Welcoming Mike Chamberlain

Engaging with USFS Projects

Celebrating Betsy MacGowan

Protecting the Big Sur Backcountry
Message from the Executive Director

COMING HOME

I’m excited to be authoring the first of what I hope will be many columns in this space. My name is Mike Chamberlain, and I’m the new Executive Director. In future columns, I’ll spend WAY less time talking about myself. However, it seems appropriate to do so for my first.

I am entering my 34th year of employment at a non-profit. At my core, I’m a communicator and an educator. I’m also a dad, skier, hiker, and sailor.

In 1989, I stumbled upon a job posting in the classifieds for an entry level position at something called a “children’s museum.” My first thought was “what the heck is that?” I applied, and was hired part-time while I finished college.

It was a small, scrappy, museum in Chicago. After graduating college, I was hired as the Exhibit Manager.

It was the most influential job I ever had. With a tiny staff, I was asked to wear many hats. During the course of a day, I might repair an exhibit, do a school field trip orientation, write a grant, unclog a toilet, and cover the front desk during the lunch hour. The following day I would paint a wall, make a run to the hardware store, teach a class, and then write a press release. Jack of all trades, master of none. Loved every minute.

Thirty-plus years have passed since then. I made a jump to Monterey, led teams at the Monterey Bay Aquarium for 22 years, and raised a family in Carmel Valley Village, where I reside today. Through luck and good fortune, I find myself today at the helm of the Ventana Wilderness Alliance, also small and scrappy, as well as nimble. And, much as at the aquarium, I’ve once again had the good fortune to work directly with many of the founders, soaking up their wisdom, guidance, and invaluable insights. To know where you’re going, it’s good to know where you’ve been.

The VWA is a mighty force for good in its own right; I’ve witnessed it firsthand in my four months with this organization. So much important work is being accomplished, thanks to people like you and your unwavering support. After a long career with humongous nonprofits, I feel like I am “coming home.” It’s a very good feeling. I’m looking forward to making a difference, with your help.

Mike Chamberlain
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Two Important Projects with “Generational Impact” Coming to Big Sur | by Gordon Johnson

Big Sur, and the Ventana and Silver Peak Wilderness Areas, are at a pivotal moment: threatened by wildfire, hammered by climate change, and besieged by human visitation. The US Forest Service recently unveiled two major initiatives intended to mitigate some of these impacts:

- **Visitor Use Management Plan (VUM)** | Seeks to manage and mitigate impact from thousands of visitors annually to the public lands and facilities managed by the Monterey Ranger District of Los Padres National Forest along the Big Sur/South Coast.

- **Ecological Restoration Plan (ERP)** | A landscape-level project intended to reduce impact of fire events in Los Padres National Forest (including the Monterey Ranger District, home to the Ventana and Silver Peak Wilderness). This project is specific to non-Wilderness areas of the Forest.

Under the auspices of the Visitor Use Management Plan, the VWA is engaged in a collaborative effort, with both the Forest Service and Big Sur/South Coast residents, to help craft creative solutions to the impacts resulting from overvisitation. Our VUM group is making progress toward these goals.

The Ecological Restoration Plan is an ambitious forest-wide fuel management and reduction project. Much of the ERP is focused on montane forest (forests at 5,000 feet and above) found mostly in the southern districts of Los Padres National Forest. Unlike the southern Forest, the Monterey Ranger District (MRD) has canyons lined with redwood forest and slopes draped in maritime chaparral. The VWA is working with LPNF to protect these unique vegetation types from inappropriate and unnecessary fuel treatments.

These Wilderness advocacy efforts are a direct result of your continued support of our work. We will keep you posted on both of these projects in upcoming newsletters.
Youthful Impressions of the Wilderness Experience

One thing I enjoyed about the trip was being able to forget about things that stress me out and just be in the present moment with everyone on the trip. It was a great experience being with everyone and getting to know them. Also making great memories that I will never forget with the people in my class. One thing I also enjoyed was getting away from the craziness in Carmel and getting to be in nature. I also loved going to the waterfall and the gorge. The water was cool, so it was refreshing after hiking to it. Seeing all of the wildlife on the trip was very cool, especially seeing turtles, newts, and lots of birds. Same with all of the plants; some of them I have never seen before, like mugwort. I would love to come back to Arroyo Seco and camp there again.

