Evening Dappling With a Wintry Landscape

Photograph by Leor Pantilat

Hot Spot: Arroyo Seco

Oaks: Our Symbiotic Partners

Chews Ridge Lookout

Protecting the Big Sur Backcountry
Message from the President

Flashback to the turn of the millennium: A small group of dedicated Ventanaphiles joins the Wildlands 2000 campaign in an effort to expand Wilderness designations in the Big Sur backcountry. It seems like a pipe dream. They share a collective lifetime of experience navigating the remote corners of the northern Santa Lucias — but experience navigating the halls of Congress? Not so much. Undaunted, they launch a website and survey thousands of acres of unprotected public lands. Formally incorporating on March 7, 2000, the newly minted Ventana Wilderness Alliance develops an inventory of potential Wilderness additions with intriguing names like Black Rock, Bear Canyon, and San Carpoforo.

Soon, Congressman Sam Farr has honed VWA’s recommendations into a compelling piece of legislation. On the evening of the final House session of the year, Representative Farr spends long hours garnering enough support to shepherd the bill to passage. Days later, Senator Barbara Boxer bundles it with a package that passes without amendment, by unanimous consent. When the Big Sur Wilderness and Conservation Act is signed into law on December 19, 2002, the diminutive Silver Peak Wilderness doubles in size to include the 8,800-acre Willow Creek drainage. The spectacular Ventana Wilderness gains nearly 35,000 acres to become the most expanded unit in the National Wilderness Preservation System.

It was a monumental achievement for a fledgling organization, and certainly there was temptation to declare victory and rest on our laurels. But Wilderness expansion was only the beginning. Then, as now, much was yet to be done. In the years since, the VWA led the charge to retire coastal grazing allotments, halt an incredibly disruptive military bombing range, clean up illegal growsites and abandoned mines, restore Willow Creek, and advocate for enlightened wildfire and Wilderness management policies. Meanwhile, VWA field programs restore access to the Big Sur backcountry, teach visitors to enjoy it responsibly, and inspire local youth to cherish and defend our precious public lands.

As a founding board member, I’m proud of what this organization has become. Not so long ago VWA was a small circle of friends. Nowadays, we’re over 1,200 members strong and, strange as this may sound, it’s wonderful seeing so many unfamiliar faces at VWA events. Even if we never meet, know that you make this critical work possible. Serving as your board president for the last 13 years has been an honor and a privilege. Soon new leadership will step to the fore, providing this old-timer with a welcome respite. But much remains to be done, and I’ll continue to serve on the board as VWA enters its 20th year protecting, preserving, and restoring the Wilderness qualities and biodiversity of the most beautiful place on Earth.

Tom Hopkins | tom@ventanawild.org
In late October the Youth in Wilderness (YiW) leadership team ventured into the Ventana Wilderness for a weekend of backpacking, skills training, and fun! This Leadership Training Event (LTE) was the first of its kind, merging a typical YiW outing with a training program. The LTE engaged 13 passionate YiW Field Instructors (FIs), each with their own unique reasons for loving the outdoors. FIs have a variety of strengths. Some leaders have a knack for relating to students, while others are adept at specific technical skills. The LTE offered opportunities to learn new topics and share tactics to facilitate field activities. The goal was to provide leaders with a chance to develop new interests, strengthen areas identified for development, and build community. Every night leaders participated in important conversations led thoughtfully and intentionally by Program Director Toan Do. These talks focused on ways to enhance the program’s cultural relevancy for participants and their families.

YiW has standardized its training program. At the LTE, each Field Instructor received a binder of training materials and a customized field guide for typical plants found in the region. FIs referred to their binders throughout the day to reinforce program policies and procedures. Toan, Program Manager Jacqui Bergner, and Field Instructor Ethan Atkins led training sessions on a wide variety of subjects. This included an interpretive natural history hike where local species such as the endemic Santa Lucia fir were identified. Along the way, the group discussed the importance of local watersheds and highlighted stewardship actions necessary to keep them wild and clean. The hike included a team-building activity called “Dangerous River” in which FIs reinforced the importance of communication and leadership in hazardous situations. Back at the camp kitchen, FIs learned to bake cornbread.

