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## Let It Be

Char Miller  
*Pomona College*

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Commentary ([http://www.kcet.org/updaily/social\\_focus/commentary/](http://www.kcet.org/updaily/social_focus/commentary/))

## [Let It Be \(http://www.kcet.org/updaily/social\\_focus/commentary/let-it-be.html\)](http://www.kcet.org/updaily/social_focus/commentary/let-it-be.html)

by **Char Miller**

on January 26, 2011 2:00 PM



The Kangaroo Rat | Photo © Dr. Lloyd Glenn Ingles, California Academy of Sciences

The kangaroo rat is a misnomer. It is neither a marsupial (though it hops like one) nor a rat (though its facial features resemble one). Yet its inapt moniker is the least of the tiny, seed-eating rodent's worries: unlike either animal whose name it bears, the kangaroo rat is endangered.

Its precarious situation is a consequence of the ecological niche it occupies, for the 22 species of the genus *Dipodomys* principally make their home in the deserts, arroyos, and washes of the American southwest; to this harsh terrain, they are beautifully adapted. They have the ability to covert dry seeds into water; their kidneys are so efficient that they secrete very little liquid; and unlike other animals, they do not need to pant or sweat to remain cool. By day, these furry creatures live in burrows, avoiding the blistering heat; they venture out only as the night falls. Alas, that's also when their predators are on the prowl, and they are not particularly adept at avoiding them--though the hopping helps; so does giving birth to three litters a year. But neither the kangaroo rat's agility nor its reproductive energy protects them from the bulldozer's blade.

Over the past twenty years, earth-moving equipment has scraped clean thousands of acres of pristine coastal sage scrub in preparation for the construction of houses, big-box malls, and the highways needed to tie suburbs to shopping. These diesel-powered engines of development have been particularly busy in the Inland Empire of Southern California,

Arizona's Salt River Valley (home to Phoenix), and the fast-growing eastern portions of San Diego County--terrain that is prime kangaroo-rat habitat. Prior to 2008, federal protection of the endangered animal had saved some of its territory. That changed in the final year of the George W. Bush Administration: the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), bowing to Executive-Branch pressure and construction-industry lawsuits and lobbying, reduced the amount of "critical habitat" required to maintain the kangaroo rat's presence in its historic range.

In San Bernardino and Riverside counties, this decision led to a sharp reduction in acreage set-asides established in 2002 for a local subspecies, the San Bernardino kangaroo rat, from 33,291 to a mere 7,779. Such a steep decline sounded the death knell for the diminutive mammal, a fact that could not have been lost on builders, construction companies, and sand-and-gravel quarry operators.

Not missing the deadly implication either was the Center for Biological Diversity, a non-profit organization committed to the protection of endangered species and threatened habitat. In 2009, it joined with the San Bernardino Valley Audubon Society and Friends of the Northern San Jacinto Valley in filing suit in federal court in Riverside on behalf of the local subspecies. Their argument was blunt: the USFWS' scientific analysis and policy prescriptions were unsound and deeply flawed. U.S. District Judge Anne E. Thompson concurred, and in mid-January 2011 she struck down the 2008 USFWS' decision, a judgment that ought to set a much-needed precedent for the protection of other kangaroo-rat species across the southwest. "The Fish and Wildlife Service tried to gut critical habitat for the San Bernardino kangaroo rat," argued biologist Ileene Anderson of the CBD. "This latest court ruling gives this rare species a better chance at survival."

Notice she said a *better* chance at survival. Nothing is guaranteed, even with this important legal victory. As the economy recovers, developmental pressures will return to Southern California, and they will focus, as they have in the recent past, on the alluvial fans that flow off the San Bernardino and San Gabriel Mountains. This rocky terrain is mined for materials critical to construction and is itself some of the last open spaces available for relatively easy conversion into commercial nodes, residential neighborhoods, and office parks. Drive along any of the freeways that crisscross the Inland Empire, or analogous landscapes throughout the arid southwest, and these the building blocks of the modern American city flick by with monotonous regularity.

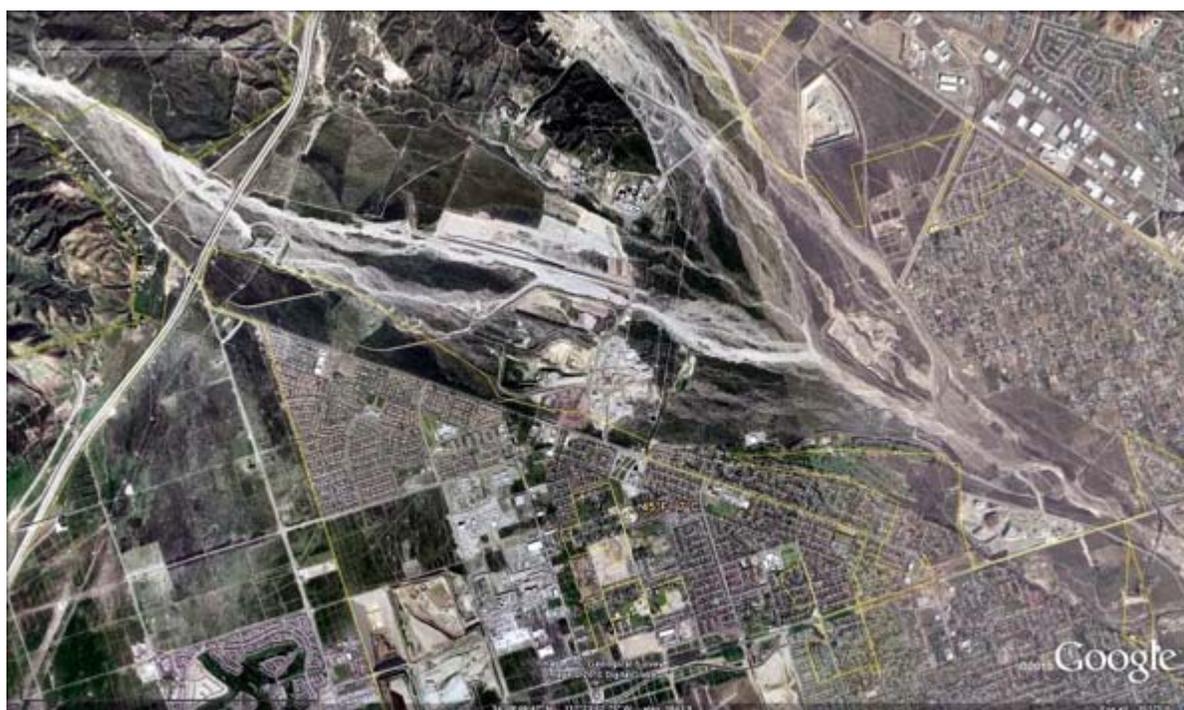
This sprawled development has not been good for the kangaroo rats and other flora and fauna whose lives are rooted in this desert scrub. To root them out is not good for us, either. Start with our moral obligation to steward the planet, which demands a restraint that we need better to cultivate. Surely that is one vital lesson in the aftershock of the 2007 economic crash. Not coincidentally it wiped out some of the very malls and housing projects that had been slapped down on unspoiled desertscapes after contractors and city officials solemnly promised they would bring unparalleled, enduring growth. This unsavory alliance, and the speculative greed that underwrote its actions, led to untold bankruptcies, innumerable foreclosures, and high unemployment. Growth for its own sake is not sustainable.

It is also fiscally irresponsible in another respect. Locating new communities and businesses smack in the middle of alluvial washes and floodplains is an expensive proposition. However cheap the housing there appears to the individual buyer, the general public has to pick up the unstated but heavy costs associated with the construction of an interlocking network of dams, channels, ditches, and culverts designed to divert rampaging waters before they can crash into McMansions or McDonalds.

Keep these cautions in mind the next time you watch powerful winter storms spin into the coastal ranges; or witness summer monsoonal rains hammer inland deserts: preserving a generous expanse of kangaroo-rat habitat might just be the best and cheapest flood protection we can buy.



November 11th, 2003: The confluence of Lytle (left) and Cajon (right) creeks in San Bernardino



January 4th, 2004: The confluence of Lytle (left) and Cajon (right) creeks in San Bernardino



April 12th, 2007: The confluence of Lytle (left) and Cajon (right) creeks in San Bernardino



Google Earth view

*Char Miller is the Director and W.M. Keck Professor of Environmental Analysis at Pomona College, and editor of the just-published "Cities and Nature in the American West." He comments every week on environmental issues.*



<http://www.kcet.org/user/profile/cmiller>

### About the Author

Char Miller is the Director and W.M. Keck Professor of Environmental Analysis at Pomona College, and author of numerous books, including "Public Lands, Public Debates: A Century of Controversy" **MORE** (<http://www.kcet.org/user/profile/cmiller>) [▶](http://www.kcet.org/user/profile/cmiller) (<http://www.kcet.org/user/profile/cmiller>)

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