

3.15 SCIENTIFIC AND EDUCATIONAL VALUE

3.15.1 AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT

The USACE currently leases the majority of the Whittier Narrows Natural Area (Natural Area) and the Recreation Area to County of Los Angeles Department of Parks and Recreation (LACDPR), including a 10.58-acre portion of the site, for recreational purposes. LACDPR currently operates the Whittier Narrows Nature Center (WNNC) and associated facilities within the site and adjacent areas to the west, south and east. The WNNC has a museum with displays of animal and plant life, a small gift shop and a library, in a building that is approximately 1,917 sf. Southwest of the WNNC is an approximately 899 sf outbuilding that contains restrooms and storage space. An approximately 1,000 sf, picnic shelter is located farther to the south. School groups often congregate here for outdoor programs.

Efforts to expand and improve the WNNC have been contemplated for many years. The facility serves as an educational resource for the area and hosts numerous educational programs for visiting school children from across Los Angeles. However, the existing facilities are aging and small in size. The aquaria and topical and live plant and animal exhibit space is limited to strictly interpreting the Natural Area and the exhibits are outdated. Further, due to the size of the existing facility, only a limited number of visiting students can be accommodated at any one time. The basic objective for the project proponent (the Authority) is to educate the general and school-age population within a 25-mile radius of the site about the San Gabriel River watershed at one accessible location that integrates indoor and outdoor exhibits and interpretive features. This could not be accomplished in the existing facility due to its limited size.

The WNNC staff conducts recreational and educational programs such as lectures, ranger tours, and school field trips. A complete list of existing programs is provided in Table 2-2 in Section 2.5. Generally, the WNNC operates from 9:00 a.m. until 5:00 p.m., 7 days per week unless a nighttime event is planned. The grounds are open from dawn to dusk. The WNNC generally attracts approximately 120 visitors per day during the week and approximately 250 visitors per day during the weekend. The average annual number of visitors to the project site is approximately 62,400. There is no fee to enter the grounds or park in the parking lot. Similarly, there is no charge to view the exhibits in the WNNC. Fees are charged for some current programs, such as the summer camp and spring nature camp.

3.15.2 CRITERIA FOR SIGNIFICANCE OF EFFECTS

Effects of the alternatives would be considered significant to scientific and educational value if the action would:

- Have a substantial adverse effect on natural native communities; or
- Degrade native habitats that are used for scientific and educational purposes.

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3.15.3 PROJECT EFFECTS ON SCIENTIFIC AND EDUCATIONAL VALUE

3.15.3.1 NO ACTION ALTERNATIVE

Because no action would be taken, there would be no direct, indirect, or cumulative effect on scientific or educational value.

3.15.3.2 18,230 SF ALTERNATIVE

The 18,230 sf Alternative would provide an expanded and more modern interpretive center. The facility would host a range of educational and recreational activities and would be utilized by several public agencies to deliver the message of cultural and natural resources and watershed conservation. A variety of activities would be expected to occur at the facility, such as family and senior citizen nature trail walks and bird walks, docent and volunteer training, summer camps, junior ranger and naturalist programs, moonlight and stargazing programs and special clean-up events. A list of proposed programs is contained in Table 2-4 in Section 2.6. There would be no fee to enter the grounds or to park in the lot. Access to the topical and live plant and animal exhibits would also be free. Some programs, such as the camps or special classes, may continue to charge a fee to participants. This 18,230 sf Alternative facility and surrounding area would only be used for an interpretive center and related activities. The 18,230 sf Alternative is not intended as a location for events unrelated to watershed education, such as weddings, etc. The focus of the facility would be altered from interpreting the natural area to allow for additional programs associated with watershed and water conservation education, including education about the benefits of the flood control areas, hosted by local water districts, County departments, and other agencies. Further, the 18,230 sf Alternative involves restoration of the locally indigenous, native habitat on-site and planting of only native species as part of project construction. As such, implementation of the 18,230 sf Alternative would have a beneficial effect on the scientific and educational value.

3.15.3.3 14,000 SF ALTERNATIVE (PROPOSED ACTION)

Similar to the 18,230 sf Alternative, the 14,000 sf Alternative would provide an expanded and more modern interpretive center. The 14,000 sf Alternative facility and the surrounding area would only be used as an interpretive center and related activities. Further, the 14,000 sf Alternative involves restoration of the native habitat on-site and planting of only native species as part of project construction. As such, implementation of the 14,000 sf Alternative would have a beneficial effect on the scientific and educational value.

3.15.3.4 10,000 SF ALTERNATIVE

Similar to the 18,230 sf Alternative, the 10,000 sf Alternative would provide an expanded and more modern interpretive center. The 10,000 sf Alternative facility and the surrounding area would only be used as an interpretive center and related activities. Further, the 10,000 sf Alternative involves restoration

of the native habitat on-site and planting of only native species as part of project construction. As such, implementation of the 10,000 sf Alternative would have a beneficial effect on the scientific and educational value.

3.15.3.5 2,800 SF ALTERNATIVE

Unlike the other alternatives, the 2,800 sf Alternative would only affect landscaped and disturbed vegetation communities within a 0.63-acre parcel located closest to Durfee Avenue and currently developed with the existing WNNC. No native habitat would be disturbed during construction. Given the size of the facility, it would not be able to accommodate additional programming. It would not achieve the educational objectives of the proposed action. It would not provide enhanced educational programs and reach a larger service area. It would not involve restoration of the site with locally indigenous native vegetation. Although there would be no adverse effect to scientific and educational value, this alternative would not provide the same benefits as the other build alternatives.

3.15.4 MITIGATION MEASURES

No mitigation measures are required.

3.15.5 SIGNIFICANCE SUMMARY

3.15.5.1 NO ACTION ALTERNATIVE

Because no action would be taken, there would be no direct, indirect, or cumulative effect on scientific and educational value.

3.15.5.2 18,230 SF ALTERNATIVE

See Section 3.15.5.4 below.

3.15.5.3 14,000 SF ALTERNATIVE (PROPOSED ACTION)

See Section 3.15.5.4 below.

3.15.5.4 10,000 SF ALTERNATIVE

Habitat creation and educational programming would be provided such that operation of the 18,230 sf Alternative, 14,000 sf Alternative, and 10,000 sf Alternative would have a beneficial effect on the scientific and educational value.

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3.15.5.5 2,800 SF ALTERNATIVE

Implementation of the 2,800 sf Alternative would not have a substantial adverse effect on scientific and educational value. However, it would not provide the beneficial effects of enhanced exhibits and resources.