24. Terminal Island (Pier 400) SEA

Location

General

The Terminal Island (Pier 400) Significant Ecological Area (SEA) is located in the southernmost part of the County within the Port of Los Angeles. Terminal Island (Pier 400) supports one of the few remaining areas for breeding utilized by the endangered least terns. The SEA is an artificial dredge spoil island located generally in San Pedro Bay within the Port of Los Angeles. Pier 400 is in the outer harbor area, and the least tern nesting area is on the southern end. It is protected from future development per inter-agency agreement among the Port of Los Angeles, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, California Department of Fish and Game, and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. The area was specifically designed for least tern nesting and is maintained with buffer from the surrounding Port development, close range to foraging areas, and clearing of the flat sandy area to have little vegetation. During the nesting season (April-August) the site is designated as a no-trespassing area. When least terns nest outside the designated boundaries, a buffer is established for the nest(s) until the chicks are fledged. At other times, the Port may use the site for temporary purposes as long as it is restored prior to the following nesting season. The SEA corresponds directly to the California Audubon-designated Globally Important Bird Area (IBA), Pier 400 Tern Colony IBA.

The site is located in the Long Beach and San Pedro Quadrangles of the United States Geological Survey (USGS) 7.5 Minute Map Series (USGS, 1964).

General Boundary and Resources Description

The SEA is not on a natural island. It is an approximately 15-acre fenced area on the south end of Pier 400, part of Terminal Island, in the Los Angeles Harbor. The area is maintained, prepared, and monitored annually by the Port of Los Angeles for the least tern. The nesting site was created, along with the entire Pier 400 peninsula, of material dredged from the Los Angeles Harbor from 1995-2003. The substrate consists of sand with small rocks and many shell pieces. Non-native flora colonize the area every year. Every year before the breeding period, the Port of Los Angeles has the plants surveyed and then cleared to prepare the terrain for what least terns prefer—a flat sandy area that is virtually free of vegetation that the terns can scrape to provide a shallow depression for their eggs. The northern part of Pier 400 is now a shipping container terminal. There is an undeveloped area, covered with low, volunteer vegetation, west of the SEA that may someday be used by the Port. The SEA site has been used by the least tern for nesting since it was created in 1997. The SEA and the adjacent field on the west are separated and protected from Port activity by a chainlink fence with locked gate. In addition, the SEA has a peripheral chick fence to keep the chicks from wandering off the SEA area.

Vegetation

The vegetation in this SEA was removed in 2003 and 2004 to allow additional nesting area for the least tern. The common species seen include sea rocket (Cakile maritima), tree tobacco (Nicotiana glauca), Bermuda grass (Cynodon dactylon), puncture vine (Tribulus terrestris), and sow thistle (Sonchus oleraceus). This removal was judged a success, and clearing has been continued in recent years. Sensitive plant communities have not been found on the site.
Wildlife

Wildlife diversity and abundance within the SEA is limited by its remote location, only accessible by terrestrial animals after traversing long distances through industrial facilities and the narrow, paved causeway of access. Feral cats, rats and mice, and birds associated with development in the region, such as gulls, crows, rock doves, house finches, house sparrows and mockingbirds have been recorded in the area. Native herons that could prey upon the least tern chicks have been observed in the area. The site was also used for breeding in 2011 by two other species that prefer bare, scraped areas: black skimmers (Rynchops niger) and Caspian terns (Hydroprogne caspia). Many types of shore birds are found nearby.

Wildlife Movement

The site is a low quality habitat for terrestrial animal foraging, and it does not lie within any identified terrestrial movement routes for wildlife. However, it is well located as a linkage site for migratory waterfowl and some birds, specifically the least tern. Surrounding bay waters on three sides provide suitable area for the least tern foraging. The principle prey items they seek are small, schooling fish that frequent the surface area of bay and estuarine waters.

Sensitive Biological Resources

Sensitive biological resources are habitats or individual species that have special recognition by federal, state, or local conservation agencies and organizations as endangered, threatened, and/or rare. This is due to the species’ declining or limited population sizes, which usually results from habitat loss. Watch lists of such resources are maintained by the California Department of Fish and Game (CDFG), the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), and special groups, such as the California Native Plant Society (CNPS). The following sections indicate the habitats as well as plant and animal species present, or potentially present within the SEA, which have been accorded special recognition.