This LTE was the first of what will be many to come. Well trained YiW Field Instructors are integral to the program’s success. They are encouraged to be their authentic selves and create a safe space for students to do the same, all the while building a trusting community gathered under starry skies. Youth in Wilderness is honored to deliver these experiences to participants and leaders alike. Throughout the weekend leaders laughed with each other, honed new skills, and practiced facilitating common group lessons like orienteering, water purification, cooking, and proper outdoor sanitation. As the outing came to a close, FIs had grown visibly more confident and comfortable with one another. One sentiment that arose again and again was, “I cannot wait for my next Youth in Wilderness outing!”

Estefani Hernandez, Daniela Cervantes, and Ruby Diaz (left to right) are former program participants who chose to become Field Instructors through the YiW Student Leadership Initiative. Estefani is holding a Ventana-specific Native Plant Field Guide created by Program Manager Jacqui Bergner.

James Farber offers fellow Field Instructor Estefani Hernandez a hand as they practice safe river crossings.
Arroyo Seco: A Leave No Trace Hot Spot!

Early in 2018, VWA staff nominated the Arroyo Seco Gorge and Day Use Area as a 2019 Leave No Trace Hot Spot. We knew it was a great opportunity to join forces with the Leave No Trace Center for Outdoor Ethics (LNT) to teach people how to enjoy this unique and wild canyon responsibly. When we found out in mid-2018 that our nomination was one of just 19 accepted, we knew that we would need to engage with a diverse range of partners to maximize the opportunity. Little did we know what a fun, rewarding journey it would be and how many new friends we would meet along the way.

Working closely with LNT, we assembled a core group of partners and stakeholders to establish a series of August 2019 events designed to celebrate and protect the Arroyo Seco. Some events were focused on educating “frontliners” to better manage the resource. Others were intended to enlighten visitors to recreate in ways that not only lessen impacts but do in fact Leave No Trace. Integral to this process was the support and commitment of Tom Murphey, Assistant Recreation Officer of the Los Padres National Forest Monterey Ranger District. Tom brought in key partners Courtney Miller and Cindi Barbour of Parks Management Company (PMC). This concessionaire operates outdoor recreation facilities like campgrounds, picnic areas, and marinas throughout California. PMC has been operating the Arroyo Seco Campground and Day Use Area since 2016.

The coalition was enhanced with the addition of JT Yeh of Patagonia Outlet Santa Cruz, Bryan Pelton of REI Marina, Brock Bill of Alvarado Street Brewery, and multiple VWA staff members and volunteers. Rounding out the team were Leave No Trace Traveling Trainers Jessie Johnson and Matt Schneider, the heart and soul of the Hot Spot project. Embedded at Arroyo Seco (when not at special events), Jessie and Matt brought a wealth of experience and expert insights to the project. From August 15–26, this team delivered a series of events between Santa Cruz and Arroyo Seco.

August 15 | Patagonia generously hosted a kickoff celebration and fundraiser at their Santa Cruz outlet. Sadly, a fluke power outage thwarted adventure runner Leor Pantilat’s eagerly anticipated “Complete Arroyo Seco” slideshow. Nevertheless, attendees enjoyed Alvarado Street Brewery ales, a fun raffle, live music, and scrumptious Tibetan dumplings. We also got to meet LNT Traveling Trainers Jessie and Matt.

August 20 | REI Marina kindly hosted a free Leave No Trace Awareness Workshop. Led by Jessie and Matt, 16 attendees learned how to minimize their impacts in the great outdoors … and how they too can impart the commonsense science and sociology that enable responsible enjoyment of wild places.

August 21 | The Los Padres National Forest Monterey Ranger District hosted a Frontliners Communication Workshop in King City. Jessie and Matt conveyed “Authority of the Resource” communication techniques specific to the Arroyo Seco area to a dedicated cadre of USFS personnel, PMC employees, and VWA staff and volunteers.

August 22 | More than 200 people came to the Alvarado Street Brewery Tasting Room in Salinas to enjoy Leave No Trace Trivia Night. The star attraction was an exceptionally juicy “Keep It Wild” India Pale Ale, custom-brewed to celebrate the Hot Spot and benefit the VWA.

Brock Bill of Alvarado Street Brewery reveals a roll of labels destined for 16 oz. cans of a special “Keep It Wild” IPA.
August 24 | Though not the final event, the Community Clean-Up Day at Arroyo Seco was the week’s crowning stewardship achievement. Twenty-six volunteers and five VWA staff members put in over 200 hours hauling, dragging, swimming, and floating approximately 400 pounds of trash out of the Arroyo Seco Gorge and Day Use Area.

August 25 | The final Hot Spot event was a Youth/Community Day that brought together participants and instructors from our Youth in Wilderness program to continue stewardship activities. The volunteers, along with VWA staff, removed inappropriate fire rings at camps not reached the day before.

