



Ventana Wilderness Alliance Executive Director Position Description

Painter Executive Search is supporting the Ventana Wilderness Alliance (VWA) in its search for an Executive Director to lead the organization's efforts 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.

The Ventana Wilderness Alliance (VWA) was established in 1998 with the creation of a comprehensive inventory of local lands to determine their suitability for inclusion in a new federal wilderness act. That all-volunteer survey began the effort that continues to this day – advocating for and actively stewarding this stunningly beautiful, highly popular, and fiercely rugged landscape of the northern Santa Lucia Mountains.

The Ventana Wilderness and the Silver Peak Wilderness (Wilderness) are located nearly entirely within Monterey County, California. This majestic region contains the majority of Big Sur which stretches between Carmel Highlands and San Simeon. The Wilderness is the ancestral homelands of the Ohlone, Esselen, and Salinan people and holds important cultural assets as well as incredible beauty. The United States Congress originally designated the Ventana as Wilderness in 1969 and the footprint has expanded over time by various acts of Congress to include 240,026 acres today. The Silver Peak Wilderness adds another 31,555 acres of land. This exquisite region offers more than 300 miles of trails providing access to upland conifer forests and rolling grasslands, fog-shrouded redwood gulches, stunningly rugged peaks and valleys, and wave-beaten Pacific headlands—truly a “best of” compilation of California landscapes.

From the beginning, the VWA has been a strong local advocate for retaining the qualities of and access to these wild places. From ensuring that roadless lands and free-flowing streams remain so by expanded Wilderness and Wild and Scenic River designations to engaging in review processes under NEPA and CEQA, the VWA engages in the policy and practice of managing the land. The VWA began as and continues to be an active and informed local voice for the Wilderness.

The Wilderness is primarily managed by the Monterey Ranger District (MRD) of the Los Padres National Forest of the US Forest Service. The MRD is an indispensable partner of the VWA. Many of the programs that have evolved at the VWA require close working relationships and rely on the MRD for access and authorization for specific work. The relationship between the VWA and the MRD can be complex at times but is based in mutually shared values--acting to preserve the qualities of this unique land and access to it in perpetuity.

The VWA's budget is nearly \$800k with restricted program grants making up the primary revenue source. Four full-time staff members and one part-time analyst currently work remotely or in the office in Santa Cruz. The current VWA Board is seven volunteers, mostly long-time dedicated supporters with deep institutional knowledge and hands-on work in the field. The organization has approximately 150 active volunteers who engage with the land in stewardship activities and outreach events. Over 1400 members provide annual financial support. The VWA has a recognized role as the voice for the Wilderness and enjoys a solid reputation among the community and its partners. The volunteers and staff are recognized and appreciated for the many hours of work in dedication to the mission.

This position will be key to supporting the VWA as it continues its transition from a largely volunteer led organization to one that has professional operational and financial expertise to sustain this advocacy work, develop new stewards and introduce a new generation to the wonders of the backcountry.

POSITION SUMMARY

The Executive Director (ED), reporting to the President of the Board and accountable to the Board of Directors, will be an active advocate for the lands of the northern Santa Lucia Mountains. The ED will engage donors, build support, and inspire collaboration to ensure practices and policies are considering the short-term and long-term needs of the Wilderness and the sustainability of the VWA.

The ED will provide visionary and tactical leadership for the organization particularly in fundraising, partnership engagement and integration of programs into a broader strategy. The ED will work with the Board and volunteer leaders to develop practices that further transition the organization to professional management of programs with appropriate Board engagement in fundraising and oversight. The ED role requires business acumen and the ability to consider the business model and the requirements for building organizational sustainability particularly the fundraising strategy to support this change.

The ED is a critical voice for the Wilderness. This person will need well-honed diplomatic skills and be comfortable navigating complex issues with clarity and goodwill. Being visible, engaging with local leadership groups including the Community Association of Big Sur and the Big Sur Multi-Agency Advisory Council, the Forest Service and State Parks, with elected officials and other core partners in order to understand and influence the policies and practices that impact the Wilderness will be critical.