— Sofia, Carmel Middle School

What a year it has been since we last got in touch! Over the past 12 months, Youth in Wilderness (YiW) led 19 single-day and overnight backpacking trips for nearly 200 participants. Wow! None of this could have been done without the crucial support of our funders, community partners, field instructors, and allies. Rather than me telling you how a YiW experience impacts a local student, I thought I'd let some students from Community Partnership for Youth in Seaside and Carmel Middle School share their impressions directly. The YiW leadership team is continually impressed by the resilience and curiosity of the participants as they engage with wild places.

Going backpacking with YiW was something fun and interesting from my point of view. I have been on two backpacking trips now and we start with us all introducing ourselves and getting to know each other, as well as saying what we are looking forward to on our trip. Mr. Ben* introduced me to the VWA and YiW. The instructors were nice and never mean, and they took risks to keep us safe, like helping us across the rivers. After getting to camp, first we would set up our equipment for our trip. Thanks to YiW we have gear we can borrow. During the hikes we would always see nature’s beauty, so much so that we would think, “Wow, look at how our world really is.” YiW opens new spots into our life. It was my first time seeing the beautiful nature in our public lands. It made me stunned because I never have been backpacking before or seen how our wilderness is. The YiW instructors would help if we needed to set up our tent or anything. Basically, the VWA helped us bond with nature and with people we want to hang out with. That’s why YiW is the best. They allowed us to see how beautiful it is in nature, and how beautiful it is in the Ventana. — Giovanni, Community Partnership for Youth

Giovanni (back) and a fellow YiW participant forage for mugwort to make tea at camp.

* “Mr. Ben” is Ben Bruce, Programs Director at Community Partnership for Youth and a VWA board member.
Forest Service Honors Betsy MacGowan with Enduring Service Award

Betsy MacGowan was working on the trails of the Big Sur backcountry years before the VWA incorporated as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit in 2000. Through her membership with the Ventana Chapter of the Sierra Club, Betsy participated in and led hikes into the wilderness. It was on a Ventana Chapter trail work trip that she met fellow Sierra Clubber Steve Chambers, who shared a passion for improving trail access in the rugged Santa Lucia Range. When Chambers became a founding board member of the VWA, Betsy kept close tabs on the fledgling organization and soon became member #20. In the early 2000’s she began joining VWA Trail Crew outings organized by Trail Crew Chiefs Boon Hughey and Dave Knapp.

Flash forward to April 2022, when the US Forest Service announces the recipients of their 2021 Volunteers and Service Awards. Just eight awards are made nationally. It comes as no surprise to anybody who has volunteered with Betsy over the years when the agency announces that she is the awardee for the 2021 Enduring Service Award.

With 30+ years of activity and leadership on the Monterey Ranger District of Los Padres National Forest, Betsy has put up some big numbers. In the past 11 years alone, Betsy (VWA Trail Crew Chief since 2014) has led or co-led 252 trail crew outings. These trips generated over 15,000 volunteer hours. The crews maintained over 44,000 yards of tread and brushed over 111,000 yards of trail. Volunteers and hired crews under Betsy’s direction have removed 1,765 downed trees from the trail. Yet these statistics barely scratch the surface of Betsy’s accomplishments.

