

What did this place used to look like, anyways? An Example of Historical Ecology Research from the San Francisco Bay Area, California.

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Society for Ecological Restoration Conference 1999
Historical Ecology Panel

In the San Francisco Bay Area, as in many places, rapid ecological change during the past several centuries has resulted in the extensive loss of native habitats and a concomitant shortage of intact systems to inform restoration efforts. Projects to-date have often been hindered by a lack of information about the basic structure and function of native habitats. To address this need, we initiated a community-based Historical Ecology Project. This involved the recovery and integration of a wide range of historical information into a GIS showing conditions circa 1800. Methodologies were developed to assess and record variations in confidence associated with different parts of the map. The resulting Bay Area EcoAtlas is being used by Federal, State, and local agencies as a basemap for regional ecological planning. An intensive, well-documented historical ecology project can provide technical information at a range of scales, from fine-grain details of habitat structure (e.g., channel sinuosity, plant community composition) to regional-scale patterns of habitat distribution and even the recognition of significant habitats which had been largely forgotten. Equally important, the process of building a richly-detailed picture of the past helps develop a strong sense of place to support visions for long-term stewardship.