Bridging the Gap
Between Youth and Wilderness

Special Map Insert
Big Sur River Trail Network

Volunteer Spotlight
Lynn Moncher

Protecting the Northern Santa Lucia
Executive Director’s Message

For many of us, trails were the gateway to conservation. Without backcountry access, we might not have learned to appreciate wilderness and the critters, plants and vital ecological processes protected within. For that simple reason, trails have always been a high priority for the VWA; and with the help of key funding from VWA members and grantmakers, the VWA Trail Crew will continue to “pay it forward” by keeping our public trails accessible.

A major milestone this field season was the completion of an ambitious project to restore the extraordinarily scenic Cone Peak loop. Guided by a Forest Service directive to maintain loops and priority trails, and inspired at how much work gets done when we focus our efforts, we surveyed hikers, VWA members and Trail Crew participants to determine what network will be next. The decision was made to focus on the Tassajara Trail Network. (See our Fall 2012 newsletter for a map.)

Of course, restoring access is just half the battle. If only every Forest visitor would respect the land, pack out everything they packed in, and use campfires in designated campsites with careful observance of seasonal fire restrictions. In a perfect world, we’d all be able to experience the same primeval landscape early European settlers encountered hundreds of years ago. But here in the real world, human impacts visibly scar heavily used backcountry locations.

Take for instance the Big Sur River corridor. For many, the Pine Ridge Trail from Big Sur Station is a logical introduction to the Ventana. For others it’s their first encounter with any wilderness. What kind of wilderness experience does this trail provide? On holiday weekends, literally hundreds of visitors line up to hike “the trail to Sykes Hot Springs,” with the unfortunate consequence of noise, trash and hazardous fire conditions at every camp along the way.

So how can we ensure that the Big Sur River isn’t loved to death? The first step is education. VWA-supported Volunteer Wilderness Rangers maintain a presence on the Pine Ridge Trail whenever possible. Rangers make public contacts and teach visitors about fire safety and backcountry etiquette. Occasionally, they greet hikers at the trailhead and encourage them to tread lightly on the land. When all else fails, Rangers bury toilet paper, disassemble unnecessary fire rings, and pack out garbage. For a novel approach to reaching the folks we can’t meet in person, check out the Big Sur River Trail Network map in this issue of Ventana Wilderness Watch and pay a visit to the Sykes-specific web page referenced therein.

For more information on the Volunteer Wilderness Rangers and other essential VWA programs, read on. But above all, when you enjoy the glory of spring on your public lands, please, Leave No Trace!

Mike Splain | Executive Director
Volunteer Wilderness Ranger Program Continues to Grow

by Richard Popchak

At first it was just a good idea. Then it became a reality... thanks to the efforts of key volunteers and grant funding. And now it has become a cornerstone of the VWA's stewardship work in the backcountry. We call it the Volunteer Wilderness Ranger program. Under the expert leadership of Steve Benoit, 13 Wilderness Rangers (formerly known as “Stewards”) are trained and equipped to patrol and maintain backcountry recreation sites while providing educational resources to wilderness visitors.

Now in its 2nd year, the program continues to grow in size and impact. On January 26, Steve and VWA Executive Director Mike Splain attended a Wilderness Ranger training program hosted by the Los Padres Forest Association in the Santa Barbara Ranger District. This event impressed on them the tremendous potential this program has to offset the limited resources available to the US Forest Service to maintain a backcountry presence.

On April 6 Monterey Ranger District personnel hosted a Wilderness Ranger Academy at the Merle Ranch near The Indians. The volunteers received training in field procedures, radio use, trail maintenance, campsite restoration, hazard reduction and other elements of the patrol process. The Rangers are now applying what they have learned in the field. Patrols are focused on the most heavily-used trails and camps, especially over holiday weekends.

In a special side project in March, Steve led an intrepid group of six volunteers to remove over 150 pounds of abandoned gear (with help from Forest Service packers) from the Big Sur River corridor near Cienega Camp. The gear was left behind when a group of ill-prepared backpackers had to be lifted out of the wilderness by helicopter after getting lost in the snow-filled backcountry last December. As further proof that a Wilderness Ranger's work is never done, the volunteers discovered more abandoned gear on their way out from Cienega Camp.

