Ventana Wilderness Watch
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Newsletter of the Ventana Wilderness Alliance

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Protecting the Big Sur Backcountry

VWA Accelerates Forest Reopening

Nature Therapy

Special Map Insert
Carmel River Trail Network

Q&A with Monterey District Ranger Fin Eifert

Photograph by Jorge Torres | jorgetorresphotography.org
Message from the Executive Director

I must confess, before I started my job 10 months ago, my impression of the Ventana Wilderness Alliance was of an org with a very strong track record for doing important work — but I also assumed it was a rather sleepy nonprofit. Boy, was I wrong! The VWA is a veritable beehive of activity, much more complex than I ever imagined, with many moving parts that were not evident to me before assuming my role.

I recently put pen to paper to try and make sense of how all those parts fit together as a whole: We work to ensure a thriving Ventana and Silver Peak Wilderness today, tomorrow, and forever, with robust and resilient forests and pristine watersheds protected and respected, benefiting both wildlife and people like you who value and appreciate the importance of accessible Wilderness for our children and their children.

It’s a vision that inspires me (and hopefully you as well), but to fully achieve it, we need to expand our programs. To do that, we need to grow our capacity. And, to be clear — you are included in the “we”!

We need volunteers: Our volunteer positions (Volunteer Wilderness Rangers and Trail Crew) historically require the ability to hike long, steep trails. But — our need for volunteers goes WAY beyond that! We’d love to hear your ideas for how you can help (administrative help such as organizing a photo database, for example). We’ll be sending out some “needs” to you in a future email (which will include the need for an individual to run the volunteer program itself).

We need additional staff: At the VWA, we have a growth mindset. It’s hard not to! Opportunities abound to expand and amplify our work: youth education, management of our field programs, and policy work that champions Wilderness protection. Current staffing constraints mean missed opportunities to protect, educate, and advocate for the lands we all love — and with your support, we will staff up to meet the moment.

We need more funders: Edward Abbey wrote, “The idea of wilderness needs no defense. It only needs more defenders.” The most effective way for you to be a defender is with your financial support, which is essential to scale up programs and ensure a sustainable future for the VWA and the Wilderness areas we protect. Click the “donate” button at ventanawild.org (or scan the QR code on page 11) to provide your financial support today. Another way to help: do you know someone who would appreciate the work the VWA does to steward, educate, and advocate on behalf of the Big Sur backcountry? Please share with them the opportunity to join our community. Growing our base of supporters is mission critical — thank you for your help, and for your generosity.

Finally, please reach out to text/chat/email and share your ideas — I so enjoy getting to know our members, and learning about what motivates them to support the VWA.

Onward!

With gratitude,

Mike Chamberlain | mike@ventanawild.org | c.831-521-8348
As the leader of VWA’s Youth in Wilderness (YiW) program, I’ve been thinking a lot lately about the challenges facing my generation, including the participants we serve. The effects of a devastating pandemic and increasing social pressures have made it more and more difficult to feel truly connected and grounded despite social media making us more connected than ever. Concerns over the state of teen well-being are at an all-time high (this past May, the Surgeon General declared a national mental health crisis for teens), and the VWA wants to be part of the solution. We believe teens spending time in Wilderness can help.

I know firsthand (and you probably do, too) that time spent in nature bestows an abundance of health benefits. We recognize that in a young adult’s development, quality time in the outdoors leaves YiW participants feeling competent, confident, and empowered to tackle big challenges. In this way, nature is therapeutic.

I have experienced YiW from both perspectives; first as a participant, and now as a leader. As a participant, each outing helped to transform everyday stress and worry into feelings of peace, awe, and a sense of connection to something larger than me — all through the beauty and wonder of the outdoors. Best of all, I learned the skills to allow me to head back into the wilderness when I needed to feel grounded and make that connection again. As a leader, I recognize that the next generation of outdoor stewards and leaders is made not only by teaching how to leave wild places better than they found them, but by intentionally amplifying the idea that wilderness is a place where they can nurture feelings of peace and wellness. My personal experience makes me want to pay that realization forward with Youth in Wilderness participants.

VWA staff are working to tailor program activities to help participants to explore outside their comfort zone and discover new coping skills and personal strengths. We’re very excited to add a new post-trip component that will allow participants, through artistic expression (photography, writing, etc.), to reflect on how their outdoor experience positively impacted them, which they can share with classmates, families, and members of their community.

As we work to double the number of teens served from communities all over the Monterey Bay area, your support is appreciated more than ever. Folks like you are making trips accessible to students from places like Greenfield (where I grew up), Soledad, Salinas, Seaside, Watsonville, and Santa Cruz. We couldn’t do it without your generosity, and we are forever grateful.

