

GOING GREEN

County is host to many sustainability efforts

Meetings and workshops focus on environment

By Mike Lee
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The county's eco-consciousness is swelling, at least when it's measured by the surging number of public meetings about sustainability.

Many of these events aren't aimed at hemp-wearing, bicycle-riding granola eaters. They target everyone from business professionals to churchgoers, basically anyone interested in making Earth-friendly changes.

On Sept. 9, developers, architects and others met at NTC Promenade under the banner of "Growing Green, Growing Healthy." Also taking place last week was a breakfast meeting of the San Diego Regional Sustainability Partnership, whose members include The Nature Conservancy and San Diego Gas & Electric.

On Thursday, organizers of the San Diego Green 2008 Conference focused on eco-friendly building strategies while coordinators of a seminar series called God's Green Earth took "biblical ecology" at a church.

Next month, the nation's largest convention for the solar industry will be held in San Diego. Also in October, a major alliance of industrial companies in the county will gather for an environmental summit titled "Navigating in an ever-greening world."

There is no official count of sustainability events in the county, but environmental and tourism experts said the growth trend is clear.

"The increasing number of conferences on the theme of sustainability is heartening. I only hope that some of it gains traction and results in significant and long-term policy changes for the better," said Geoffrey Smith, who manages an Internet-based calendar of environmental events in the region.

Several factors are boosting the number of "green" gatherings in the county.

California's latest environmental regulations are forcing agencies and companies to rethink their operations, while San Diego County is home to a growing number of environmentally friendly businesses and institutions. And don't forget the region's mild weather, which is a big selling point for all sorts of groups looking for an appealing meeting spot.

Sustainability conferences typically are low-budget affairs with few frills. Often, they attract a few dozen or a few hundred people who live in the area.

"For the most part, (the draw) is the exchange of ideas," said Mary Lydon, executive director for the San Diego/Tijuana chapter of the Urban Land Institute.

The group helped sponsor the “growing healthy” conference on Sept. 9 to discuss connections between human health, urban life and climate change.

One person who regularly attends meetings about sustainability is Emily Young, who runs the environment program at The San Diego Foundation. She said the proliferation of such gatherings is partly due to rising concern about global warming.

“What climate change has done is created a much larger umbrella in which people are looking at these issues together in a more interrelated way,” Young said.

While eco-conferences aren't commonly big business, some do attract a large crowd. Roughly 10,000 people are expected for the Solar Power International convention and trade expo in San Diego on Oct. 13-16.

“It just became huge overnight,” said Steven Johnson, spokesman for the San Diego Convention Center Corp., which will host the event in the downtown area.

The organization is preparing a new ad for trade publications that will tout its commitment to “green” meetings.

“There is no doubt that this is a growth industry,” Johnson said.

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