The entire Ventana Wilderness Alliance community congratulates Betsy for this achievement. Restoring and maintaining trail access in the northern Santa Lucias is a difficult and never-ending labor of love. It requires a variety of skills as well as commitment, resolve, and passion. These are traits that Betsy possesses in abundance. That’s why she is such an inspiration. Congratulations Betsy!
Commitment and Tradition at the Ranger Summit

A fine assemblage of Wilderness stewards convened at the Arroyo Seco Recreation Area on November 5 for the annual Volunteer Wilderness Ranger (VWR) Summit. The purpose of this event is to improve skills, update protocols, and celebrate the important conservation work being done in the Big Sur backcountry. It also was a great way to welcome and thank new trainees John Howerton, Remo Payson, Michael Framberger, Alice Kollmann, and Lynne Starr. 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 in the Monterey Ranger District. Big thanks to VWR program leaders Maria Ferdin, Lynn Moncher, Beth Benoit, and Steve Benoit. They devoted hundreds of hours planning and delivering this unique event. We’d also like to thank the US Forest Service–Los Padres National Forest and the Parks Management Company for their help in making this year’s Summit a great success.

PARTNERS IN CONSERVATION  |  Pictured here (from left to right) are Maria Ferdin, Lead Volunteer Wilderness Ranger; Lynn Moncher, Assistant Lead Volunteer Wilderness Ranger; Kip Valesano, USFS Forestry Technician (Wilderness/Trails/Stock); Chevene Simmons, USFS Recreation Officer for the Monterey Ranger District; Beth Benoit, VWR Administrative Officer; and Steve Benoit, VWR Safety Officer.

LEFT  |  After a year as a trainee, Lisa Max celebrates becoming a full-fledged VWR.

RIGHT  |  Leif Behrmann has a more subdued reaction as he officially becomes a VWR.

All photos on pages 6 and 7 by Mike Chamberlain.
Steve Moore was conferred the annual Ford Award for synthesizing disparate documents into a comprehensive and fun-to-read Ranger Trainee Manual.

Trainees and rangers practice using a signal mirror as part of an Olympics-style training competition.

PRESENTING THE 2022–23 VOLUNTEER WILDERNESS RANGERS COHORT.

This year’s trainees are identified by their green long-sleeve t-shirts.

FRONT ROW (kneeling or sitting, from left to right): Lisa Max, Colleen Young, Jackie Pelosi-Harris, Beth Benoit, Steve Moore, Lynn Moncher, Bobby Steger, Anne Canright

BACK ROW (standing, from left to right): Maria Ferdin, Steve Benoit, John Howerton, Remo Payson, Leif Behrmann, Michael Framberger, Joe Radoslovich, Alice Kollmann, Dave Wachtel, Stuart Carlson, and Lynne Starr
A Jubilant Return of the Annual Gathering

After all we’ve been through, and with much to celebrate, we decided it was time to bring the VWA community together. So we threw a big ole party! By all accounts, the return of the Annual Gathering was a huge success.

Over 200 folks from near and far converged at Toro Park in Salinas on October 22. We came to honor the Ventana and Silver Peak Wilderness Areas and exalt the hard work that goes into keeping these lands wild and accessible. The event was focused on two themes. We just had to celebrate the 20th anniversary of the passage of the Big Sur Wilderness and Conservation Act of 2002. This legislation was a founding achievement of the fledgling VWA. The bill forever protects over 54,000 acres in the northern Santa Lucias as designated Wilderness. Our second theme was to honor VWA board member and Trail Crew Chief Betsy MacGowan for earning a national US Forest Service “Enduring Service Award” for her 30+ years of volunteerism on the Monterey Ranger District. (See page 5.)

If seeing old friends for the first time since early 2020 wasn’t enough, the festivities were enhanced by the presence of special guests, treasured partners, and amazing volunteers.

SPECIAL THANKS TO THE FOLLOWING Donors, Vendors, Volunteers, and Guest Speakers

- Aaron Wines
- Alvarado Street Brewery
- REI Marina and Santa Cruz
- Patagonia Santa Cruz
- Fire On Wheels Artisan Pizza
- Greg Freeman (musician)
- Michael Troutman Photography
- Malea Hansen
- Marna Genes
- Founding VWA Board Member Jon Libby
- Congressman Jimmy Panetta
- CA State Senator John Laird
- Monterey County Supervisor Mary Adams
- Former Congressman Sam Farr
- Supervisor Chris Stubbs of USFS – Los Padres National Forest
- Stuart Carlson
- JT Yeh

All photos on pages 8 and 9 by Michael Troutman Photography.
Betsy MacGowan is congratulated by former Congressman Sam Farr.

