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## Discovery of rare wildflower in Ballona Wetlands could halt recreation project

Environmental groups ask the city of L.A. to cease construction of a walkway after thousands of nearly extinct Orcutt's yellow pincushions are found.

By Louis Sahagun

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A walkway project along the banks of a Ballona Wetlands lagoon may be halted because of a surprisingly robust bloom of an obscure wildflower believed to be close to extinction, Los Angeles public works officials said Thursday.



Robert Jan "Roy" van de Hoek looks at a tiny flowering Orcutt's yellow pincushion, which had been considered close to extinction, next to Ballona Lagoon near the western edge of Marina del Rey. (Francine Orr / Los Angeles Times)

said Robert Jan "Roy" van de Hoek, director of the Ballona Institute. "Potted native plants nurtured with irrigation systems are not what we need. Instead, this area should be set aside as a sanctuary for pincushions."

In the midst of recent rains, thousands of Orcutt's yellow pincushions, a dandelion-like plant with bright yellow blossoms, have sprouted in the center of the \$400,000, four-acre "recreation and wildlife enhancement" project that includes native-plant landscaping, irrigation systems, fencing and a walkway made of decomposed granite.

Environmental groups, including the Ballona Institute and the Center for Biological Diversity, are pleading with the Los Angeles Department of Public Works to cease construction pending a determination by state wildlife authorities of the plant's endangerment.

"What we have here are nature-lovers killing nature with a wildlife-enhancement project,"

The California Coastal Commission has asked the city to redesign the walkway to avoid harming what is believed to be the largest population of the plant in existence.

City project engineer Richard Liu said construction will continue for as long as possible. "If we have a court order to do so, we will stop the project," Liu said. "The project is about half completed."

City biologist William Jones acknowledged some pincushions would be wiped out by construction. But he also plans to collect seeds from existing plants and grow them elsewhere.

State botanists do not consider transplantation to be adequate mitigation.

"This thing is so rare that any threat to its existence is cause for concern," said state Department of Fish and Game botanist Roxanne Bittman. "We currently are collecting data that we expect will make it eligible for state listing" as an endangered species.

In the meantime, city crews have surrounded three patches of pincushions with yellow caution tape and placed small plastic flags beside individual plants as part of an effort to alert pedestrians.

But there were signs that those precautions were not working.

Dropping to his knees to assess the damage at one of the sites, Van de Hoek shook his head in dismay and said, "Here's a pincushion with a snapped stem, and a few feet away at least three pincushions were squashed by a single shoe."

A week ago, environmentalists snapped photographs of pincushions sprouting between two utility poles placed on the ground by Los Angeles Department of Water and Power crews. The poles were recently removed.

Orcutt's yellow pincushion was discovered and scientifically described by British naturalist David Douglas in 1831 somewhere between San Francisco and Santa Barbara.

Today, remnant populations are believed to be clinging to existence in San Diego and Ventura counties, Rosarito Beach in Baja California and the Ballona Wetlands lagoon sandwiched between Playa del Rey, Marina del Rey, Westchester and Culver City.

"Suddenly having so many pincushions to admire is a source of pride for me, and it should be for the city," said Marcia Hanscom, co-director of the Ballona Institute.