

# TELLURIDE DAILY PLANET

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**TUESDAY**

FEBRUARY 3, 2009

VOLUME 16, NUMBER 212

[www.telluridedailyplanet.com](http://www.telluridedailyplanet.com)

## Guided by science, managing the Valley Floor

*Scientists reveal, discuss draft environmental report tonight*

By KATIE KLINGSPORN  
*Associate Editor*

**B**ack in the summertime, a small team of scientists descended on the Valley Floor. They studied the wetlands and examined the plants, researched the history, did tests on the soils, checked out migration paths, jotted down existing wildlife and gathered piles of data.

The scientists, from Ecological Resources Consultants, have turned this mountain of information into a draft environmental report — complete with recommendations to the town on how to manage its Valley Floor.

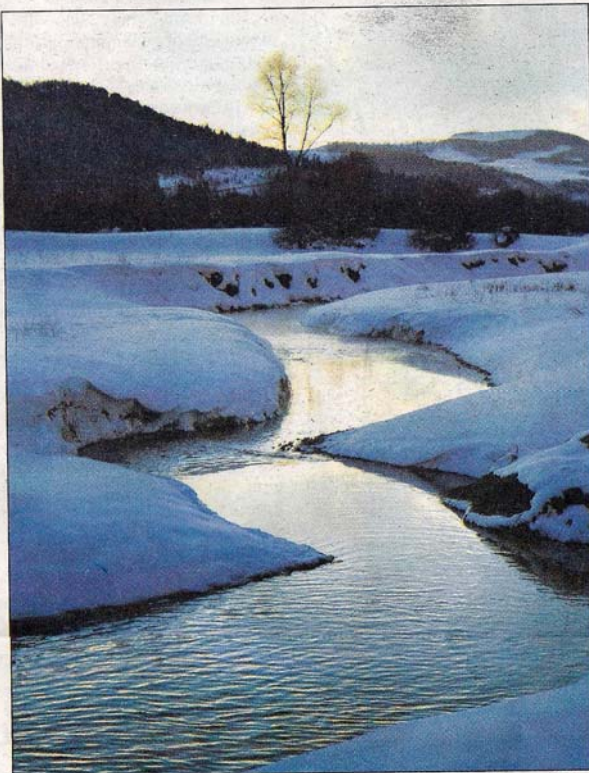
The draft report is out there for public consumption, and today, the town-hired consultants are holding a meeting to discuss, explain and gather feedback on their report.

An open house — where people can look at maps and documents and ask questions — will take place today at 4 p.m. at Rebekah Hall. A more formal meeting will follow, at 6-8:30 p.m. at Rebekah.

To access the report, go to the town's Web site, [www.telluride-co.gov](http://www.telluride-co.gov) and click on the link.

Troy Thompson, a water resource engineer with ERC, said the scientists hope that feedback from the community will help them fine-tune the final report.

"We want to have open comments and discussions and any kind of input we can get from the community," he said.



A waterway on the Valley Floor reflected the light of a dusky sky on Monday evening. Consultants have finished the draft environmental report for the Valley Floor, and it will be reviewed at a public forum held this afternoon. [Photo by Erin Raley]

The draft report is no light reading — it's a bulky document that takes a long time to peruse. It's filled with data and maps, and covers pretty much everything out there — from the creatures that reside in the river to the tailings left from the

days of mining and the storied history of the land. It delineates wetlands and identifies sensitive areas.

ERC described the Valley Floor an "extremely unique natural resource."

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# Managing the Valley Floor

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The draft report paints the Valley Floor as a patchwork of diversity, with runners and Nordic skiers using its paths and elk munching its meadows, nearly three miles of river running through it, and some 310 acres of wetlands within its boundaries.

It is home to a colony of Gunnison prairie dogs and fields of dandelions, but is by no means pristine. There are mine tailings with high levels of lead, cadmium, copper and zinc, old structures, a long-unused railroad grade, segments of old fence and abandoned sewer ponds.

The draft report also offers management recommendations.

It suggests the town define management zones that emphasize the conservation of the most sensitive resources and areas.

It recommends that the colony of prairie dogs — which appeared suddenly two years ago when the former owner stopped irrigating, and has grown rapidly since — be more or less left alone. This “dispersal approach” entails minimizing disturbance to the colony while allowing it to disperse, and to monitor it for further growth.

The report recommends the same for the beaver colony. “Beavers are dynamic creatures and are an important component of the overall ecological functioning” of the land, says the report.

As for dogs — a topic of keen interest among Telluriders — the environmental report offers several strategies, but empha-

sizes that with dogs, a balance is vital to protect sensitive areas.

If the town does allow dogs on the Valley Floor, the report says, it should implement one of the following:

- Permit dogs under voice and sight command along designated corridors, but prohibit them outside the corridors, including wetlands, prairie dog colonies and other zones.

- Permit dogs on-leash in designated corridors.

- Permit dogs along perimeter trails and on Boomerang Road, and prohibit them from the interior areas of the Valley Floor.

In regards to recreation, ERC recommends the town develop a trails plan for the Valley Floor that does things like minimize use in sensitive areas, maintain barriers (trees, etc.) between trails and sensitive areas, and think about a pedestrian-only trail. The draft contends that wildlife is affected the same by hikers and people on bikes.

And, it says, hot air balloon use, paraglide landing and disc golf may be appropriate in low sensitivity areas.

And with the wetlands, the draft report recommend the town maintain hydraulic flows and connections, minimize weed infestations and increase plant diversity.

The report also offers 13 areas they believe restoration would most improve ecological functions and values. They include:

- Tailings remediation
- San Miguel River restora-

tion

- Mill Creek remediation
- Railroad grade
- Historic Cornet Creek sewage lagoons
- Boomerang Road field
- Eider Creek field
- Eider Creek restoration
- Abandoned sewer ponds
- Historic Cornet Creek confluence

Wetlands hydrology restoration

- Debris piles
- Abandoned pond area

The town acquired the 570-acre Valley Floor through the power of eminent domain from its former owner, San Miguel Valley Corporation, in a land battle that dragged for years and culminated in a valuation trial, \$25 million private fundraiser and state Supreme Court decision. It is now open space land.

It has been open to the public for more than a year now, and the public has responded; people have been out there skate skiing, mountain biking, fishing, watching birds and just sitting in the dandelions.

The town hired ERC to put together an environmental report with the idea that before it puts a management plan and conservation easement in place, it wants to know all it can about the land.

The consultants have held several informational meetings and forums since they began, and the hope is to have the final environmental report completed by March.