Message from the President

As the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded, the VWA was forced to scale back our outreach activities and field programs. This afforded the board, staff, and key stakeholders time to concentrate efforts on the completion of our Vision 2020 Strategic Plan, which will guide our actions over the next five years. This exhaustive and collaborative effort was facilitated by the VWA’s first Executive Director, Paul McFarland.

What emerged was a functional structure for the organization that allows us to proceed in a consistent and orderly manner. These functions have always existed in the VWA, but now they are more clearly defined, with comprehensive and detailed strategies and tactics supporting five key pillars:

Advocacy  Stewardship  Fundraising & Membership  Communication  Management & Governance

Please see pages 6–7 of this newsletter for an outline. We know that the greatest of plans can sit on shelves and gather dust if they do not have leaders responsible for progress. Accordingly, we assigned responsible parties with due dates for each specific activity. We will hold ourselves accountable.

For the VWA to continue being a highly effective and professional organization, this type of exercise was necessary. And with this hard work behind us, we look forward to increased boots-on-the-ground activity in the very near future. Although the pandemic persists, as do the ongoing impacts of the Dolan Fire, and now the shutdown of Highway 1 at Rat Creek, we are undaunted.

The pandemic will pass, Mother Nature will heal the land, plants, and animals as she sees fit, and Caltrans will fix the gap in the highway. We look forward to Congressman Jimmy Panetta’s Save our Forests Act being re-introduced in the new Congress. This legislation will direct the U.S. Forest Service to fill critical vacancies to mitigate wildfire risk and safeguard our natural resources. We are actively working to restore access to the Carmel River Trail at Los Padres Dam. Thanks to VWA volunteers and staff, the long-closed Pine Ridge Trail may be reopened as you read these words. Pent-up demand for Youth in Wilderness programs is enormous. Our Volunteer Wilderness Ranger program has barely missed a beat through the pandemic and Dolan Fire.

We will emerge from this time with scratches and bruises. But we will emerge stronger and ready to seize new opportunities to protect, preserve, and restore the incomparable public lands of the Big Sur backcountry.
Collaboration Key to Pine Ridge Trail Reopening

For generations, the lower (or western) section of the Pine Ridge Trail (PRT) has been the most popular backcountry route in the Ventana Wilderness. It has been long valued for its redwood-cloaked canyons, bounteous natural resources, and bucolic camps. Day hikers, trail runners, backpackers, and equestrians flocked to the Big Sur River valley for the benefits of simple, unconfined forms of recreation.

But then in 2016 somebody abandoned a hot campfire in Garrapata State Park (20 miles to the north) and the resulting conflagration became the Soberanes Fire. This tragic, avoidable event burned 57 homes, killed a bulldozer operator, and cost $260 million to suppress, making it at the time the most expensive wildfire to fight in United States history.

Pushed by prevailing winds to the south and east, the Soberanes Fire burned over 132,000 acres, including much of the Ventana Wilderness. The trails and camps along the Big Sur River suffered tremendous damage. Powerful storms the following winter added to the destruction. The U.S. Forest Service (USFS) closed the PRT from Big Sur Station near the coast to Redwood Camp, 12 miles into the backcountry. The closure order was renewed again and again as the USFS searched internally for funding to restore the trails and camps. While unplanned, the closure gave the habitat a reprieve from the consistent, heavy visitation that had become the norm in recent years.

In 2019, the USFS finally secured funding to reestablish the PRT and replace infrastructure lost in the fire. **VWA staff and volunteers, along with our friends at Los Padres Forest Association, quickly joined in as agency partners.** In 2020 a committee was established to set and prioritize goals around access, management, and communications.

A significant project component is the implementation of a self-registration permit system. The objective is to impart information about fire safety, Wilderness regulations, and minimal-impact recreation practices, while compiling critical data like group size, destination, and trip duration. Data gleaned through self-registration will guide future management decisions and determine whether additional steps are needed to preserve the Wild and Scenic character of the Big Sur River and protect Wilderness qualities like primitive recreation, naturalness, and solitude.

