Restoring Access to the Carmel River Trail  
Serving the Next Generation  
Connecting Wilderness with Community

Protecting the Big Sur Backcountry

Sunset  
Acrylic painting by Father Arthur Poulin | fatherarthurpoulin.org
Father Arthur Poulin is a Camaldolese monk, priest, and artist. His landscape paintings reflect the beauty, harmony, and unity of creation. Fr. Poulin’s paintings echo the Impressionists, yet he has developed his own original style. When asked about his painting he speaks in terms of moving from the unknown to the known, from chaos to unity, which he sees as a sacred journey not to be feared. Visit fatherarthurpoulin.org to learn more.
Carmel River Trail Reroute Update | by Tom Hopkins

In May 2019, a landslide destroyed a significant section of the Carmel River Trail (CRT) just above the Los Padres Reservoir. The CRT, at that location on the west side of the reservoir, followed an old road that was built in the 1940s as part of the original dam and reservoir construction. The reservoir and adjacent section of the CRT are on private property owned by the California American Water Company (Cal-Am). The CRT on Cal-Am property is an official US Forest Service (USFS) system trail and within a public trail easement on Cal-Am’s Los Padres Reservoir property. At the upper end of the reservoir, the CRT leaves Cal-Am property and enters the Ventana Wilderness.

Following the landslide, VWA learned that Cal-Am would not be rebuilding the old road next to the reservoir. We also learned that it would take several years for the Forest Service to consider including a reroute of the CRT around the slide as part of the Monterey Ranger District’s “program of work.” Concerned that no timely effort to reestablish the CRT might jeopardize the historic easement that provides public access to this important trail within the Ventana Wilderness, VWA went to work to solve the problem.

Now, after more than one year of effort, VWA has designed a new 3/4-mile route for the CRT circumventing the slide. We have also completed archaeological and biological reports on the land being crossed as well as engineering plans of the reroute. These documents will be submitted to Monterey County for their approval and permit issuance. Because the reroute is on Cal-Am private property, Monterey County has permit authority for the new CRT reroute. Successful completion of the County permit process is necessary before Cal-Am and USFS can amend the existing easement to incorporate the new trail route.

While we wait for the bureaucratic permit process to be completed, hiking the public, eager to visit the upper reaches of the CRT, have followed the route laid out by VWA and an active use trail now exists. Once the County issues the required permit, VWA will improve the existing use route to provide a new, reliable trail around the landslide to USFS trail standards. VWA will then work with Cal-Am and USFS to amend the existing easement agreement to include the new CRT reroute and ensure that this access to the Ventana Wilderness remains open to the hiking public.

VWA would like to thank the following for their contributions making this interim success possible:

VWA Volunteers
Beth Benoit, Bob Stallard, Lynn Moncher, & Steve Benoit

Aman Gonzalez | California American Water Company
Michael Papa | United States Forest Service
Aaron Cole | Focalpoint Geospatial
Jack Glendening | Big Sur Trailmap
The Law Office of Aengus L. Jeffers
Nicole Nedeff | Consulting Ecologist
Susan Morley | Consulting Archaeologist
Tom Nason | Esselen Tribe of Monterey County
Gary Wiegand | Professional Engineer
Serving the Next Generation | by Daniela Cervantes

In March 2020, Youth in Wilderness had just finished leading the third trip of what was expected to be its strongest season to date, with a total of eighteen scheduled outings on the calendar. Our weekend backpacking trip to Escondido Camp wrapped up like any other as smiling participants parted ways and field instructors drove back up to the VWA office. What we didn’t know, though, as tents were rolled back into their sleeves, backpacks were hung on the rack, and the door to the gear library closed behind us, was that this would be the last backpacking outing for almost a year as the COVID-19 pandemic stopped all in-person programming. We were unsure just when a new group of participants would bravely hike into the Ventana Wilderness. Our courage was abruptly redirected from trekking through vast wilderness spaces to facing new challenges in the great indoors and in the previously comfortable frontcountry.

From the pandemic to forest fires and closures, Youth in Wilderness has navigated every new obstacle with creativity and innovation while identifying opportunities for growth in the face of adversity. In lieu of immersive backpacking outings, YiW offered partners alternative engagement in the form of socially distanced day hikes, social media and Zoom instruction, and Take Home Kits full of outdoor themed lessons and resources. Since the onset of the pandemic, YiW has executed thirteen day hikes and two backpacking outings while practicing safety protocol in accordance with CDC guidelines. YiW remains hopeful that improvements in public health conditions and continued programmatic risk mitigation will make way for a slow but steady return to immersive programming at our full capacity in 2022.

As a former YiW participant and field instructor, and as the new YiW program manager, it is with the utmost care and dedication that I look forward to leading YiW into a new chapter in its history. I have intimate knowledge of the impact that arises from reconnection to the outdoors.

