Q&A with Meteorologist Dann Cianca

Special Map Insert
The Silver Peak Wilderness

Citizen Scientists in the Milpitas SIA

Protecting the Big Sur Backcountry
Executive Director’s Message

My, how the world has changed since our last issue of Ventana Wilderness Watch. Corporate conservatism is on the rise in Washington, while environmental protections, public lands and the underlying institutions of conservation are under constant attack. Meanwhile, the Soberanes Wildland Fire has dramatically reshaped once-familiar country. On top of that, a deluge of precipitation has buried the Sierra Nevada in snowpack, prompted a wildflower super bloom and recharged streams throughout the Santa Lucia Range, all the while wreaking havoc on trails, roads and infrastructure. Massive landslides and the collapse of the Pfeiffer Canyon Bridge have relegated many Big Sur residents to “island life.”

Numerous other roads have endured severe storm damage, and even if we could drive to places like Bottcher’s Gap, the northern Ventana Wilderness remains under a post fire closure order. At this writing, Highway 1 is closed near Ragged Point Inn, restricting access to the Silver Peak Wilderness. Here at the VWA office, more than a few inquiries are met with “Sorry but you can’t get there from here.” So what good is all this protected land if people can’t enjoy it? Of course the answer is that wilderness has a right to exist regardless of us. Plants, wildlife, and indeed evolution itself are threatened by human incursions across the vast majority of our state. Wild things deserve places to go about their business, untrammeled by anthropogenic meddling. Still, the visitors will come, and their impacts will be concentrated in a handful of accessible locales that I dare not mention here.

While it may take years to dig ourselves out of this mess (literally and figuratively), I hope you’ll find some solace and inspiration in these pages. Together, we can stave off the onslaught, depoliticize conservation, protect biodiversity, and fight for public lands and wilderness. Although the scale of the challenge is daunting, as Gil Scott-Heron once declared, “No one can do everything, but everyone can do something.” So please, write a letter to the editor, call your political decision makers, join a volunteer trail crew, get involved in citizen science, donate to the VWA, or some combination thereof. Wild places have no voice of their own. No matter if we ever set foot within its hallowed grounds, wilderness has an inherent right to exist—thanks for doing all you can to keep it wild.
Fire and Rain | by Richard Popchak

My buddy says that Californians are overly dramatic about weather. “With you guys it’s always something,” he says. “Spend a year in Virginia and then complain.” Well, I’m not complaining. And it is readily apparent that the weather here has been dramatic. Like ole James Taylor, we’ve seen fire and we’ve seen rain. And not long ago we saw sunny days that we thought would never end. It’s just that all of these events packed a significant punch and lasted a long time.

The drought, the fire, and the rains have had a tremendous impact in the Ventana region and these events have far-reaching consequences. There are many after-effects on the land and waters and the native plants and animals that live there. The repercussions for the people who live and work in the communities on the periphery of the wilderness are profound.

A big part of this dramatic change is the loss of access to the region—for locals, workers, tourists and the people who protect the land while improving access into it. Let’s talk about how all of this affects the VWA mission.

Advocacy | The VWA is dedicated first and foremost to the protection and preservation of the public wildlands of the northern Santa Lucias. Our advocacy work continues unimpeded by fire and rain. The organization recently provided comments on the US Forest Service-proposed Strategic Community Fuelbreak Improvement Project (SCFIP), which could have a huge effect on wildfire suppression strategy for many years to come. The VWA also continues to reach out to agencies and elected officials whose decisions impact the wilderness character of the Ventana region.

Youth in Wilderness | Despite the challenges presented by the fire and road closures, VWA’s unique outdoor education program for underserved youth in the region continues to grow and improve. The biggest impact has been the increased time and expense necessitated for travel to far-flung trailheads. Program Manager Toan Do and our education partners have demonstrated great flexibility and creativity to ensure that local young people are connected to our public wildlands. See page 5 for more information.