Wellness in Wilderness | by Dani Cervantes

Dani presents a plant identification lesson to participants. Photo: Jorge Torres

YiW Program Manager Dani Cervantes orients participants to their location in the Ventana Wilderness. Photo: Jorge Torres
USFS/VWA Partnership Accelerates Forest Access | by Richard Popchak

The Ventana and Silver Peak Wilderness areas are valued because they are undeveloped, natural, untrammeled, and offer outstanding opportunities for solitude or primitive and unconfined recreation. Because wilderness areas are undeveloped, with few man-made structures, they are more resilient to disasters than the places where we live and work. That’s the theory, at least. It was put to the test when powerful atmospheric rivers ravaged California’s central coast earlier this year.

The impacts of the historic storms will be felt for quite some time in our human communities. On our public lands, damage was widespread across Los Padres National Forest (LPNF), especially in the southern ranger districts where US Forest Service recreation sites, trails, and roads were hard hit. The impacts on the Monterey Ranger District (MRD) did not seem as widespread — especially in the backcountry — and there was public consternation when LPNF closed four of the five districts, including Monterey, on January 13, 2023, for reasons of public health and safety.

As a trusted and valued partner, the VWA immediately coordinated with LPNF to perform assessments and emergency repairs of trails and camps throughout the Ventana and Silver Peak Wilderness areas. Working within the agency’s Incident Action Plan, 46 team members conducted 66 outings in the Big Sur backcountry, with the objective of restoring public access as quickly as possible. In most cases the issues were no worse than what one would expect from a typical winter, but there were exceptions, notably on the Kirk Creek, Pine Ridge, and Rocky Creek trails. The sections of the Kirk Creek Trail and Pine Ridge Trail that were deemed unsafe for passage were quickly repaired, and the wilderness areas on the MRD (with the exception of the Rocky Creek Trail) were reopened to visitation when a superseding forest order restored access on April 14, 2023.

Much work remains, of course. Several developed recreation sites in the frontcountry (such as campgrounds and a day-use area) are still closed. Access provided by Highway 1, Monterey County roads, and National Forest system roads will remain limited until repairs are completed. But thanks to LPNF/VWA collaboration, over 270,000 acres of designated wilderness in Monterey County are once again open for visitors to enjoy and protect.
It's important to celebrate small successes. Beth rejoices upon receipt of the required Grading Permit for the new trail segment.

Surveying and stalwart land use attorney Aengus Jeffers continue to provide essential expertise through this phase of the process.

On-the-ground project leader Beth Benoit (seen here on a section of the reroute) has been instrumental in moving this effort forward.

PHOTO: Nicole Nedeff

Carmel River Trail Reroute Complete — Easement Update Continues | by Tom Hopkins

The lower Carmel River Trail is now complete following VWA development of a rerouted trail segment around the 2019 landslide. The massive slip-out destroyed a significant portion of the trail upslope from Los Padres Reservoir. After assessing the slide, VWA and reservoir property owner California American Water Company (Cal-Am) went to work to plan and develop a new three-quarter mile trail segment around the affected area. That reroute was essential to preserve access to the upper Carmel River Trail, the Big Pines Trail, and the Ventana Wilderness.

While a team of VWA Volunteer Wilderness Rangers developed the new trail route on the ground, other VWA volunteers sorted through the maze of the Monterey County Planning Department to secure a required Grading Permit for the new trail segment. We could not have done that without the expertise and tenacity of land use attorney Aengus Jeffers and his associate Laura Lawrence, who guided every step of that bureaucratic traverse. Also essential for that permitting process were ecologist Nikki Nedeff and archaeologist Sue Morley, who provided the necessary reports required by the County. Civil engineering services to meet County requirements were provided by Belinda Taluban with mapping services by Aaron Cole.

With the trail reroute now complete, work continues with Cal-Am and the US Forest Service to update the existing public trail easement to ensure that the hiking public retains access through Los Padres Reservoir property to the public lands of the Ventana Wilderness. Lynn Kovach of Polaris Land

PHOTO: Nicole Nedeff

It’s important to celebrate small successes. Beth rejoices upon receipt of the required Grading Permit for the new trail segment.

