

# SYMBIOSIS

NEWSLETTER OF THE MRCA - SPRING 2015

- Bridge to Park Careers: Connecting LA Youth to Park Job Opportunities
- At a Crossroads: How the MRCA Pursues Diversity
- Aztec Fire Crew: New Jobs Program Along the LA River

## PATH TO PARK EQUITY



# SYMBIOSIS

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## AT A CROSSROADS: MOVING TOWARDS EQUALITY, DIVERSITY, AND INCLUSION



### MRCA

Mountains Recreation & Conservation Authority

The MRCA is dedicated to the preservation and management of local open space and parkland, watershed lands, trails, and wildlife habitat. The MRCA manages and provides ranger services for almost 69,000 acres of public lands and parks that it owns and that are owned by the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy or other agencies and provides comprehensive education and interpretation programs for the public.

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#### Special thanks to:

- Los Angeles County Supervisor Sheila Kuehl
- All Supporters of the MRCA and the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy



## MESSAGE FROM THE

# MRCA

Dear Friends,

It is truly exciting to focus this Spring 2015 issue of Symbiosis on our communities' youth. In particular, we wanted to provide an in depth look into the **many** youth oriented programs the Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority (MRCA) provides for our diverse communities and for populations that are too often underserved. This is a real priority for MRCA, and, we hope, will increasingly be so for similar organizations around the country. This issue's theme, "Path to Park Equity", reflects how we are steadily focused on increasing access to parks, programs, and career paths for youth.

As you may recall, in our 2012 Symbiosis edition we began a discussion of paths to equity by focusing on Environmental Justice (EJ) and how it related to our communities and parks. EJ is an ongoing issue that turns our attention to how we design and develop parks and programs, and the benefits they offer for quality of life, accessible for all communities. As profiled in that 2012 issue, many of the MRCA's programs are directed to underserved intercity youth and families in an effort to advance EJ. These programs represent – and build on – our overall commitment to serve and address the recreational and environmental needs of all residents in our Southern California service area. This Spring edition will focus specific attention to long-term engagement with our communities including our multi-generational approach to programming and professional development programs for young adults in Los Angeles. Specifically, we describe how we aim to engage diverse communities through the three main approaches noted below:

- MRCA Urban Parks: Los Angeles lacks accessible green open spaces for urban youth. This is precisely why we opened up urban parks throughout Los Angeles County keeping in mind best practices in park planning and visitor use.

- MRCA Public Programs: Parks are important places for people to share stories, take a walk, and learn about their environments. MRCA incorporates these activities in connecting children and families to park resources through multi-week themed programs.

- MRCA Career Programs: We value people being able to share stories about the communities and places in which they live. The agency's new career programs recruit individuals from local communities surrounding our urban parks to connect with visitors and tell a more personal story of the places they call home.

I sincerely hope that the many MRCA accomplishments through past programs and those highlighted in this 2015 Spring issue will serve as a model for other agencies engaged in similar work. **Your MRCA is confident** in our future as a park agency to meet the challenging and changing needs of our communities, and we are totally committed to making parks, programs, and careers accessible to all!