YiW is immensely grateful to its funders, community partners, field instructors, chaperones, and supporters who continue to believe in YiW’s ability to foster the next generation of outdoor stewards and leaders. Your investment in YiW is helping to provide transformative wilderness experiences imbued with a deep sense of connection, healing, and personal meaning during a time when these are needed the most. The next time we dust off the tents, strap into our backpacks, and immerse ourselves in the wonders of the Ventana Wilderness together, we will treasure each moment more sweetly, remembering your crucial support and sacrifices during our time apart. Thank you for your support!
Deepening Connections with Wilderness and Community
by Krikor Andonian

Conservation and education have always been at the forefront of my work. I began my journey in the environmental field as a plant ecologist. For over a decade I have been teaching university students about the wonders of nature and how to explore the world through science and research, and for the last four years I led a UC-systemwide field course that took place entirely in remote protected wilderness all over California. Although science has been the primary language I used to connect with nature, my motivation has always been the pure joy of being in a beautiful wild place surrounded by plants and animals in their natural state. I love nothing more than the feeling of discovering something new on the trail, and sharing this joy with others is an incredible opportunity to connect with each other and the world. I believe that raising awareness about our planet, protecting wilderness, and increasing access to nature are of paramount importance, and so I am honored to take on my new role as the Field Programs Director with the VWA.

My goals are to share my skills and experience to strengthen existing field programs and develop impactful new projects. Leaders of the VWA Trail Program and Volunteer Wilderness Rangers have done incredible work increasing access to open spaces and educating the public on wilderness ethics and use. I look forward to supporting these programs and collaborating with the Youth in Wilderness program to increase our effectiveness with those we serve. I am also excited to continue monitoring visitor use of popular trails in Big Sur and using this information to better manage high-traffic trails. In 2022, I plan to develop a field education program to teach the public about their lands and the beautiful species that live there. This exciting new program will increase engagement with and access to wilderness, while creating deeper connections between the local community and nature.

I am honored to be a part of the VWA community and would like to extend my gratitude to all the volunteers who have welcomed me on board and have already taught me so much. Special thanks to Mike Heard, who has been an incredible resource in getting me up to speed, and Rich Popchak for his wealth of knowledge in regard to the organization. I would also like to thank all the partners, volunteers, donors, and funders who make our work possible. I am looking forward to getting to know the VWA community in the coming months and am grateful to be a part of a new chapter for the VWA.

“In the end we will conserve only what we love; we will love only what we understand; and we will understand only what we are taught.”
— Baba Dioum, Senegalese forester, 1968
Volunteer Wilderness Rangers Take It to the Summit

The Volunteer Wilderness Rangers held their annual Summit November 6–7 at the Arroyo Seco Recreation Area. The purpose of the event is to improve skills, update protocols, welcome trainees, and celebrate the important work that is done in the backcountry. Highlights of the Summit included a presentation by Monterey Ranger District Law Enforcement Officer Jonathan Ares, an “Olympics” competition, special awards, and an amazing potluck dinner. We cannot thank these volunteers enough for their service and professionalism. The joint USFS/VWA program has an outstanding reputation on the West Coast and we are very fortunate to have this dedicated group of folks protecting natural resources, Wilderness character, and visitors right here in the Monterey Ranger District. Special thanks to the US Forest Service–Los Padres National Forest, Parks Management Company, Officer Jonathan Ares, Esperanza Hernandez, and Marc Eldridge for their roles in making this year’s Summit a great success.

Seen here on the helipad at Arroyo Seco are the attendees of this year’s Summit. Trainees Leif Behrmann and Lisa Max are in green t-shirts. Full-fledged VWRs in uniform are (roughly from left to right) Lead Ranger Maria Ferdin, Assistant Lead Ranger Lynn Moncher, Colleen Young, Jackie Pelosi-Harris, Sharol Sevilla, Bobby Steger, Anne Canright, Dave Wachtel, Stuart Carlson, Steve Moore, Ethan Atkins, Beth Benoit, Vince Silva, and Steve Benoit. The guy with the red hat (back row right) is VWA staffer Krikor Andonian. Not pictured are VWRs Barbara Ray and Joe Radoslovich.

“Torchbearer” Steve Benoit summons the attendees to the Ranger Olympics.

Organizers actually used French broom for the “ceanothus toss” event. The idea is to teach rangers that debris cleared from a trail must be thrown far from the tread to ensure a clear path and maintain natural esthetics.

Nice form here by Stuart Carlson.
Ethan Atkins shows how it’s done in the signal mirror relay event. When used correctly, a mirror can reflect sunlight with life-saving accuracy (as far as 7 miles on a clear day) to alert potential rescuers of your location.

Beth Benoit presents Dave Wachtel with this year’s Ford Ranger Award for his thoughtful efforts aiding a hiker who suffered a mishap in the backcountry.