This work requires the ED to inspire and empower the staff and support them in an integrated and compounding effort to highlight and act upon the needs of the Wilderness, ensure access to it, and build the number of people invested in its future. The ED will need to be comfortable in delegating responsibilities and authority and in working side-by-side with staff and volunteers.

THE LAND AND ACCESS

The Big Sur region is some of the most visited natural lands in the country. Millions of people travel through the coastal corridor each year. Balancing the needs of the local residents and access to the highly sought-after coastal experience is fraught and community engagement around solutions is complex. Since significant access to the backcountry wilderness is through this busy corridor, solutions require thoughtful consideration. Advocating for the continued access to the “other” Big Sur experience -the wilderness experience- is challenging on many fronts.

The Wilderness backcountry is defined by steep-sided, sharp-crested ridges and craggy peaks falling into V-shaped valleys wondrously hidden from the outside world. Elevations range from 600 feet where the Wild and Scenic Big Sur River leaves the Wilderness to 5,800 feet at its highest peak. This region is often formidable. In addition to outstanding opportunities for backcountry recreation and solitude, day hiking opportunities abound, and popular routes can be crowded at peak times of the year.

Retaining high quality trails and access to these areas is complicated by the region’s popularity, the ruggedness of the geography, and also by the vegetation. The inland area is dominated by fast-growing chaparral which can quickly overtake a less traveled trail. When wildfires occur, it quickly regenerates. Active management of the trails is required if they are not to be lost. The VWA volunteers have become not just the eyes and ears of the quality and condition of these trails, but experts on their history, use and potential.

PROGRAM AREAS

ADVOCACY

For over 20 years the VWA has leveraged informed community involvement to preserve and restore public lands across the region. In addition to advocating for expansion and special designations to increase protections for unique attributes of the land, the VWA also takes positions on particular practices and proposals, defends, and secures access to the land and monitors it through active volunteers who hike and report real time information regarding trails and usage.

While legal action is rare and cautiously engaged, the VWA actively contributes and elevates the conversation regarding the needs and resources required to effectively steward such wild and wildly popular land. The VWA actively cooperates with the MRD in activities such as efforts to track trail usage but can also be steadfastly independent when that is advantageous and required. The VWA's advocacy efforts recognize that sometimes an outside voice--one that speaks for the Wilderness--is needed to uphold the standard of care required for stewardship and to navigate the interests of the many stakeholders, including those who are local and those who visit.

STEWARDSHIP

Trails

The maintenance of trails in the Wilderness is a constant need. The once robust 300-plus mile trail system originally provided relatively straight-forward hikes into the backcountry. Today, with the help of major donors and occasional Forest Service funding, dedicated VWA volunteers, often working with contract crews, labor to retain and restore access to more remote trails and maintain popular trails. The realities of reduced Forest Service funding and increased wildfires have made it a challenge to retain a foothold in the ever-regenerating chaparral that blankets much of the backcountry.

Every project that the VWA takes on is carefully planned with the guidance of the VWA Volunteer Trail Crew Chief and executed with the help of active volunteers. Using the public Meetup app as an interface to volunteers, the VWA volunteer leadership manages all the details of this program including advocating for specific work to be authorized, gaining access, and creating a fun, collaborative, and productive volunteer experience. Staff members work closely with the volunteer leadership to develop funding for the work and to interface with the key partners.

Wilderness Rangers

The VWA partners with the US Forest Service to organize, train, and outfit Volunteer Wilderness Rangers. These dedicated volunteers hike the trails, clean up trash, and impart Leave No Trace principles to backcountry visitors. Patrols are focused on the most heavily used trails and camping areas especially over holiday weekends.

