

Quiet Amid the Urban Sprawl: A Nature Preserve in the City Is Born

■ City employees, support groups and volunteers band together to turn a former missile launch site into a nature preserve.

The transition might have taken 25 years, but it was worth it: a former U.S. military anti-aircraft missile site in Palos Verdes, overlooking the blue Pacific and Catalina Island in the distance, is now just about ready to reopen as a nature preserve. People aren't waiting for the official opening later this spring to enjoy the charms of the 102-acre White Point Nature Preserve, next to the County's Royal Palms Beach Park. They're already enjoying it, even though it's not even officially open yet.

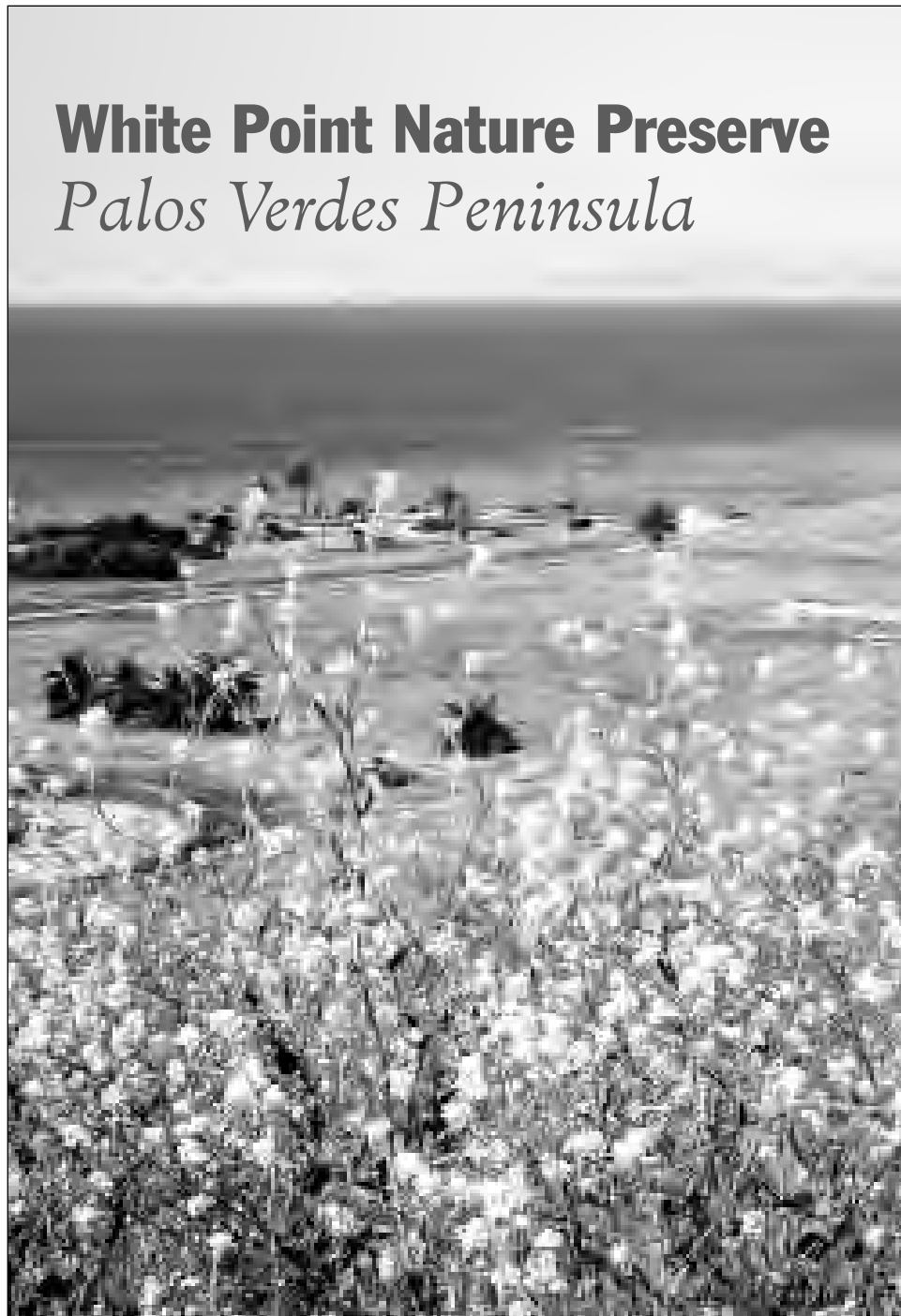
A wide-ranging master plan, with significant contributions from restoration botanist Angelika Brinkmann-Busi, was finalized and approved last year. Miles of improved walking trails, including some for the physically challenged, will be installed over the next two years. Signs, water fountains, improved parking and a restroom facility/visitor center are in the planning stages. Total cost of building the nature preserve are estimated at just under \$2 million.