Staff from the USFS, Parks Management, and VWA met with Jessie and Matt on Monday, August 26 to debrief and bid adieu. A comprehensive Hot Spot Analysis reached our inbox a few short weeks later. Within, the Traveling Trainers offered a frank assessment of the Arroyo Seco’s current state, including visitor impacts, management frameworks, LNT presence, and staff/volunteer engagement. Events were evaluated, as were project-specific print and social media assets. Jessie and Matt provided astute recommendations to improve messaging, signage, staff training, visitor education, partnerships, and management at Arroyo Seco. The analysis document will serve as a blueprint for the ongoing multi-partner effort to protect this wild yet fragile watershed.

Special Thanks to Our Hot Spot Partners!

Leave No Trace Center for Outdoor Ethics Patagonia Outlet Santa Cruz Arroyo Seco Citizens Association
US Forest Service REI Marina Arroyo Seco Winegrowers
Parks Management Company Alvarado Street Brewery Lloyd’s Tires Santa Cruz
“As a board member, Volunteer Wilderness Ranger, and Friend of the VWA, please join me in making the 2019 Monterey County Gives! campaign our most successful ever.”

— Maria Ferdin

2019 Monterey County Gives! Campaign Ends December 31
If you are reading this and it is still December 2019, please load the following URL into your browser and join Maria and hundreds of other VWA supporters in making a year-end gift to the VWA.

Our goal is to raise $100,000 by midnight of December 31, 2019. See our progress at:

mcgives.com/vwa

Make Wilderness Your Legacy

Help us ensure the future of local public land conservation by considering a charitable bequest to the Ventana Wilderness Alliance. Bequests to the VWA come in many forms and demonstrate your passionate and forward-thinking commitment to leaving a wilderness legacy. We can help. Please call 831-423-3191 or email vwa@ventanawild.org if you’d like to learn more about making a gift from your will or trust. Helpful online resources are at ventanawild.plannedgiving.org.

Photo: Leor Pantilat
A Very Special Wild & Scenic Film Festival

There was something special about the VWA's screenings of the Wild & Scenic Film Festival this year. Maybe it was the plethora of outstanding films. Or maybe it was the tremendous energy exuded by the crowds that packed the Nickelodeon in Santa Cruz and the Golden State Theatre in Monterey. By all accounts, our 7th annual presentation was quite special and a huge success.

The numbers tell a great story:
- 937 awesome attendees
- $15,705 in ticket sales
- $5,760 in raffle ticket sales
- 44 amazing volunteers
- 9 inspiring special guests

Special THANKS to our sponsors!
VWA Board of Directors
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New Leaf Community Markets
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Community Printers
Good Times Weekly
KAZU
Monterey County Weekly
Portola Plaza Hotel and Spa

Special THANKS to our presenters, guest speakers, and filmmakers!
Ally Arganbright and Sara French | Amah Mutsun Land Trust
Cari Herthel and Tom Little Bear Nason | Esselen Tribe of Monterey County
Steve Benoit and Stuart Carlson | Forest Fire Lookout Association
Agathe Bernard | Filmmaker, Carving Landscapes
Heather Hawksford and Reed Harkness | Filmmakers, Forest on Fire

The Wild & Scenic Film Festival is essential to the VWA's outreach efforts. Our conservation work in the Big Sur backcountry depends on the funding, volunteers, and partnerships this event nurtures. Please join us in extending a big thanks to all involved! We encourage you to support the businesses that support the VWA.

Special THANKS to raffle donors!
515 Kitchen and Cocktails
Aubergine
at L'Auberge Carmel
Bargetto Winery
Big Sur Bakery
Calwise Spirits
Coast Carmel
Coco Chispa
Feral Wetsuits
Harley Farms
Heyday
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Patagonia
Peak Design
Red Restaurant and Bar
REI
Splash! on the Wharf
Steeped Coffee
The Crepe Place
The Treadmill
Tom Bihn Packs
Ventana Surfboards
Well Within
EDITOR’S NOTE:
Mario Pesendorfer, Ph.D., is a postdoctoral researcher at the Institute of Forest Ecology, University of Natural Resources and Life Sciences, Vienna, Austria, and a research associate at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and the Smithsonian Migratory Bird Center. From 2014 to 2018, VWA staff, members, and volunteers had the distinct pleasure of meeting Mario at the Hastings Natural History Reservation, where he studied ecological dynamics in oak forests.

