

SYMBIOSIS

Newsletter of the Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority

Fall 2012

MEET YOUR SANTA MONICA MOUNTAINS

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Cover: Santa Monica Mountains viewed
from the Mishe Mokwa Trail

Top: Malibu Creek State Park

Side: Coyote, photo by Louise Rishoff

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GREETINGS FROM THE MRCA

Dear Friends,

We have another great theme for our Symbiosis Newsletter, and one close to our hearts: the Santa Monica Mountains! These mountains have acted like a magnet over the years, attracting people for a host of reasons including recreation, conservation and even personal rejuvenation. The draw is not surprising considering all the Santa Monica Mountains have to offer, including a truly unique ecosystem with a Mediterranean climate and diverse plant and animal species -- all bordered to the south by the largest ocean in the world. I would venture to say there are no other mountains exactly like them in the world. And this is all in our own backyard!

Now, I'll share with you up front that I have a long history with the Santa Monica Mountains, being born in Santa Monica (let's just say before the 1940's) and then having grown up on the other side of the mountains in Van Nuys. My long interaction with these mountains has forged a strong connection to them. Just a few of my memories include family picnics, walks in the mountains, body surfing, visits to Griffith Park, and fishing at Trout Dale. I'm sure many of you have your own memories, and your own relationships to the Santa Monicas.

For a moment though, let me take you back in time to an era you may not have experienced. I remember taking Mulholland when it was practically all dirt west of Sepulveda Boulevard, and before the 405 freeway was even envisioned. Back then, family-oriented motorcycle clubs would use the "Mulholland trail" for scavenger hunts, and many times I accompanied my friend and his parents to establish clues for the next day's scavenger hunt. We made lots of trips from Van Nuys to Santa Monica via Sepulveda Boulevard to visit relatives and friends, passing a Poinsettia farm at the intersection of Sepulveda and Sunset -- where a hotel now exists. My Dad would often take the long way home on a Sunday, north along PCH to Malibu Canyon north, so we could get an ice cream bar from the Good Humor Man, whose truck was always parked along the road just north of the tunnel.

Looking back on the history of the Santa Monicas, there has been much change, both good and bad. Happily, in recent years more of the good has occurred, often reversing the bad that had previously taken place. In 1978, Congress designated part of the Santa Monica Mountains as a National Recreation Area. Shortly thereafter, the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy and the Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority (MRCA) were formed. As I gather my thoughts to write this letter, it's gratifying to recognize that the MRCA, in concert with our National and State park agencies, have played major roles in facilitating so many of those good changes.

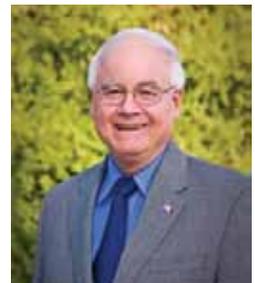
The mission of the MRCA is inspired by these mountains, and the unique resource they represent for our communities. It's rare to find such natural beauty just minutes away from a major metropolitan area. This issue of Symbiosis will show us how these mountains, only miles away from Los Angeles, can provide a respite from our busy and complicated lives. And it will showcase some of the many parks and recreational options you can find in the Santa Monicas. Whether you want to surf off the sandy shores, hike one of the many trails, or ride your horse along a ridgeline trail, these mountains offer a wealth of outdoor opportunities. Then there's the diverse wildlife. Spend an afternoon at a park and you can come across deer walking through a field, a red-tailed hawk soaring high above, and a great many insects if you only take the time to look.

Beyond the more obvious features, there are many subtle reasons these mountains are special. Partnership and conservation have protected the mountains and introduced more visitors to the parks. Just this summer, the MRCA worked alongside the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy, National Park Service, and California State Parks to open the new Anthony C. Beilenson Interagency Visitor Center, an excellent example of the successful partnership at the mountains.

This issue of Symbiosis aims to acquaint you with some of these stories and to inspire you to strengthen your connection with the Santa Monica Mountains. Whether you are a newcomer or old pro at hiking these trails, we hope to reveal even more reasons to love and protect our precious Santa Monica Mountains.

