Community Leaders
Inspire Youth in Wilderness

Lost Valley
Rediscovered

Volunteer Spotlight
Darlene and Gary Felsman

Protecting the Big Sur Backcountry
Message from the Executive Director

Since our last issue, extreme temperatures and airborne insects set in on the Big Sur backcountry with a vengeance. To continue feeding my obsession for wild places, some elevation was in order. In June, the wildflowers and volcanic crags of the Carson-Iceberg Wilderness did not disappoint. Then came fire season. My smoky July exodus ended high in the Warner Mountains, amid blue skies and whitebark pines. In August, it was on to the obsidian domes and Yosemite toads of the Owens River Headwaters. Fundraisers precluded September travel, but I cheerfully slogged through knee-deep October snow to behold the airy peaks and aspen groves of Colorado’s Ruby Range.

As fascinating as it was to meet the varied flora and fauna of the Sierra Nevada, Great Basin, and southern Rockies, I couldn’t help contemplating that wise observation penned by Gary Snyder half a century ago: “Nature is not a place to visit, it is a home.” Sometimes the best part of traveling is gaining the perspective to appreciate what you already have.

Thanks to the Wilderness Act, despite millions of human inhabitants, and against all odds, 270,000 acres of California’s Central Coast shall remain forever wild. The Wild and Scenic Rivers Act celebrated its 50th anniversary on October 2. This landmark law enables the perpetual preservation of free-flowing waterways like the Big Sur River. The Silver Peak Wilderness safeguards myriad ecological wonders (including the southernmost redwoods) along the Monterey-San Luis Obispo county line. The mighty Ventana Wilderness spans from the steepest coastal rise in the contiguous United States to the largest valley oak savannah in public hands. It’s beloved enough to have become the most frequently expanded unit in the National Wilderness Preservation System.

These protected public lands weren’t just handed to us; every line on the map is a testament to a hard-fought battle. And while those campaigns are over and done, all is not well. Unless we remain ever-vigilant, changing climate, increasing visitation, and disappearing agency budgets will compromise and tame all the wild that remains. If you love this place in space—from Timber Top to Chews Ridge, from Mount Carmel to Lottie Potrero—and care about its future, please read on. Whether you choose to wield a tool, pack out trash, lobby Congress, or simply make a donation, the Big Sur backcountry needs you—because there’s no place like home.

Mike Splain | mike@ventanawild.org
Have You Thanked a Ranger Today?

When the Volunteer Wilderness Rangers (VWRs) of the Monterey Ranger District gathered on November 4 for their annual Summit, the question was, “How do we make this program even more effective?” Indeed. Since its inception in 2011, this humble cohort has completed over 400 patrols, donated over 15,000 hours of service, made over 9,800 visitor contacts, and packed out nearly 3,000 pounds of trash. These numbers would be even more impressive had not the 2016 Soberanes Fire and subsequent winter storms of 2017 limited access to the Forest. Thank you, VWR’s!

Selflessly led by Steve Benoit, Beth Benoit, and Lynn Moncher, the core group of volunteers is largely unchanged over the years. Thankfully, new recruits continue to step up to reinvigorate the team and instill fresh ideas. With visitation to the Big Sur back-country ever-growing and current volunteers ever-aging, we need to vet and train new rangers.

Congressman Jimmy Panetta (left) and Monterey County Supervisor Mary Adams (right) honored Steve Benoit, US Forest Service Enduring Service Volunteer of the Year, at the VWA Annual Gathering in June.

The Ventana Wilderness Alliance funds this program with grant support from Patagonia, the National Wilderness Stewardship Alliance, and generous individual donors. The program is necessitated by the chronic underfunding and understaffing of the US Forest Service, which has not had a full-time paid ranger in the Big Sur backcountry since the 1980s. That said, this program would not exist without the critical support provided by the Monterey Ranger District. We thank them for enabling this essential partnership.

You can help address the risks associated with the overuse and under-management of our public lands by encouraging your elected officials in Congress to properly fund the US Forest Service. These lands belong to all of us (and future generations) and proper management is essential to protect natural resources, lives, and property. Also, your financial support of VWA provides the infrastructure to write grants, create and store materials, and gives rangers the tools they need to do the job. Finally, if you are interested in becoming a VWR, please join a VWA Trail Crew event to start the vetting process.

Beth Benoit presents Bobby Steger with a homemade cookie to acknowledge the many patrols he has performed over the years.