Sincerely,

George Lange  
Chair, MRCA



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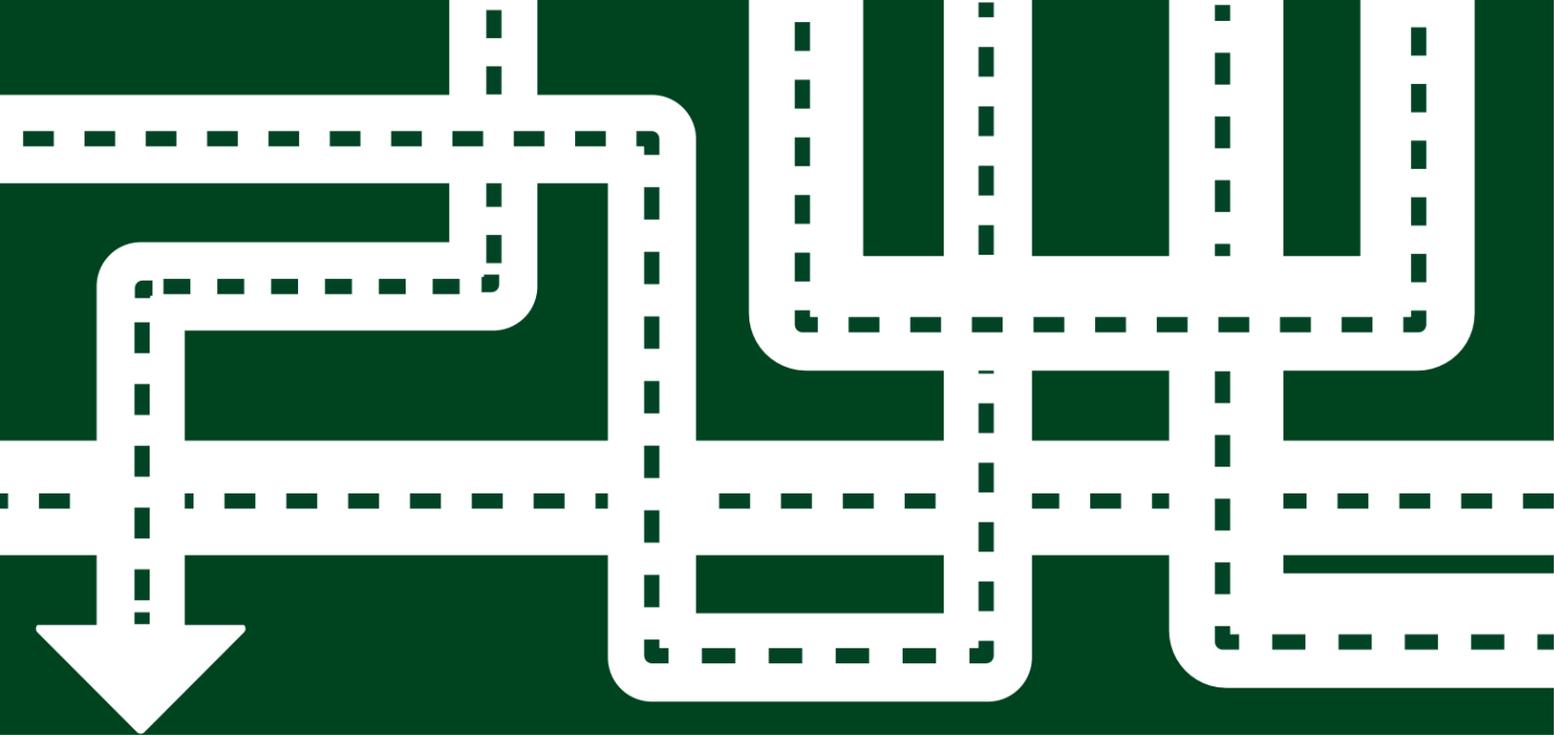
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interpprograms@mrca.ca.gov

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# AT A CROSSROADS: MOVING TOWARDS EQUALITY, DIVERSITY, AND INCLUSION

We all reach a point in our lives where we come to a crossroads and must decide which path we want to take. Do we want to go left or right? Do we want to take the path that looks easy or take the one that is more challenging but has the better outcome? Just as we all face these decisions as individuals, the environmental and park agency fields are facing a similar dilemma at a crossroads involving equality, diversity and inclusion. We can either continue down a path that has historically excluded people of color and other underserved audiences or we can choose a path that seeks to address this history of marginalization. The Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority (MRCA) has been aggressively working to enact the change needed to adequately resolve this dilemma.

## The Dilemma

To understand how we got to this crossroads, we must look back at the events that led us down this current path. In the 1960s, the Civil Rights Movement began to strategically organize itself, bringing about important political change. Nevertheless, the many institutional injustices continued well beyond this movement through years of discrimination and systemic oppression. In the late 1980s, the United States Environmental Justice Movement (EJM) was born and attempted to deal with those overlooked injustices: hazardous waste facilities are disproportionately located in communities

of color and, environmental organizations, including park agencies, failed to significantly hire people from diverse backgrounds who reflect the rapidly changing demographics. (Price 2012)

