

Heroes of Ormond Beach

WETLANDS AWARD:

Two retired teachers give environmental activism a good name.

Retired Ventura County schoolteachers Roma Armbrust and Jean Harris are going to be in Washington tomorrow, accepting an award at the U.S. Capitol. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright should seek them out.

Armbrust and Harris are being honored by the National Wetlands Award program for their volunteer leadership in the effort to preserve Oxnard's Ormond Beach — an effort akin in its complexity to the Middle East peace process.

They've been at it for a dozen years, and know something about perseverance, diplomacy and negotiation.

Neither one will ever be confused with Butterfly Hill, the celebrated protester who camped in a tree to keep loggers out of the Headwaters Forest.

Armbrust and Harris may wear people down with their well-researched, pointed advocacy, but they stay out of people's faces.

"Jean has the amazing ability to see issues from all different perspectives," said Kim Uhlich of the Environmental Defense Center, who nominated the two for the national award.

"She can talk with people from their respective positions. People who meet with her always feel like they've been heard by her."

Armbrust and Harris met in the late '80s when both were involved with the League of Women Voters. In 1989 they formed the Ormond Beach Observers.

They would take anyone with an interest — most, it must be said, whose interest they gently provoked — on tours of one of the



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largest remaining specimens of Southern California's once-abundant coastal wetlands.

They'd bring in university biologists to map and inventory the land as it is, as it used to be and as it could

be once again.

After being a guest on one such tour, I wrote of the against-the-odds preservationist crusade of these two "little old ladies in tennis shoes."

Armbrust remembers. When she called me a couple months back to inform me of the award, she joked, "See what two little old ladies in tennis shoes can accomplish?"

Indeed.

In the mid-'90s after the Baldwin development company purchased most of Ormond Beach and, with the eager support of city officials, proposed a massive housing project and golf course for the site, Armbrust and Harris were unfazed.

They monitored activity at Ormond Beach and blew the whistle when they discovered unauthorized grading that was apparently being done to prevent water from standing on the site — nature's telltale sign of a wetland.

By the mid-'90s, the real estate market had gone sour, Baldwin had gone bankrupt, and Armbrust and Harris were still making their pitch to Oxnard city officials that the best use for Ormond Beach was to preserve it as a wetland.

Motivated in part by the persistent prodding and persuasion of Armbrust and Harris, the California Coastal Conservancy

this year reached agreement to purchase 600 acres at Ormond Beach for \$15 million — the state's largest wetlands purchase.

But the battle isn't over. The city retains the right of first refusal on a property swap the wetlands deal would require, and city officials are still enamored of the idea of allowing residential development on Southern California's largest undeveloped piece of buildable coastal property.

Harris has a goal, and it hasn't yet been achieved: "to bring the Ormond Beach wetlands back to the rich proportions of 150 years ago when the Chumash Indians climbed down from their oak groves and collected shellfish here."

Over dinner last month, Harris fretted that this award, and the fuss over it, has come too soon.

She has a record of seeing projects through.

In the '70s, she was the main force in pushing the Oxnard City Council to insist that developers of Mandalay Beach carve out a piece of their project as public space.

The city had to fight an inverse condemnation lawsuit to win that battle, and ultimately the state came to the rescue with funds to purchase what is now Oxnard Beach Park — the magnificent stretch of public recreational space that complements the nearby Mandalay Beach Resort hotel.

Ever the diplomats, Armbrust and Harris are eager to share credit — with state agencies, community groups, the media and other environmental organizations.

But make no mistake: When the director of the Environmental Protection Agency's Wetlands Division passes out those awards tomorrow, he will put them in the hands of the two women who have truly made a difference.

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