OAKS ARE ECOSYSTEM ENGINEERS. By changing the physical environment around themselves, they create habitat for hundreds of other species, including other plants, fungi, and countless animals. Their crowns provide shade on hot days and shelter from downpours, as many grateful hikers have experienced in the Ventana Wilderness. By decomposing mother rock and depositing leaf litter, they create new soil, increasing water retention and reducing erosion. Their bodies generate physical structures that provide space readily utilized by lichen, ants, woodpeckers, and many others. Not only do oaks change the physical environment—often for centuries beyond their own lifetimes—but they also provide food for some of California’s most beloved animals.

When the acorns start ripening in late summer, a long list of gourmets line up to get their share. Weevils—beetles with long snouts that function as a miniature drill—burrow into the husks to lay eggs in the nutritious nut meat, before the seeds have even fully developed. While acorns are still on the tree, birds squabble over who gets to hoard the precious resource that ensures their overwinter survival. On the ground, squirrels and deer gorge themselves by day, while mice, rats, and wild boars wait to feast under cover of darkness.

It should come as no surprise, then, that the population dynamics of acorn gourmets closely track the annual levels of seed production in oaks—a fact that many homeowners realize when they struggle to stem the tide of hungry rodents once the acorns are depleted. But why would oaks invest so much energy and sacrifice so many of their potential offspring to these predators?

Oaks: Our Symbiotic Partners | by Mario Pesendorfer
While oaks obtain energy through photosynthesis and use roots to forage for essential minerals, they face the challenge of the sessile lifestyle. Once they put their roots down, the extent of their movement is limited to a few feet, which take a long time to cover. But movement is essential to participate in the evolutionary race to contribute one’s genes to the next generation. Not only is the immediate vicinity of the parent tree a hostile environment – the offspring has little chance in the competition for light, water, and other resources – but specialized predators and pathogens are common.

Once the acorn gourmets have moved on, the seedling gourmets are not far behind, ready to devour the juicy green leaves that first emerge from the seeds. To overcome this spatial challenge, plants generally have evolved ingenious ways of sending young into the world. Some actively throw their seeds; others equip them with wings or buoys so they can fly or float to a new home; and many simply rely on animals to carry offspring away.

In the case of oaks, the strategy involves enticing animals, particularly birds and rodents, to actively carry their seeds away. Rather than defending seeds with spines or tacking them onto the fur or feet of innocent passersby, oaks lure potential dispersers with the promise of a tasty meal. In fact, there is so much food that it can’t all be eaten by one individual or in one visit. This abundance encourages animals to store acorns for future enjoyment – a tactic that also helps protect these creatures from competition.

It’s here that oaks take advantage of the fact that animals occasionally forget where they stored the seed, or they get kicked off their territory, or they die. Sometimes, the hoarder was simply too greedy and stored more seeds than it needed to survive. Whatever the reason, the seed is left behind, and the spatial challenge is overcome, the seed dispersed, and the predator transformed into the unaware partner in an age-old symbiotic interaction between plants and animals. For ages, long before humankind arrived, tree populations have relied on this mutualistic interaction to colonize new habitat or to shift their ranges as climates changed.

Once humans entered oak forests, we, too, played this evolutionary game. Before modern agriculture allowed us to decouple our living space from where we obtain our food, oaks and similar trees were at the very center of human existence. Acorns sustained many early cultures – in part because nutritious acorns store well over the winter – and oak wood provided the building materials for houses and ships, or it fueled the fires around which we gathered. In turn, people planted and revered the trees. They built their villages around them, held court beneath them, and fed livestock on their crops. Acorns were collected, traded, and, most importantly, planted; just like other animals, humans fulfilled their ecological role as seed dispersers.

Yet at this crucial time, when a rapidly changing climate and relentless human impacts on the landscape force oaks to rely on animals to shift their ranges quickly, we are not holding up our end of the bargain. We cut down many more oaks than we plant. Even worse, we replace them with non-native trees and keep other dispersers from doing their job, by feeding them peanuts or by poisoning them in our yards.

It is time for us to return to a more natural order and to reinvest in our end of the symbiosis. Our existences are intricately linked, and our futures intertwined.
VWR Annual Summit

Indefatigable by nature, Volunteer Wilderness Rangers (VWRs) protect the Wilderness character of the Monterey Ranger District of Los Padres National Forest. They patrol the trails and camps of the Big Sur backcountry to engage visitors and teach fire safety and Leave No Trace principles. They also perform camp and trail maintenance, report violations, and document trends, observations, and activities. This VWA program, delivered in partnership with the US Forest Service, provides a “thin green line” of protection for our precious public lands.