Ladies and gentlemen, your 2018–19 Volunteer Wilderness Rangers!
What Once Was Lost Can Now Be Found | by Betsy MacGowan

Thanks to the combined efforts of many dedicated VWA Trail Crew volunteers, the Lost Valley Trail is now clear from the Marble Peak trailhead on Coast Ridge Road to its namesake meadows four miles below. This section of trail was justifiably rated as “impassable” for several years; thick brush and vines interwoven with fallen trees obscured any hint of a trail in many locations. Ceanothus bushes 10 feet tall were growing right in the center of the tread. The few hikers who made it to Lost Valley did so by bushwhacking in Higgins Creek, rather than hiking on the trail.

An effort to restore the trail started in 2016, but progress came to a halt with the July 22 start of the Soberanes Wildland Fire. Trail conditions were even worse by the time volunteers got back to work in early 2018. Thanks to mapping help from Jack Glendening, the trail crew flagged the route to Pelon Camp. The project resumed with gusto on Presidents’ Day weekend 2018, when 15 volunteers cleared a half mile of trail, reaching Upper Higgins Camp and several hundred feet beyond. The next outings pushed on from Upper Higgins Camp and then beyond Pelon Camp. Through a year of trail work, volunteers endured rain, snow, extreme heat, and lots of bugs. Work days ended with wonderful dips in the lovely pools of Higgins Creek.

Since the beginning of 2018, volunteers have completed a total of ten work trips on the upper (western) section of the Lost Valley Trail. The trail is now open and passable to hikers from end to end. This project has re-established several loop hikes for those seeking to experience multiple days of backcountry exploration. The many volunteers who participated in this project deserve a huge thank you for their hard work to open up the western Lost Valley Trail.

Joe Radoslovich and 14 other volunteers woke up to several inches of snow on Presidents’ Day (February 19, 2018)

Joe Radoslovich, Betsy MacGowan, Heidi Hopkins, and Cyril Focht were part of the crew that finally reached Lost Valley on October 15.
Contract Trail Crews Making Huge Gains

While the efforts of volunteers is an impressive component of VWA’s overall Trail Program, we also work diligently to secure funding to hire contract crews to maintain and restore access in the Big Sur backcountry. Thanks to the support of several major grant providers, significant improvements to the trail system are being accomplished in 2018.

Pine Ridge Trail

The goal of the 2017–18 Pine Ridge Trail (PRT) project was to restore pack-stock access from China Camp to Pine Ridge Camp. This would establish Pine Ridge Camp as a base of operations for future work on the Black Cone Trail as well as the PRT toward the coast. Despite incredible challenges presented by weather and road conditions, the American Conservation Experience (ACE) crews led by VWA Stewardship Program Coordinator Trevor Willits nearly achieved the goal. The 7.9-mile section of trail is free of brush and is clear for trail runners and backpackers. There are just a few places where the tread is not yet restored to pack-stock standards.

The project funded 5,400 contract crew hours, which represents a $133,326 value to the public trail system. Thirty-seven volunteers contributed 1,426 hours of service, which adds another $35,207 in value.

The work done in 2017 was funded by an REI Co-op grant with matching funds from the National Forest Foundation (NFF). The 2018 work was funded by yet another REI grant as well as a grant from the Monterey Peninsula Regional Park District. We can’t thank these funders enough for their foresight and generosity.

Silver Peak Trails

Thanks to a grant from Sean and Alexandra Parker (Neraida LLC) and matching funding from the National Forest Foundation, contract crews (and volunteers) have been improving access in the Silver Peak Wilderness since 2015. This project has been delayed by a postfire forest closure, historic winter storms, and loss of access due to slides on Highway 1. We are happy to report that VWA-hired contract crews are back in action this fall in a big way!

Work started on October 17, 2018, and will continue until March 2019. The current focus is on the upper half of the Cruikshank Trail, with crews based near Lion Den. With the spring dry at this camp, ACE trucks in a 250-gallon water tank to slake the thirst of the hardworking crews. The goal of this project is to fully restore the Cruikshank Trail, but a slide just east of Silver Camp cannot be repaired with hand tools and probably requires blasting.

VWA is hopeful that additional funding for this project will be awarded by the US Forest Service. If so, work will begin on the upper Salmon Creek Trail once all work on the Cruikshank Trail is complete. Many thanks to Sean and Alexandra Parker (Neraida LLC), the National Forest Foundation, and the US Forest service for their support of this project. We’d like to thank the volunteers of the VWA Trail Crew, Volunteer Wilderness Rangers, and local horse packers Richard Waller and Kathleen Phelps for their important contributions as well.