Volunteer Wilderness Rangers | This essential program gets boots on the ground in the Ventana and Silver Peak backcountry. Within the fire closure area, the rangers are gathering information on trail and camp conditions. Unsurprisingly, given the weather and the plethora of road closures, the rangers are not seeing much evidence of people entering the forest. It’s just too darn difficult to get there! Outside of the fire closure area, there were concerns that visitor impacts would be concentrated in a few areas. For the most part, this has not been the case as the lack of accessibility is keeping people away. The one exception is the Milpitas SIA which continues to grow in popularity.

Trail Program | The greatest impacts are being felt within the Trail Program. Weather and road conditions have conspired to stymie the efforts of our intrepid volunteer Trail Crew. Meanwhile, the lack of accessibility has resulted in the postponement of grant-funded professional crews. See the next page for details. Heaven knows much work lies ahead once things return to “normal.”

Big Pines may someday be known as “no pines” due to more frequent fire cycles. Photo: Erich Huebner/USFS

“Discovery Falls” near the middle fork of Limekiln Creek in March 2017. Photo: Leor Pantilat
The Never-Ending Challenge

One only needs to look at winter storm damage to the area’s roads and bridges to imagine the devastation to the trail system within the Ventana. But unlike the effort to repair our state’s roadways, we can’t count on tax dollars and heavy machinery to get the job done. The VWA is the only organization taking on the challenge to restore and maintain the 300-mile network of trails in the Big Sur backcountry. Fortunately, generous donors, dauntless volunteers, and the U.S. Forest Service are providing essential support to chip away at the many challenges.

Professional Crews  Our biggest setback this year has been the cancellation of professional crew work in the Silver Peak Wilderness. Major slides north and south of key trailheads have effectively eliminated access to the work area. The multi-year project to restore and maintain trails in the Silver Peak is funded by a grant from Sean and Alexandra Parker (Neraida LLC) with matching funds from the National Forest Foundation. We will re-start the project this fall.

In the meantime, thanks to a grant from REI and matching funds from the National Forest Foundation, work is being completed by professional crews on the upper Pine Ridge Trail. The goal is to make the trail pack-stock accessible from Divide Camp to Pine Ridge Camp. This work will provide access to iconic backcountry locales and set the stage for continued work on the Black Cone Trail and further on the Pine Ridge Trail.

Volunteers  Despite the forest and road closures, and the inclement weather, VWA Trail Crew volunteers are completing an amazing amount of work inside and out of the closure area. Trail Crew Chief Betsy MacGowan is leading by example. She recently spearheaded a nine-outing effort to clear the Pine Ridge Trail from China Camp to Divide Camp. This area was significantly damaged by Soberanes Fire burnout operations. Betsy and the other volunteers understand that supporting professional crews with pack stock greatly increases their productivity. We thank the U.S. Forest Service for providing pack stock support to the VWA Trail Program at no cost. Betsy also has led outings on the historic Carrizo Trail this year. Other volunteer leaders that we’d like to acknowledge for their work since last November include Beth
Local Youth Go Wild

Despite the 2016 Soberanes Fire and the destructive winter storms, the Youth in Wilderness program continues to grow and improve. We’d like to thank VWA members and the local and national grant providers (see page 10) that make it happen. We also greatly appreciate the relationships that we have with our education partners such as Rancho Cielo Youth Campus, Community Partnership for Youth, Greenfield Community Science Workshop, Warner Davis Community School, and Paso Robles High School.

“Access to and nurture of our local wilderness is our right and responsibility, a key aspect of child development and an urgent environmental necessity. The VWA is making this a reality for our youth here in Greenfield and across the central California coast.”

— José S. Sánchez
Greenfield Community Science Workshop

Rancho Cielo Culinary Academy students and expedition leaders goofing around in the rain on the Cawatre Trail at Arroyo Seco.

Students from Greenfield Community Science Workshop exploring a cave at The Indians.

