

# Karen Telleen-Lawton: Volunteers Tend to San Clemente Island

Invasive plant removal targets ice plant on the active Navy bombardment area



Channel Islands Restoration volunteers enjoy a lunch break overlooking the clouds on the east coast of San Clemente Island.

By Karen Telleen-Lawton, Noozhawk Columnist | [Published on 10.31.2011 6:30 p.m.](#)



Only a select few could attend the first-ever invasive plant removal project on [San Clemente Island](#). The list of interested volunteers for [Channel Islands Restoration](#) was winnowed to 20 privileged to pull ice plant on the southernmost Channel Island, an active [Navy](#) bombardment area since 1934.

After identifying our way onto San Diego's naval base with CIR Director Ken Owens, we flew past [Catalina Island](#) to a long, skinny strip of land reminiscent of a surfacing blue whale. Four of our group promptly celebrated their qualification into the "All 8 Club," having visited each Channel Island.

Gathering in the Navy commons, we dutifully listened to mandatory ordnance training. But once our trainer, Tom, described the island as "one of the most contaminated places I've ever seen," he got our undivided attention. Rule No. 1 for dealing with UXOs — unexploded ordnances — "If you didn't drop it, don't pick it up."

We unloaded our luggage into clean rooms in a building dubbed "the three-story." Outfitted in long sleeves, leather gloves, gators and combs for yanking cactus spines from our clothes, we immediately piled into vans for our first afternoon of work. On the western side we hiked to a 55-acre site overlooking a picturesque stretch of dunes and shoreline.

There we perused our project: rescuing native boxthorn, cactus, Ambrosia, Stephanomeria, Bronia and deerweed from the ice plant's smothering tresses. Within the first few minutes we discovered another obstacle: black widow spiders. By the end of our project we'd seen many dozens in the depauperate ice plant.

A depauperate ecosystem is one that can't support much flora and fauna and thus lacks biodiversity. Besides the black widow, few species survive under the tangled vines, leaving a denuded landscape for the federally threatened San Clemente sage sparrow and other species.

This sparrow and the federal endangered San Clemente loggerhead shrike are two of the species the Navy is working to protect. The original catalyst was the [1970 Endangered Species Act](#). Since then, the Navy has taken a proactive role as a land steward, hiring and empowering biologists to nurse the island back to health. Emily Howe, a restoration ecologist for SCI's Native Habitat Restoration Program, is often asked for tours by visiting admirals and captains.

We grew accustomed to working carefully among the cactus, black widows and UXOs. On the second day we came across a metal disc that we marked for Tom the Bomb Guy's inspection. Several times per day we heard a loud kaboom and sought Ken's assurance that the Navy knew our location.

Except for unimaginative sack lunches, lunch times were heavenly. Each day we drove to a different site, admiring native outplantings, visiting the shrike captive breeding program and lounging above beautiful rocky beaches. One day we admired some of the finest examples of marine terraces in the world. We also encountered several of the 7,500 midden sites showing habitation dating back at least 8,000 years. Navy archaeologists research and protect these sites.

We wound down Sunday afternoon, our efforts earning us Emily's effusive gratitude. She admired the 100 or so chest-high piles of ice plant cascading over the hill in three directions. Returning to the "three-story," we removed the last bits of cactus spines, iced sore wrists and eased aching backs with beer and wine at the Salty Crab Pub.

The ordnance discovered on the second day was inspected by Tom. It turned out to be an empty can of sardines.

— *Karen Telleen-Lawton's column is a mélange of observations supporting sustainability. Graze her writing and excerpts from Canyon Voices: The Nature of Rattlesnake Canyon at [www.CanyonVoices.com](http://www.CanyonVoices.com).*