

Management of Lee Creek Natural Area

Location	Lee Creek Natural Area, Great Salt Lake, Utah, USA
Rio Tinto company	Kennecott Utah Copper Corporation
Partner organisations	National Audubon Society, Utah Reclamation Mitigation and Conservation Commission
Key people	Ella Sorensen (National Audubon); Ann Neville (KUCC)
Habitats	Saline mudflats, freshwater inlets, lake shoreline
Birds	Snowy Plover, American Avocet, Wilson's Phalarope
Outcomes	Habitat conservation; environmental education; promotion of Great Salt Lake IBAs

Through a fencing and public education programme the ecological integrity of an important part of the Great Salt Lake ecosystem has been restored. Kennecott Utah Copper Company, National Audubon Society and local interest groups have found common ground to deliver these conservation outcomes.



Spring at Lee Creek Natural Area

Project background and history

Great Salt Lake is an internationally recognised treasure, of great importance for millions of nesting and migrating birds. Shoreline beach areas where fresh water spreads and braids naturally across saline mudflats as it enters the lake provide excellent habitat for birds such as Snowy Plover, American Avocet and Wilson's Phalarope and for internationally significant numbers on migration. The Lee Creek Natural Area is a key site for avian biodiversity within Great Salt Lake.

Lee Creek Natural Area is neighboured by the Inland Sea Shorebird Reserve and the Gillmore Sanctuary, which together constitute a Utah state IBA. Lee Creek has been heavily trespassed by off road vehicles in the past and suffered from rubbish dumping, hunting and other unauthorised activities. Bird habitats (including nesting grounds), other wildlife and water quality in general have all been degraded by these uncontrolled activities. These threats prompted National Audubon Society and Kennecott Utah Copper Corporation to join forces and make a difference both to local wildlife of global importance and the community's appreciation of the natural world.

Project details

In 1996, the Utah Reclamation Mitigation Commission purchased and began to manage 282 acres of the Lee Creek Natural Area, aided by the financial assistance of Kennecott Utah Copper and National Audubon Society. The objectives were to improve site security, facilitate more effective access for visitors and provide an interpretation centre to raise community environmental awareness. Education is an important component of the project because the Lee Creek area is the closest lake site to Salt Lake City, and, therefore, has the potential to become very popular with visitors.

To begin with, the integrity of the site was secured through the placement of about 6,500 feet of barbed wire fencing to prevent uncontrolled access. This was followed by continued surveillance of the area to ensure the enhanced land use changes were successful. A small parking area and pedestrian walk were created, to allow public access in designated areas and during appropriate seasons. To raise awareness of the site's value for wildlife, a kiosk with educational materials was established to provide information for interested visitors from Salt Lake City and those travelling along the nearby Interstate-80 highway. Habitat management is ongoing, for the benefit of key bird species of state, national and global significance. Visitors to the Lee Creek Natural Area can now participate in wildlife-compatible activities, such as birdwatching, photography, and quiet appreciation of the views and beauty of Great Salt Lake.

The restoration of ecological function to this formally degraded site has the potential to reverse perceptions of Great Salt Lake, from that of a derelict wasteland to an area rich in biodiversity, and recognised as an asset to the local community. The project was dedicated in May 2006, attended by local dignitaries and representatives of the wide range of partners and stakeholders who hold an ongoing interest in Great Salt Lake.

The future

The project has demonstrated that local alliances among conservation organisations, community regeneration groups and a mining company can fulfil mutual objectives of conservation, education and corporate citizenship. Continued management of the site will improve habitat for both migrating and breeding birds, especially Snowy Plover, to nurture a site of international importance for avian biodiversity.



American Avocet