Students from Community Partnership for Youth (Seaside) jumping for joy at Landels-Hill Big Creek Reserve.
The Silver Peak Wilderness offers a rare combination of primitive recreation, high-value conservation, and fee-free trailhead access to visitors of the California coast. But increasing human visitation is having a profound impact on this special place. In partnership with the U.S. Forest Service, and thanks to grants from Patagonia and the National Wilderness Stewardship Alliance, the VWA has created a special map and brochure to help people practice Leave No Trace principles in the Silver Peak. It is being distributed in print and online at ventanawild.org/trails/silver-peak-wilderness-trails.
Folks living in the Monterey/Salinas/Santa Cruz area are probably familiar with KION News Channel 5/46 meteorologist Dann Cianca. And if you are familiar with Dann, then you know that he loves weather and forecasting. We asked Dann to share some thoughts with us about public lands, weather in the Ventana region, and the historic storms of 2017.

Q: What a winter! When did you first realize that it had the potential to be one for the record books?
I think that realization is coming to me more retrospectively! After the last few years, even when the rains have come, it seems like they would abruptly shut off, killing off hope of an end to the drought. I think many of us kept waiting for that to happen this winter. Meanwhile, the rain totals kept climbing and floods kept happening. Even looking at the computer models, I would often think, “This wet pattern couldn’t continue, could it?”

Q: As you look at the various measurements for this winter, what are some of the numbers that really stand out?
Since October 1st, 113 inches of rain have fallen at Three Peaks above Salmon Creek, 103 inches at Anderson Peak above McWay, and 74 inches on a hill above the village of Big Sur, numbers which are two to three times the yearly normals. On January 10th, the Big Sur River reached a flood stage of 12.34 feet, the second highest on record. (Data as of April 14)

Q: What are some of the ways that the Santa Lucia Mountains affect weather in the region?
The Santa Lucia Range has a large impact on the weather of the region. To the West, you have a flat and fairly thermally uniform body of water which rules the weather of the air mass above. Any weather system moving through this environment does so with ease. Then come the mountains—a 5,000 foot-tall wall that can block and divert these weather systems as they reach the coast. Air flowing up over the mountains is forced to shed its moisture, keeping the east side arid. Big Sur (Station)’s annual rainfall is around 45 inches, King City, just 30 miles away usually picks up 12 inches. In the mountains, the moderating influence of the ocean is often negated. During the winter, the mountains tap into the colder air aloft; in the summer, the warmer, continental air mass often sits just above the cooler, maritime air. Hike up a mountain and feel the temperature rise as much as 40ºF!

Q: What can you share about the effects of climate change in the region? Could boom-or-bust winters and frequent landscape-scale wildfires become “the new normal”?
I think the uncertainty is the scary part. Water is already such a valuable resource in the state. There are some studies that show that the frequency of drought will increase as the climate of California changes. Other studies have shown that weather events can be more extreme. It seems that there is much less comfort in between! Will that happen for certain? It’s hard to say.

Q: What makes the northern Santa Lucia Mountains so special? Why is it important that these public lands remain protected?
Back in January of 2016, I drove up to Chews Ridge to see the snow. I was astounded at the views, showing the vast expanse of dynamic, wild terrain. It seemed as if the mountains would stretch on forever, even though I knew the ocean was hiding behind them, only ten miles away. It is also very comforting to realize that despite the proximity to urban California, this wilderness is an island of solitude—where it is easy to disappear from humanity for a few hours or a few days. It’s an incredible expanse where nature can be nature without too much interference from man. And I think without these places, we might forget that they ever existed—and I don’t think that would be good for anyone.

Dann Cianca kicking around Corral de Tierra.
On April 15, 2017, the VWA teamed up with researchers, field biologists and intrepid volunteers to survey the biodiversity of the Milpitas Special Interest Area (SIA). The Milpitas SIA was created in 2005 by the Los Padres National Forest to preserve the exquisite natural and cultural resources of the upper Arroyo Seco and San Antonio watersheds. In order to fully protect this precious, sensitive landscape, land managers and scientists need information about what species occur there and how they use the area. Community members can assist in collecting this data by becoming citizen scientists and recording photos and information on the species they observe. Citizen science allows for collection of much larger datasets than a single team of scientists could gather on its own. These observations provide valuable information on where species occur, when they are active, and timing of activity patterns or life history cycles.