Each year the VWRs launch the field season with a two-day “Ranger Summit” to clarify procedures, build skills, welcome new recruits, and celebrate their work. This year’s Summit kicked off on November 2 at the Los Padres National Forest Monterey Ranger District office in King City. Eighteen of this year’s roster of twenty rangers were in attendance. Later that day, the team reconvened at the Milpitas Special Interest Area (aka The Indians) for a fun potluck. The next morning, they enhanced their skills in radio usage, public contact techniques, fire ring management, first aid, and trail maintenance. Think about that list for a second. It’s an amazing variety of skill sets for volunteers to possess! So be sure to thank VWRs if you see them in the field or at a VWA event. You can support the program by making a gift to the Ventana Wilderness Alliance earmarked for the Ranger program. If you are interested in becoming a VWR, please contact the VWA at 831-423-3191 or vwa@ventanawild.org. Thank you, VWRs!

2019-20 VOLUNTEER WILDERNESS RANGERS AND TRAIL CREW LEADERS (pictured left to right)

BACK: Bob Stallard, Darlene Felsman, Tom Murphey (Forest Service), Roxanne Renado, Mike Heard, Maria Ferdin, Mark Moehling, Steve Cypher, Colleen Young, Lynn Moncher, Steve Moore, Brian Robinson

FRONT: Steve Benoit, Bobby Steger, Sharol Sevilla, Beth Benoit, Anne Canright, Vince Silva, Betsy MacGowan, Gary Felsman, Roger Beaudoin, Joe Radoslovich, Dan Hartmann

NOT PICTURED: Ethan Atkins, Barbara Ray, Dave Wachtel

Rangers head into the field to enhance their trail restoration and maintenance skills under the tutelage of Mike Heard.
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 the founders and continues to this day with over 200 passionate volunteers giving their time and expertise over the past year to ensure that the Big Sur backcountry is carefully protected, thoughtfully managed, and rightfully celebrated. Our heartfelt thanks to each and every person listed below.

Stuart Abel
Raymond Akagi
Rachel Allen
Anita Alvarez
Guadalupe Arias
Ethan Atkins
Clayton Ayers
Alan Baldwin
Brynn Bate
Roger Beaudoin
Leif Behrmann
Brett Bell
Beth Benoit
Steve Benoit
Mark Bibbo
Tim Bills
David Bjork
Tom Boehme
Eva Bonnano
Joe Bonnano
Miles Bradley
Joan Breuch
Ron Breuch
Sarah Brick
Ben Bruce
Al Budris
Konnor Callihan
Anne Canright
Stuart Carlson
Gabrielle Carroll
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Bobby Steger
Dorthy Tenney
Jacob Tenny
Zach Tescher
John Tillie
Blake Toney
Mark Torres-Gil
Alyssa Traube
Chuck Tremper
Johno Turner
Lois Van Buren
Kristen Vega
Francesca Verdier
Bill Vogt
David Wachtel
Rebecca Walzer
Al Washburn
Emily White
Trevor Willits
Michael Wolfe
Suzy Worcester
Kyle Worcester-Moore
Owen Works
JT Yeh
Amy Young
Colleen Young
Events

March 7
Ventana Wilderness Day
Details TBA

Please like our page on Facebook
Be sure to join us on Meetup

Volunteers on the Lookout

Constructed in 1919, Chews Ridge Lookout (elevation 5,060’) may be the oldest fire lookout in the Los Padres National Forest. In fact, it even predates the Los Padres, which was then known as the Santa Barbara National Forest. After years of disuse, the nonprofit Forest Fire Lookout Association (FFLA) has spruced up and reactivated Chews Ridge Lookout and is seeking volunteers to staff it and provide early smoke detection. VWA volunteers who have completed the necessary training and have donated time at the lookout in 2019 include Steve Benoit, Stuart Carlson, Al Budris, Lois Van Buren, Barbara Ray, and Sean Lawley. The lookout is shuttered for the winter season but will be staffed once again come spring. If this sounds intriguing, visit firelookouthost.org/chews-ridge-project/ to learn more and get involved! The next training session will be in March 2020.

Should a smoke be spotted, volunteers (such as Steve Benoit pictured here) use the Osborne Firefinder to record the bearing and distance, which is radioed in to Los Padres dispatch in Santa Maria.