Richmond, Contra Costa Co.

Sense of Place

Guest Author
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Richmond Shoreline

Richmond is one of the last large relatively undeveloped tracts of shoreline habitat in the East Bay where the hills come right down to the San Francisco Bay. Driving east across the Richmond-San Rafael bridge, you get the best view from a distance of the Potrero Hills and Point Molate looming north of the bridge. I was drawn to explore the grasslands there in the 1970s. I found native red fescue growing in the remnant coastal prairie, a special ectype that I named “Molate fescue”. Point Molate is uniquely situated in the rain shadow of Mount Tamalpais, so it gets less rain than other areas of East Bay shoreline. Geologically and botanically, the point is related to the other highlands in this part of the Bay including the islands and China Camp. Today there are some native plants that occur only in China Camp on the west side and Point Molate on the east. The views are stunning and the sunsets are spectacular. The early summer is the best time to see the grasses. The special combination of climate and topography creates some rare plant communities. There’s coastal bluff where you find the live forever, Dudleya farinosa, coastal prairie that contains oatgrass, red fescue, purple needlegrass, California melic, Junegrass, Diego bentgrass, and a wonderful array of forbs like narrow leaf mule’s ears and pipewine. These and other terrestrial communities include coastal scrub and oak woodland. In the subtidal zone there’s one of the largest beds of eelgrass in the Bay, a critically important aquatic habitat. It’s disturbing to see how large the infestations of broom, eucalyptus and pampas grass have become, but for me the most depressing development is the proposal to build a huge casino. It makes no sense to turn a beautiful piece of shoreline property into something you’d find in Las Vegas. I find it hard to believe that Point Molate couldn’t be preserved for its unique natural beauty, its abundant natural resources, and its value as open space.

Richmond’s meandering shoreline is considered the longest of any city in the East Bay. Once the industrial stronghold for the East Bay, Richmond’s shoreline factories and operations have faded, leaving behind poverty and pollution. Yet, the promise of environmental justice is still unfulfilled. Much of the shoreline is polluted or scarred, often obscuring the natural value and promise of this area. Thus shoreline development presents itself as a tool to recover prosperity in Richmond, but often at the cost of gentrifying a tortured landscape into a source of civic pride, ensuring that this unique stretch of shoreline will endure for generations to come.