You can see proof of this even here in Los Angeles. In 2002, a survey was conducted in the Santa Monica Mountains Recreational Area revealing just how low the visitation rates by people of color and people from underserved backgrounds were in relation to that of others. Of the 912 park visitors surveyed, 72% of visitors identified as White, 11.8% as Latino, 5.5% as Asian, 3.4% as either Black, African American, Native American, Alaskan Native, Native Hawaiian, or Pacific Islander, and 17.3% decline to identify. These percentages sadly do not reflect the demographics of Los Angeles County, with White 48.7%, Latino 44.6%, Asian 11.9%, Black 9.8%, American Indian/Alaskan Native 0.8%, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander as 0.3% (United States Census Bureau 2000), though greater diversity is found at Temescal Canyon and other parks accessible by public transportation. The study also found that 21.5% of the visitors make under fifty thousand dollars each year while 68% of the park visitors make over the fifty thousand dollar mark. These demographics and visitor rates confirm that access to parks is not equitable. (Byrne, Wolch, and Zhang 2009)

The question was raised: if parks are not equally accessible to all, what are the barriers? In an attempt to investigate this social phenomenon, researchers proposed key explanations ranging from socio-economic barriers to experienced racial discrimination within parks.

Although 30% of Los Angeles land is green open space, these spaces are located in more affluent and White areas. While Los Angeles' Westside enjoys 34 acres of park space, places like South Central offer only 1.2 acres of park space. In addition, Angelenos know very well that public transportation is not a convenient method of travel in this city, and car transportation and parking costs might be too expensive for someone on the lower end of the economic scale.

Further, the fact that people of color are severely underrepresented in both environmental and park professions might account for some of the experienced racial discrimination reported by park visitors. A recent study finds that racial diversity is far behind that of gender diversity in the environmental fields. Of the 293 environmental agencies involved in this study, people of color occupy less than 16% of all staff positions and only 12% of leadership positions. If people of color occupy few positions at parks, how welcoming is this to others who might look like them? Do current management and field staff have the appropriate knowledge and skills to work closely with diverse visitors? These questions point to a cycle of exclusionary practices. (Taylor 2014)

## Its Implications

As with every decision in our own lives, actions have unforeseen consequences or implications. The same is true with practices within parks nationwide. If a large portion of the population is not engaged in the environmental movement, specifically people of color and those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, what are the implications for Los Angeles and its people? It is well known that providing green, open spaces allow for recreational activities and free play that promote physical and mental health. However, as mentioned earlier, these spaces are not equally accessible to all Los Angeles residents. Consequently, residents that live in park poor neighborhoods are predisposed to obesity and other health problems that decrease the quality of life for those affected. The City Project found that obesity rates of children correlate to a city's proximity to open space. To highlight this finding, while 37% of Maywood's children are obese, only 4% of Manhattan Beach's children are obese. These findings present a stark reality and point to the importance of green open space. (The City Project 2011)

Many of those who have pursued careers in the environmental and park agency fields had some of their first encounters at parks learning about the park's natural and cultural resources. For those with little to no access to parks, hands-on educational and interpretive opportunities outside of formal education—which may inspire interest in environmental careers—can be difficult to come by. Students from underserved communities are further marginalized from entering into this field.

Vista Hermosa Natural Park near Downtown Los Angeles



Additionally, studies show that people of color are largely interested in environmental issues at the ballot. Today, people of color make up 33% of the national population and by the year 2050, this percentage is expected to double. This is a significant projection for the voting public. If people of color are underrepresented in the environmental fields, what agency do people of color have in defining the development and successes of the American environmental movement? (Bonta and Jordan 2007)

### Approaches

While there is a universal move among environmental and park agencies to travel towards the path of addressing this history of marginalization and diversify the movement, the approaches are far from uniform.



Augustus F. Hawkins Natural Park

#### Approach 1: Urban Parks

One of the earliest attempts at engaging diverse communities was observed in the 1970s when U.S. Secretary

of the Interior proposed the Parks to People Initiative influenced by McCone Commission's investigation into the 1965 Watts uprising. This investigation found that parks were needed throughout the most vulnerable areas of Los Angeles to help alleviate some of the stress experienced in heavily populated areas. Overall, this initiative intended to bring National Parks closer to underserved and marginalized urban communities. By 1978, five urban National Parks had been created including the Santa Monica National Recreation Area. Interestingly, a third of all visits to National Parks were to urban National Parks. Yet, as mentioned before, this approach proved to be ineffective as the number of visitors from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds and cultural backgrounds remained low. (Byrne, Wolch, and Zhang 2009)