This ACE crew included folks from England, Denmark, Sweden, El Salvador, and New Zealand.
Why I Support the VWA | by Richard Beach

I have lived in Santa Cruz County for 45 years and have always enjoyed a vast array of outdoor activities. I had a classic Silicon Valley career for over 30 years. My work ranged from startups to large multinational companies. I am mostly retired now, managing a family real estate, property management, and finance business.

Now that I have more time to get involved in local activities, I am focusing on my interests in environment, education, and water projects. I have had a wonderful career supported by many people, most of whom I never met, and now I believe it is a time for me to “pay it forward” to help the next generation of environmentalists with their careers and to get more young people to the woods.

VWA combines all three of my interests (environment, education, and water) and is a natural area for me to focus my time and support. We especially like the mission of the Youth in Wilderness Program to “educate, inspire, and motivate future wilderness stewards and advocates.”

My interest in the outdoors started when I got a job with the US Forest Service after high school graduation. I joined a four-man crew surveying logging roads in Sequoia National Forest. We were making trails through the woods to identify areas to thin by removing old or diseased trees. We backpacked all of our equipment several miles into the woods each day and learned to be self-sufficient while out there.

When my children were growing up, we would camp many summers. Even now, my three children meet once a year to backpack in the woods and spend time with each other in beautiful, natural settings. My goal is to get them all together to hike the Cone Peak Trail and camp.

Getting young people out in the woods to learn natural history, hike, and experience the beauty and diversity of the natural spaces—and to be self-sufficient for a few days—is a great way to learn about, respect, and protect the forest. VWA is doing a great job!
Films Inspire Activism

In September, VWA hosted its 6th annual Wild and Scenic Film Festival with two unique screenings in the Monterey Bay area. We screened 12 films at the Del Mar Theatre in Santa Cruz and 10 films at the Golden State Theatre in Monterey. As the VWA’s biggest outreach event of the year, it is instrumental in the recruitment of volunteers, funders, and partners. Over 900 filmgoers (and 248 new VWA members) made this a highly successful event. As the organizers and producers of the tour like to say, “the Wild & Scenic Film Fest is a call to action. Filmgoers are transformed into a congregation of committed activists, dedicated to saving our increasingly threatened planet.”

VWA presented a unique lineup of films about wild places and wild things at each location. We chose to end both shows with the short film *A Letter to Congress* because it highlights the impassioned plea author Wallace Stegner penned to Congress in 1960. “We need wilderness preserved—as much of it as is still left, and as many kinds—because it was the challenge against which our character as a people was formed. The reminder and the reassurance that it is still there is good for our spiritual health even if we never once in ten years set foot in it. It is good for us when we are young because of the incomparable sanity it can bring briefly, as vacation and rest, into our insane lives. It is important to us when we are old simply because it is there—important, that is, simply as an idea.” This idea is as relevant today as it was when it was originally written.

This event would not have been possible without the support of many volunteers (too many to list here), sponsors, raffle prize donors, and all those who attended. We are very grateful for your support and we are already looking forward to next year!

A generous Patagonia Impact Grant, presented at the film fest, will support Ranger patrols and an inventory of campsite conditions throughout the Ventana and Silver Peak wilderness areas. Thank you for shopping locally and making these types of grants possible! (Pictured from left to right: Chris Cleary and Janice Ng Cleary of The Treadmill, Lead and Assistant Lead Rangers Steve Benoit and Lynn Moncher, and Kerith Harrison and Mike Hirst of Coast Carmel.)
Meet Fabiola Lopez | Youth in Wilderness Field Instructor

Now in its 10th year, the Youth in Wilderness (YIW) program strives for continuous improvement. To that end, Program Director Toan Do launched an initiative in 2018 with the aim of increasing the program’s sustained participant engagement, cultural relevancy, and scope of opportunity provided. The Community Leader Training Initiative trains and empowers community leaders to become youth outdoor educators so that they may continue the work of engaging the youth of their communities in environmental conservation. Fabiola Lopez is one of four community leaders who have been recruited, trained, and employed to be YiW Field Instructors. Her presence provides the Greenfield and King City communities with a larger voice and impact within the program.

How did you first get involved with Youth in Wilderness and how has your involvement with the program evolved since?
I became involved with Youth in Wilderness through my work at the Greenfield Community Science Workshop. We always looked for ways to expose our youth to new and exciting experiences. YiW was a great way to bring our high school students together on adventures. I began as a chaperone and then became a YiW Field Instructor (Co-Lead) after I was invited to be part of YiW’s new Community Leader Training Initiative. I got my Wilderness First Aid certificate sponsored by VWA.

How has being engaged with YiW impacted your life?
There has been a positive personal impact on my life. My wilderness skills and knowledge have been enhanced because of guidance from the YiW leadership team. My understanding of how to build positive connections with and a healthy setting for youth has expanded. I continue to grow through every expedition I am a part of.