The lower Pine Ridge Trail may be open to the public very soon. We are excited and nervous about the reopening. Will the novel self-registration process enlighten visitors? Will the accumulated data lead to better management of a fragile ecosystem? There is an elephant in the room (or should we say elephant in the canyon?). The natural warm springs near Sykes Camp have long attracted oversized crowds detrimental to natural resources in a wild and protected locale. **The USFS prohibits impoundments and structures at Sykes, stating that they cause resource damage, and will not be tolerated due to the unsustainable problems that human built tubs create.** The VWA supports their position. But given the remote location, we have to wonder: will human visitors demonstrate self-control, obey the law, and resist altering a wild landscape for their personal pleasure? Stay tuned.

BIG THANKS!

- **PRT Reopening Committee**
  - Los Padres Forest Association – Tim Bills, Brian Conant
  - USFS – Tom Murphey, Andrew Madsen, Finn Eifert
  - VWA – Toan Do (chair), Beth Benoit, Steve Benoit, Maria Ferdin, Betsy MacGowan, Mike Heard, Mike Splain, Rich Popchak

- **California State Parks**

- **VWA Trail Crew and Volunteer Wilderness Rangers**

- **Marc Eldridge and Esperanza Hernandez** (trailhead infrastructure)

- **Last but not least, special thanks to the Community Association of Big Sur, the Nepenthe/Phoenix Corporation Donor Advised Fund at CFMC, and National Wilderness Stewardship Alliance for funding to implement the visitor self-registration process.**
A Rough Chronology of a Rough Year

Looking back over the past twelve months can be disheartening, but there is much to be thankful for. Despite the tumult, we took on a bevy of new challenges in 2020, all the while addressing perennial obstacles to the VWA mission.

2020

MARCH 7 | Over 130 members gather in Carmel Valley to celebrate VWA’s 20th birthday with memories, food, and fun. For many of us, this was the last gathering of the year. None could predict the changes yet to come.

MARCH 26 | Due to the burgeoning pandemic, the Forest Service (USFS) closes recreation sites across California.

APRIL 21 | Los Padres National Forest issues a “COVID-19 Emergency Closure” order that effectively eliminates public access to all roads and trails (frontcountry and backcountry) in the Monterey Ranger District (MRD). The VWA objects to the exclusive, comprehensive nature of the closure as none of the southern four ranger districts is subject to the same access restrictions.

MAY 18 | The MRD permits Volunteer Wilderness Ranger (VWR) patrols to resume. With no USFS presence in the backcountry, VWRs are the only boots on the ground to observe conditions, report violations, and protect resources.

AUGUST 4 | The Great American Outdoors Act is passed by Congress and signed by the President. Two major components of the law may directly benefit the Ventana region: permanent funding for the Land and Water Conservation Fund and $9.5 billion over five years to address deferred maintenance on federally managed public lands.

AUGUST 16 | A widespread electrical storm ignites some 650 wildfires throughout coastal California, including the River Fire (4 injuries, 30 structures destroyed) and possibly the Carmel Fire (73 structures destroyed). Moving northward, the storm sparks the CZU Lightning Complex in the Santa Cruz Mountains, causing tremendous loss and disruption for VWA volunteers, partners, and staff. Miraculously, the Ventana and Silver Peak Wildernesses are spared.

AUGUST 18 | A new conflagration is reported along the Big Sur coast south of Esalen Institute. The Dolan Fire is believed to be caused by drug trafficking organizations that set up shop during a long-term District closure following the 2016 Soberanes Fire. By the time the Dolan Fire is “controlled” on December 31, it has burned 124,924 acres and destroyed 14 structures. Untold resources are again compromised by anthropogenic wildfire and suppression damage. A new round of District closure orders ensues.
The Dolan Fire races towards a Forest Service fire station atop Nacimiento-Fergusson Road; 14 firefighters deploy emergency shelters in a last-ditch effort to survive. Captain Casey Allen is severely injured and airlifted to a medical center in Fresno. All suffer from smoke inhalation and the life-long trauma of nearly being burned alive. (After 50 days of treatment, Captain Allen was released on October 28 to continue a long road to recovery. You can help at gofundme.com/f/26fojbl76o).

OCTOBER 1 through DECEMBER 31 | Dolan Fire suppression repair work gets underway throughout the burn perimeter.