So if urban National Parks are ineffective at reaching a diverse public, what alternatives could increase the presence of underserved communities in this field? The Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority (MRCA) envisioned a new approach to park access. More parks had to be created at the center of those communities. With this idea in mind, the MRCA built many urban parks in Los Angeles including Augustus F. Hawkins Natural Park, Marsh Park, Vista Hermosa Natural Park, and Compton Creek Natural Park at Washington Elementary School. Each showcases state-

of-the-art design, hires from the community to build, and offers public programs. Public programs build on the natural curiosity of park visitors and engage them in conversation about the park's resources with the intention of generating environmental stewards. (Price 2012)

#### Approach 2: Multigenerational Family Program

In order to engage local families in the park-poor areas, it is important to find programs or activities that not only engage the parents, but also the youngest toddler to the grandparents, while overcoming traditional barriers to park access. Since 1985, the MRCA has provided free bus transportation to natural parks from low-income areas of Los Angeles through the Transit to Trails program. This free program offers inner city youth and their families' transportation from one of our urban parks to the parks and beaches of the Santa Monica Mountains. Each trip includes a guided tour of the park visited and is offered in conjunction with community partners including the City Project, Anahuak Youth Sports Association, and many other nonprofit community based organizations.

The MRCA also provides a Youth Leadership Series (YLS) for underserved youth ranging in age: **Future Urban Naturalists** (5-10 years), **Junior Naturalists** (11-13), **Naturalist Explorers** (14-18), and **Outdoor Leaders** (17+). By partnering with organizations like Anahuak Youth Soccer Association, Compton Jr. Posse, Para Los Niños, and the Boys and Girls Club, MRCA's YLS fuses traditional outdoor skills with team-building and leadership skills to inspire a new generation of stewards. These programs can build upon each other to produce longer-term engagement or serve as a multi-week stand-alone opportunity that serves as an introduction to the environmental fields.



Naturalist Explorers

#### Approach 3: Career Development Training

To directly address the issue of a diverse park staff to greet our visitors, the MRCA has developed one of our newest programs: Bridge to Park Careers. The Bridge to Park Careers program is a unique approach to engaging urban youth who have traditionally been left out of the park agency field. The program facilitates urban youth in acquiring a competitive skill set within the parks, with the pilot program focusing on the field of interpretation. This



Outdoor Leaders

comprehensive, four-month paid training program was started in December 2014 and will be offered each year hereafter. All nine of the participants in the pilot program have been offered full-time positions at the MRCA and this success has generated an expansion to the program, with future tracks in restoration, park and facilities maintenance, and ranger services. Graduates will earn a competitive skill set that can be used to fill a variety of positions at the MRCA or other park agencies.

The MRCA isn't new to job training programs. The Bridge to Park Careers program draws on the lessons learned from previous efforts.

#### The Path Ahead

These approaches are just some of the ways we can put park agencies and the environmental field on the right track to move towards equality, diversity, and inclusion. While choosing the new and unknown path at the crossroads may be more difficult at first, we at the MRCA are up for the challenge and know the outcome is a necessary one. We are starting right here in Los Angeles, with the hope of ensuring that all residents of Los Angeles have access to careers, parks, and programs.

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# BRIDGE TO PARK CAREERS

Bridges are vital parts of our everyday lives. We often don't even think about the important role they play in connecting our world. Bridges provide a clear path from one area to another that would otherwise be impossible to cross, overcoming initial barriers that appear insurmountable.

This phenomenon is prevalent in many careers, where youth often confront difficult barriers when crossing over to new job opportunities. These barriers may take the form of lack of work experience, lack of certifications, or uncertainty about necessary steps to pursue certain professions.

The MRCA Bridge to Park Careers program aims to do just that; by connecting the youth of Los Angeles to a clear pathway of career opportunities with park agencies. The MRCA has a long history of creating bridges for the people of Los Angeles to a variety of park experiences. By bridging the gap between traditional park youth programs and a permanent job, graduates of this paid training program are eligible to apply for many full time park positions with the MRCA and other park partners.

## The Blueprint

The MRCA Bridge to Park Careers program is a four-month, paid training program for young adults in Los Angeles. The program provides the stability of full-time employment, so participants can focus on learning and growing as qualified park staff. From our experience with the Youth Leadership Series, the MRCA envisioned this program to help promote a workforce that represents the diversity of the communities in which our parks are located.