After a day and a half of training, these VWRs still found time to complete trail work. Pictured here (from left to right) are Lynn Moncher, Vince Silva, Beth Benoit, Steve Moore, Steve Benoit, and Colleen Young. Photo: Krikor Andonian
Collaboration Essential to PRT Restoration

Trail projects in designated Wilderness areas are a challenge. For one thing, the work is completed with traditional hand tools. Also, trails in designated Wilderness areas cross greater distances than those on other public lands. Here in the Ventana region there are distinctive challenges. These include rugged terrain, frequent fire cycles, powerful winter storms, and unique vegetation types. To overcome these obstacles, trail managers understand that collaboration is integral to a successful project.

The ongoing effort to maintain and restore over 24 miles of the Pine Ridge Trail is a prime example. Funding to contract the American Conservation Experience (ACE) crews is being provided by the USDA Forest Service. That funding is being administered by the VWA through a cost share agreement. To maximize the efficiency of the ACE crews, volunteers of the VWA Trail Crew work closely with the USFS Region Five Pack Stock Center of Excellence. Before the ACE crews hit the trail, the VWA volunteers make sure that the trail to the spike camp is pack stock accessible. Then the packers lead mules that carry in the ACE crew’s heavy tools, food, and gear. This allows the ACE crews to get to their base camp with less effort. They can save their energy for sawing, brushing, grubbing, and working the tread.

The result of this collaboration is that the Pine Ridge Trail is designated as “clear” all the way from Big Sur Station at Highway 1 to Pine Ridge Camp. Thanks to earlier work funded by REI and community service provided by the Gabilan Conservation Camp (CA Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation), the PRT from Pine Ridge to China Camp at Tassajara Road is certainly “passable.” The goal is to make it “clear” this spring utilizing the remaining USFS funding and the same collaboration formula.
A clean and happy ACE crew about to start their day on the Pine Ridge Trail.

The section of the PRT from Redwood Camp to Pine Ridge is in its best condition in decades thanks to ACE crews, VWA volunteers, and packers.

SPECIAL THANKS
- USDA Forest Service Region Five Pack Stock Center of Excellence
- Packers Emily Allen and John Sprik
- Kip Balesano of the Monterey Ranger District of Los Padres National Forest
- American Conservation Experience
- VWA Trail Crew volunteers especially Betsy MacGowan, Brian Robinson, Robert Parks, Tom Nicholson, and Greg Hoisington

John Sprik of the Region Five Pack Stock Center of Excellence follows a string of mules laden with ACE crew gear and supplies on their way to base camp.
Thank You, Volunteers!

Volunteers are the heart and soul of the Ventana Wilderness Alliance.

They always have been. Despite limitations imposed by COVID-19 and forest closures due to pandemic and wildfire, over 100 kindhearted folks donated their time and expertise between January 1, 2020, and November 19, 2021. Their efforts help 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.

Please email us at vwa@ventanwild.org if we accidentally omitted you from this list.

Chris Andrews
Ethan Atkins
Alan Baldwin
Sam Balthazard
Leif Behrmann
Scott Bell
Beth Benoit
Steve Benoit
Jacqui Bergner
Tim Bills
Ben Bruce
Kyle Bunte
Jason Campbell
Anne Canright
Gabrielle Carroll
Stuart Carlson
Dolly Chapman
Paul Clemmensen
David Collins
Jennifer (Jac) Combs
Avery Cripe
Kate Cunningham
Steven Cypher
Amy Dawe
Peggy Dilfer
Toan Do
Allen Duong
Carrie Edsinger
Marc Eldridge
Kirsten Erickson
Julia Evered
Darlene Felsman
Gary Felsman
Maria Ferdin
Matthew Fiess
Alan Fisk-Williams
Kyle Flippo
Nick Flores
Sandra Flores
Austin Fowler
Michael Framberger
Erik Gandolfi
John Glendening
Gamai Gregory
Daniel Hartmann
Mike Heard
Esperanza Hernandez
John Hickok
Gregory Hoisington
Heidi Hopkins
Tom Hopkins
Boon Hughey
Aaron Jacobs
David Jacobs
Jesse Jacobs
Melodie Kao
John Kenny
Dave Knapp
Jean LeBlanc
Jon Libby
Ellen Linder
Mackenzie Little
Lucy Logsdon
Betsy MacGowan
Dottie Massey
Lisa Max
Nelson Max
Bruce Merchant
Greg Meyer
Lynn Moncher
Steve Moore
Josh Nankivel
Nikki Nedeff
Tom Nicholson
Nika Obydzinski
Krishna Pal Singh
Leor Pantilat
Robert Parks
Amy Patten
Jaclyn Pelosi-Harris
Aaron Powell

