

## **Vineyard Views** **By Cliff Ohmart**

### **Is Winegrape-growing Bad for the Environment?**

“Vineyards threat to cranes?” This October 23<sup>rd</sup> *Sacramento Bee* headline caught my eye. The article focused on the potential negative impact that vineyards in the Sacramento/San Joaquin River Delta region could have on the greater sandhill crane. The sandhill crane is a magnificent bird that breeds in parts of California, eastern Oregon, Washington and British Columbia and over-winters in the western part of San Joaquin County and southwestern part of Sacramento County. The article began by stating that cranes cannot find enough to eat in vineyards and, due to their 7-foot wingspan, need running room to take off. Something they would not find among trellises and vines. It then went on to describe a Nature Conservancy report warning that “if the shift from rice, corn and other row crops and pastures to the more profitable vineyards continues rapidly, little crane habitat soon may exist in the Sacramento River Delta.” I finished the article with a sense of frustration. Are vineyards the major problem here? Loss of habitat for wildlife is an increasingly common, and complex, problem. Lately, much of the blame has been laid squarely at the feet of winegrape growers. However, articles like the one above are just another way to create polarization over an issue that has many aspects. The author chose an inflammatory title to attract attention and then tried to make an issue out of something that might happen rather than a problem that currently exists. Furthermore, the Nature Conservancy report also indicated that coyotes and encroaching suburbs pose threats to sandhill cranes. However, the title of the newspaper article did not read “Coyotes, suburbs and vineyards threat to cranes?”

It is not surprising that newspaper articles about winegrapes are no different in tone from other articles. Good news does not attract as much attention as bad news. In the case of the sandhill cranes the ‘hook’ is the furor over the environment vs. winegrape vineyard expansion that has been growing in the public arena over the last few years. The premise of the article is that vineyards are bad for sandhill cranes. What frustrates me is that the crux of the article’s argument is based on something that will probably never happen, i.e. expansion of vineyards to replace all other agricultural crops in the Delta as well as grasslands and pastures. Although vineyard acreage has increased over the last few years there is no evidence that they will increase to the point of occupying all arable land in the Delta. Of course, the average newspaper reader does not know this.

The *Sacramento Bee* article on sandhill cranes and vineyards is a good example of how polarized the environment vs. winegrape vineyards issue has become and, unfortunately, reinforces the public perception that winegrape growers are uncaring plunderers of the environment. Yet ironically, within many agricultural circles, winegrape growers are considered the most advanced when it comes to adopting environmentally friendly farming practices. For example, the use of organophosphates by winegrape growers has almost ceased, and the adoption of beneficial cultural practices such as use of cover crops, application of compost to vineyard soil, and canopy management to reduce the use of certain fungicides has been widespread.

So why have winegrape growers developed a bad public image in some parts of the state? Certainly the conversion of oak woodlands and grasslands to new vineyards in the foothill and coastal regions is one factor, a factor that elicits strong emotions. This passion is best illustrated by some of the statements I have read in newspaper articles and heard at various public meetings devoted to vineyard issues. For example, one environmentalist in the central coast region was quoted in a local newspaper as saying that there is more wildlife habitat value in housing tracts, as long as they have green belts, than in vineyards. In another winegrape growing region, some citizens have said that they wouldn't be sorry to see all of the vineyards in their area disappear. A less drastic comment, in relation to the potential invasion of the glassy-winged sharpshooter and Pierce's Disease, was that vineyards could use a little 'pruning'. Extremist statements such as these don't help solve the serious problems we are confronted with.

It would be more helpful to begin by looking at the larger context. California is an environmental treasure and a desirable place to live. Moreover, the climate, fertile valley soils, and the availability of high quality irrigation water combine to make it one of the most productive agricultural regions in the world. Ever since the gold rush in 1849 California has been the destination for people from all over the world and, because it is so bountiful, its population continues to grow rapidly. Pressure to build houses on the valley bottomland, which is also the most desirable agricultural land, increases along with the population. Unfortunately, growing houses always wins out over growing crops so agriculture is forced to move to land that is less desirable i.e. more expensive for housing and less suitable for agriculture, such as the foothill regions. Over the past decade the population pressure is such that even these areas are becoming home sites. Land-use conflicts become inevitable. Farmers want more land to farm, suburbanites want more housing sites, people fleeing urban and suburban life want more land for ranchettes, and people who enjoy the wilderness and open space want more natural habitat. Unfortunately, none of these groups can have it all. The reality of the situation is that environmentalists, conservation-minded citizens, and winegrape growers are not going to disappear. Compromises have to be made.

One way of coming to grips with a serious conflict is for each side to be honest with themselves. From the public's side of the argument, one polarizing force is the 'NIMBY' syndrome, i.e. 'not in my backyard'. Let's face it, who wouldn't want to live in a location where the landscape never changes, where vistas from the front and back porch are unblemished. All too often we find our dream spot, then resent any encroachment upon it. From the winegrape grower's vantage point, land rights and freedom to farm appear to be an inalienable right. Farming tends to attract people who are their own bosses and who don't want to be told what to do or how to do it. Through experience, education, or both they have learned how to farm successfully and feel like they are good land stewards. From the environmentalist's perspective, nature is always right and the most important thing is preserving natural systems regardless of the impact these activities have on other land uses or other peoples lives or livelihood. There is a feeling of self-righteousness in these pursuits. However, all of the above groups need to realize

we no longer live and work in a world where we can disregard the needs and concerns of other people.

So...are cranes threatened? It turns out that protection of nesting sites in northeastern California is the most critical issue for the greater sandhill crane at the moment. That doesn't mean we should ignore preservation of pastures and open grassland in the Sacramento/San Joaquin Delta to protect over-wintering habitat. When dealing with complex issues like vineyard expansion in California it is important to identify the community groups involved, recognize the needs and concerns of each one, discuss the facts pertinent to the issue, and try and come to a consensus. 'Scoring points' against people on the other side of an issue doesn't accomplish anything other than widening the gap between them. Environmentalists and concerned citizens need to realize that winegrape growers are good land stewards and winegrape growers need to realize that the world is a far more regulated place than it was even 10 years ago. And consider this, what better way to reach a consensus than over a nice glass of wine.