



It isn't easy being green

Reprinted with permission
from *The Washington Times*

Los Angeles (AP) – To prosecutors, Robert “Roy” van de Hoek is a vandal with pruning shears. To supporters of native California shrubs and trees, he’s a martyr.

Once again, he is in court.

The Los Angeles city attorney’s office says the former park supervisor cut down non-native plants in one of the largest coastal wetlands in southern California, killing a ficus tree and myoporum shrubs.

He is facing six misdemeanor charges that include injuring vegetation without permission. Each count could bring jail time and thousands of dollars in fines.

“Trimming and landscaping isn’t done without authorization from government agencies,” said Frank Mateljan of the city attorney’s office.

For decades, many Californians saw native flora as dry, brown shrubs and grasses better suited to kindling than a garden. Recently, however, landscape designers both professional and amateur have come to favor native species, which require minimal water or polluting fertilizer.

Environmentalists also warn that non-native species of plants can harm indigenous ones. For example, myoporum shrubs, a species that is native to New Zealand and has waxy green leaves, can crowd out less vigorous native plants that are home to various animals.

“I love the wetlands, and I care about the endangered species that live there, the plants and animals,” Mr. van de Hoek said, his voice trailing off with emotion.

Mr. Van de Hoek arrived for an arraignment last week looking ill at ease in a borrowed navy blazer that hung limply on his gangly frame. He also brought attorney Thomas Mesereau, Jr., famous for defending Michael Jackson against molestation charges brought by what he cast as overzealous prosecutors.

After the case was postponed, Mr. Mesereau would say only that his client would plead not guilty.

“This is an attempt to intimidate the environmentalists,” said one of Mr. van de Hoek’s friends and supporters, Denny Schneider, wearing a “Free Roy” T-shirt with a picture of Mr. van de Hoek strolling around the Ballona Wetlands in Playa del Rey, the site of the purported crimes.

Mr. van de Hoek serves as an adviser to the Sierra Club Ballona Wetlands Restoration Committee, which is authorized to remove myoporum shrubs. But Mr. van de Hoek has no such authority himself, the city says.

Outside court last week, after a judge rescheduled his arraignment for Oct. 12, Mr. van de Hoek held hands in a circle with his friends and attorney. After reaffirming a commitment to nature, Mr. van de Hoek broke into song, borrowing a refrain from his favorite singer, John Denver.

“I am the eagle, and I live in the high country and rocky cathedrals that reach to the sky,” he sang. “All those who see me and all who believe in me share in my freedom I feel when I fly.”