What is most exciting about what YiW is currently doing?
It’s difficult to choose the most exciting thing so I’ll name two: First, as a candidate of the Community Leader Training Initiative, I have seen my confidence and my ability to lead engaging expeditions grow and have enjoyed working my way up to being a capable expedition leader. I have close relationships with a couple of Greenfield students who are now participants in YiW’s Student Leader Training Initiative and have observed their confidence and skills grow as well. The second is YiW’s She-Hikes initiative where our community’s young women are invited on empowering female-only backcountry expeditions.

Can you speak to the impact that the YiW experience has on its participants?
YiW is important because program leadership and its Community Partners are striving to provide high-quality backcountry experiences for local youth. I experienced this as a participant chaperone and now as part of the YiW team. I see the effort that goes into fostering a supportive and safe environment (both physically and emotionally), ensuring that our youth have loads of fun, and that they are also walking away with important knowledge. Many real life skills are taught on YiW expeditions that participants can carry with them and share with those around them once they return from their adventures.

What is your favorite YiW memory?
My favorite memory was seeing my group of high school students (all of diverse backgrounds and personalities) come together as a close-knit group, playing interactive games, laughing so hard with each other they couldn’t breathe, sharing stories, and listening intently. I sat back and watched YiW leaders facilitate these positive interactions with confidence, knowing that this was far from the norm for some of these students. That was over two years ago but the memory still moves me like it did that day.
We’d like to welcome the newest member of the VWA family. **Lucy Logsdon** came on board as our Office Manager in August. A Colorado native, Lucy’s family moved to California when she was a kid and she has spent most of her life exploring the state’s wild spaces. She graduated from Saint Mary’s College with a BA in Environmental Studies and has a passion for both conservation and nature photography. Lucy’s broad skillset and can-do attitude has already effected improvements in VWA outreach and business management processes. When not in the office, Lucy can usually be found in the garden, in a camp, or on top of a mountain with a camera in hand.

New Board Member **Dottie Massey** has wilderness in her blood. Born and raised in southern Monterey County, she spent her childhood hiking and camping in the Los Padres National Forest and along the Big Sur coast. Her happy place is where the wilderness meets the sea and she sought out the VWA in order to become active in the preservation of the Ventana Wilderness. For 30 years, Dottie has worked in the produce industry and is now managing exportation of fresh vegetables for International Produce Group in Salinas. Dottie’s career allows her to explore other parts of the world, which only serves to reinforce her belief that there is no more beautiful place on earth than the public lands of the Big Sur backcountry.

New Board Member **John Tilley** lives in Pacific Grove with his two sons. He earned an MBA from San Francisco State University and a BA from University of Missouri. John is a Senior Vice President with Pinnacle Bank with a multi-decade record of civic service on various boards and ad hoc committees. John’s enjoyment of backpacking and concern for wilderness conservation in the Western United States drew him to the Ventana Wilderness Alliance. The organization is benefitting from his wisdom, financial oversight, and many relationships in the community.

In May of this year we bid adieu to Administrative Assistant **Amy Patten**. In her nearly two years on the staff, Amy brought tremendous energy, creativity, and knowledge to the team. As a biologist, Amy organized several BioBlitz events which enable “citizen scientists” to team up with researchers, naturalists, and land managers to catalog species occurring in places like the Milpitas Special Interest Area. We miss seeing Amy’s smiling face each day and wish her the best in her new role at the California Native Plant Society. Since she’s still engaged as a volunteer, we are glad that we will continue to see Amy around. Thank you Amy!

We’d also like to thank **Elizabeth Thomas** who is departing the VWA Board after two and a half years of service. During her tenure, Lizzie guided VWA towards new sources of grant funding and offered keen insights on policy issues. She also inspired the organization to improve our volunteer tracking tools by embracing Salesforce relationship management applications readily available to nonprofits at no cost. Elizabeth continues her work in the renewable energy field, managing projects to engage the public on climate-related issues. We wish her the best and thank her for her service.
In this edition of *Ventana Wilderness Watch*, we get to know Volunteer Wilderness Rangers Darlene and Gary Felsman.

**Q:** Please tell us a little bit about yourselves. How did you meet?

**DARLENE:** I have lived in the San Luis Obispo area since 1971. I graduated from Cal Poly in 1981 with a degree in biochemistry. Gary and I met on a Sierra Club hike in 1992. He was the hike leader, and it was my first hike with the club. Our first date was a hike just north of San Luis Obispo. Since then we have had many wonderful trips together camping, hiking, and backpacking.