(From left to right) Congressman Jimmy Panetta, new Monterey District Ranger Fin Eifert, and the VWA's Mike Chamberlain enjoying a special day.

(From left to right) Guest speakers Dani Cervantes (Youth in Wilderness Program Manager) and Ben Bruce (VWA board member and Community Partnership for Youth Programs Director) getting to know Chevene Simmons (Monterey Ranger District Recreation Officer).

(From left to right) Brio and Keith Vandevere catch up with founding VWA board members Boon Hughey and Jon Libby.
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 120 kindhearted folks donated their time and expertise between November 20, 2021, and November 4, 2022. Their efforts help to ensure that the Big Sur backcountry is carefully protected, thoughtfully managed, accessible by trail, and rightfully celebrated. Our heartfelt thanks to each and every person listed below.

Please email us at [vwa@ventanwild.org](mailto:vwa@ventanwild.org) if we accidentally omitted you from this list.

| Mary Jo Alo | Paul Garneau | Dottie Massey | Adam Robinson |
| Carlota Andrews | Marna Genes | Lisa Max | Brian Robinson |
| Vickie Backman | John Glendening | Nelson Max | David Sadowski |
| Alan Baldwin | Bryan Goldberger | Bruce Merchant | Will Salmon |
| Leif Behrmann | Colin Gregory | Lynn Moncher | Richard Seely |
| Beth Benoit | Malea Hansen | Steve Moore | Pov Seng |
| Steve Benoit | Daniel Hartmann | Caleb Morgan | Sharol Sevilla |
| Tim Bills | Tim Hausler | Judith Mostyn | Daniel Shefer |
| Tom Bishop | Mike Heard | Nikki Nedeff | Katia Silva |
| Tom Boehme | Nathan Hechtman | Tom Nicholson | Vince Silva |
| Alex Bondarenko | Gregory Hoisington | Claire Northall | Mike Splain |
| Ben Bruce | Evon Holladay | Nika Obydzinski | Mike Splain |
| Anne Canright | Shawn Holladay | Sean Padgett | Robert Parks |
| Stuart Carlson | Heidi Hopkins | Leor Pantilat | Phillips Patton |
| Chris Carmitros | Tom Hopkins | Robert Parks | Remo Payson |
| Cameron Chabre | Byron Hoppes | Carl Pecevich | Nick Pearl |
| Mike Chamberlain | John Howerton | Jackie Pelosi-Harris | Carl Pecevich |
| Dolly Chapman | Boon Hughey | Martin Perez | Jackie Pelosi-Harris |
| Michelle Chen | Chris Hyland | Brandon Peshong | Martin Perez |
| Paul Clemensen | Aaron Jackson | Hazel Platt | Brandon Peshong |
| David Collins | David Jacobs | Anoop Poonada | Hazel Platt |
| Jac Combs | Melodie Kao | Aaron Powell | Anoop Poonada |
| Kate Cunningham | Ryan Klippel | Sierra Rad | Aaron Powell |
| Steven Cypher | Jacob Koff | John Radford | Sierra Rad |
| Amy Dawe | Alice Kollmann | Joe Radoslovich | John Radford |
| Dylan Deeny | David Jacobs | Darien Raistrick | Joe Radoslovich |
| David Dully | Melodie Kao | Narendran Ramanathan | Darien Raistrick |
| Carrie Edsinger | Ryan Klippel | Barbara Ray | Narendran Ramanathan |
| Maria Ferdin | Jacob Koff | Roxanne Renedo | Barbara Ray |
| Matthew Fiess | Alice Kollmann | Giovanni Rey | Roxanne Renedo |
| Alan Fisk-Williams | Paul Kotrodimos | | Giovanni Rey |
| Michael Framberger | Stephanie Lam | | |
| Philip Frausto | Christian Lamonea | | |
| | Jean LeBlanc | | |
Please Support VWA Through Monterey County Gives

