



Santa Monica Mountains Trails Council

Protect • Preserve • Maintain

Spring 2020

Farewell Witness Tree

The massive oak tree stood in between the old barn and main street in Western Town at Paramount Ranch. This majestic valley oak spanned the entire area between the buildings. Some called it the Witness Tree because it was a witness to so many events. It's been the centerpiece of weddings, family reunions, and many movie shoots. It was the cherished gathering place for musicians of all ages at the Topanga Banjo Fiddle Contest for years. It was a magical place to sing and play with friends and total strangers, with the old barn as a backdrop and the contest stages echoing distant riffs of bluegrass. I loved that old tree, a place to meditate, a respite of shade after a hot hike; memories were made there. It was



Courtesy of National Park Service

awesome to look at, with its two trunks and massive twisting branches sweeping upward to the sky and downward to the earth as if to embrace all of nature.

In 2018 when the Woolsey fire tore through Western Town, scorching nearly everything in its path (the chapel and train station survived), the Witness Tree was completely burned. In 2019, it looked like it might make a comeback, but by the end of the year, all bits of new green were gone, and the giant grandfather oak lived no longer. "From an ecological perspective, the tree was in some respects a lasting example of towering valley oaks that once dominated our landscape.

This makes it all the more difficult to lose an iconic symbol of past and present", said Mike Malone, retired National Park Service Ranger and current volunteer. On February 8th, there was a public farewell to the Witness Tree where folks could stop by and pay their respects. I heard traces of stories...we were married under that tree in 1979, we renewed our vows there, we still bring our kids here, etc. "It was a touchstone of a moment in time" said Mike Malone. The life of the beautiful tree is gone, but the wood will be used for benches, signs and other items in Western Town, and the memories will be with us forever.

By Barb Thomas 

President's Vision

Life does have its surprises and challenges, and right now we are all being challenged with the widespread COVID – 19 (CoronaVirus). It has challenged and changed our volunteer trail work especially. Of course, the recent extended length of rainy days that we have had have been good for the lands, but they have also made it difficult to do any trail work. Why do we do trail work? Well, it gives us a sense of accomplishment. Unmaintained trails undermine and challenge the outdoor experience for many Americans. Additionally, we're paying it forward for others to enjoy our Santa Monica Mountains and to appreciate what these mountains have given to us.

How important is it for people to have an Outdoor experience? It is vitally important on several levels – physical, emotional and mental. It's a heck of a lot cheaper than going to a gym for exercise; and you have far better views with the beautiful scenery of trees, bushes, flowers and wildlife. The exercise and visual aspects of being on a trail help stabilize the emotional issues that we may have, giving us time and space to sort things out for a better perspective. Mentally, it is needed as a break from work and stress issues in an outdoors area where you can choose where you want to wander and to put some things in order or even remove them from the stress list. Medically, the Outdoors improves your whole self by addressing any of the issues that have been unresolved. Take a neighbor, a buddy, a stranger or a youth the next time you go into the Outdoors to reclaim and revitalize yourself.

Ruth

Unfortunately, we have to cancel the **BBTrek and Trail Days** to protect the health of the participants and the volunteers during these challenging times with the Corona Virus. We hope you and your families are well and safe.

Trails Council Wins \$15K Grant

The Trails Council board of directors is delighted to have received a \$15,000 grant in February from the Ventura County Community Foundation (VCCF) for the replacement of picnic tables damaged in the Woolsey Fire at the Danielson campground at Pt. Mugu State Park.

The Trails Council's efforts to secure the grant began last year with committing \$5,000 of SMMTC's own funds to replace five of the 15 tables that are arranged around the stone firepit dining area. Boy Scout Troop 111 of Ventura assembled and installed the first group of tables last November with



guidance from the Trail Council's crew leaders. Crewleader Jerry Mitcham said, "The Scouts of Troop 111 arrived early on a Saturday morning, quickly organized into five small crews, and within a few hours assembled the tables. The new tables greatly enhance the beauty and capacity of the patio area of the campground."