**GARY:** I graduated from Cal Poly in 1978 with a BSEE. I worked for NCR in San Diego designing computer main frames, then for Storage Technology in Colorado. I returned to San Luis Obispo in 1984, designing satellite communication equipment, then to TRW for a few years. I was hired by Ziatech to design computer hardware. The company was sold to Intel, then Performance Technologies, and finally ZNYX Corporation. I retired in April 2015. During all these jobs I was lucky to have bosses that allowed me to pursue my love of the outdoors, conservation, and exploring. In my spare time I am still an outings leader and a former member of the executive committee for the Sierra Club as well as a former member of the board of trustees for the Land Conservancy of SLO County. Darlene and I continue to volunteer for these organizations and others giving back to the community. We love being on the Central Coast.

**DARLENE:** After college, I worked for a printing company doing estimating, customer service, and planning. I then took an entirely different track and, for the last nine years of my working life, I used my field of study in college and became a study coordinator for clinical drug trials. I have assisted Gary in most of his volunteer activities, working in the background.

**GARY:** Before the VWA was formed I was a Forest Service volunteer/ranger via Will Metz, former Monterey District Ranger. While doing trailwork one day, I met Steve Chambers, Boon Hughey, and David Knapp. We attended a few of the trail outings and attended the first crosscut saw certification led by Pat Bailey and David Knapp and hosted by the VWA. We continued to work on our own as well. From there I met Mike Splain and others as part of the Ventana Trails Forever campaign.

**Q:** Please tell us about your careers.

**DARLENE:** I really enjoy contact with the public and being able to answer questions and pass along some knowledge of the area. I also love being able to help maintain the trails and campsites.

**GARY:** I really like giving back to the general public, making things better for all to enjoy. The trailwork we do, infrastructure repair, and meeting people all make the volunteer effort really worthwhile. Lastly, I get to be in the outdoors exploring places I love.

**Q:** What is your connection to the public lands of the Big Sur backcountry and how did you learn about the VWA?

**DARLENE:** It is special because of the wildlife, the botanical diversity, and how much it can challenge you while you are there.

**GARY:** Living in San Luis Obispo County, many of the trails lack trees and water. I really love the diverse terrain, grasslands, redwoods, oaks, madrones, rivers, streams, and wonderful views. The country is very rugged and unforgiving for the unprepared.
Thank You, Volunteers!

Volunteers are the heart and soul of the Ventana Wilderness Alliance. They always have been. It started with the vision and wisdom of Zack Anastassya that the Big Sur backcountry is carefully protected, thoughtfully managed, and rightfully celebrated. Our heartfelt thanks to each and every person listed below.
Leverage Your Year-End Donation Through Monterey County Gives!

The VENTANA WILDERNESS ALLIANCE is delighted to once again be a participant in the 2018 Monterey County Gives! campaign. Your year-end gift goes further because of the pro-rata match provided by the campaign. Last year the match added over $7,000 to the total. On top of the match, VWA President Tom Hopkins has greatly sweetened the pot with a $30,000 Challenge Grant! Our goal is to triple Tom's challenge by raising over $90,000 during the campaign. This year's program runs through December 31, 2018. Donations may be made at: www.montereycountygives.com/vwa

Monterey County Gives! is a special project of Monterey County Weekly in partnership with the Community Foundation for Monterey County. VWA thanks them, along with their partners and sponsors, for creating the campaign and setting a goal to raise over $4,000,000 for 169 area nonprofits in 2018.

VWA's “Big Idea” for this year’s campaign is the profound impact created by the Youth in Wilderness (YiW) program. Directly combatting “nature deficit disorder,” YiW provides no-cost, transformational wilderness expeditions into the Ventana and Silver Peak Wilderness areas. Most participants are from underrepresented and underserved communities – many have never spent a night under the stars; outdoor recreation is simply not part of their lived experience. YiW provides a progressive, outdoor-based learning opportunity where redwood groves, mountain summits, and river valleys are the classroom.

VWA is honored that the Monterey County Weekly chose to use a photograph by YiW Program Director Toan Do for the cover of this year’s campaign kickoff special insert. Toan’s photo captures program participants from the Community Partnership for Youth jumping for joy at Landels-Hill Big Creek Reserve. YiW was kindly permitted to use the reserve following the closure of the Monterey Ranger District in the wake of the 2016 Soberanes Fire. Toan’s beautiful photo captures the very essence of why wild lands must be conserved and the importance of inspiring the next generation of wilderness stewards. In this instance, a partnership between three nonprofit entities ensured that the good work continued.

Thank you for supporting VWA during Monterey County Gives!