In conjunction with the US Forest Service, the VWA has also instituted the Partners in Preservation – Archaeological Site Steward program. This program trains and deploys volunteers to monitor existing sites in the Los Padres National Forest and report signs of degradation from human, animal, and weather so that steps can be taken to preserve them.

Restoration

In addition to routine trail maintenance, the VWA has also taken on restoration work such as the major clean-up completed in the Willow Creek drainage in 2004. That multiyear project systematically removed approximately three tons of trash over 2 years. The VWA volunteers worked without the benefit of any motorized tools as required by Wilderness regulation in an amazing effort to restore this key area.

YOUTH IN WILDERNESS

The mission of the Youth in Wilderness (YiW) program is to inspire, educate and motivate future generations of central California's wilderness advocates and stewards. While the program serves all young people of Central California, YiW prioritizes serving those from surrounding communities of color who, through historic and systematic inequities, have faced increased barriers to accessing outdoor spaces and outdoor education opportunities. Providing overnight backpacking trips and single-day nature walks, YiW specializes in introductory wilderness immersion experiences for young people at no cost to participants - all outdoor leadership, essential gear, and meals are provided by the program through grant funding and individual donations.

CURRENT CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

In the past, the VWA was capably managed by a long time Executive Director who supported the work of volunteers by assuring that grant funding was available for specific work and who managed the reporting of that funding. As the volunteer leadership ages, the need to adapt the model to include staff leadership has become more apparent. This shift, as well as the desire to free up the ED's time from grant reporting, requires building broader unrestricted funds and adapting the historical roles and organizational model to support that effort. The new ED will need to be engaged in thinking broadly about the structure and organizational needs of the VWA.

Additionally, the VWA currently maintains an office in Santa Cruz while the work of the VWA is in Monterey County. Developing a plan that increases access to materials and supplies for volunteers and roots the organization more deeply in Monterey County would be beneficial and will need to be balanced to retain the existing staff.

Fires and COVID responses closed the Wilderness at times in the last couple of years essentially closing down many of the VWA's programs. As the need to be in nature fuels tourism and the backcountry becomes more popular, managing some of these routes and more accessible areas has become more challenging. The VWA needs to work even more closely with the Forest Service to increase their influence and strengthen their partnership so that during challenging situations they can work together even when their positions are not fully aligned.

The VWA has a current Strategic Plan which was completed at the beginning of COVID under a prior leader. It contains overarching goals for advocacy, stewardship, fundraising and membership, communication, and management and governance. Those goals will need to be reviewed with the leadership of the new ED.

The VWA is currently developing a couple of new programs including one that focuses on introducing adults to the backcountry and one that increases stewardship in a highly important cultural area, the Milpitas Special Interest Area. The ED will be helpful in building support and infrastructure for these new efforts which will include increased engagement with indigenous cultural leaders and representatives at Fort Hunter Liggett.

Executive Director

KEY DUTIES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Leadership and Strategy

- Collectively shape, articulate, and execute a vision that inspires the preservation of and retains access to these important wildlands;
- Create, cultivate, and maintain relationships with government agencies, local groups, elected officials, public servants, scientific researchers, volunteers, and other constituents to deepen the VWA's effectiveness as a leader, partner, and collaborator;

- Be visible. Attend important planning and community meetings and gatherings, advocate broadly and with integrity; collaborate with the Board on internal approaches and policies in order to present a consistent unified position on behalf of the Wilderness;
- Work closely with the Board to build strong board governance and capacity, establish clear lines of communication and responsibility; assist the Board in recruitment and actively communicate with the Board on issues affecting the health and strategy of the organization;
- Inspire, mentor, and support the staff; encourage professional development and collaboration internally and with other aligned organizations;
- Appreciate, engage, and recruit volunteers; deeply listen, learn from their collective experience, and communicate openly so that goals are understood, and the support required for the work is received.