In preparation for this program, we examined job descriptions for the MRCA and other agencies to craft a program that would create qualified staff for a variety

of park jobs. We met with representatives from other agencies who expressed a dilemma with the experience of their applicants, transitioning from youth programs into eligibility for jobs in the workforce. We also polled our current naturalist staff and young adults that participated in our Youth Leadership Series with the following question - "If you could have learned something valuable at the beginning of your career, what would it be?" From that feedback, we designed a comprehensive training program, which covered a tremendous amount of topics that would prepare any motivated individual to become fully qualified for a park agency career.

There are 6 key content areas covered by the program: Introduction to the MRCA, Natural and Cultural History, Outdoor Skills, Education and Interpretation, Customer Service and Public Safety, and Leadership Development.

## The Participants

Once we designed the program's blueprint, we started to seek out the most passionate and promising youth for this innovative jobs program. Those interested in the program were referred from a variety of community partners and governmental organizations including Los Angeles Conservation Corps, Friends of the LA River, Los Angeles City Recreation and Parks, California State Parks, and National Park Service. All applicants had some experience working in the outdoors or had participated in youth programs about nature from their referring organizations. Past experiences varied from urban forestry and restoration projects to public outreach and education programs. Because we wanted to serve audiences who are not traditional park users from the areas surrounding our urban parks, we hoped to increase exposure to park careers as well as knowledge of the outdoors.

After resume reviews and interviews with a panel of MRCA staff, a core group of nine individuals were offered positions in the program. These nine participants are shining examples of promising youth from surrounding communities, all which have an interest in the outdoors, a passion for learning, a commitment to public service, and a desire to share the outdoors with others. One participant, Edgar Del Campo, exemplified the passion of all the selectees by clearly stating he was "hungry" for an opportunity to pursue a solid career path. With the applicants in place, we began the essential steps to build the bridge.



Learning about Ballona Wetlands

## Who Will Support the Bridge?

We began by looking at our own staff to see who could train the participants in certain topics, and then we

identified areas where external speakers would add value to the program. We strived to find guest speakers who would represent a wide variety of backgrounds, including university professors, professional storytellers, team building experts, Los Angeles River advocates, and National Park Service staff. The participants have had opportunities to network with community organizers from local non-profits and elected officials. Many of the speakers remarked at the impressive spectrum of information covered during the MRCA Bridge to Park Careers program.

The experiences of working alongside park educators and guest speakers has allowed the MRCA Bridge to Park Careers participants to learn a variety of teaching styles, shared collective knowledge, life skills, and career paths.

## Crossing the Bridge

Many of the skills and certifications acquired by the participants will be invaluable to future park careers. The group learned to develop and deliver public programs through the Certified Interpretive Guide training from the National Association for Interpretation, learned cultural and natural history of the region through the Certified California Naturalist program from the University of California Cooperative Extension, practiced life saving skills through a CPR and First Aid Certification from the American Heart Association, and earned certificates in hands-on teaching practices such as Leave No Trace, Project Wet, Project WILD, and Project Learning Tree.

By the completion of this program, participants will have accumulated an astounding amount of practical hours in a variety of fields, including:

- 150 hours of cultural and natural history
- 100 hours of interpretive skills
- 100 hours of formal and informal education techniques
- 100 hours of leadership development
- 100 hours of visitor services and public safety
- 60 hours of outdoor skills
- 60 hours of professional development

The Los Angeles River Center and Gardens has served as the home base for classroom discussions and guest lectures. Over the four months of the program, participants traveled all over Los Angeles and the Santa Monica Mountains to visit parks and open spaces and to meet the personnel who work in those areas.

## The Bridge Continues

After four months of intensive and valuable training, the nine participants are ready for full-time employment. Initially, the MRCA Education and Interpretation Division had about four positions available for the Naturalist I job title. We envisioned that the other five participants would find employment with other agencies by aiding participants to achieve park jobs with resume work and interview opportunities. But as the program continued and other MRCA divisions had opportunities to work with the participants, it became clear that the MRCA would benefit from these dedicated individuals finding positions throughout the agency. At the program conclusion, all participants were offered jobs within the MRCA in divisions ranging from Restoration to Interpretation.

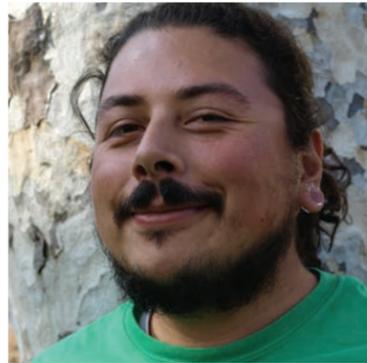
The next steps will be to continue this program with a new group of enthusiastic young adults from Los Angeles and focus on other aspects of park careers including urban forestry, park construction, park planning, and river safety.