The site of this SEA is entirely artificial, but it provides the least terns the ideal kind of substrate they prefer: a flat sandy area, devoid of vegetation, that they can scrape for a nesting depression. Artificially created sites (inadvertently created by development) are frequently chosen for breeding by least terns. The site has been used by the least tern for nesting since it was created in 1997 and has been continually managed for this use.

Sensitive Plan Communities and Habitats

The SEA supports no habitat types considered sensitive by resource agencies, namely the CDFG California Natural Diversity Data Base (CNDDB) [2011].

Sensitive Plant Species

No sensitive plants are expected to occur within this SEA.

Sensitive Animal Species

The California least tern (Sternula antillarum browni) is both state and federally-endangered. It nests in the SEA and forages in shallow water near the nest site. The western snowy plover (Charadrius alexandrius nivosus) is listed as a federally-threatened species and California species of concern, and migrants have been seen but have not nested. Black skimmers ([F-BCC, CA-SSC]) used the site for nesting in the 2011 season.
**Ecological Transition Areas (ETAs)**

There are no ETAs designated within this SEA.

**Regional Biological Value**

The SEA meets several SEA designation criteria and supports many regional biological values. Each criterion and how it is met is described below.

### CRITERIA ANALYSIS OF THE TERMINAL ISLAND (PIER 400) SEA

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criterion</th>
<th>Status</th>
<th>Justification</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>A)</strong> The habitat of core populations of endangered or threatened plant or animal species.</td>
<td>Met</td>
<td>This area was set aside because endangered least terns use it for breeding in the summer. Their breeding depends on availability of forage fish, and they may not use the area consistently. In addition there may be some breeding by the black skimmer (bird of concern for the State and USFWS).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>B)</strong> On a regional basis, biotic communities, vegetative associations, and habitat of plant or animal species that are either unique or are restricted in distribution.</td>
<td>Met</td>
<td>This area was set aside because endangered least terns use it for breeding in the summer. Their breeding depends on availability of forage fish, and they may not use the area consistently. In addition there may be some breeding by the black skimmer (bird of concern for the State and USFWS).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>C)</strong> Within the County, biotic communities, vegetative associations, and habitat of plant or animal species that are either unique or are restricted in distribution.</td>
<td>Met</td>
<td>The least tern typically breeds in flat sandy areas that are created by disturbance, but are free of disturbance and vegetation during the breeding period. The area needs to be close to a source of the terns’ prey, which are small, estuarine or surface-schooling marine fishes. The choice breeding areas require no disturbance because the terns make an unsheltered scoop for a nest, and eggs and nestlings would be crushed by constant traffic of vehicles or pedestrians. This kind of habitat was once common along the beaches of Southern California, but has nearly disappeared as estuaries have been filled and channelized, and sandy beaches have become a favorite Southern California recreation area.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>D)</strong> Habitat that at some point in the life cycle of a species or group of species, serves as concentrated breeding, feeding, resting, or migrating grounds and is limited in availability either</td>
<td>Met</td>
<td>Los Angeles has many fine beaches that are potential nesting sites, but nearly all have become recreation areas. The terns have continued to use the areas with protection from disturbance, which are a small number compared to the previously available undisturbed sites.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In conclusion, the area is an SEA because it contains: A) the habitat of core populations of endangered and threatened plant and animal species; B-C) biotic communities, vegetative associations, and habitat of plant and animal species that are either unique or are restricted in distribution in the County and regionally; D) concentrated breeding, feeding, resting, or migrating grounds, which are limited in availability in the County; and E) biotic resources that are of scientific interest because they are either an extreme in physical/geographical limitations, or represent unusual variation in a population or community.

### 24. Terminal Island (Pier 400) SEA Sources


County of Los Angeles, Department of Regional Planning. 2006. *The Pier 400, Terminal Island SEA Description*, Los Angeles County, California.


and Port of Los Angeles, Harbor Department.