Now, 19 more sturdy redwood tables are on their way to the state park from the County of Sonoma Probation Camp where they are produced. The new group will include three ADA-compliant

tables. The order is expected to arrive in early April and the Boy Scouts of Troop 642 of Woodland Hills have volunteered to assemble and install them this time.

Some of the old tables are still serviceable and the parks facilities department will deploy them elsewhere at Pt. Mugu.

SMMTC board member Charlotte Farrens spearheaded the grant proposal to the Ventura County Community Foundation, which is a charitable foundation that focuses on nonprofits that benefit the Ventura County community. "We are honored and grateful to be recognized for our contributions to California State Parks in Ventura County with this generous grant from the VCCF," said Ruth Gerson, president of the SMMTC board of directors. "The new picnic tables will bring joy and comfort to visitors and campers for decades to come."

By Anne Russell 

What Do Southern California Coyotes Eat

Coyotes (*Canis latrans*) represent a model organism to test for individual specialization due to their omnivorous, highly variable diet. This species readily colonizes urban areas and learns to consume the sources found in those areas. Their natural prey base in cities can be limited, as native rodents are sensitive to habitat loss and fragmentation, however some prey populations can be as abundant in urban areas as in nearby natural areas (rabbits). Coyotes may subsidize their diet with anthropogenic items in increasingly urban (isolated) patches. For example, in the Santa Monica Mountains north of Los Angeles, it was found that increasing urbanization correlated with elevated consumption of human-related food items.



In Chicago nature preserves, Newsome found evidence for individual specialization, characterized by high between-individual variation and low within-individual variation in diet, suggesting individual coyotes maintained different diets for multiple months. Coyotes are a particularly important species because they often function as an apex predator and are capable of killing pets and even injuring people, particularly children interactions that often elicit strong

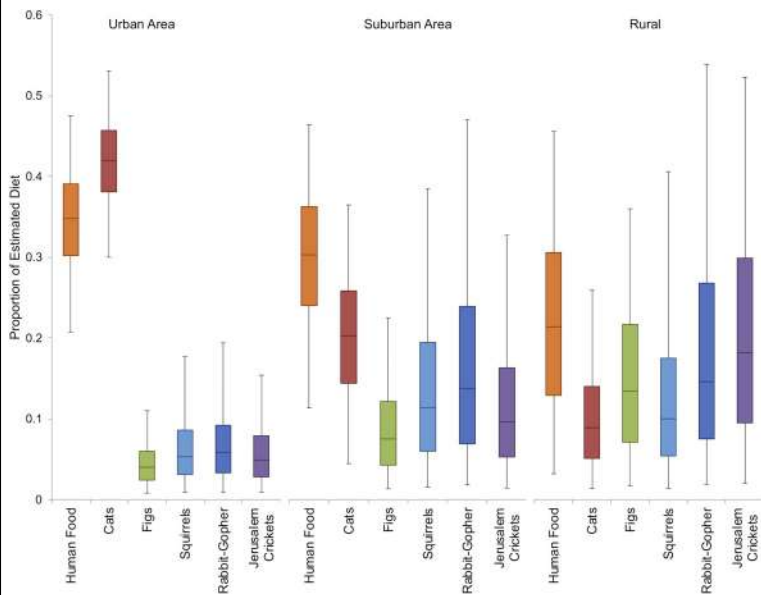
reactions from the public. Anthropogenic subsidies have also been linked to conflict between humans and coyotes and therefore are of particular management concern. To determine if land cover affects diet, we calculated the percent of the area surrounding a scat line that belonged to five categories: Commercial / Industrial, Residential, Agriculture, Developed Open Space, and Natural Open Space. The average home range size of resident coyotes in the study area has been reported as 5 km², so we delimited a circular buffer with a radius of 1.26 km around the linear center point of each scat line to approximate a “pseudo-home range” buffer zone of the coyotes sampled at each scat line. Buffer zones were clipped by major freeways (I-5, I-10, U.S. 101, U.S. 405, State Route 23, and State Route 110), which can be movement barriers to coyotes.