OCTOBER 8-13 | The VWA's annual presentation of the Wild & Scenic Film Festival goes virtual. See page 8.

NOVEMBER 8 | Volunteer Wilderness Rangers brave cold temps and icy breezes at an annual Summit in Big Sur. Four promising trainees join 20 veteran rangers for a masked and safely-distanced celebration of 2020 accomplishments, with a strategic eye to the year ahead.

DECEMBER 31 | The annual Monterey County Gives! Campaign concludes as the VWA's most successful year-end fundraiser to date. See page 12.

2021

JANUARY 22 | A revised Forest order finally opens most unburned sections of the Monterey Ranger District.

JANUARY 29 | An “atmospheric river” washes a large section of Highway 1 into the sea at Rat Creek, ground zero for the August 18 Dolan Fire. Storm damage to the 300-mile network of trails in the backcountry is still being assessed.

MARCH 24 | In collaboration with the Esselen and Salinan Tribes, Community Association of Big Sur, and fellow conservation organizations, VWA submits Great American Outdoors Act project recommendations to Los Padres National Forest Supervisor’s Office. Projects include restoration of Bottchers Gap and Salmon Creek Station, and enhanced management of the Milpitas Special Interest Area.

While this chronology is instructive, it simply cannot convey the scope and magnitude of the epic work being done every day by VWA volunteers, staff, partners, and funders to keep the Big Sur backcountry wild and accessible. We could devote dozens of pages to the work of the VWA board, Trail Crew, and Rangers alone. Your support makes this critical work possible. THANK YOU.
VISION 2020 STRATEGIC PLAN

Following twenty years of success in fulfilling our mission, the leadership of the Ventana Wilderness Alliance has re-affirmed the need for its continued service to the Wilderness qualities, native biodiversity, and human visitation on the public lands of the northern Santa Lucia Mountains and Big Sur Coast. The following outline of the VISION 2020 STRATEGIC PLAN builds on the organization’s three previous plans and re-confirms commitment to our mission and acknowledges the necessity to expand our service to meet current and future needs.

We’ve augmented this admittedly dry information with images of native plants and animals to remind us that our ultimate mission is to protect biodiversity and Wilderness character in the Big Sur backcountry. Many thanks to Amy Patten — formerly a VWA staffer and currently with the California Native Plant Society — for the use of her photographs.

ADVOCACY | Leverage regulatory, administrative, legislative, and judicial means with community involvement to advance the VWA mission.

- Monitor proposals that affect the public lands, cultural and historical resources, and ecological integrity of the northern Santa Lucia Mountains and take appropriate action.
- Preserve public access to public lands.
- Educate, inspire, and motivate future Wilderness advocates.
- Advocate for expanded Wilderness and Wild and Scenic River designations to ensure that roadless lands and free-flowing streams remain wild. Advocate for enforcement of existing regulations.
- Establish Advocacy Committee and maintain relevant and timely targets.
- Encourage and support scientific research and education.
- Build coalitions to advance the VWA mission.

 STEWARDSHIP | Use hands-on projects to preserve and restore ecological health of public lands across the Ventana region.

- Educate, inspire, and motivate future Ventana region public land stewards.
- Preserve and restore public access by engaging volunteer and professional crews to maintain public trails.
- Establish Field Programs Committee.
- Develop, organize, prioritize, and implement habitat restoration and stewardship projects.
FUNDRAISING & MEMBERSHIP | Build and sustain the human and financial resources necessary to achieve the VWA mission.

- Expand major donor giving and cultivation.
- Continue to build a sense of the VWA community and common purpose among members and volunteers.
- Renew organizational focus on endowment funds.
- Sustain and cultivate a diverse source of restricted funds to support specific mission-driven programs and projects.

COMMUNICATION | Advance an understanding of the VWA’s work, the place we protect, and how people can experience and care for the Ventana region.

- Cultivate relationships with stakeholders and communities adjacent to and affected by the public lands and waters of the Ventana region.
- Craft and adopt a Communications Plan with policies and protocol to ensure quality, consistency, and effectiveness of all publicly facing organizational communications across all platforms.
- Continue a broad events calendar designed to increase public knowledge of the VWA's mission and work while building a community of people who actively care for the Ventana region.