The Pine Ridge Trail corridor back to Sykes Camp historically has been an overused and over-impacted part of the wilderness. In an effort to educate the public about Leave No Trace principles, we have added a Sykes Camp/Sykes Hot Springs page to the VWA site. In addition to teaching visitors about backcountry etiquette, the page offers alternative destinations to Sykes. As Steve likes to point out, “There’s nothing malicious about novice backpackers. They just don’t know any better.” Check out the page under the “Planning a Trip” section of the VWA site.

We would like to thank the US Forest Service for their support of the Volunteer Wilderness Ranger program. We would also like to thank the generous VWA members and donors who provide essential program funding, and the National Forest Foundation, which has effectively doubled these private contributions with matching awards for two years running.

We would like to thank the 2013 Volunteer Wilderness Rangers: Steve Benoit, Lynn Moncher, Mike Heard, Vince Silva, Betsy MacGowan, Anne Canright, Dave Wachtel, Robert Jaramillo, Fabiana Zambrano, Daniel Waage, James Showalter-Garcia, Adam Wachtel, Esperanza Hernandez, Joe Radoslovich, Maria Ferdin, and Brian Williams.
USFS Fuelbreak Proposal Overview
by Gordon Johnson

The Monterey Ranger District of the Los Padres National Forest has proposed the construction of a series of fuelbreaks both inside and outside of the Ventana Wilderness. Entitled the Strategic Community Fuelbreak Improvement Project, the stated purpose of the fuelbreaks is to “enhance protection for at-risk communities from fire.” The fuelbreaks are described as “… strategically located, wide blocks or strips on which a heavy fuel loading has been changed to one of lower fuel volume and reduced flammability.” Conversely, a firebreak or fireline has had all vegetation removed.

Generally, the footprint of the fuelbreaks would fall on ridgetops where firelines have been constructed by bulldozers during previous wildfires. The proposed fuelbreaks would serve as anchor points to permit burnout operations that create “black lines” which could slow or halt the spread of wildfire during an incident. This “indirect attack” method is more frequently employed than “direct attack,” with firefighter safety an important consideration.

The Proposed Action would establish the fuelbreaks over ten years on approximately 7.5 miles inside wilderness and 16.6 miles outside of wilderness. Depending on fuelbreak design, there is the possibility that another 2 miles inside wilderness could be subject to fuelbreak construction.

The Forest Service proposes that fuelbreak construction be accomplished within wilderness using chainsaws with the possibility that fuelbreak maintenance every three to five years would also utilize chainsaws. Outside of wilderness, in addition to chainsaws, machine thinning, piling, mastication and chipping would be used.

The Proposed Action has met with a mixed reaction by wilderness supporters. Some believe that chainsaw use or fuelbreak construction will lead to the widespread implementation of motorized equipment and a weakening of the Wilderness Act. Others believe that pre-suppression fuelbreak construction would reduce the many miles of bulldozed firelines created inside wilderness during major wildfires.

The Wilderness Act of 1964 speaks to the use of motorized equipment and “installations” such as fuelbreaks inside wilderness: “Except as specifically provided for in this Act, and subject to existing private rights, there shall be no commercial enterprise and no permanent road within any wilderness area designated by this Act and, except as necessary to meet minimum requirements for the administration of the area for the purpose of this Act (including measures required in emergencies involving the health and safety of persons within the area), there shall be no temporary road, no use of motor vehicles, motorized equipment or motorboats, no landing of aircraft, no other form of mechanical transport, and no structure or installation within any such area.”

Before the Forest Service can implement its Proposed Action, the “minimum requirements” must be analyzed and documented by a process known as a Minimum Requirements Analysis (MRA). Briefly, the MRA process first determines whether or not any action is actually required. If determined to be necessary for the purposes of the Wilderness Act or subsequent legislation, it directs what the minimum activity would be. For instance, the minimum activity could influence design criteria such as fuelbreak width and the “minimum tool” used to accomplish the task. While chainsaws are proposed, the minimum tool could be determined to be traditional tools, such as brush hooks and cross-cut saws.