The overall study was divided in 3 main areas to coarsely reflect the gradient of urbanization: the “urban study area”, the “suburban study area”, and the “rural study area”.

The urban study area was located in the Los Angeles basin, with approximately 70% of the surface area covered by human development (housing units and commercial/industrial areas) and an average human density of >2,500 people/km². Within this highly-developed area there are small fragments of green space, mostly cemeteries and undeveloped hill-tops.

The suburban area was located in the Simi Hills and Santa Monica Mountains, with approximately 50% of the surface area covered by human development and an average human density of 850–900 people/km². Naturally-vegetated open space is mainly found on the undeveloped hill-tops and federal, state, local parks, while residential and commercial areas lie in the valleys.

The rural area (from which only coyote vibrissae were collected) was located along SR 126, from Santa Clarita to Oxnard. Approximately 9% of the surface area is covered by human development and the average human density is 470 people/km². The area is in the Santa Clarita River Valley, which is dominated by agriculture within the valley and bordered by large open spaces in the Topatopa and Santa Susana Mountains.



This article appears online at:

<https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article/related?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0228881>
Effects of urbanization on resource use and individual specialization in coyotes

Where Did We Work this Past Year?

Challenged by fire and rain in 2019, our work on the trails in the Santa Monica Mountains reminded us of how these forces can change the landscape.

Dense chaparral one day, charred wasteland the next day and then followed by a flower-covered Eden months later. Flames from the Woolsey fire burned miles of the Backbone trail. Without chaparral to hold back the flow of water, the rains then ripped the soil from the tread, redistributing more than a few rocks and boulders. Winter rains and increased sunlight signaled long dormant annual flowers that their time to live was now! Shrubs began to sprout from charred stumps. We saw phenomenal growth of plants both native and invasive. Plants crowding along and inside our trails kept our crews busy.

We began working with NPS rebuilding drains to control the flow of water and filling trenches gouged out by rain. Our drains on the Sandstone Peak trail held up well. Out of the 61 drains, 2 were overwhelmed by the amount of water coming down and had to be fixed.



Many large rocks (up to 300 pounds) went into the large crevice ~10 feet wide and five feet deep, for the time being this section of the trail is "repaired"

Our Trail Days event in April drew a large number of volunteers eager to fix the damaged sections of the backbone trail that winds its way through the park. NPS and a dozen of our crew leaders held a trails event in June that helped to re-open another stretch of the Backbone trail between Trancas Canyon and Etz Meloy.

Working on trails where most vegetation was burned provided a stark contrast to the Summer/Fall where we employed gas powered trimmers to clear large amounts of brush. 3 trails in Point Mugu State Park received considerable attention: Fossil trail, Old Boney (east of Blue Canyon) and the Hidden Pond trail. Choked by brush, these popular trails were systematically restored after many weekends of work.



Why do we work on trails when we could hike them? We do both, because watching the water channel off the trail after a rain or watching trail users move along the trail unimpeded by the brush you have removed provides an opportunity to do something for others and to take care of the medium, that adds so much to your life.

By George Sherman



Trail Maintenance Statistics

From January 01, 2019 through December 31, 2019 a total of 1,096 volunteers performed 5,611.5 hours of trail maintenance in the Santa Monica Mountains and nearby areas. State Parks and NPS budgets are not near enough to maintain the hundreds of trails we have.



Agency	Events	Vol #	Regular	Casuals	Hours
COSCA	5	30	29	1	128.0
NPS	14	148	107	35	805.5
State Parks	74	1096	383	393	4,371.0
California State University Channel Islands	1	131	11	120	288
Totals	98	1,096	534	549	5,611.5

Check out our Stats Through the Years

Year	# of Events	Vol #	Hours
2019	98	550	5,611.50
2018	72	721	4,302.50
2017	78	740	4,181.50
2016	74	718	4,367.50
2015	87	916	5,532.50
2014	84	746	4,577.00
2013	74	517	3,496.50
2012	70	645	4,159.50
Totals	637	5,553	36,228.50

Interested in becoming a team member?