This program reflects a long history of MRCA programs aimed at career development for urban youth. The history of jobs programs have successfully brought us long time employees such as Chief Ranger Fernando Gomez and MRCA Park Manager Lorenzo Mateo. The Bridge to Park Careers program represents our on-going development in job training programs over many years. Our hope is that the MRCA Bridge to Park Careers program will create the next generation of long-term, dedicated park staff.

Just as we rely on bridges as important parts of our daily lives, we hope the MRCA Bridge to Park Careers program enriches the lives of Los Angeles' young adults. Just as we build bridges with strong foundations that last for centuries, we hope the new generation of park staff will promote stewardship and conservation at local parks for many years to come.



2015 Bridge to Park Careers Trainees



**WILFREDO ARROYO**

**Mission Statement:** To provide my community with knowledge and information about all of our natural resources by leading interpretive programming and sharing my experiences.

"The MRCA Bridge to Park Careers program inspired me to follow my dreams to a green lifestyle."



**ADRIANA BARRERA**

**Mission Statement:** To inspire others to seek new experiences by challenging their curiosity and intellectual ability.

"To be introduced to nature feels truly amazing. An even better feeling is sharing nature with others."



**EDGAR DEL CAMPO**

**Mission Statement:** To inspire a sense of stewardship in my community by sharing ecological literacy through interpretive techniques.

"Prior to starting the program, our horizon was a five mile radius. As we venture through this program, our horizon became endless."



**CARLOS ESPINOZA**

**Mission Statement:** To bring awareness of our environment by exploring the ways we can keep species and their habitats healthy.

"As I started this program, I was mostly thinking of what I wanted to become in the future not knowing what steps to take and where my journey will take me. Now I'm open to whatever comes in my way and to always say yes to greater opportunities."



**JONATHAN FELIX-ROBLES**

**Mission Statement:** To inspire others to connect with nature by understanding that nature is a reflection of ourselves.

"The program has recharged my curiosity of life. I will always remember is not about my destination I pursue, but the journey that gets me ready for great adventures."



**SALLY GARCIA**

**Mission Statement:** To use my past experiences and enthusiasm for the future to inspire others to achieve their fullest potential.

"The MRCA Bridge to Park Careers program has opened my eyes to a career path that not only inspires me but on which I can make a difference for others."

# MEET THE NATURALIST TRAINEES



**EFRAIN GUERRERO**

**Mission Statement:** To bring attention to the importance of green open spaces and the wildlife that inhabits it by working closely with the community.

"Being in the program was a great opportunity because not only did I achieve becoming a naturalist but also a role model for younger generations. If I had the chance to be part of this again, I'd be happy to do it."



**TEIAH HENRY**

**Mission Statement:** To educate and learn from others by sharing experiences and developing relationships.

"The Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority Bridge to Park Careers program is and will always be a significant step in my journey to becoming a more effective steward."



**SALVADOR ORNELAS**

**Mission Statement:** To promote curiosity among urban youth about the natural world through interpretive moments and fostering personal connections.

"This program has helped illuminate my path towards a meaningful career that connects my community to nature."

# THANK YOU

The Bridge to Park Careers program has truly been a collaborative effort, thanks to the help of many partner organizations, speakers, and supporters. Many groups and individuals dedicated their time and effort to help make this a rewarding experience for our 9 participants. The MRCA wants to specially thank all those who helped make this program a success, including:

