Owens Lake Land Art

Keeler, CA

Owens Dry Lake is located in the Owens Valley on the eastern side of the Sierra Nevada Range in Inyo County, California. Unlike most dry lakes in North America's Basin and Range Province which have been dry for thousands of years, Owens held significant water until 1913. To supply Southern California's rapid population growth, the Owens River was diverted into the Los Angeles Aqueduct, causing Owens Lake to desiccate by 1926. The lake became the largest single source of dust pollution in the United States. Legislation passed in 1983 initiated the dust mitigation effort. Since then, significant reductions in dust production have been realized through the implementation of mitigation measures (shallow flood, gravel cover, and managed vegetation) over engineered parcels on the dry lake playa.

Purpose of Project and Role of Landscape Architect

Owens Lake Land Art project (located on a 700 acre parcel named T30) began with a mandate from California State Lands to the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power (LADWP) to meet the following goals: provide public access and hiking trails, create bird and mammal habitat, and preserve cultural resources while still meeting the dust emission controls. The landscape architect, adhering to the approved yet limited dust mitigation palette (shallow flood, gravel cover, and managed vegetation where soil conditions allow), designed a solution which evolved into a land art project named the 'Whitecaps'. The project did not start out as an art commission yet the design developed into a spiritual composition of simple materials and forms inspired by the Owens Valley.

The landscape architect led team workshops, created over 75 presentation exhibits, designed themed site elements which celebrate local wildlife, native culture, and historical industry, established graphic and CADD sheet standards for all consultants, and provided on-site construction observation. Collaborating with the civil engineer (prime - infrastructure), environmental consultant (soils and wildlife), and signage consultant (way finding and interpretive), the landscape architect (grading, construction, irrigation, and planting) developed buildable construction documents for a site that improves the quality of life by:

- reducing dust emissions
- promoting interpretive education
- offering safe public access
- celebrating local native cultures
- creating and protecting habitat
- providing functional aesthetic site elements
- increasing awareness and public interest in the story of Owens Lake and its continued protection

Special Factors

The implementation of dust mitigation measures on Owens Lake have created incredibly productive habitat for birds and other wildlife. Over 100 different species of birds have been observed at Owens Lake to date. On the project site during spring and fall, tens of thousands of shorebirds, waterfowl, and other migratory bird species stop to rest and feed on alkali flies, brine shrimp, and other invertebrates in shallow flooded areas and natural springs. Breeding shorebirds like the endangered Snowy Plover nest along the barren shore-line. Mammal's found on site include Mule deer, Tule Elk, Jackrabbit and Brown Bats just to name a few. Although the presence of this variety of wildlife presented unique challenges for design and construction, the resulting project has created and protected habitat while providing interpretive access to the public.

Imagine the lake before the river was diverted; a large body of water in a vast valley with 80 mile per hour winds blowing across its surface. Old photographs show the lake having the appearance of a small sea filled with white caps during its windy season. Our team, in collaboration with LADWP's biologists, designed a monument to the lake's past which solves the challenge of providing habitat for shorebirds, small mammals, and invertebrates. The 'Whitecaps' are large land forms in four size variations which provide niches and topographic variation for both plant and animal diversity. The shape and direction of the sculptures emulate the direction of white caps blowing over the once 110 square mile lake. As the landscape architect/artist we embraced the beauty of this majestic place and understood the importance of creating an art piece that is in harmony with the surrounding view shed while providing an important habitat benefit.

Significance

Ted Schade, former air pollution control officer for the Owens Valley and avid critic of the LADWP, recently stated in the Los Angeles Times that the Owens Lake Land Art project, "is California's version of Stonehenge".

The Owens Lake Land Art project has made a positive impact both locally and nationally toward increasing public understanding of the unique Owens Lake environment as well as the role landscape architects can play in large environmental projects. Having only been open to the public since April of 2016, the project has been featured in several articles, blogs, and new stories including: Smithsonian.com (recognition as one of six Monumental New Outdoor Art Installations to see this Summer), Vogue, KCET Art Bound, KABC, Los Angeles Times, Inyo Register Celebrating Art and Science, Sierra Wave Media, and the California State Lands Commission. Owens Lake Land Art provides the region with a new interpretive habitat destination which is improving local business, creating recreation opportunities, and increasing public dialog on water conservation.