

Tiny plant's rediscovery raises hopes

Report shows state rich with endangered species

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Staff Writer

He searched for almost a decade, then one day last spring, in the chaparral at Oakcrest Park in Encinitas, botanist Craig Reiser found a plant that was once thought to be extinct.

Squatting close to the ground, Reiser found about 15 specimens of Orcutt's spineflower, *Chorizanthe orcuttiana*, an annual herb found nowhere but San Diego County.

The herb is among 209 plant species listed by the Department of Fish and Game in its 1990 Annual Report on the State's Listed Threatened and Endangered Plants and Animals. Also included are 72 animals, including reptiles, fish and birds found in San Diego County.

Of the 209 plant species, 25, including Orcutt's spineflower, are found in the county. Of those found locally, at least eight species exist nowhere else in the world.

"It was growing in a low, sandy opening," Reiser said of the spineflower he described as being "incredibly small."

Reiser said the stems of the plant are "kind of red, the leaves are very small and green with little spines at the tips. It's so small, you have to get down within a couple of inches of them to see them. The petals are about a millimeter in length."

It was only because he knew what he was looking for that Reiser found the annual herb of the buckwheat family that once ranged from Oceanside south to Point Loma.

"Typically, these plants are rediscovered through a concerted effort," said Mark Skinner, state botanist for the California Native Plant Society. "It does not happen by accident."

Reiser took a specimen to Geoff Levin, chairman of the botany department at the San Diego Natural History Museum. Levin is having the find confirmed by an expert at the University of Maryland.

Levin said a discovery like Reiser's is like finding a long-lost member of a family.

"It's nice to know that we haven't so destroyed the habitat that we eliminated those plants," he said.

The species has had a rocky existence. For 12 years, the plant was

believed extinct. Then in 1979, Tom Oberbauer, a regional planner for the county, found about 20 specimens at Oakcrest Park. That same year, the species also was sighted at Torrey Pines State Reserve.

Dave Hogan, coordinator of the San Diego Biodiversity Project, a watchdog organization for environmentally sensitive areas, contends that the site where Reiser found the herb should be given federal protection.

"This site is desperately needed as a seed bank to replant areas where it was once known," Hogan said. "That would be part of the recovery program."

If the species receives federal listing as an endangered species, as proposed, a recovery plan would be initiated by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. That provision is lacking from the state Endangered Species Act.

At present, only two of the plants found in San Diego County — the San Diego mesa mint and salt marsh bird's-beak — are federally listed. But under an agreement stemming from a lawsuit filed by the California Native Plant Society, at least 15 species found here are slated for federal listing.

Mike Wells, park and beach management assistant for the city of Encinitas, said that a master plan process for the park is under way and that the site where the plants were found is not slated for development.

Wells said the city is awaiting confirmation of the find and then will consult with the Fish and Wildlife Service.

"In the meanwhile, we're basically leaving the area alone," he said.

Like many of the state's rare or endangered plants, the species has fallen victim to destruction of habitat.

"Human activity of one sort or another account for 99 percent of the decline of California's plants," Skinner said. "Natural extinction is an insignificant process compared to human-caused extinction."

Many plant species, such as Orcutt's spineflower, the Encinitas baccharis and Gander's butterweed, survive in small, fragmented populations.

"Overall, 21 percent of California's listed plants and animals are stable (but are not necessarily safe) or increasing," according to the report.



The San Diego Union/Michael Darden

Geoff Levin, chairman of the botany department at the San Diego Natural History Museum, shows examples of rare endangered plant species.

"However, 70 percent of the listed plant and animal species are declining, signaling further degradation in the health of California ecosystems. These declines result from the destruction and degradation of endangered species habitat through a variety of direct and indirect human impacts . . ."

Although California spends more money for endangered species protection than any other state, "our effort has been inadequate to counter the demands that nearly 30 million residents place on our natural resources," the report said.

Since California attained statehood in 1850, at least 34 animals and 30 species of plants have disappeared.

"San Diego is the richest county in California and California is the richest state" in the continental United States in terms of plant species, said Ken Berg, a biologist and coordinator of the endangered plant program for the state Department of Fish and Game.

"We have more endangered species than any state outside of Hawaii. We have the richest flora, the richest plant life, of any state outside of Hawaii," he said.

"Up to one-third of the native plants in California are found nowhere else in the world. That part of the living landscape is unique to our state. If we're not

protecting them here in California, then they're not being protected anywhere in the world."

In addition to development, other factors having an impact on plants include livestock grazing, off-road vehicles, agriculture and exotic plants.

Berg calls predictions for population growth "terrifying."

"We're not leaving any room for them as we grow," he said of plant species. "The mesa tops in San Diego have been built on. Now we're building in the canyons. There won't be any room left for the plants and animals."

He said the species that will be left will include "man and the species that are dependent on man, like . . . the English house sparrow that you see in McDonald's parking lots."

Mike McLaughlin, director of land-use planning for the San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG), said his agency is "trying to provide coordination with a number of activities designed around protecting endangered and sensitive habitat species.

"It's important when you're dealing with endangered species to look at a systematic approach so you can have a habitat that preserves that wildlife rather than having a habitat preserved that has no real function," McLaughlin said.