MANAGEMENT & GOVERNANCE | Develop and maintain a sustainable, effective, accountable, and compliant non-profit organization.

- Sustain organizational culture of strategic plan implementation, cross-program collaboration, organizational cohesion, adaptation, and accountability.
- Demonstrate an organizational commitment to justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion.
- Build a culture of engagement across the organization.
- Enhance and sustain staff effectiveness.
- Build and sustain effective board governance.
- Enhance organizational visibility and recognition in Monterey County with a satellite office.
- Create tools for long-term administrative continuity, financial integrity, accountability, and regulatory compliance.

All photos: Amy Patten
Wild & Scenic Film Festival Goes Virtual

Having never done a virtual event before, VWA staff and volunteers were a bit nervous about our 2020 presentation of the Wild & Scenic Film Festival. We were confident about one thing: we had an excellent slate of films and guest speakers. And thanks to attendees, sponsors, and the kind folks who donated online auction packages and the bidders who won them, our 8th annual presentation was a unique, fun, and special success. Since this event was watched at home with friends and family, the 454 tickets sold correlates to approximately 1,135 film festival viewers.

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 that 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.

The numbers tell a great story:

■ $14,243 in ticket sales
■ 196 brand-new VWA members
■ $3,980 in online auction income
■ $16,850 in sponsorship support!

Special Thanks to Our Presenters and Guest Speakers

Tom Little Bear Nason – Esselen Tribal Chairman
Tim Paule and Nicole Lindsey – Detroit Hives Founders
Ben Bruce – VWA Board of Directors
Daniela Cervantes – YiW Field Instructor
Obi Kaufmann – Writer and artist

Special Thanks to Online Auction Donors!

Alvarado Street Brewery
Brett Bell
Calwise Spirits Co.
Dottie Massey
Feral Wetsuits
Frame Circus
Frans Lanting
Heyday Books
Juniper Ridge
Kennan Ward
Peak Design
REI
National Geographic Maps
Obi Kaufmann
Tom Hopkins

Special Thanks to Our Sponsors!

Wild & Scenic Film Festival graphics: Obi Kaufmann

Ventana Wilderness Alliance

ALVARADO STREET BREWERY

The Board of Directors of

Alan Buchwald
in Memory of Charmion Richardson

Kate Cunningham & Jon Libby

Jack Glendenning &

1ST CAPITAL BANK

JUNIPER RIDGE

KindPeoples

NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

community printers

90.3 kazu

MONTEREY COUNTY WEEKLY
Editor's note: A longtime friend to many in the Ventana conservation community, Anneliese Suter passed away last September. We asked her friend Randy May to offer a few words of remembrance.

Leor Pantilat Joins VWA Board

We’d like to welcome Leor Pantilat to the organization’s all-volunteer Board of Directors. It is no exaggeration to say that Leor is a profound Ventana Wilderness enthusiast. He is captivated and inspired by virtually all aspects of the land, from the coast to the interior, from the rugged canyons to the summits. He is passionate about adventure running to the most rugged and remote corners of the Ventana and throughout California. Leor’s adventures have led him to catalog hundreds of waterfalls in Big Sur. He also enjoys nature photography and meticulously tracking weather models. Leor understands that access to public lands facilitates his adventures and his deep connection with the land, and is committed to ensuring the protection and expansion of public lands and accessibility for the benefit of all. He earned a B.A. from Rice University and a J.D. from Stanford Law School. Leor currently practices law while residing in San Carlos, California. Thank you for joining the board, Leor!

Remembering Anneliese Suter | by Randy May

One fine spring day years before Carol and I moved from the Bay Area, I sampled a day hike sponsored by the Sierra Club’s Ventana Chapter. Waiting at the Pine Ridge trailhead was Anneliese Suter, with her beatific smile, gentle voice, and hiking legs of carbon steel. A few hours later, as we emerged onto the gaily flowered hillsides above Coast Ridge Road, Anneliese’s beaming face reflected not only the natural beauty but also her joy of sharing it with friends. Anneliese’s energy and enthusiasm seduced one person after another into a similar love, both for the Ventana itself and for the people who appreciate it. During her 25 years as chair of the chapter’s hikes and outings, a regular highlight was the annual New Year’s hike from Garland Ranch Regional Park to Anneliese’s apartment for Kaffee und Kuchen. Anneliese personified the value and rewards of “giving back,” and those of us who were touched by her warmth and generosity can only feel gratitude and offer something of ourselves in return.