Pictured below is Volunteer Wilderness Ranger (VWR) Colleen Young on patrol in the Big Sur backcountry. Colleen and her cohort of 14 veteran rangers and five trainees protect natural resources, promote fire safety, and engage with visitors. The VWR program — now in its 11th year — is achieved in partnership with the Monterey Ranger District of Los Padres National Forest. With few agency boots on the ground to manage recreation, a friendly ranger presence is priceless. That’s why the program is our “Big Idea” for the 2022 Monterey County Gives! campaign.

We are asking that you support Volunteer Wilderness Rangers — and all VWA programs — through a donation to the VWA at Monterey County Gives! Our goal is to raise over $120,000.

Please scan this QR Code to go to montereycountygives.com/vwa

Campaign ends at midnight 12/31/2022

Thanks to generous Challenge Gifts from volunteer rangers, VWA board members, and new executive director Mike Chamberlain, your contribution will be matched dollar-for-dollar up to $14,000. Your gift also earns a 10–15% match from the Monterey County Weekly Community Fund. No matter where you live, Monterey County Gives! is a win-win for Wilderness. Please act soon!

The Community Foundation for Monterey County (CFMC) provides options to make it easy to support the VWA at MCGives!
Please call 831.375.9712 if you have any questions.

Not only does CFMC manage online MCGives! gifts to the VWA and provide an acknowledgment for tax purposes, they facilitate alternative ways to make your gift.

IRA Qualified Charitable Distributions (QCD) | Donors aged 70 1/2 or older can make a QCD from their IRA directly to the MCGives! campaign. A QCD is a great way for eligible donors to make tax-advantageous contributions. Simply instruct your IRA administrator to make the distribution directly to CFMC for the benefit of the VWA through MCGives! Please call 831.375.9712 to confirm your donation is complete.

Wire, ACH, and Stock Transfers | CFMC will happily facilitate gifts made in this way. Please call 831.375.9712 for transfer instructions.

Checks | If you prefer to donate by check, please, put “MCGives/VWA” in the memo and mail your gift made payable to “Community Foundation for Monterey County” to 2354 Garden Road, Monterey, CA 93940. Please note that checks must be received by 12.31.2022 to be counted in the campaign.

Thank you for keeping it wild in the Big Sur backcountry.

— Stan Russell, Big Sur Chamber of Commerce

MONTEREY COUNTY GIVES!
Joining Together for Big Ideas
Thank Heavens for Continuity | by Richard Popchak

Watching former VWA Executive Director Mike Splain having a chat with new ED Mike Chamberlain at the Annual Gathering was a comforting sight. It’s nice to know that they have each other’s ear and that they talk fairly often. After much change in the organization in 2021, their exchange gave me a sense that “all is well.” Especially now that the rest of the “new” staff — Jen Hewitt, Krikor Andonian, Dani Cervantes, and Gordon Johnson — have a year of experience under their belts. Thank heavens for continuity.

The long-delayed Gathering brought many dedicated Wilderness defenders together. Amidst the carnival-like atmosphere, I saw a huddle of the only three Trail Crew Chiefs the VWA has ever known: Boon Hughey, Dave Knapp, and Betsy MacGowan. I saw Dr. Jack Glendening of Big Sur Trailmap fame talking with Silver Peak Wilderness aficionado Jean LeBlanc. And there’s Congressman Jimmy Panetta engaged in conversation with new Monterey District Ranger Fin Eifert, and new MRD Recreation Officer Chevene Simmons meeting his retired predecessor Tom Murphey. These were just a few of the many scenes that promise the continuity of our Wilderness conservation work, and they warmed my heart.