

# VENTANA WILDERNESS WATCH

[www.ventanawild.org](http://www.ventanawild.org)

## Ventana Wilderness Alliance

Volume 12 Number 1 | Summer 2011



Indian Pink (*Silene californica*)

Photo: David Gubernick, Rainbow Spirit Photography [www.rainbowspirit.com](http://www.rainbowspirit.com)

Youth in Wilderness  
Building tomorrow's  
stewards today

Sustaining Wilderness  
with the  
Wilderness Steward program

Esperanza  
Hernandez  
Voluntaria especial

*Protecting the Northern Santa Lucia*

**VENTANA WILDERNESS WATCH**  
 Newsletter of the Ventana Wilderness Alliance



PO Box 506 | Santa Cruz, California 95061  
 (831) 423-3191 | [ventanawild.org](http://ventanawild.org)

*The mission of the Ventana Wilderness Alliance is to protect, preserve and restore the wilderness qualities and biodiversity of the public lands within California's northern Santa Lucia Mountains and Big Sur coast.*

**BOARD of DIRECTORS**

- Tom Hopkins, *President*
- Dennis Palm, *Vice President*
- David Jacobs, *CPA, Treasurer*
- Richard Popchak, *Secretary*
- David Knapp, *Director & Trail Crew Chief*
- Betsy MacGowan, *Director & Trail Crew Leader*
- Bob Dawson, *Director & Outreach Coordinator*


*Volunteer Trail Crew Leaders*  
 Mike Heard, Steve Benoit, Robert Parks, Mark Maslow

**STAFF**

- Paul McFarland, *Executive Director*
- Mike Splain, *Development Director*
- Morgan Harris, *Conservation Associate*
- Julie Anne Hopkins, *Botanist/Biologist/Cartographer*
- Hannah Schoenthal-Muse, *Keep Big Sur Wild Campaign Director*
- Greg Meyer, *Youth in Wilderness Director*

**NEWSLETTER PRODUCTION**

Richard Popchak  
 Paul McFarland  
 Design: Lynn Piquett  
 Printing: Community Printers, Santa Cruz

 Printed on 100% recycled paper (50% post consumer waste) using vegetable oil-based inks.

**ON THE COVER**



*Silene californica* (Caryophyllaceae) is an annual or short-lived perennial familiar to anyone who hikes in chaparral or mixed evergreen forest between May and August. VWA member and expert photographer, David Gubernick, captured this image at The Indians.

**President's Message**



The Cone Peak area is one of the outstanding jewels of the Ventana Wilderness. Stretching from the wild coastal cove at the mouth of Limekiln Creek to the Cone Peak summit and descending to the San Antonio River this dramatic landscape reveals a myriad of habitats and ecotones that make the Ventana Region unique.

Public access to this spectacular area has been difficult in the past due to trail damage from natural brush growth, downed trees, erosion and impacts from the 1999 and 2008 fires. Forest Service trail funding remains spotty and the trails of the Cone Peak area have not been their priority.

To remedy this situation, VWA Trail Crew Leader Mike Heard took an extended leave from his software engineering career in 2008 to volunteer full time to lead the restoration of the 26 miles of public trails that access and circumscribe 5,155 foot Cone Peak. Dubbed the Cone Peak Trails Network project, Mike's leadership has galvanized a heroic and sustained effort by scores of volunteers, including other VWA Trail Crew Leaders, in the restoration of the Kirk Creek, Stone Ridge, Gamboa, Carrizo, Arroyo Seco, North Coast Ridge and the project namesake, Cone Peak trail. The project has also been greatly advanced with hired youth crews from American Conservation Experience that have been funded by various grant sources and our very own Ventana Trails Forever Fund at the Community Foundation for Monterey County.

While not complete, the overall project has substantially restored these valuable public trails from being lost to the elements and neglect. The last three miles to be worked is the portion of the Stone Ridge trail in the remote upper canyon of the West Fork of Limekiln Creek. To complete this last leg of the project, VWA is pursuing a one-to-one matching grant from the National Forest Foundation. We are raising our \$24,000 match for the NFF grant in thirds: \$8,000 from available VWA trail funds and an \$8,000 private commitment **IF** we can raise the last \$8,000 from our own membership.