While still closed to the public, the White Point Nature Preserve's popularity to the neighborhood was readily apparent on a day earlier this spring when volunteers were busy planting new growth: people, often with their pets, streamed by continuously.

A public grand opening is planned for late spring or early summer; call the number at the end of this article for event information.

The City might own it and might have contributed to its flowering, literally and figuratively, but the change from swords to plowshares has many parents:

- the Defense Department, which turned the land over to the City in 1978;
- the Palos Verdes Peninsula Land Conservancy, a nonprofit organization with which the City has contracted to manage the preserve and oversee the transition;
- the City departments of Rec and Parks, Public Works, and Water and Power;
- a volunteer steering committee;
- a Getty grant;
- a major grant from the State of California's Wildlife Conservation Board;
- taxpayers, who voted for Proposition 12 to fund a majority of it;
- the local Council district; which kept things moving;
- neighborhood groups;
- local high schools and other institutions;
- service groups like Habitat for Humanity and the Audubon Society; and
- individuals who love the idea of open space, where people and plants can enjoy the land as it was intended to be.



The vegetation overlooks the Pacific Ocean at the White Point Nature Preserve.

"Oh, and I have to thank Manuel A. Mollinedo [the General Manager of Rec and Parks]. He's been really enthusiastic for what we've been doing," said Andrea Vona, White Point project manager and associate director, Palos Verdes Peninsula Land Conservancy. "Janice Hahn has given us great support."

"At Rec and Parks, Ron Berkowitz, Juan Benitez and Steve Barklow have been great to work with..."

Vona continued the conversation as she rambled up the hillside, eager to help the morning's volunteers fill the hundreds of pre-dug holes with native vegetation. Every Saturday is volunteer day; on this day and recent Saturdays, the volunteers come from the San Pedro High School Earth and Key Clubs; El Camino College; the Girl Scouts; and from the community at large.

Remnants of the site's military history remain. Paved roadways provide access to several abandoned military structures and foundations that remain above and below ground on the site. A Nike missile silo, while empty and unusable, remains. The site was never "online" as a military facility. Fences have been constructed around older decrepit military structures until their fate can be determined by the military.

Close to Paseo del Mar on the western portion of the property is the former location of the Ramon Sepulveda homestead or guesthouse. Although an overgrown mound is all that indicates the location of these buildings, there are some plantings, dominated by a grove of Phoenix palms that frame this local historic site.

It's a great coming-together for the neighborhood. For the native vegetation. For the City.

"People have waited a long time for this and have worked a long time for it," Vona says as she checks in another group of volunteers. "It's finally going to happen." ■

Call the Palos Verdes Land Conservancy for more information: (310) 541-7613.

Wanna be heard?

Tell us what you think of this new nature preserve: talkback@cityemployeesclub.com



A family helps plant native growth on a hillside at the preserve.



Andrea Vona, Associate Director, Palos Verdes Peninsula Land Conservancy, oversees the nature preserve's development.



While the missile silo exterior remains surrounded by a fence at the preserve, its interior mechanisms have been removed. The Nike missile site was never active.