Visit us at www.smmtc.org to get involved.
Part of our hard working team is pictured below.



Understanding the Mind of a Horse

Horses are the largest and least predictable trail users. No matter how well trained horses are, the fact remains that they have a brain and their DNA for survival may kick in without listening to the rider. In that event, the instinct to flee from their perceived danger of a biker suddenly coming at them may take over. When meeting horses on multi-use trails, it is best for bikers and hikers to stop on the downhill side and not make abrupt movements that can startle a horse as they pass. The reason we ask you to be on the downhill side is that if a horse suddenly shies, at least he won't go over the edge as he turns or goes up



the hill to get away from what is scaring him. Speaking to the riders lets the horse know that the biker is a human which most horses trust; and it is also important to be visible and not hide behind trees/bushes. In many instances, riders will stop for people to pet the horses; and children especially enjoy that experience. Everyone should understand the safety triangle that is posted throughout the parklands.

In any event, bikers should always announce their presence by calling out "bike" especially when coming from behind. Without some voice notice, the horses, riders and hikers cannot hear the silent bike coming up behind them or hauling at them from the front. Bells are not always heard. For the safety of all trail users, responsible bikers should announce their presence.

By Ruth Gerson



Signs are only guidelines – Courtesy is the best safety measure.

Understanding the Trail Triangle

Mt Bikers should always yield to hiker/horse

Hikers yield to horses

Horses always have the right of way!



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Upcoming Events and Cancellations

- 39th Annual Santa Monica Mountains Trail Days has been **CANCELED**
Danielson Ranch/Pt. Mugu State Park.
- Backbone Trek – **Has been CANCELED**
- March & April Board Meetings Have Been Canceled
- Annual Dinner Meeting – Thursday, October 22th
6pm social, 7pm dinner, 7:45pm meeting
Complimentary dinner for the trails community.
Agoura Hills/Calabasas Community Center, 27040 Malibu Hills Rd, Agoura Hills.
RSVP at smmtc.org or (818) 222-4531

Trails Council Board Meetings

Board Meetings are open to the public and are on the 4th Thursday of the month at 7:00 pm.
They are held at Diamond X Ranch, 26412 Mulholland Highway, Calabasas, CA 91302,

Trail Crew Rookie Of The Year

Our Rookie of the year award goes to Jon Sheldon, who put in 163 hours of volunteer labor during 2019. One Saturday, during 2019, Jon showed up to work. He worked hard and kept coming back. Before we knew it, it was like Jon had always been working with us. We are delighted that Jon has found a place amongst our hard working and dedicated trail workers!



Come work with us for an event and you note that the work is satisfying and fun. Work with us 3 times and there is the possibility that the bond we share as trail workers will be something you want to be part of. Trail work can be a life changing experience as you learn new skills and view our trails in new ways.

The reward of a thing well done, is to have done it
Ralph Waldo Emerson



PLEASE RENEW YOUR MEMBERSHIP

Dues are on a rolling 12-month basis. Membership dues are effective the first of the month following receipt; membership will be effective for 12 months. Please make your check payable to SMMTC and mail it to PO Box 345, Agoura Hills, CA 91376 or you may use your credit card with PayPal.
<http://smmtc.org/membership/>

Thank you for your continued support.

Name: _____
 Address: _____
 City: _____ ZIP _____
 E-mail: _____
 Phone: _____

Check to have newsletter sent by e-mail

MEMBERSHIP CATEGORIES

Individual Memberships

- Annual Membership — \$35
- Life Membership — \$360
 Life membership may be paid in three consecutive annual payments of \$120.

Business Memberships

- Supporter — \$100
- Patron — \$250
- Benefactor — \$500

Donation \$ _____

SMMTC is a tax exempt, non-profit organization under IRS code 501(c)(3).

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