If you hike the public trails of the Ventana region or if you simply understand how important it is to preserve public access to these treasured wild lands, please help us raise the \$8,000 match. Every dollar you contribute will be matched by our private donor, and then matched again by the National Forest Foundation. This is a two-for-one **tripling** of your donation that will finally secure the reopening of the Cone Peak Trails Network. For more information on how you can help reopen this quintessential Ventana trail, please see page 5.

Thank you for your support.

**IN MEMORY**

Longtime friend of the Ventana  
**Douglas Dilfer of Santa Cruz**

March 15, 1940 – May 28, 2011

Wayne and Jeanne Boss, Jon and Kate Libby, Essam and Donna Badawi and Richard and Phyllis Wasserstrom generously donated to the Ventana Trails Forever Fund in Doug's memory.

## Building Tomorrow's Stewards Today | VWA's Youth in Wilderness program

by Morgan Harris

The Ventana Wilderness Alliance's Youth in Wilderness Program is celebrating the end of a successful 2010-2011 field season and is looking forward to an ever expanding group of partners as well as increased wilderness opportunities for youth across the Central Coast.

This year we expanded our existing relationships with Salinas Community School, CSU Monterey Bay and UC Santa Cruz. These included environmental education trips into the Carmel River and Tassajara Creek watersheds, as well as trailwork restoration trips on the Skinner Ridge, Pine Ridge and Ventana trails. We also fostered new partnerships with Rancho Cielo Alternative High School, Big Sur Land Trust, King City Elementary Science Camp and Cal Poly San Luis Obispo. These new partnerships involved work on the Marble Peak trail, restoration of the Cruikshank trail and environmental education on the Mitteldorf Preserve. In addition, we led interpretive hikes and multi-day backpacking trips for high school students from across the state, underscoring the importance of getting all Californians excited about their public lands. The breadth of ages, as well as diverse cultural and geographic backgrounds within Youth in Wilderness outings demonstrate the



Salinas Community School students enjoying the walk.



UCSC students get rolling at Apple Tree Camp.

program's success in connecting with and serving young people throughout the Monterey Bay area and beyond.

In 2011-2012 these successes will continue to grow. In addition to growing our list of partners, we have been developing exceptional volunteer leaders through a partnership with the CSUMB Outdoor Adventure Club. Sara Kelly and Mike McDonald have been valuable additions to that program, bringing experience and positive mentorship for trip participants.

In an effort to keep wilderness accessible to everyone, our trips are provided at low to no cost. To help ensure that we are able to continue inspiring the youth of California, please consider making a donation to the Youth in Wilderness Program. Your contribution will allow us to keep providing fun and memorable outdoor experiences to youth, many of whom would otherwise not have the opportunity.

### 2010-2011 Field Year

Number of Outings	Elementary Students	High School Students	College/University Students	Partners	Educational Hours	Restoration Hours
12	236	90	49	11	1452	2156

For more information, please contact Morgan Harris at [morgan@ventanawild.org](mailto:morgan@ventanawild.org) or (831) 423-3191.

## Sustaining Wilderness

by Paul McFarland

It is a truly modern irony that no wild place on today's Earth remains wild on its own; it takes people, caring people, to keep places "natural."

Rising abruptly from the pounding surf of the Pacific Ocean to 5000'-plus ridgelines, the Ventana and Silver Peak wilderness areas preserve one of the nation's wildest places smack dab in the middle of the most populous state in the nation. This verdant hodgepodge of redwood-filled canyons, rolling oak woodlands and mountain glades reminiscent of Sierran forests is not only wild in all respects, but also loved by many.

Educating the many visitors who hike Ventana trails, swim in clear streams and tell stories around aging picnic tables is one way to ensure people take only photos and leave footprints. When education fails, well, you simply have to pick up the trash, leave the land better for the next person and hope those who come next will be moved enough by the beauty of the place to keep it that way. Education and clean-up take people, and people in the backcountry

– namely Wilderness Rangers – have long been in short supply across the Ventana region – the last full-time Wilderness Ranger on the Monterey District of the Los Padres National Forest left in 1988.

To help bridge this capacity gap, the Ventana Wilderness Alliance, in partnership with the Monterey Ranger District is establishing a volunteer Wilderness Steward program through generous matching funding from the National Forest Foundation.

Following a weekend training class, Wilderness Stewards will be responsible for hiking the trails, providing recreation, campfire and natural history information, as well as performing light trail maintenance, restoration (i.e. cleaning up trash) and identification of invasive plant infestations. Another focus of the Ventana Wilderness Stewards will be building a current database of camps, trails and signs complete with conditions and repair needs. This database, along with information from other volunteers and conditions reported on the VWA Trails Conditions Forum will form the foundation for planning future work and investment across the Ventana Region.