Advocacy

- Work with the Advocacy Committee of the Board and the Senior Policy Analyst to understand and develop positions regarding opportunities and concerns in the Wilderness at large, special cultural areas, highly popular trails, camps, and roads and regarding uses and access;
- Establish and maintain effective positive working relationships with the Forest Service and other government groups locally, regionally, statewide, and federally, as well as regional groups and influencers; understand common concerns; be clear and transparent about the VWA's priorities and stances;
- Build relationships with elected officials and their local representatives; advocate for support on key priorities and build understanding and appreciation of the needs of the Wilderness and access to it;
- Work with the communications staff and others to grow greater outreach and engagement with the public around key issues and strategies.

Fundraising and Communications

- Support the development of a Fundraising Strategy and execute that plan to increase unrestricted donations and rationalize sources of funding and fundraising management;
- Work with the Board to identify and cultivate donors to raise the funds needed to achieve the VWA's aspirations and vision for the future;
- Personally participate in growing individual support and deepening relationships with foundations, business, and civic leaders, as well as individual donors;
- Coordinate with and engage the Board and staff in donor cultivation activities, including public and community outreach, solicitations, events, and stewardship;
- Oversee and review grant applications and reports for public and private funds;
- Oversee communications; personally, and collectively, engage the media (both traditional and social media) highlighting the VWA's work and effectively communicate its positions to inspire public support;
- Work with the communications staff and others to build a robust grassroots capacity for program delivery.

Internal Leadership and Financial and Organizational Management

- Oversee and adapt the VWA's operations to build sustainability and efficiency for the organization, and ensure the safety of its staff and volunteers;
- Recruit, nurture, and challenge a motivated professional staff; delegate with appropriate authority and foster open, positive communication;
- Empower the staff and support their learning and growth; implement sound human resource and organizational development practices; grow the capacity of the organization;

- Develop the annual operating budget for presentation to the Board, report progress regularly, and ensure that the finances are managed appropriately and according to the approved budget;
- Ensure that contractual and business requirements (including taxes, licenses, insurance, and human resource policies) for the current and future needs of the VWA are met;
- Support and champion the Youth in Wilderness and other educational programs that build the next generation of conservation stewards;
- Ensure program grants are utilized effectively; monitor project budgets and ensure that the reporting deepens support for the VWA's work;
- Support and encourage the VWA's volunteers; ensure that they are appropriately acknowledged and thanked, provide the resources needed to maximize their value and secure a smooth transfer of knowledge and leadership to new volunteers and staff.

POSITION REQUIREMENTS

A successful Executive Director candidate will likely have:

Experience

- Passion for the wilderness; demonstrated personal and professional understanding of the value of wild lands and familiarity with the legal framework of the Wilderness Act, NEPA and/or CEQA;
- Experience as the “face” of an organization; well-developed interpersonal skills; outstanding oral and written communication skills, ability to present ideas, stories, and information clearly and persuasively;
- Experience effectively leading an organization or program of similar size and complexity, ideally within a nonprofit organization and reporting to a Board of Directors;
- Experience developing a collective vision, implementing effective strategy, and growing an organization;
- Experience with fundraising, building connections to the mission and growing support from individuals, foundations, and the public at large;
- Strong financial and organizational management skills; hands-on business decision-making and comfort with day-to-day operations including human resource management;
- Demonstrated leadership skills; experience building effective internal and external teams;
- A history of strong collaboration; builds trust, credibility, and strategic relationships.

Attributes

- Politically astute; able to professionally and respectfully communicate and work with a diverse group of stakeholders toward shared goals;
- Highly diplomatic; able to disagree without being disagreeable; patient and calm—in the work for the long term;
- Leads with vision and strong management skills; able to motivate and direct while establishing accountability and celebrating shared successes;
- Able to build effective and lasting relationships; acknowledges challenges and seeks solutions; listens well and creates effective strategies;
- Brings energy, empathy, and attention to daily work;
- Exercises high ethical standards with honesty, directness, and a good-natured approachability;
- Knows the Big Sur region/Monterey County area and its social and political environments.

For additional details or to submit your experience for review, please contact;

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