Ecological Knowledge.
- Design river planning and policy efforts to include community science data, and to encourage environmental education.
- Decriminalize access to the river, including by removing signs that threaten imprisonment and fines.
- Promote inclusive access with welcoming and multi-lingual signage.

Foster Climate Resiliency

- Engage frontline communities along the river in planning processes, including related to flood risk.
- Incorporate climate change, equity, and ecology into community stabilization plans that protect the most vulnerable and prevent displacement related to restoration efforts.
- Update flood maps with climate change modeling. Consider how an equitable floodplain reclamation program could be executed.
- Limit new development along the river and in the floodplain so that we are not placing people in harm's way.

ABOUT THE RIVER ASSESSMENT FIELDWORK TEAM (RAFT)

LA Waterkeeper's River Assessment Fieldwork Team (RAFT) program provides community members with opportunities to learn first-hand about the health of the Los Angeles River watershed through ecological analysis. We educate the community on how to collect critical baseline data and gain tools to advocate for a healthier LA River watershed. We started this program in response to ongoing river revitalization efforts that have failed to prioritize the river's ecology and the community's connection with it.

In 2018 and 2019, LA Waterkeeper trained more than 100 community members in the California Rapid Bioassessment Protocol to monitor eight sites along the LA River and its tributaries. We studied natural sites (no concrete), soft-bottom sites (concrete levees and a sediment stream bottom), and concrete-lined sites (concrete levees and a concrete stream bottom). RAFT volunteers monitored water quality, habitat quality, and biological integrity. We also recorded observations about our experiences along the river.

ABOUT LOS ANGELES WATERKEEPER

Founded in 1993, Los Angeles Waterkeeper's mission is to safeguard LA's inland and coastal waters by enforcing laws and empowering communities. We envision the Los Angeles region as an international leader on integrated, sustainable and equitable water management, a region that is water self-sufficient and where all waterways throughout LA County are safe, healthy, and accessible to the public. LA Waterkeeper advocates for the restoration of the LA River watershed to maximize ecological health and community resiliency.