Together the VWA and Forest Service will provide uniforms, radios, and field equipment for the Stewards. Through our grant from the National Forest Foundation, VWA will also provide tools, supplies and a stipend for the Stewards (as long as supplies last!).

While sorely needed, the VWA Wilderness Steward program is not intended to replace professional Forest Service Rangers. The professional Ranger, working year in and year out across a given piece of ground, is fast becoming an Endangered Species. VWA will continue to push for restoration of funding to support field-going, professional Rangers. Until such time, it is up to all of us to get creative, get our hands dirty and, together, figure out how to sustain the diversity and wilderness values of the Ventana region and Big Sur Coast. At the end of the day, it's the health of our public wild places that ultimately matters.

Interested in helping others enjoy and sustain the Ventana and Silver Peak wilderness areas as a volunteer Ventana Wilderness Steward?

Visit [ventanawild.org](http://ventanawild.org) or contact

[Paulmc@ventanawild.org](mailto:Paulmc@ventanawild.org) to learn more.

To help us sustain this critical program, please join as a member of the Ventana Wilderness Alliance.



## The Cone Peak Trails Project | *Help needed on the home stretch*

by Paul McFarland

In 2007, the Ventana Wilderness Alliance, with Trail Crew leader Mike Heard at the helm, began the Cone Peak Trails Project – an ambitious project to restore the trails surrounding 5155' Cone Peak. Hammered by a combination of inconsistent trail maintenance, fire, erosion and simply being perched on the steepest coastal gradient in the continental

United States, the Gamboa, Kirk Creek, Vicente Flat and Stone Ridge trails were fast becoming merely a memory before this project began. The fact that many of these trails can even be found today is a testament to the truism that if you want something done, you have to do it yourself. No quip better captures the spirit of the VWA and Cone Peak project lead, Mike Heard.

Four years, thousands of volunteer hours and tens of thousands of dollars into this project, success is literally less than a few miles away, and you can help get us all there.

Fueled by an original American breakfast of coffee and doughnuts, project leader Mike Heard and I set off from the trailhead on Highway 1 early this summer to review the work completed over the last few years and come up with a plan to complete what some have called the quintessential Ventana trail. The June gloom quickly cleared as we climbed first through dense coastal scrub, then through ancient, live oak woodland and, eventually, after rounding many a corner, dropped into the cool damp redwood groves of the Hare Creek drainage.

Along the way, Mike narrated a story populated with a cast of Central Coast characters (American Conservation Experience Crews, California Conservation Corps Crews, US Forest Service Fire Crews, chainsaw-wielding Smokejumpers) and natural disaster plot twists (landslides, redwoods falling in the dead of night, rain storms, impenetrable tree jumbles, ground squirrels...) to rival a T.C. Boyle tale.

The trail, from the highway all the way through pastoral Vicente Flat Camp and around to the Stone Ridge – the grassy ridge

dividing the Middle Fork from the West Fork of Limekiln Creek – is uniformly wonderful. Evenly graded, the newly cut tread was flat, a true joy to walk and the perfect path to forget one's feet and concentrate on ocean views and darting Whiptail lizards. Mind wandering, I contemplated that along this route I was walking



**FS Volunteer and VWA Trail Crew Leader Mike Heard enjoys newly worked trail tread.**

California: cruising nearly every habitat from Sierran pine forests on Cone Peak, to verdant, gulch-hugging Redwood groves, to the spiky Yucca in the chaparral. A walk on the Cone Peak Trails network is (ecologically) akin to walking from San Diego to Arcata. Perhaps J. Smeaton Chase could have just spent his year walking this trail.

As we dropped the 2000-odd feet down from Stone Ridge to the highway, it

became clearer why folks like Mike and others like him work so hard. Even though trees keep falling and ravel keeps rolling, a good trail, like a Coltrane melody or Stegner sentence, leads us to deeper places. Without their work, we will lose these precious pathways to wildness. Thank you, Mike, and all the others out there who cut brush, drag dirt and roll rocks – you folks are the modern poets of the Santa Lucia Mountains.