John Radford
Joe Radoslovich
Barbara Ray
Roxanne Renedo
Mia Roberts
Austin Robertson
Brian Robinson
Glenn Schwarzbach
Pov Seng Poe
Sharol Sevilla
Mark Silbernagel
Katia Silva
Vince Silva
Mike Splain
Bob Stallard
Bobby Steger
Emily Stuart
Nils Tikkanen
Chuck Tremper
Jessica Tunis
Francesca Verdier
Eric Volk
David Wachtel
Al Washburn
Amy Wells
Colleen Young

■
The Ventana Wilderness Alliance is honored to be part of the 2021 Monterey County Gives! campaign. Established by the Monterey County Weekly and the Community Foundation for Monterey County (CFMC), the year-end fundraising effort is a boon to the VWA because your donation is matched by a $20,000 challenge grant made by the Tom Hopkins Wilderness Fund and a pro rata matching grant from the campaign organizers.

FAQ for montereycountygives.com/vwa
Campaign ends at midnight 12/31/2021

What is the advantage of donating through Monterey County Gives?
It is easy to donate to the VWA at the Monterey County Gives! site. But best of all, matching grant dollars raised by the campaign will increase the value of your donation.

What’s the big idea?
Our “big idea” for this campaign is our unique Youth in Wilderness program, which provides no-cost wilderness immersion trips for diverse groups on local, public lands. Funds raised during this campaign will be used to support all VWA programs, however.

Are donations tax deductible?
Yes. Donors will receive an email receipt from the Community Foundation for Monterey County immediately after making an online donation. Please note that your entire donation will go to the VWA. But for tax purposes, your official acknowledgment will come from the CFMC.

Can I donate stock?
Yes, donations of stock are accepted. Please contact Brian Thayer at the Community Foundation for Monterey County for instructions: briant@cfmco.org or 831-375-9712.

Can I convert an IRA Charitable Rollover into a donation to the VWA through Monterey County Gives?
Yes. Required minimum distributions are back in 2021. Donors aged 72 (or 70 1/2 if born before 7/1/49) or older can make a qualified charitable distribution (QCD) from their IRA to the campaign. A QCD is a great way for donors to make tax-advantageous contributions, especially those who do not itemize their deductions. Donors can simply instruct their IRA administrator to make the distribution directly to the CFMC for the benefit of Monterey County Gives! You or your administrator need to inform the CFMC that your gift is for the Ventana Wilderness Alliance. For more information, contact Brian Thayer at the Community Foundation: briant@cfmco.org or 831-375-9712.

Additional questions?
Please email vwa@ventanawild.org or call 831-423-3191.

I believe it’s incredibly important that today’s youth have the opportunity to learn how wonderful and empowering being in nature is, especially in our own Ventana Wilderness. Youth in Wilderness leaders are planting that seed every time they take us on trips or simply have a casual conversation. Not only do they teach us to be good stewards in our local wilderness, but they also provide important life skills and leadership development. Through nature and wilderness experiences, they have taught kids mechanisms for how to deal with the different obstacles that we face in life.

— Sammy Meza, Community Partnership for Youth
Good People Come and Go, the Land Remains
by Richard Popchak

When Mike Splain snapped this photo of his fellow VWA staffers in February 2020, I don’t think any of us were pondering big changes ahead. As a team, we were simply happy to escape the office for a few days and immerse ourselves in the lands that we help to protect. At Plaskett Creek Campground we made burritos and told tall tales. The next morning, we took a lovely day hike into the Silver Peak Wilderness. Mike was botanizing. Lucy was taking beautiful photos. Jacqui was leading the way, and Toan was, well, I don’t remember what Toan was doing. He was probably keeping an eye on his fearless canine companion Monique. I was just trying to keep up with the group.

Here we are almost two years later. Exciting change has come to our lives and the VWA in 2021. Mike and his wife, Gabrielle, are embracing new jobs and experiences in northern California. Lucy’s settling into her new gig with the Wild & Scenic Film Festival in Nevada City. Jacqui, having been recruited by Western Washington University, is pursuing a master’s degree in environmental sciences in Bellingham. Toan gets the prize for biggest change (geographically): he’s now living in Santiago, Chile, where he’s starting a new life chapter with his fiancée. The dramatic staffing changes continued when new executive director Michael Ward resigned this summer. He and his family decided that things simply weren’t working out for them on the central coast. We wish them the best.

We are embracing the changes and confidently moving forward with four new staffers. You can learn more about Daniela and Krikor in this newsletter. We’ll be sure to feature new business manager Jennifer Hewitt in future communications and at events. We’ve also added VWA founding board member Gordon Johnson to the team as senior policy analyst. The new blood brings fresh perspectives and outstanding leadership skills to the organization. This is a solid, motivated team.

We are forever thankful for Mike, Lucy, Jacqui, and Toan for their years of service to wilderness conservation. Their selfless support of the VWA continues to this day.