SPECIAL THANKS
to the following volunteers and professionals for preserving Carmel River Trail public access:

VWA volunteers Beth Benoit, Bob Stallard, Lynn Moncher, Vince Silva, and Steve Benoit
Aman Gonzalez | California American Water Company
Michael Papa | United States Forest Service
Aaron Cole | Focalpoint Geospatial
Jack Glendening | Big Sur Trailmap
Mike Heard | USFS Wilderness Volunteer
The Law Office of Aengus L. Jeffers
Lynn Kovach | Polaris Land Surveying
Nicole Nedeff | Consulting Ecologist
Susan Morley | Consulting Archaeologist
Tom Nason | Esselen Tribe of Monterey County
Belinda Taluban | Taluban Engineering

On-the-ground project leader Beth Benoit (seen here on a section of the reroute) has been instrumental in moving this effort forward. Photo by Photo: Nicole Nedeff
For generations, the Carmel River Trail Network has provided access to iconic locales in the northern Ventana Wilderness. However, increasingly frequent wildfires and winter storms have caused damage to roadways leading to the area, often shutting out citizens from their public lands. Without trail crew and visitor access to trailheads — especially Bottchers Gap at the top of Palo Colorado Road — we are at risk of losing significant sections of the Skinner Ridge, Ventana Double Cone, Big Pines, and Puerto Suello trails, to name just a few.

When accessible, trailheads at Bottchers Gap, Los Padres Dam, and China Camp afford quick entry to diverse terrains and habitats, allowing visitors to enjoy the lush canyons of the Little Sur and Carmel Rivers and their enchanting tributaries. Spacious Pine Valley Camp, framed by towering ponderosa pines and dramatic sandstone cliffs, remains a popular destination. The summits of Mount Carmel and the eponymous Ventana Double Cone reward hikers with fantastic vistas of a vast and rugged wilderness just a short drive from the Monterey Peninsula.

You can help prevent these trails from being “lost” by taking action:

- If Jimmy Panetta is your congressman, ask him to work with federal, state, and Monterey County officials to restore access to the entirety of Palo Colorado Road. Use the form at panetta.house.gov/contact.
- Donate to the Ventana Trails Forever fund at the Community Foundation for Monterey County. Or you can make a donation directly to the VWA and earmark your gift to the VWA Trail Crew.
- Volunteer with the VWA Trail Crew. Please give us a call at 831-423-3191 if you would like to learn more about VWA efforts to maintain access in the Ventana and Silver Peak Wilderness areas.

This section of Palo Colorado Road has been closed since 2016 and denies the public vehicular access to the trailhead at Bottchers Gap.
Partnering with the Ventana Wilderness Alliance staff and volunteers to protect the Big Sur backcountry was an amazing experience! I learned how to properly operate a crosscut saw thanks to Steve and Lynn, and Amy taught us about local fauna and flora. I’m grateful for the opportunity to build our local relationship, protect the place we love MOST, and inspire equitable access to it for ALL! Now we’re sharing the work we got to do here with our local community, and it’s been such a great way to continue to build connections.

Marissa Pockat | Sales Manager, REI
Heading for the hills on the Carrizo Trail.

Guided by Amy Patten (far right), Kira, Nancy, and Maximilian get acquainted with the biodiversity of the Santa Lucia range.

High above the San Antonio valley: (Back row, left to right) Mike Chamberlain, Nancy Smith, Maximilian Marshall, Scott Ekin, Kira Sherriff  (Front row) Jess Gallardo, Megan Vandewalle.
Partner Spotlight | John “Fin” Eifert

Promoted to Monterey District Ranger late last year, John Finlay Eifert was immediately tasked with addressing the impacts of one of the wettest rainy seasons on record. What a lucky guy. Fortunately, Fin has been on the Monterey Ranger District (MRD) since October 2018 and has worked side-by-side with MRD staff and with stakeholders like the VWA for years. Let’s get to know the new Monterey District Ranger.

Q: Please tell us a little about yourself and your family. Where were you born and raised?
A: I was born in Oakland, California, in 1972. When I was one, my father retired from a career in the US Navy and we settled in the Pacific Northwest, in the small town of Poulsbo, Washington. We had the Olympic National Forest as our nearest public lands. I have two older brothers. One lives in Scotland (a fisherman) and the other lives in South Korea (an English professor). I also have a younger sister, who lives in the Palm Springs area. I spent my formative years in the Pacific Northwest, where I was active in both baseball and soccer. I am a lifelong Seattle Mariners and Seattle Seahawks fan and love to get back up to the area to visit at least once a year.

Q: Tell us about your education and career.
A: My education did not take a formal path after high school, as I first joined the US Coast Guard, completing my time on a cutter stationed out of the Bay Area. After that, I spent several years exploring the world — traveling, teaching English, and experiencing the beauty that is everywhere around us. On my return to the US in 2004 I went back to school, earning a two-year degree in Outdoor Recreation Leadership at Colorado Mountain College in Leadville, followed by a bachelor’s degree in Rangeland Management and Ecology at Colorado State University in Fort Collins. I began my federal career with the Bureau of Land Management in Meeker, Colorado, and began slowly working my way up the ranks. In 2018, I completed work on my master’s degree at Norwich University in Organizational Leadership, and moved to King City as the Resource Officer on the Monterey Ranger District. That same year, I began my PhD studies at the Chicago School of Professional Psychology. My PhD is centered around the role of district rangers within public land management work environments. My emphasis is on individual psychological capital, empathy, and navigating the complexity of the work environment. I anticipate defending my thesis in December 2023 or January 2024. I was promoted to District Ranger in December 2022.

Q: What do you enjoy most about your role as a District Ranger?
A: I enjoy all aspects. It’s where the rubber meets the road. I am fortunate to be organizationally positioned to engage diverse perspectives across all levels of our work, both internally and externally, to realize meaningful outcomes for the land and the community. I believe it is the best position in the agency and I am excited to see what we can accomplish together.

Q: How do you envision the Forest Service’s partnership with the VWA evolving over time?
A: The partnership we share with the VWA is essential for us to accomplish the necessary work on the ground. As the work on public lands is becoming more complex, and the solutions we seek are beyond the grasp of any one leader or expert, the relationship we have with the VWA is vital if we want to realize the shared vision we have for this land for current, and future, generations.

Q: You’ve been on the MRD for some time now. What are some of your favorite places?
A: I am continually in awe of the beauty and majesty that is the natural landscape of the Monterey Ranger District. From the coastal ecosystems where redwoods reach for the sky and cliffs drop to the Pacific Ocean to the inland environs where oaks have stood the test of time, this natural landscape is a recreationist’s dream. I especially enjoy the openness of the oak valleys of the east side of the Santa Lucias and the viewscapes to the west.
A Little Goes a Long Way with Monthly Sustaining Donations

Please join the VWA's community of supporters that make monthly recurring gifts to protect the Big Sur backcountry. As a sustaining supporter, you will empower the VWA with a reliable revenue source to fund ongoing projects and programs like Youth in Wilderness, Volunteer Wilderness Rangers, and Trail Crew. From a strategic perspective, if most of our new and existing supporters made recurring gifts, the subsequent increase in income also would enable the VWA to more quickly implement important projects to educate visitors, clean up marijuana grow sites, and advocate for Wilderness conservation with agencies and elected officials. In short, an increase in reliable monthly income will ensure the organization's sustainability and enable us to take on more challenges.

Since its founding in 2000, the VWA has steadily grown its effectiveness thanks to the generous support of members and grant providers. We can't thank you enough. And while we express our gratitude, we also ask that you join our strategic initiative to increase sustaining income.

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

What are the benefits to you?

CONVENIENCE: Monthly giving is a great way to include the VWA in your charitable support budget; allowing you to offer continuous support to an organization and a cause that you believe in. The online transaction process is quick and easy. You can give via a credit or debit card, or bank account. We will send monthly confirmation of your gift once it is processed.

IMPACT: When you make a monthly gift, you enable the VWA to plan, budget, and implement programs to benefit the Big Sur backcountry. We will always keep you up-to-date on new initiatives and programs.

If making sustaining gifts to the VWA seems like a good idea to you, please take action today by scanning the QR code on this page or go to the Donate button at ventanawild.org. The QR code will take you directly to the VWA's secure recurring donation page. We are tempted to say, "Set it and forget it." But we won’t let you forget how much we appreciate your sustaining support. Thank you!

Does your employer offer a match for charitable donations? Please let them know you support the VWA!
Max and Cynthia Chaplin’s Amazing Gift

Years before Max and Cynthia Chaplin passed away (in 2020 and 2021 respectively), they approached the Ventana Wilderness Alliance with the intention to support our Youth in Wilderness program with a legacy gift. After learning more about their planned giving goals, we connected Max and Cynthia with Christine Dawson, Senior Vice President of Philanthropic Services at the Community Foundation for Monterey County (CFMC). Together, Christine and the Chaplins set up a Charitable Gift Annuity. A “CGA” would provide Max and Cynthia with fixed payments for life in exchange for a gift of cash or securities to the Youth in Wilderness Fund at CFMC.

The Youth in Wilderness Fund at CFMC is a classic endowment. Its principal value is kept intact, while the investment earnings are distributed annually to the VWA to support our work to educate and inspire future generations of wilderness advocates. Since the Youth in Wilderness Fund is being held permanently, the Chaplins are supporting youth outdoor education in perpetuity. How cool is that?

Many people in the Ventana region remember Max and Cynthia for their love of hiking and dedication to the conservation of wild places. For years, Cynthia was a docent at Point Lobos and Garland Ranch. Let us also remember them for their commitment to the well-being of future generations. We are forever grateful to Max and Cynthia for their philanthropic vision. Please give us a call at 831-423-3191 if you’d like to follow the Chaplins’ lead in legacy giving. Go to cfmco.org to learn more about Charitable Gift Annuities and other ways to plan your legacy. ■