Nearly 75% of the 15 mile Cone Peak Loop has been rebuilt. To complete the remaining 25%, we need your help. We are applying for a matching grant from the National Forest Foundation to support professional crew work to complete the last section of Stone Ridge trail from Trail Springs Camp to Stone Ridge. If we can raise \$8000 from you, our membership, VWA will be able to apply for a tripling of your funding from the National Forest Foundation. Securing a path around Cone Peak is more than worth it. To support Mike and the Cone Peak Trails project, use the envelope in this newsletter and write *Cone Peak* on your check or visit [ventanawild.org](http://ventanawild.org) and click *Join*.

## Volunteer Spotlight | *Esperanza Hernandez*

In this issue of Ventana Wilderness Watch, we profile a beloved friend and active volunteer, Esperanza Hernandez. Born in Paracho, Michoacan, Esperanza moved to the Salinas Valley with her family in the 1950's. Now semi-retired, Esperanza volunteers with the VWA Trail Crew and can be found on any number of trails in the Ventana and Silver Peak backcountry. Esperanza considers herself to be a jack-of-all-trades and has taken on a wide variety of jobs over the years to support and raise her children. It was as a field worker that Esperanza had a life-changing experience. She became gravely ill from exposure to pesticides and could not return to that type of work once she recovered. Fortunately, Esperanza found work as a bilingual Teacher's Aide. She retired with 30 years of service in the Greenfield Union and Alisal Union School Districts. After that, Esperanza found time to work for National Parks at the Pinnacles National Monument and with the US Forest Service on the Monterey Ranger District. A long-time resident of Soledad, Esperanza lives near many relatives including her brother David and her three children, Everardo, Claudia and Jorge, as well as eight grandchildren.

We caught up with Esperanza while she was planning a trip to car camp with a friend somewhere along the coast.

### Q. How did you first become involved with the Ventana Wilderness Alliance?

I met (VWA Board Member) Betsy MacGowan around 2005 while guiding hikes for the Sierra Club. I was looking for something a bit more challenging and Betsy suggested that I join VWA and become a member of the Trail Crew. Thanks to Betsy, I have found "mentors" in people like Robert Parks, Mike Heard and Dave Knapp.

### Q. You are famous for bringing tasty treats to share with your fellow trail crew members. How do you decide what to make and bring out on the trail?

I usually bring whatever pops in my head that day. I think about what is easiest to carry. I also think about what people like and maybe don't like.

Everybody loves my banana nut cake so I might bring in half a cake. I enjoy cooking salmon in the backcountry.

### Q. What are your most challenging experiences when in the wilderness?

I have always had a fear of snakes, especially rattlesnakes. And as you know, snakes are everywhere in the Santa Lucia Mountains. I have nothing against snakes. They are just creepy to me. But I have come a long way. I have encountered rattlesnakes in the backcountry about 10 times and while I still jump 10 feet in the air and run a mile a minute away from them, I'm better than I used to be. Also, it is challenging for me to deal with the cold weather in the backcountry. I'm a warm weather girl. I like it when it's hot. So much of our work is done in the cold of winter. I have to thank Dave Knapp for giving me air-activated hand warmers.

### Q. What motivates you to support the trail crew? Why do you keep coming back?

I love the outdoors. Grandpa was a Native American medicine man, and he often took us into the hills when we were children. He would gather roots and bulbs. One time I complained that I was hungry. Grandpa dug up the bulbs of a plant and told me to eat only so many if I was hungry. The bulbs looked like little coconuts so we called them "coquitos" and they really worked to control hunger. On another trip, I was very hungry, and I ate more coquitos than he told me to eat. I completely lost my appetite and I went a few days without eating. Grandpa noticed this and asked me how many coquitos I ate. I lied at first, but eventually I had to admit that I ate more coquitos than instructed. I wish I knew that plant now. I could create the ultimate diet pill.

I keep coming back to the wilderness because there are so many trails and each has its own beauty. I wish I could forever work the trails so that my grandkids and their grandkids can experience these wild places. It is a shame that so few come to these beautiful places. If the trails become overgrown and nobody comes to enjoy nature, the trails could be lost forever.



Esperanza with her brother David Garcia.

# **FIRESCAPE Monterey** | *Working together to protect ecosystems, life and property*

by Mike Splain

It's no secret that the Monterey Ranger District desperately needs a formalized wildfire management plan. Without clearly defined objectives and protocols, every ignition triggers a chaotic chain of events that can only be described as perpetual crisis mode. Fortunately, District Ranger Sherry Tune has drawn on her vast knowledge (gained from prior wildfire experience on Arizona's Coronado National Forest) to develop a formal management plan.

