

58

Conjunctive use of farmland adds value . . .

Winter flooding of ricelands provides waterfowl habitat

Brouder, Hill

Flooding rice fields and leaving residual rice seed as forage create stable wetlands habitat for waterfowl in the winter.

61 Residual rice seed is critical food for waterfowl

Miller, Wylie

62 Waterfowl and rice in California's Central Valley

Reid, Heitmeyer

65

Growers respond to contamination . . .

Changes in pest control practices reduce toll on wildlife

Anderson

Changes in biocide use are reflected in recoveries of bird populations previously affected by biocides.

69 Unexpected side effects of chemicals acting as hormone mimics

Fry

73

The case of Putah Creek . . .

Conflicting values complicate stream protection

Marchetti, Moyle

The events surrounding Putah Creek underscore the need for communities and irrigation districts to develop long-term water policies that consider environmental needs and drought years.

74 The decline of sea-run fishes in California: An ongoing tragedy

Marchetti, Moyle

77 A truce in the water wars

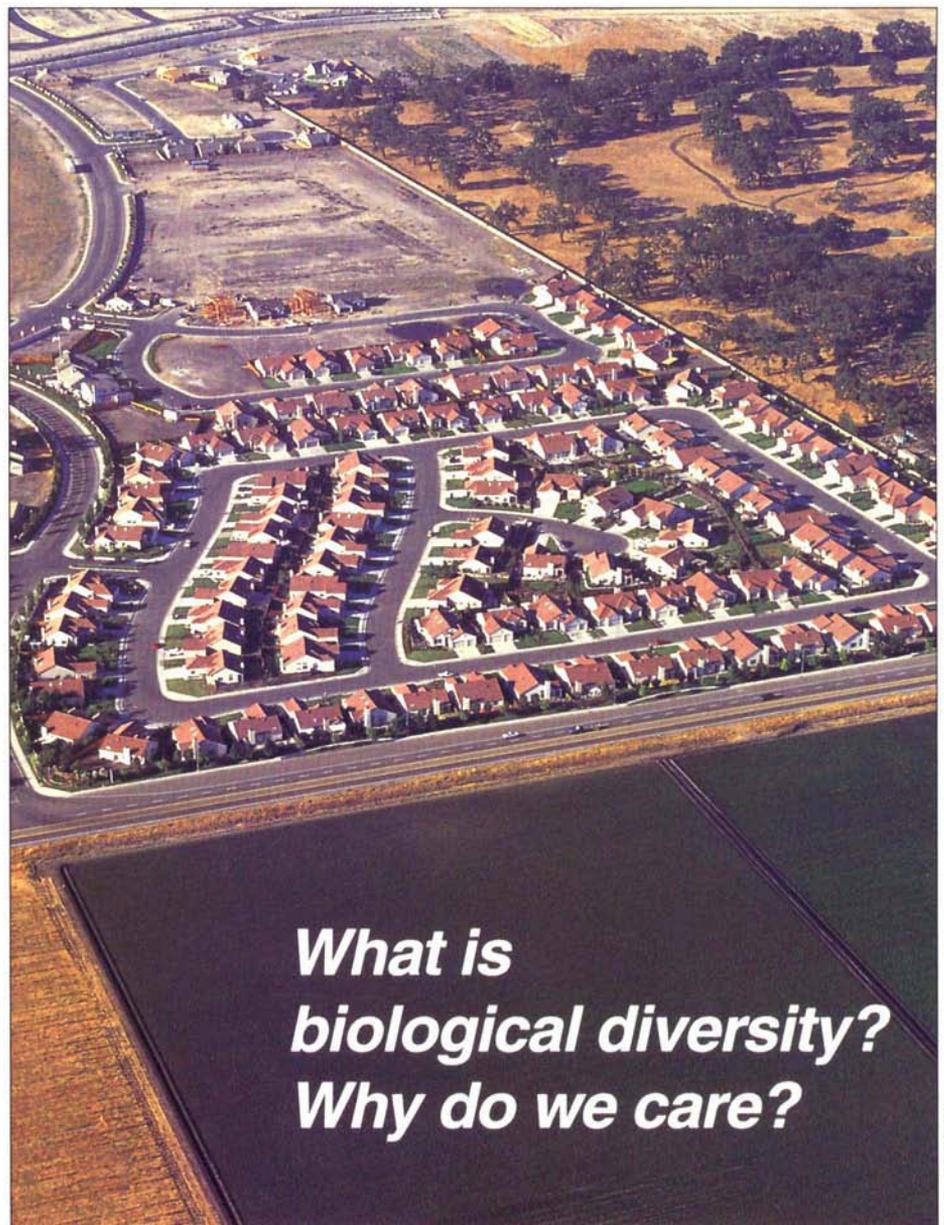
Marchetti, Moyle

79

Pioneer in genetics, conservation . . .

Q & A with Ledyard Stebbins

Cover: Strips of natural landscape along riverbanks can provide wildlife habitat for endangered species such as least Bell's vireo, shown here in the Prado Basin of Southern California. *Photo by B. Moose Peterson/WRP*



**What is
biological diversity?
Why do we care?**

Jack Kelly Clark

Our lives, and those of future generations, depend on biological diversity. Scientists have described 1.4 million species on Earth, but they estimate the true total is up to 100 times greater. All contribute to the healthy functioning of the planet. Some with the least appeal — soil fungi, bacteria and insects — are essential workhorses that clean air and water, and recycle nutrients to create fertile soil.

Today the extinction rate is among the highest in the fossil record — perhaps 10 to 1,000 times the background rate. By far the greatest threat to biological diversity is human population

growth; Californians will double to 63 million by 2040, usurping open space, wildlife habitat and farmland.

In this issue, we take stock of California's current biological diversity and the roles farmers and ranchers can play in conserving it, while maintaining economic viability. We begin with a look at the current controversies surrounding the Endangered Species Act. —*Editor*

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