Students from the Drummond Culinary Academy at Rancho Cielo enjoy a YIW outing at Garrapata State Park.

Leor Pantilat

Youth in Wilderness Adapts and Delivers

Prior to the pandemic, the VWA’s Youth in Wilderness program was humming. Led by program director Jacqui Bergner, our unique outdoor education platform served 517 students in 2019. Participants enjoyed nearly 5,000 hours of engagement in the ultimate outdoor classroom; the northern Santa Lucias and Big Sur coast. As you can imagine, convening disparate students and Field Instructors for outings in the backcountry does not stand up to COVID-safe protocols. So we had to adapt. Jacqui put a plan in place that continues to connect students to wild places. With help from Field Instructors, she shares stories and videos on social media. She publishes a fun and informative newsletter. And to bring the outdoors closer to the lives of shut-in students, Jacqui assembles “Take Home Kits” and delivers them to our education partners. The packages include a cloud reading activity, instructions on how to use iNaturalist to identify plants, and materials to build a rain gauge and a pine cone bird feeder. During the holidays she even threw in hot chocolate and a candy cane. Well done, Jacqui! Field activities are resuming with day hikes and it won’t be long before backpacking outings take place at cherished Wilderness locales.

Students from the Drummond Culinary Academy at Rancho Cielo enjoy a YIW outing at Garrapata State Park.
We Can't Thank You Enough: Our 2020* Members and Funders

Individuals

Stuart Joel
Garin Achtemier
Patricia Adamson
Sue Adleman
Samuel Adelson
Betty Burchard & Barry Affler
Annabelle Agnese
Dan Alchev
Mark Albers & Annie Seeker
Laura Alexander
Ray Allen
John Bain & Jennifer Allen
Mary A. Ali
Alina Azarov
Irineu Annis
Alfredo Arreola
Robert Armstrong
Jesse Arnold
Laura Arrow

Businesses

1st Capital Bank
Alex Cole Construction
Alfredo Street Wine Bar
Backcountry Medical Guides
Backcountry Press
Bisbud
Bunter Spring Winery
Chuini, Paul & Carrie
Frame Circus
Great Expectations
iPutsch
International Product Group
Jasper Blue
Kindnog
Peanuts Landing Studio
Makersfood
National Geographic Maps
Oer & Books
Parks Project
Patagonia
Pearce European & Japanese RIL
Resterante Aranti

Foundations and Funds

Applewood Fund
Barrett-Sigel Charitable Trust
Beers Neufield Foundation
Carrel Knob Farms
Clint Foundation
Clift Foundation
Community Foundation
Community Foundation for Monterey County
Community Foundation for Santa Cruz County
Fenton Family Gift Fund
Monterey County Community Fund
Monterey Peninsula Foundation
Nancy Burs Ramson Foundation

Nepal Corporation

Donor Advised Fund

Nonprofit Insurance Alliance

Partner's Foundation

Pebble Beach Company

Richard & Susan Beach Family Fund

Bayer Sky Division

Tides Foundation

Ventana Wilderness Alliance Fund

Ventana Wilderness Fund

Ventana Wilderness Fund

Ventana Wilderness Fund

Organizations

California Coastal Commission
Carret Valley Garden
Association
Community Association of Big Sur

Environmental Protection Agency

National Wildlife Federation

Stewards Alliance of New Zealand

Point Our Lighthouse

Rotary Club

Camel of the Sea

Save the Redwoods League

Leads National Forest

Watershed

Superintendent’s Office

Tsogoomu on Emerald Center

In congratulates our members and funders.