Sincerely,

George Lange, Chair of the Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority



WHAT MAKES THESE MOUNTAINS SPECIAL

Unique Features of the Santa Monica Mountains

“The most sophisticated city in the world is surrounded by indomitable nature.” –Simone de Beauvoir¹

Stretching over 40 miles from the Hollywood Hills to Point Mugu, the Santa Monica Mountains are without a doubt unique. Unique because of the location and size - the National Recreation Area, which only covers part of the mountains, is the world’s largest national park, covering 5 area codes and 26 zip codes. Unique because of the climate and native species. And maybe not as well known, but just as important, unique because of the successful partnerships of multiple agencies.

Blessed With Sunny Days

We all know it’s not the traffic that attracts us to Southern California, it’s the weather. Our hot, dry summers and mild, wet winters allow us to have beach days in December and low humidity days in July. This type of climate is a major characteristic of the ecosystem we are blessed to live in – the Mediterranean ecosystem.

Not only special for its ideal weather, the Mediterranean ecosystem is rare. In fact, it’s one of the rarest in the world. Only occurring in 5 locations, we are lucky one of them is right here in Southern California. Other areas that share this ecosystem are the region around the Mediterranean Sea (thus the name), Central Chile, South Africa, and Southern Australia.

With the mild climate and ample resources, comes ever increasing development pressure and economic value of these unique lands. Humans have inhabited Mediterranean ecosystems for thousands of years, and these areas continue to be affected by population growth, urbanization and fragmentation. Southern California is a good example of this. Over the past 100 years, tens of millions of people have settled in and around the Santa Monica Mountains, enjoying the climate and natural resources.

This is why it is so important to

protect as much open space as possible. Not only is it home for us, but for many plants and animals as well.

Diverse and Rare

For many of the same reasons people flock to the Santa Monica Mountains, plants and animals find this region to be an ideal home. With the rich ocean and mountain habitats, these mountains are home to over 5,000 native plants species and 450 animal species (not including the countless insects and other invertebrate species).

It’s an impressive and diverse list to be sure - everything from Woolly Blue Curls and Pearly Everlasting to Long-tailed Weasels and Silvery Legless Lizards. As the natural habitat of the Santa Monicas continues to decrease in size, it should be no surprise this extensive list includes 26 species on state and federal endangered or threatened species lists, such as the California

Aerial View of the Santa Monica Mountains





Long-tailed Weasel at King Gillette Ranch, photo by Louise Rishoff

Red-legged Frog and Belding's Savannah Sparrow. In order to support the populations of these species, parklands, and open space need to be protected and connected.

Wildlife corridors (you can imagine them as animal highways) are key to this effort. Large animals, such as mountain lions, coyotes, and bobcats, rely on these protected lands and thoroughfares to travel from one area to another. The passageways, formed from culverts, underpasses, and large canyon parks stretching from one range to the next, act as major traffic areas for wildlife. Without corridors, animals would be restricted with habitat "islands", separated by houses, roads, shopping malls, and other urban development. This becomes a problem when these "islands" cannot provide the basic needs, specifically food and mates. By providing ways for animals to move back and forth, the corridors greatly improve an animal's chance of survival and reproduction.

With all this in mind, local park agencies work together to protect viable habitat and key wildlife corridors.

Success with Partnerships

The Santa Monica Mountains have become a national model for collaborative partnerships between agencies. For example, look at these numbers:

- 153,075 acres of local, state, and federal parks within the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area
- More than 35 million annual visitors recreate at the parks and beaches
- 70,000 inner-city school children are served through a consortium of education partners delivering nature programs
- Public parks immediately accessible to 17 million people
- Critical habitat for 26 threatened and endangered species will remain permanently protected
- 46 restored streams and estuaries exceed federal clean water standards
- 500-mile inter-jurisdictional trail system is administered under a common trail management plan

All this success is not due to one or even two agencies, but to a large partnership of agencies and

organizations coming together for one common goal: to protect the Santa Monica Mountains. Through years of hard work, battles, and creative solutions, these partner agencies have successfully protected over 153,075 acres in the Santa Monica Mountains. And this number only continues to grow. The Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority works closely with the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy, California State Parks and National Park Service (see page 6), along with countless other organizations, to bring this dream into reality.

From acquiring land, providing public access, enforcing public safety, and educating the public, these four agencies have a strong history of coming together to get the job done. The most recent example of our growing and innovative partnership has been the opening of the new Anthony C. Beilenson Interagency Visitor Center at King Gillette Ranch (see page 10). The Center is proof that by combining each agencies' strengths and resources, we can work together to protect our special Santa Monica Mountains.