The NEPA process is in an early stage with the scoping phase recently completed. A Draft Environmental Impact Statement, along with a Preferred Alternative, is expected to be released in late 2013 or early 2014. The VWA has already provided scoping comments and is committed to guiding this process toward a conclusion that protects wilderness values. Watch for updates on the VWA website and in future issues of Ventana Wilderness Watch.

Gordon Johnson is a founding VWA board member; he now works throughout the state with the California Wilderness Project.
Special Places of the Ventana | Hanging Valley

by Mike Splain

From the spectacular Arroyo Seco River gorge, let's continue south along the proposed Arroyo Seco-Indians National Recreation Trail, through some of the grandest scenery in the Santa Lucia Range. Rising high above the gorge on tight switchbacks, we pass a spur trail that descends to Santa Lucia Creek and soon enter a gulley with an immense slide that closed Arroyo Seco-Indians Road fifteen years ago. This area, known as Jackhammer Springs, once featured a water tank and roadside picnic table. The 1977 Marble Cone wildfire wiped that slate clean, but it's still a nice place to catch one's breath and sip the cool mountain water. Not far beyond, a prominent rock formation comes into view, marking our entrance into majestic Hanging Valley.

True hanging valleys tend to occur on glacially scoured terrain at higher elevations so the name of this feature is questionable, but its streams are unquestionably perched on benches 1,500 feet above the nearly inaccessible river gorge. The valley's character depends as much on the time of year as on the type of year. El Niño weather can prompt a sequence of abundant wildflowers from March well into June while drought conditions may compress the entire bloom into early April. Whatever the case, Hanging Valley is the place to experience a remarkable juxtaposition of habitats seldom seen in such close proximity.

These Vaqueros sandstone outcrops are thought to have originated 45 million years ago at the mouth of a submarine canyon. This formation, which is also exposed in Vaqueros, Reliz and Church Creek Canyons, hosts a number of rare and unusual species, including the coast horned lizard (*Phrynosoma coronatum*) and Butterworth's buckwheat (*Eriogonum butterworthianum*). Both play an essential role in the local ecology — the lizard by keeping carpenter ant (*Camponotus* spp.) populations in check, and the buckwheat by providing scarce summer butterfly forage.

From Humboldt County to Baja California Norte, the range of chamise (*Adenostoma fasciculatum*) may well define the range of California chaparral. The species has an advantage in recovering from frequent wildfires through both seed germination and stump, or epicormic sprouting. Typically accompanied by several manzanita (*Arctostaphylos*) and wild lilac (*Ceanothus*) species, chamise shrublands here in Hanging Valley are punctuated by occasional stands of Coulter and knobcone pines (*Pinus coulteri* and *P. attenuata*).

Riparian trees like willows (*Salix* spp.), cottonwoods (*Populus* spp.), and alders (*Alnus* spp.) populate moist corridors between the rocks and chaparral. Shady, fire-resistant coves host Oregon grape (*Berberis aquifolium*), an unusual occurrence in Monterey County. Hanging Valley's most well-developed riparian zone is particularly surprising, given its arid surroundings. Follow a prominent side trail to the delightful cascade just below a campsite west of the road. Hikers who quietly approach this splendid oasis may catch a glimpse of western pond turtles (*Actinemys marmorata*) resting among the rocks and sedges.

Perhaps the most intriguing terrain of all reveals itself as we approach the valley's southern limit. Careful observation of these extensive grasslands will reveal botanical rarities like Yadon's horkelia (*Horkelia yadonii*) and Hickman's sidalcea (*Sidalcea hickmanii*). Meadow rue (*Thalictrum fendleri*) is common along seasonal stream boundaries; and where granitic gravels have been deposited, one may encounter skullcap (*Scutellaria tuberosa*) and the extremely rare purslane (*Calyptridium parryi var. hesseae*). One could linger here for days and never exhaust Hanging Valley's wonders, but eventually we must continue on to crest a low rise and traverse toward special places beyond…

Hanging Valley's cascade-fed oasis. Photo: Dave Nelson
Ventana Wilderness - Big Sur River Trail Network

TRAIL CONDITIONS - MARCH 2013

The Big Sur River Trail Network provides easy access to the spectacular Ventana backcountry from the Big Sur coast. Backpackers and hikers enjoy expansive ridgetop views and deep, refreshing river canyons.