The **FIRESCAPE** process (**F**ire **I**ntegration in **R**estoration **E**cology using **S**cience and a **C**ollaborative **A**pproach with a **P**artnership **E**mphasis) began in early March with two workshops in Big Sur Valley. Participants included local homeowners and fire personnel, as well as agency employees, scientific researchers and conservation advocates from the California Wilderness Project, Sierra Club, and of course, Ventana Wilderness Alliance.

These initial workshops focused on developing a geographic scope and identifying targets by which to gauge the ongoing success of the FIRESCAPE process.

The group agreed on six primary targets:

- 1 Fire-adapted human communities
- 2 Watersheds
- 3 Fire-adapted /fire-sensitive biotic communities
- 4 Riparian areas
- 5 Cultural resources
- 6 Aesthetics and wilderness qualities.

Subsequent workshops identified threats to these targets and opportunities to protect them. The emphasis on “fire-adapted human communities” with defensible space around homes has been promising. Presuppression fuel treatments, as well as fire line creation and maintenance are likely outcomes of the process, and it is heartening that the vast majority of participants have expressed sincere concern for healthy watersheds and wilderness values. In an effort to ensure that fuel treatments on public lands are applied with maximum effectiveness and minimum resource damage, VWA is committed to staying the FIRESCAPE course through to implementation.

A common theme that has surfaced throughout FIRESCAPE workshops is the need for more data. The complex topography of

the northern Santa Lucia Range precludes a “one size fits all” approach to fire management, and anyone who has ever hiked in the backcountry knows the limitations of maps as a planning tool. To address this knowledge gap, VWA staff have been manually documenting fire breaks and hand lines within and adjacent to the Ventana Wilderness. The end result will be a georeferenced photodocumentary (in publicly-available Google Earth format)



**A VWA staff member inventories an old hand line north of Post Summit.**

that should prove invaluable for future planning, implementation and emergency response.

Please stay tuned for more developments as FIRESCAPE approaches completion. For more information contact Mike Splain at [mike@ventanawild.org](mailto:mike@ventanawild.org). To support our continued engagement in the FIRESCAPE process, please visit [www.ventanawild.org](http://www.ventanawild.org) and click “Join.”

## **FIRESCAPE Vision**

“FIRESCAPE Monterey promotes protection of both life and property affected by wildfire and healthy resilient ecosystems through collaborative stewardship.”

ADDRESS SERVICE REQUESTED

## EVENTS

### September 24, 2011

National Public Lands Day  
Email [vwa@ventanawild.org](mailto:vwa@ventanawild.org)  
or call 831-423-3191 for details.

### October 22, 2011

VWA Fall Gathering  
Special Guest Speaker!  
Save the date - Details TBA

Find us on 



From left to right: John Laird, Tom Hopkins, Dan Baldwin and Sherry Tune.

The rain continued into the afternoon as folks gathered for a reception at Big Sur Station to celebrate the future of Ventana Trails Forever and witness the public unveiling of the Ventana Trails Forever Fund. This fund is an endowment to support public trail maintenance across the Ventana and Big Sur Region. Hosted by VWA President Tom Hopkins, speakers at the event included Monterey District Ranger Sherry Tune, President and CEO of the Community Foundation for Monterey County, Dan Baldwin and California Secretary for Natural Resources, John Laird. Each congratulated VWA for establishing the fund and thanked the initial donors for their generosity. The celebration continued into the brightening afternoon as the attendees were treated to wonderful hor d'oeuvres by *A Big Sur Affair* amid the country-rock stylings of Big Sur's own *Songs Hotbox Harry Taught Us*. To learn how you can support Ventana Trails Forever, contact us at [vwa@ventanawild.org](mailto:vwa@ventanawild.org).

## A Celebration of Trails

by Richard Popchak

A diverse group of people assembled at Big Sur Station on June 4 to observe National Trails Day and to celebrate **Ventana Trails Forever**.

A steady rain failed to deter 26 volunteers who arrived in the morning to clear the Oak Grove trail in Pfeiffer Big Sur State Park. They were expertly and safely led by Matt Buonaguidi, Isa Perez and Candelario Reyes of California State Parks. The trail crew, which ranged in age from 4 to 60+, contributed a total of 130 work hours. A special thanks to REI-Marina who treated the volunteers to shirts, food, coffee, juice and prizes prior to the day's work. REI was well-represented with 8 volunteers.