For donations received January 1, 2020, through February 15, 2021. Our apologies if we somehow missed you. Please notify us at vwa@ventanawild.org.
2020 Annual Report  2020 WAS A YEAR LIKE NO OTHER. Over 100 members convened to celebrate VWA’s 20th anniversary on March 7, and within a week the world was in lockdown. As the pandemic ravaged the nation, many thousands of visitors flocked to the public lands of the Santa Lucia Mountains. Backcountry trails and camps endured the impacts of heavy use; frontcountry visitors engaged in experiences were limited to 653 field hours, an unavoidable shift to social media and remote learning nevertheless brought outdoor education to hundreds of new participants. Five staff members and nine board members managed fundraising, program logistics, and communications on an

Then there was the disastrous Dolan Fire, which ignited on August 18. Through it all, VWA field programs bolstered Forest Service

$300,000
$450,000
$50,000
$476,844 66.3%
$94,376 13.1%
$71,406 9.9%
$35,384 4.9%
$24,520 3.4%
$13,810 1.9%
$2,802 0.4%
$719,142 100.0%
$476,844
$94,376
$71,406
$35,384
$24,520
$13,810
$2,802
$719,142
$610,962
$300,000
$450,000
$50,000
$476,844 66.3%
$94,376 13.1%
$71,406 9.9%
$35,384 4.9%
$24,520 3.4%
$13,810 1.9%
$2,802 0.4%
$719,142 100.0%
$610,962

■ Grants (2020 + 2019 carryover)
■ Annual Appeal
■ Member Dues
■ Events
■ Endowments
■ Corporate Giving
■ Interest

$450,000
$350,000
$300,000
$250,000
$200,000
$150,000
$100,000
$50,000
$30,000
$20,000
$2,802
$13,810
$24,520
$35,384
$71,406
$94,376
$476,844
$13,810
$2,802
$719,142
$610,962

Grants (2020 + 2019 carryover) $476,844 66.3%
Annual Appeal $94,376 13.1%
Member Dues $71,406 9.9%
Events $35,384 4.9%
Endowments $24,520 3.4%
Corporate Giving $13,810 1.9%
Interest $2,802 0.4%
TOTAL $719,142 100.0%
PROGRAM EXPENSES

Advocacy $129,443 21.2%
Stewardship $415,139 76.9%
Fundraising $33,749 5.9%
Management & Governance $32,631 5.3%
TOTAL $610,962 100.0%

Support and Revenue

2020 Contributions Percent of Total
Grants (2020 + 2019 carryover) $476,844 66.3%
Annual Appeal $94,376 13.1%
Member Dues $71,406 9.9%
Events $35,384 4.9%
Endowments $24,520 3.4%
Corporate Giving $13,810 1.9%
Interest $2,802 0.4%
TOTAL $719,142 100.0%
Generosity Reigns

Imagine life in your community without nonprofit organizations. Think about the many benefits and services they provide to people, animals, and wild places. Now let's throw pandemic, wildfire, economic turmoil, and physical and mental challenges into the mix. Oh my!

Thank you for supporting the VWA and other nonprofit orgs in 2020. Here in the Ventana region, the northern Santa Lucia Mountains provide essential benefits to all living things. They give us fresh air, clean water, and opportunities for solitude and primitive recreation. They also provide pollinators, carbon sequestration, and habitats for wild plants and animals to thrive. Yet these places are threatened and need our help. The final numbers for our year-end campaigns are in and thanks to generous donors and focused organizers it was our most successful effort ever.

**Monterey County Gives!** This campaign is a partnership between Monterey County Weekly, the Community Foundation for Monterey County, and the Monterey Peninsula Foundation, coupled with the generosity of their major partners — the Neumeier Poma Investment Counsel, Cannery Row Company, the David and Lucille Packard Foundation, and the Colburn and Alana Jones Foundation at CFMC. The VWA received all time highs with 304 donations totaling $115,497. Wow! This total includes a 9.32% match provided by the campaign organizers.

**Giving Tuesday** also was a great success. Thanks to a generous $3,000 challenge gift by Spencer and Heather Hays, we leveraged our peer-to-peer networks to a raise a one-day total of $6,400 for Wilderness conservation.

On behalf of the VWA board, staff, and volunteers … thanks to everyone for stepping up during difficult times. We are inspired! ■