Explorers of the 60-mile Big Sur River network of trails will experience a wide variety of conditions in 2013. Thanks to the efforts of the US Forest Service and VWA volunteers, the Pine Ridge Trail from Pfeiffer-Big Sur State Park is a wilderness freeway all the way to Sykes Camp. On the other hand, encroaching brush, falling tread and deadfalls make sections of other trails in the network difficult to impassable. See the VWA's online Trail Conditions pages at www.ventanawild.org for the latest trail condition reports.

Your support of the VWA funds professional trail crews and provides tools and stipends for VWA volunteers, including Volunteer Wilderness Rangers who patrol the most heavily used trails, providing Leave No Trace recreation and fire safety information to visitors.

DISCLAIMER: This map is not intended for route finding or travel. Trail conditions change constantly. VWA assumes no liability for the usage of this map.

Sources: Jack Glendenning, USGS, CaAtlas, Monterey County, US Forest Service – Projection: NAD 83 UTM Zone 10 North – Scale: 1:60,000 – Contour Interval: 100 ft.
My Recreation Site Inventory Experience
by Bryce Winter

As reported in the last newsletter, VWA has undertaken a comprehensive census of camps and trails in the Ventana and Silver Peak Wilderness areas. The data gathered will assist US Forest Service personnel and VWA's Volunteer Wilderness Rangers in making "visitor use management" decisions.

As a Recreation Site Inventory Intern, I've had the pleasure of spending many days and nights in the backcountry over the past seven months. It's with mixed emotions that I can report that the inventory is now nearing completion. It all started last August when a group of us trained with GIS guru Aaron Cole on the handheld GPS units that are essential to the process. We learned how to collect and enter data such as campsite impactedness, size and overall condition.

To kick off this gargantuan task we pinned a map of the Monterey Ranger District to the wall in the VWA office. We marked off trails with a highlighter as sections were completed. We tried to fit most field hitches into efficient and reasonable segments of two to four days. VWA Executive Director Mike Splain helped us choose routes that would maximize our ability to visit multiple sites and minimize vehicular travel, while enjoying epic loops and through hikes. Given the ruggedness of the terrain and the variability of trail conditions, many veteran hikers of the Ventana offered wise advice on which direction to take on a particular route or how to locate more remote campsites, such as Elk camp in the Silver Peak Wilderness (thanks to Boon Hughey).

Special thanks are due to VWA member Jack Glendening, the man behind the maps. The project has been greatly aided by the excellent data Jack has gathered in his exhaustive backcountry research. Having already mapped the actual location of many trails and backcountry camps, Jack provided us with extremely accurate GPS data. There were times when the trail disappeared and we found ourselves in a wall of chaparral, only to check the unit and see that the trail was just below us. This groundwork was crucial to the success of the project. To our great surprise, we crossed paths with Jack this spring while making our way through the Church Ranch en route to Pine Ridge. Having known of each other but never having officially met, it was quite the coincidence to meet way out in the wilderness, drawn to the same place in time.

The opportunity to hike so much of the northern Santa Lucia Range has afforded us the rare pleasure of visiting some of the more remote locations such as South Fork Camp on the South Fork Trail. We hiked in from Strawberry Valley and the trail immediately became a difficult and steep mess. We crashed through brush, ducked under fallen trees, and flicked off ticks by the hundreds. As we made our way to the river, however, we ended up rock hopping our way down one of the more beautiful river corridors we had experienced, a place now rarely visited. Along the way we found fresh mountain lion tracks in the riverbank. Moments like these remind us why we do this work and what we’re out there to protect. Check out more photos and stories from our adventures on the VWA blog at www.wildventana.org.

View from the Black Cone Trail.

Sam Ellis and Bryce Winter cross paths with Maria Ferdin and Dr. Jack Glendening at the Church Ranch.

View from the Black Cone Trail.
Volunteer Spotlight | Lynn Moncher

In this edition of Ventana Wilderness Watch, let’s get to know Lynn Moncher. Lynn is an active member of the VWA Trail Crew and patrols the backcountry as a Volunteer Wilderness Ranger.

Q: First off, please tell us a little about yourself.

W: Where were you born and raised?

I was born and raised in Martinez, California. The house I grew up in and my father still lives in was once a pear orchard that John Muir tended. JM and close family members are buried in a family plot just down the street. My first camping trip was to the Rubicon River when I was a month old. My parents made a bed in a box. My father loves the Sierra. We skied every winter at Lake Tahoe and camped every summer at Tuolumne Meadows. My first backpacking trip was with a college roommate out of Pinecrest. I love the granite of the Sierra and the long vistas from peaks and ridges.

My mother was a volunteer. I don’t ever remember her not being involved with some organization. She never pushed me in that direction, but she was a constant model for helping others. Blending nature and volunteering has provided me with some great experiences and many ‘do good’ feelings.

Q: What led to you becoming a Volunteer Wilderness Ranger?

I was asked. During the time that Steve Benoit worked as a paid USFS wilderness ranger, we talked a lot about what he saw and what he did – good and not so good. I initially said “no” because I didn’t think I would have the diplomacy needed when approaching visitors in the backcountry about behaviors that were violating Leave No Trace principles. But after talking with Steve about the program the VWA was hoping to implement, I changed my mind. A determining factor was learning that there was no ranger presence to help educate visitors about the wilderness and their impact on it.

Q: What advice would you give to someone before their first trip into the Ventana backcountry?

Check the VWA website for trail conditions, of course. More and more I hear from individuals that this is the go-to website for current information about the wilderness, not just trail conditions. Always consider when reading a person’s account of a trail that knowing your hiking abilities as well as likes and dislikes are essential to determining if the route you have chosen is the right one for you. Finally, be prepared for anything: heat, cold, rain, snow, bugs, water crossings, no water.

Q: What are your other areas of interest and hobbies?

Most of the activities I engage in are outdoors. I run or ride my bike daily to maintain some semblance of strength and endurance to make skiing, hiking, backpacking and kayaking a little less painful at the end of the day. I volunteer for two other organizations regularly: the Beach Garden Project and the Monterey Bay Aquarium. The BGP’s goal is to revegetate the coast of Monterey Bay with native plants by collecting seed, growing plants, and then planting the seedlings along with removal of non-native species. At the MBA, I volunteer as a maintenance diver washing windows.

Q: You have done a lot of trail maintenance in the Ventana. What brings you back trip after trip?

There are many reasons why I return – people, the puzzle of how to clear a fallen tree, being in the wilderness, the appetizer pot lucks, creating a wilderness highway from a ceanothus-encroached trail, physically working, creating an environment for people to enjoy, and most of all eating chili rellenos with Steve and Beth at Jose’s after each trip.

Q: Your volunteer work has taken you all over the Wilderness. What places are near and dear to your heart?

Pine Valley and the Carmel River Trail. I’ve been in Pine Valley in the heat, rain, wind and snow and loved every minute. I love the Ponderosa Pines. And then there’s the Sycamore trees along the Carmel River. The gray granite boulders in the river and the big, sprawling branches that create shade are beautiful.
Bridging the Gap Between Youth and Wilderness

by Kimmy Gal

The Youth in Wilderness Program is growing by leaps and bounds. As we develop new partnerships with youth programs across the central coast, more and more schools and organizations are realizing the value of wilderness experiences for youth.

Our Spring season is off to an incredible start. So far, university students have partnered with the VWA Trail Crew to help restore the Stone Ridge Trail, Vicente Flat Trail, Marble Peak Trail and the Santa Lucia Trail. Elementary and high school students have been learning about Leave No Trace outdoor ethics, wilderness conservation and coast redwood ecology. Throughout the season, we will provide wilderness stewardship and environmental education experiences for over 200 students on eleven different outings.

For many students, a Youth in Wilderness expedition is extraordinarily different from their everyday experiences. Most have never been backpacking before, and some have never even spent a night under the stars. Youth in Wilderness gives these students a chance to step away from everyday social pressures and distractions and immerse themselves in wild nature. We hope that these experiences motivate and inspire them to become lifelong stewards of the Ventana and Silver Peak Wilderness areas.

After a recent expedition with the Bakari Project, we asked students if they learned anything about themselves on the trip. One student replied, “Yeah, that I don’t need Facebook 24/7.” Another student, likely referring to the initial steep climb up the Cruikshank Trail, said, “Yes, if we try hard we can succeed.” We are thrilled to see youth growing through wilderness experience.

Looking toward the future, Youth in Wilderness will be working closely with our partners to provide students with a sustained engagement in wilderness education. Beginning in Fall 2013, we will incorporate classroom visits to provide outdoor education workshops that will enhance students’ knowledge and excitement about the northern Santa Lucia backcountry. Workshop topics will include natural and cultural history of the Ventana Wilderness, survival skills, ecology, wilderness conservation and Leave No Trace principles. To begin, we will incorporate this sustained engagement approach with three partners: Rancho Cielo Youth Campus, Salinas Community School, and YES High School. Through consistent wilderness education, these students will have a deeper understanding and connection to our public wildlands.

We are grateful for everyone’s support of the Youth in Wilderness program. We’d like to give a special “thank you” to Save the Redwoods League, Monterey Peninsula Foundation, Arkay Foundation, Community Foundation of Santa Cruz County, California State Park Foundation, and the Foundation for Youth Investment.

The mission of the Youth in Wilderness program is to educate, inspire and motivate future generations of central California’s wilderness advocates and stewards.
Discover the Benefits of Giving Wisely

Did you know there are creative ways to support the Ventana Wilderness Alliance – ways in which the VWA, you and your loved ones all benefit at the same time?

Such giving techniques are called “planned gifts” because, with thoughtful planning, you create win-win solutions for you and the VWA. For example:

- You can make a gift that costs nothing during your lifetime.
- You can give stock and realize larger tax savings.
- You can donate your house, continue to live there, and get a tax break all at the same time.

http://www.legacy.vg/ventanawild

We encourage you to consider supporting the VWA through planned giving. For more information, please see our Planned Giving pages at the above link or contact Tom Hopkins at tom@ventanawild.org.

2012 Annual Report

In February of this year, we shared the organization’s financial data with our supporters. Included in the mailing were programmatic highlights of 2012. We are proud of our accomplishments, including the remarkable efficiency of the organization. 94% of every dollar contributed went directly to VWA programs on the ground, 3% goes towards fundraising and 3% towards management and governance. This is an ideal financial profile for an organization of our size and speaks to the professionalism and integrity of everyone involved.

**PROGRAM EXPENSES**

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**SUPPORT AND REVENUE**

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**BALANCE SHEET**

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**EVENTS**

**June 1**  
National Trails Day  
Details TBA

**September 14**  
Wild & Scenic Film Festival On Tour  
Henry Miller Memorial Library, Big Sur

**Join the Trail Crew Email List**  
www.ventanawild.org/trails/trail-crew.html

Please like our fan page on [Facebook](https://www.facebook.com)

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**Celebrating Stewardship at the Indians**

On May 4th, nearly eighty VWA members travelled far and wide to be part of our Spring Gathering at the Indians. Attendees were rewarded with a delightful day to enjoy friends, food and fun at the spectacular Milpitas Special Interest Area. The theme of the gathering was “Celebrating Wilderness Stewardship” and that we did, with engaging presentations by Steve Benoit (Volunteer Wilderness Rangers), Kimmy Gal (Youth in Wilderness), Sam Ellis and Bryce Winter (Recreation Site Inventory) and Betsy MacGowan (VWA Trail Crew).

Thanks to Monterey District Ranger Tim Short, who presented Volunteer Trail Crew Leader Mike Heard with a plaque and belt buckle to commemorate his amazing multi-year restoration of trails around Cone Peak. We’d also like to thank USFS Archaeologist Bob Strickland for leading an interpretive walk around the Wagon Cave Rocks, and Julie Anne Hopkins and Ed Mercurio, for leading an afternoon natural history stroll in the nearby meadows. After the event, folks dispersed to enjoy hiking, swimming and camping throughout the magnificent landscape. Although we don’t have space to list every name here, thanks to everyone who made the day so memorable.

Gathering participants enjoy a guided natural history walk in the Milpitas Special Interest Area.

Mike Heard was awarded this plaque to honor his leadership of the Cone Peak Trail Network project.

Photos: Debi Lorenc