SPOTLIGHT ON PARTNERSHIPS



Westridge-Canyonback Wilderness Park

Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority (MRCA)

The MRCA is a local government public entity, which manages and provides ranger services to almost 69,000 acres within the Los Angeles and Ventura area. The MRCA is a local partnership between the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy, the Conejo Recreation and Park District, and the Rancho Simi Recreation and Park District. The agency is dedicated to the preservation and management of local open space and parkland, watershed lands, trails and wildlife habitat.

Connecting to the Wild - Deep in the eastern Santa Monicas, Westridge-Canyonback Wilderness Park is a favorite among hikers, dog walkers, mountain bikers and equestrians. It is contiguous with the 20,000 acre wilderness park known as the “Big Wild.”

Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy (SMMC)

Through direct action, alliances, partnerships, and joint powers authorities, the Conservancy’s mission is to strategically buy back, preserve, protect, restore, and enhance treasured pieces of Southern California. The Conservancy has helped preserve over 69,000 acres of parkland in both wilderness and urban settings, and has improved more than 114 public recreational facilities through the region.

Colorful Beauty - Red Rock Canyon Park makes for a surprising hike through brilliant red, tan and even faint purple sandstone formations. The trail meanders through a tranquil canyon and leads to spectacular views at Calabasas Peak.



Red Rock Canyon Park

National Park Service (NPS), Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area

The Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area (SMMNRA) was established in 1978, as a unit of the National Park System. The National Park Service oversees the National Recreation Area, and is directly responsible for managing 22,093 acres. NPS collaborates with many agencies and organizations to make the Santa Monica Mountains a unique place in which to live, volunteer, work, and play.

Movie Magic in the Mountains -Having served as a backdrop for hundreds of movies, Paramount Ranch exemplifies the Santa Monica Mountains’ ties to Hollywood. Its a great place take any movie lover.



Paramount Ranch

California State Parks, Angeles District

California Department of Parks and Recreation manages more than 270 park units, which contain the finest and most diverse collection of natural, cultural, and recreational resources to be found in the state. Within the Santa Monica Mountains, California State Parks manages the most public land with an estimated 35,059 acres.

Surf and Turf - Explore tide pools, catch some waves, or pitch a tent at the nearby campground; Leo Carrillo has got it all! This beach is a wonderful place for a family beach day.



Leo Carrillo State Park

HOW WE SPENT OUR SUMMER



Big Attendance at Campfire Evenings

What better way to spend a summer evening than around a campfire? With songs, an entertaining nature program, and of course, roasting marshmallows, our summer campfires are an annual tradition. On one record-breaking night, we had over 150 people in attendance! These programs are held every summer at King Gillette Ranch, Franklin Canyon, Temescal Gateway Park, Vista Hermosa Natural Park, and Marsh Park.



Prepared for Fire Season

As the temperature rose and the plants dried out, the MRCA and other local agencies prepared for fire season. Every summer we hold our Fire Academy, training new recruits to become wildland firefighters through a partnership with Americorps. During this time, we also made sure our equipment, fire roads, and communication systems were in good condition in the event of a fire.



Paddling Down the River

Just down the road from the Santa Monica Mountains, you can see a different side of LA - from the seat of a kayak! Having just completed its second year, the Paddle the LA River program has become wildly popular. The 2,000 available seats sold out in minutes. This summer, the Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority (MRCA) also offered an extension program, LA River Access for All, which provided kayak trips for participants with limited mobility by using specially designed rafts. The MRCA has partnered with the Los Angeles Conservation Corps, The River Project, Los Angeles River Expeditions, Friends of the Los Angeles River, and Urban Semillas to bring this amazing opportunity to the public. For more information visit: www.paddlethelariver.org



Hiking trail at Temescal Gateway Park

RECREATION ACTIVATES CONSERVATION

Protecting the Santa Monica Mountains By Jim Hasenauer, MRCA Board Member

Some people think that recreation threatens the conditions of wild lands, but it's a natural progression from visiting and enjoying LA's wonderful open spaces to working to protect and expand them.

When I first started riding mountain bikes in 1984, the shop told me to check out Dirt Mulholland. We called this place "the park". I didn't know who managed it, what their mandate was, who fought to create it, or what threatened its expansion or sustainability. That kind of knowledge came with time, time on the trails and time in meetings.

My riding created a thirst for local knowledge: history, geology, plant and animal life. The more I knew, the more I loved these mountains, the more I needed to protect them. Every ride was a field trip. All trail users have a sensual connection with the natural world. Each experience remakes our understanding of both immediate and remote environments. Familiar trails create depth; visiting new areas, breadth.

The payoff for trail users is that the exact qualities that sustain biological health – wildness, scope, connectivity and the presence of

natural processes – also make the trail experience so satisfying. All trail users, hikers, equestrians, and mountain bikers are a natural conservation constituency.

A lot of the land in these mountains is undeveloped private land and the greatest threat to the Santa Monicas has always been development. That's often the first conservation issue that really touches trail users. One day you return to an area that you used to enjoy and you discover it's been bulldozed – terraced into building sites, gone forever. Once that happens, you're never the same;

you become vigilant. “Development monitoring” and land acquisition become critical conservation efforts. On the trail, you become attuned to new fences or signs or truck tracks. Newspaper articles on zoning changes or public hearings catch your attention. It becomes important to partner up with land trusts, environmental groups, neighborhood associations and the rare politicians who value open space over real estate development.

Those connections often lead to conversations about priorities. Land costs money and public land acquisition requires political influence. Neighborhood groups usually want their over-the-fence open space protected; environmental groups are more likely to be concerned with habitat protection, animal migration, and water sources. These are important dialogues and they require a willingness to set aside biases and an openness to the big picture. This conversation is advanced study in both natural and human communities. It highlights technical knowledge and sensual experience, competition and cooperation, issues of use and restraint, and self interest and the common good. Good environmental planning requires both hearts and minds.

It’s easy to take a place at face value, but there’s often more to learn. Our local mountains are an example of the Mediterranean biome, one of the smallest, most populated and most threatened land forms on the planet. It’s not only that the land stays undeveloped; it needs to retain its character and that means its biological diversity. Certain species mark its health, others its fragility.

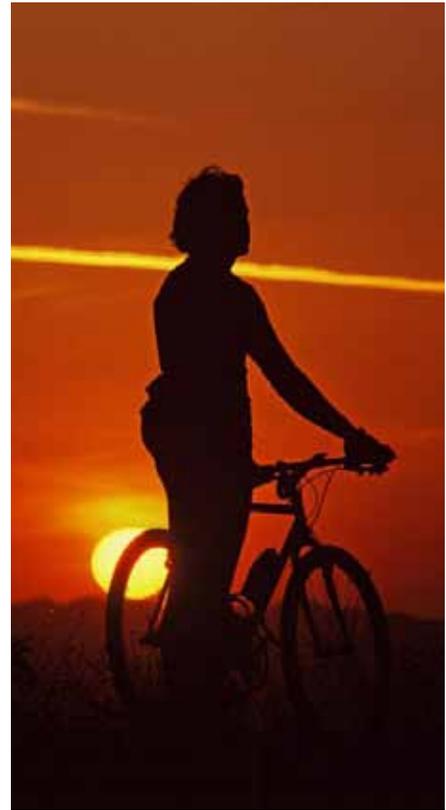
One of the things that keeps us coming back is the wildlife. Most

trail users have an animal story. These chance encounters with our earth cousins transform us. They remind us that we share our niche. It’s easy to appreciate the big critters. We identify. But, in some ways their greatest gift to us is that they’re the access point to understanding the smaller life forms and the way things all fit together. Plant and animal life are bound in dynamic systems pitting change against stability. Throw in fire, flood, earthquake, weather events, and human intervention and this dance becomes dramatic, one of life or death.

That’s where our role becomes more clear to me. There are things we can control and things we can’t. I want to be conscious of the effects of my causes. I want to be mindful, to never take the Santa Monica Mountains or other wild places for granted. These plants and animals, this wild mountain geology, they are survivors and I can abet their survival or their demise.

So I ride, but I also read and talk to people. I want to know how the indigenous people lived on this landscape. What happened after colonization and settlement? What economic forces changed the land? What does this land or this species need to maintain or recover its wildness? What can I do? Where can I learn these things?

I know I’m not alone. I’ve ridden in some stunning places around the country and I’m always taken with the familiarity that locals provide on these rides: the way they automatically point things out, explain subtleties, provide background. They’re like docents showing things off. We love the ride, but it’s clear they’re also loving the place and they want newcomers to appreciate it too.



Bicyclists enjoying the sunset

That’s the key. Whether you take advantage of one of the MRCA’s many interpretive programs, hike with the Sierra Club, ride with CORBA, or use guidebooks or the web to show you the way, a wealth of knowledge awaits. That knowledge compels action. We recreate to sustain ourselves and we advocate to sustain this wildness that we treasure.

Jim Hasenauer is the public member of the Governing Board of the MRCA. He’s a Professor Emeritus of Communication Studies at California State University at Northridge, the Co-Chair of the California Roundtable on Recreation, Parks and Tourism, and the President of the California Trails and Greenways Foundation. Hasenauer was a founder of the Concerned Off Road Bicyclists Association and the International Mountain Bicycling Association. He and two co-authors have just completed a new mountain bike guidebook to Los Angeles. An earlier version of this essay appeared in the IMBA Trail News.



Entrance Plaza of the Anthony C. Beilenson Interagency Visitor Center

MEET YOUR MOUNTAINS

At the Anthony C. Beilenson Interagency Visitor Center

Need an introduction to the Santa Monica Mountains? Looking for a new park to add to your list of favorites? Then you need to check out the new Anthony C. Beilenson Interagency Visitor Center. When you walk into the Visitor Center you'll be greeted by smiling park staff and volunteers, ready to answer any and all of your park questions. In the Map Room, use the 'Trip Planner' to organize a new adventure or be reminded of an old favorite. Wander into a hallway that awakens all your senses, from sight to sound to smell, and before

you know it you'll be reading and watching displays about the unique features of the local mountains. Last, but not least, visit the amazing bookstore and discover the Visitor Center has something for everyone. It is the perfect place to meet your mountains!

A Team Effort

Located at King Gillette Ranch in Calabasas, California and open since June 2012, the Visitor Center has been years in the making. The Mountains Recreation and

Conservation Authority, Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy, National Park Service, and California State Parks recognized that visitors needed one central location to ask questions and find answers about the Santa Monica Mountains. These agencies came together to see this dream become reality and from planning, construction, and now staffing, the agencies pulled their resources together to open this superb center for the public.

Now park visitors have a place

where they can learn about the mountains through interactive exhibits and face-to-face conversations with park staff. There is much to explore at the Visitor Center, both inside and out. Visitors can stroll through the nearby native plant garden, go to public programs on site, picnic on the lawns, or be inspired to visit other local parks. The building is just the starting point.

Being Green

It has famously been said that ‘it isn’t easy being green’, but the new Visitor Center has found a way. Through careful planning and construction practices, the Visitor Center building has transformed into the environmentally friendly marvel you can now visit.

Built in the 1920’s as horse stables, the structure has been cleaned up and repurposed with much of the original building remaining. The thick adoblar walls are excellent insulators and much of the wooden ceiling panels endure; those that couldn’t were reused for the front desk.

The latest in modern technology has also found its way into the Visitor Center. Solar tubes (think of a smaller but mightier ‘sky light’) allow for natural lighting while solar panels provide the energy for the various displays and additional LED lighting. The geothermal heating and cooling system make use of the nearby pond to help regulate the buildings’ internal temperature.

All of these features and more help to distinguish the Visitor Center as a ‘net zero’ building and certified Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) Platinum by the U.S. Green Building Council. This is the first ‘net zero’ visitor center for the National Park Service and one of only a handful of



The Trip Planner will help find the park that is perfectly suited for your outdoor adventure.



A young visitor enjoys learning about wildlife corridors and getting the perspective of a coyote.

LEED Platinum certified buildings in Southern California. Neither is easy to obtain and are a crowning achievement for the Visitor Center.

At the Heart

Even with the design accolades and unprecedented agency cooperation, visitors are still at the heart of the Visitor Center. Designed to engage young and old alike, with each new and returning face, the mission of the Visitor Center is fulfilled. Of those who have already visited, they

have found ways to reconnect with the Santa Monica Mountains. So what are *you* waiting for?

Visitor Center hours are 9am – 5pm daily.

Mountains Recreation & Conservation Authority

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For more information visit:

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A NEW LOOK FOR THE MOUNTAINS

Debuting this year, the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area has a new logo. Intended to unify the parks and agencies within the area, the new logo represents the amazing diversity of the mountains. The tiles captures the unique characteristics of the region, from the land to the sea and from the animals to the plants. Look for this new logo on merchandise at the Visitor Center and on publications through out the mountains.



Beach along Pacific Coast Highway



Mule Deer, Photo: Louise Rishoff



Historic photo of stables at King Gillette Ranch



Sycamore leaves at Ramirez Canyon Park