The citizen scientists at the BioBlitz were treated to their own Ventana “super bloom” with carpets of goldfields, owl’s clover, and lupines covering the grasslands and tucked between rock outcrops. Naturalists tracked down rare plants, including Santa Lucia fir, near the Arroyo Seco River and western toads in breeding ponds full of tadpoles and recently metamorphosed toadlets. Observations were entered into iNaturalist, a publicly accessible database of natural history observations. Experts in the iNaturalist community peer-reviewed the observations and verified species identification to generate research-grade data. BioBlitz observations provided a valuable snapshot of biodiversity, including information on the spread of invasive plants and locations of species of conservation concern. These data will be shared with the Forest Service to guide management decisions. Thank you to all of our citizen scientists who participated in this fun event! If you are interested in getting involved in VWA’s citizen science projects, contact Amy Patten at amy@ventanawild.org for more information.

The success of VWA’s BioBlitz relied on a wide range of field guides. One of the most useful was Monterey County Wildflowers – a Field Guide by Rob Yeager, MD and Michael Mitchell (CNPS Press, 2016). This excellent tome features the county’s most common species. Organized by flower color and plant family, it’s got plenty to offer for amateurs and seasoned botanists alike. Pick up your copy at the CNPS bookstore at store.cnps.org/collections/books. Proceeds will benefit the conservation of California’s precious native flora.
We Can’t Thank You Enough: Our 2016 Members and Funders
Discover the Benefits of Giving Wisely

Did you know there are creative ways to support the Ventana Wilderness Alliance? Ways in which the VWA and 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.

The VWA is proud to offer web resources to help you think about legacy giving. This information is presented in simple language. You don’t have to be a lawyer or accountant to understand the variety of ways that you can protect wilderness now and in the future. Learn more at: ventanawild.plannedgiving.org

2016 Annual Report

In 2016, the VWA launched a “Scaling for Sustainability” initiative that included hiring new staff and relocating to an expanded office. Factor in the sweat equity of nearly 200 volunteers and we now have greatly increased capacity to achieve our mission, and are much better positioned to meet the many challenges ahead. The VWA’s 2017 focus is to grow and improve programs with maximum efficiency and minimal expense, while increasing major gifts and grant funding. For every dollar raised in 2016, 90 cents went to programs on the ground. Thank you for your ongoing support.

PROGRAM EXPENSES

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SUPPORT AND REVENUE

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* includes a $64,920 matching award from the National Forest Foundation
** includes 80% pass-through to the Ventana Trails Forever endowment at the Community Foundation for Monterey County

STATEMENT OF ASSETS

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Remembering Pat Bailey

Those who love and care for the public lands of the northern Santa Lucias lost a dear friend when Pat Bailey passed away last November. Prior to his retirement from the U.S. Forest Service, Pat was the Wilderness, Trails, and Stock Manager for the Monterey Ranger District of Los Padres National Forest. He worked closely with VWA staff and volunteers on a multitude of projects and could always be counted on to bring a fun-loving and friendly attitude to the work at hand. Longtime friend and VWA member Robert Walton offered this poem to the Bailey family at the memorial celebration of Pat’s life:

A Walk Postponed

Like wild trout
My thoughts dart away
From the shadow
Of your death.

We did not stop
Near Ojito;
We did not kneel
In bay-scented shade;
We did not sip water
Frost-spiced;

But some October day
At Willow Springs
Beneath sable ridges,
Or in Lost Valley's
Wood-smoke dusk,
We’ll meet,
For these hills
Are eternal
And you
Are of them.

— Robert Walton, 2016