**Mayisha Akbar**, Compton Junior Posse  
**Shelly Backlar**, Friends of the Los Angeles River  
**Anthony Bevilacqua**, National Park Service  
**Richard Brody**, California Department of Fish & Wildlife  
**Tamika Butler**, LAC Bicycle Coalition  
**Fredrick Chapel**, Antioch University  
**Bob Freidin**, Freelance Puppeteer  
**Kate Delaney**, National Park Service  
**Sabrina Drill**, UC Cooperative Extension  
**Paul Edelman**, Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy  
**Joseph T. Edmiston**, Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy  
**Lisa Fimiani**, Friends of Ballona Wetlands  
**Philip Folsom**, Fulcrum Adventures  
**Micheal Garcia**, Leave No Trace Master  
**Melissa Gomez**, North East Trees  
**Cindy Hardin**, Los Angeles Audubon Society  
**Michelle Hasendonckx**, Cal State Channel Islands  
**Meg Jakubowski**, NatureBridge  
**Kate Kuykendall**, National Park Service  
**Leeta Latham**, The Reserve at Rancho Mission Viejo  
**Joe Linton**, Author and LA River advocate  
**Yvette Lopez**, Pacoima Beautiful  
**Miguel Luna**, Urban Semillas  
**Raul Macias**, Anahauk Youth Soccer  
**Irma Munoz**, Mujeres de la Tierra  
**Kristen Perry**, California State Parks  
**Sarah Rascon**, Field Deputy for Assem. Jimmy Gomez  
**Luis Rincon**, California State Parks  
**Rob Remedi**, Outdoor Guide  
**Peter Rice**, Local Naturalist  
**Jim Robertson**, Survival Skills Expert  
**Jonar Rodrigo**, US Forest Service  
**Bruce Saito**, Los Angeles Conservation Corps  
**Tarja Sarar**, National Park Service  
**Professor William Selby**, Santa Monica College  
**Antonio Solorio**, National Park Service  
**David Szymanski**, National Park Service - Santa Monica Mountains Superintendent  
**Robert Taylor**, National Park Service  
**Barbara Tejada**, California State Parks  
**Aaron Thomas**, North East Trees  
**John Tiszler**, National Park Service  
**Jessica Williamson**, Freelance Storyteller  
**Dwain Wilson**, Wildwoods Foundation  
**Sean Woods**, California State Parks - Los Angeles Superintendent  
**MRCA Park Staff**



## RECHARGING YOUTH THROUGH NATURE AND LEADERSHIP

### MRCA'S YOUTH LEADERSHIP SERIES

Walk around any high school campus and you'll see most of the students glued to their smart phones and chatting with friends over text messages or social media. Youth today spend a staggering amount of time on digital devices, and less and less time in nature and interacting directly with each other. According to a national survey, teenagers spend an average of 7.5 hours a day watching TV, browsing the internet, or consuming other types of media (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2010). This change in behavior has enabled them to have a great deal of knowledge of technology, yet has resulted in many children and teenagers to lose touch with nature and not practice essential life skills that are fostered through interpersonal relationships.

With this in mind, the MRCA wanted to create a series of youth programs to recharge young people by connecting them to the outdoors and exposing them to important leadership and life skills. The MRCA's Youth Leadership Series (YLS) incorporates all 5 components of a successful youth development program: learning, thriving, connecting, working, and leading all (Ferber, Pittman, and Marshall, 2002). Our series carefully interweaves these 5 components as it blends the natural world and leadership development through a unique multi-week approach. We believe the strength of this series is focusing on a group of participants. They meet on multiple days over a few months to go beyond a one-day experience and instead aim for deeper connections,

resulting in more personal growth and leadership development over time.

Participants for this series come from diverse backgrounds. We work with community partners in urban areas to recruit youth that have limited access to nature and who would most benefit from this type of program. For example, we have worked for years with Anahuak Youth Soccer Association, Compton Junior Posse, and Boy and Girls Clubs to recruit and coordinate with interested participants. These community organizations serve as an essential link between our agency and the local community to ensure that we can deliver successful programs and reach the youth that can most benefit from such an opportunity.

The MRCA's YLS is broken into 4 stages, designed to have the flexibility of either building upon each other or being stand-alone programs. Each are geared towards certain age groups, with activities and topics that are relevant and age-appropriate. Throughout the entire series, youth build strong and lasting relationships with MRCA park naturalists and each other while developing into the environmental stewards of tomorrow.



Future Urban Naturalists

### Future Urban Naturalist

*Early Elementary, Ages 5 - 10*

Little children are natural explorers and have the instinctual desire to investigate. Incorporating these innate skills, we bring these youngsters to our parks as outdoor classrooms to maximize hands-on, experiential learning and to promote inquiry in the outdoors.

Each lesson uses interactive and age-appropriate activities and games to reinforce the day's topic. All the while, we encourage teamwork and cooperation amongst each other. As the children learn about local plants and animals and explore key concepts like community and using our five senses, our naturalists also have the children practice working together and building basic cooperation skills. This program is the perfect way to introduce youngsters to their "Big Backyard".

