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Trashing the Gregory Canyon Landfill



The California garbage dump project would have desecrated sacred tribal lands, destroyed vital wildlife habitat, and put local waters at risk.

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Gregory Canyon, in California
Damon Nagami/NRDC

Listen closely, and you can almost hear a croak of relief from the arroyo southwestern toad. It's one of the myriad rare wildlife species that make their home in Gregory Canyon, located in the rural northern reaches of California's San Diego County. The canyon feeds into drinking water sources for thousands of people. Local Native-American groups consider it sacred.

Sounds like a pretty bad spot for a 300-acre garbage dump, right? The County of San Diego certainly thought so back in the late 1980s, when its selection process for landfill sites ranked Gregory Canyon one of the worst spots in the region to pile trash. And yet, for more than two decades, property owner Gregory Canyon Limited (GCL) aimed to do just that.

GCL had good reason to want to push forward despite the ranking. "Any property that was identified as a suitable dump site would go up in value and price, and developers don't make money by buying high," says [Damon Nagami](#), director of NRDC's Southern California Ecosystems Project.

In 1994, determined to circumvent the county's landfill site selection process, GCL spent nearly a million dollars to fund a countywide ballot initiative that, if passed, would give the company the authority (with proper permitting) to build its dump. Lured by claims of an imminent landfill capacity crisis, the public voted yea to turning Gregory Canyon into a trash heap. The initiative passed.

"From the very beginning it was a flawed concept," says [Joel Reynolds](#), NRDC's Western director and a senior attorney. "The people of southern San Diego County—and the city, in particular—were sold the bill of goods that they needed a big dump. And where better to put it than far away from where they lived, up in the northern part of the county . . . in somebody else's backyard."

The "somebody else" in question was the Pala Band of Mission Indians, whose reservation sits adjacent to the site. For centuries, the Pala held coming-of-age ceremonies on Gregory Mountain—which rises from the canyon's eastern wall—and at nearby Medicine Rock, a weathered boulder decorated with ancient pictographs. Today, the Pala and other local Luiseño Indians continue to visit these sacred spots for meditation, prayer, and communing with the spiritual world.

The project was an affront not only to tribal integrity but also to the environment and public health. Gregory Canyon provides habitat for golden eagles and endangered birds like the least Bell's vireo and the southwestern willow flycatcher. It also drains into the San Luis Rey River, which supports vital drinking water sources for tens of thousands of people in northern San Diego County. A garbage dump would pose a grave public threat: Leaking landfills can lead to serious contamination.

"You don't mix garbage with water," Reynolds says. "And yet they were talking about putting this 300-acre dump literally on the banks of this beautiful river."

Over the course of 15 years, GCL attempted, and failed, to get the requisite environmental permits to break ground. Then, in 2009, it made a bold move: It applied to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers—the agency in charge of doling out Clean Water Act permits—for a permit that would fast-track the environmental review process for the dump and eliminate public participation completely. Opposition to this move was swift, including on the part of elected officials, and NRDC was called upon to help.

"We needed more support to bring awareness to our fight," says Pala environmental director and tribal historic preservation officer Shasta Gaughen. "NRDC provided us with a platform to engage our supporters beyond just the local community. It helped us gain important leverage against our opponents."

"When we got involved, it was essentially a protracted legal battle between the company, on the one hand, and the Pala Band and local activists, on the other," Reynolds says. NRDC tapped into its deep understanding of the Clean Water Act, as well as its ability to organize, and mobilized a broad swath of groups to fight the dump.

The newly formed coalition included the Pala Band, elected officials, environmental organizations like RiverWatch and Sierra Club San Diego, and numerous other Luiseño groups. "The Pala were able to get practically all of the tribes in San Diego County on board," Reynolds says. "It made a big difference."



Pala children at a protest
Damon Nagami/NRDC

In the face of this broad-based opposition, it was nearly impossible to ignore Gregory Canyon's cultural significance. The Army Corps denied GCL's request for a fast-tracked Clean Water Act permit and required the proposed dump to undergo a comprehensive environmental review. This more thorough vetting process allowed public input and provided an opportunity in 2010 for coalition members, including NRDC, to speak out, submit comments, and testify at multiple hearings against the dump. Members of the Luiseño tribes voiced the significance of the sacred lands to their ancestors, and longtime area residents shared concerns about how a leak in the landfill's liner could devastate the San Luis Rey watershed.

In the end, no Clean Water Act permit was issued.

NRDC and its partners pressed on. GCL still held a solid waste facilities permit, and the following year, NRDC filed a joint lawsuit with Sierra Club, RiverWatch, and the Pala Band to contest it. The groups contended, among other things, that the landfill's potential emissions impact had not been adequately studied. Though the lawsuit was unsuccessful, it did garner media attention that helped raise awareness of the dump's environmental threat. It also strained GCL's economic resources and, perhaps most instrumentally, delayed the development process.

In 2014, after reportedly spending more than \$100 million on the proposed Gregory Canyon Landfill, GCL's original investors declared bankruptcy. And finally, this past November, the Pala Tribe announced it had come to an agreement with the company's new investors. The tribe was able to purchase more than 700 acres of GCL's land, including most of Gregory Canyon and Gregory Mountain, marking the end of a decades-long fight.

"There are no words to describe how important this victory is to Pala and to all Luiseño people," Gaughen says. "Sacred Chokla [Gregory Mountain] and Medicine Rock are now protected from desecration and are back in the hands of the original inhabitants of this land. The environment is also sacred, so saving the San Luis Rey River and critical habitat for plants and animals from being polluted by the dump is a huge relief."

And what about that predicted overabundance of trash? Through recycling, composting, and the reuse of goods, the amount of landfill-bound garbage generated by San Diego County fell by approximately 885,000 tons between 2005 and 2015.

With today's many alternative methods of waste management, dumps are, quite simply, dated.

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