### Junior Naturalists

*Late Elementary/Middle School, Ages 11 - 13*

In this part of the series, youth are introduced to classic outdoor skills while continuing to grow foundational leadership skills. Through critical thinking and practical use of outdoor skills, Junior Naturalists gain a richer understanding of cultural and natural resources. They learn the basics of orienteering, practice identifying native flora and fauna, get hands-on exposure with camping skills, and discover the importance of watersheds. All along the way, team building activities are highly integrated into the program as a way for youth to learn and utilize fundamental leadership skills. The goal of the Junior Naturalist program is to inspire both passion and action for the environment that they can take with them for the rest of their lives.

### Naturalist Explorers

*High School, Ages 14 - 18*

This program is geared toward high school students, and focuses on personal and life skills using the environment as a base to build the framework of a responsible citizen. During the multi-week program, teenagers learn important life skills, like public speaking and career development, while also exploring higher level nature-related concepts, such as ecology, wildlife conservation, and nature interpretation. A highlight to the program is when Naturalist Explorers create a meaningful and relevant keystone project from start to finish, including assessment, planning, and implementation. These personal, leadership, and outdoor skills will ultimately help these young people during the sometimes difficult transition from teenager to adult.



Naturalist Explorers

These personal, leadership, and outdoor skills will ultimately help these young people during the sometimes difficult transition from teenager to adult.

### Outdoor Leaders

*High School/College, Ages 17+*

This innovative MRCA program offers recent Naturalist Explorer graduates the opportunity to become paid, part-time staff of the MRCA. Through diverse assignments and interactions with park staff, the Outdoor Leaders will gain valuable work experience and hone their leadership skills. Their tasks have included helping on Transit to Trails bus field trips, leading public programs, and assisting with future Youth Leadership Series programs. The goal of this program is to prepare the Outdoor Leaders for success in their future careers.

Ultimately the real value of these programs is not seen during these programs, but are truly seen in the years that follow. Many participants have expressed the impact of the programs on their lives, personal skills, and their love of nature. Jose Garcia, participant in our Junior Naturalist and Outdoor Leader programs explains: "The Outdoor Leader program has really changed my life. It gave me a career in the parks I can pursue. I love this program and hopefully future Outdoor Leaders can find a sense of direction with the help of this program."

While not every participant in the program will become a future park Naturalist or land conservationist (though some may!), we do believe the experience will help the participants put down their phones and look away from their screens for a few hours a week and recharge themselves by discovering all that nature has to offer and find in themselves their personal strengths and leadership skills.

Richard Louv, acclaimed author of *Last Child in the Woods*, put it best when he asked, "What could our lives and our children's lives be like if our days and nights were as immersed in nature as they are in technology?"



Naturalist Explorers

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## THE RIVER OPENS PATHWAYS FOR LA'S YOUNG ADULTS

### MRCA'S NEWEST JOBS PROGRAM WITH AZTEC FIRE CREW



MRCA River Safety Staff with Ranger James Latham

This year the MRCA is piloting an exciting, new jobs program along the LA River for at-risk young adults. In partnership with Aztec Fire Crew, a local gang intervention program, participants will work directly with MRCA Rangers and Maintenance staff to gain valuable experience in both restoration and public safety through on-call employment. The 8 selected participants will be MRCA River Safety Staff who will physically restore the river, and conduct river safety patrols along the LA River Recreation Zone in the Sepulveda Basin over the upcoming months. We hope this pilot program is only the beginning, as we continue to discover the River's potential for providing pathways to employment and recreation opportunities.

The Aztec Fire Crew is a promising new partner of the MRCA and specializes in working with at-risk young adults from the Los Angeles area. The organization aims to engage the youth through a Firefighting Training Course and paid on-call firefighting work, as a way to take them away from gang culture. The crew assists the Los Angeles Fire Department and other groups in wildland fire suppression. The program on the river will expand their service and training.

# MRCA

Mountains Recreation & Conservation Authority

26800 Mulholland Highway  
Calabasas, CA 91302

For more information visit:  
[LAMountains.com](http://LAMountains.com)  
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MRCA River Ambassadors

The Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority's River Ambassadors are local high school students who have spent a semester learning about the history, quality, and ecological role of the Los Angeles River. Through culmination projects related to camping, art, teaching local schools and recreation along the river, the River Ambassadors are striving to involve the local community in positive actions that can improve the river and environment for all. Presented by the MRCA with funding by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy.