

**Long-term sustainability of “real nature” adjacent to a world-class metropolis:
Case Study of the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy
Los Angeles, California USA**

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With science-based ecological planning and astute political ability, the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy has assembled and managed a complex patchwork of protected areas within the largest metropolitan area in the United States.

The State of California acted to establish the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy in 1979 to assist the protection of natural resources surrounding the Los Angeles. Environmentalists and elected officials had recognized that piecemeal land development was threatening the remaining mountain lands in and around Los Angeles, and that the best practical strategy for implementing a vision of protected lands near a vast urban setting just might be a public agency conservancy, capable of both coordinated regional land planning and outright acquisition of land to preserve wildlife habitat, scenic areas, cultural resources, open space, and recreational uses into the future.

Thirty years later, the Conservancy’s original vision of a network of interlinking public open space parklands, trails, wildlife corridors, and recreational opportunities accessible to the nearly 13 million residents of the Los Angeles metropolitan area, has proven remarkably successful. The agency’s hard-charging creativity has sometimes been controversial, but over 65,000 acres have since been protected and 300 new parks opened, through either direct acquisition by the Conservancy or partnerships with other governmental or non-profit organizations. Los Angeles continues to be one of the most sophisticated real estate markets in the nation, with high demand and high land values that challenge conservation agencies’ ability to play in such a high stakes arena.

The Santa Monica Mountains Zone (including the Rim of the Valley Trail Corridor) is part of the Mediterranean ecosystem of coastal Southern California, with highly diverse habitat types. Chaparral, coastal sage scrub, oak woodlands, oak forest, riparian, native and non-native grasslands, alluvial fan scrub, high desert vegetation, freshwater and coastal marshland, mixed coniferous and hardwood forest are well represented. Large already-urbanized areas of the region are also included in the jurisdiction in the efforts to protect watersheds of the Los Angeles River, Santa Clara River, and Santa Monica Bay. The complement of large mammal species that live in the Zone include mountain lion (*Felis concolor*), bobcat (*Lynx rufus*), coyote (*Canis latrans*), mule deer (*Odocoileus hemionus*), American badger (*Taxidea taxus*), gray fox (*Urocyon cinereoargenteus*), ringtail cat (*Bassariscus astutus*), raccoon (*Procyon lotor*), and even black bear (*Ursus americanus*). Bird life is highly diverse, from resident species to migratory birds. The region is part of the Pacific Flyway. Other species of concern in the Conservancy area of jurisdiction include reptile and amphibian species, and fish such as the endangered Southern Steelhead trout.

Wildlife populations live right up against suburban and even urban neighborhoods, so the challenge of ensuring continued habitat viability for wildlife and native plant communities has been a driving force for the Conservancy.

Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy Governance

The Conservancy is an independent state agency under the California Natural Resources Agency, governed by a board made up of appointees from state, federal, and local agencies: The Governor, State Assembly Speaker, State Senate President, Mayor of Los Angeles, the Boards of Supervisors of Los Angeles County and Ventura County, United States National Park Service, U. S. Forest Service, California Natural Resources Agency Secretary, State Coastal Commission, State Coastal Conservancy, and California Department of Parks and Recreation all are represented. The state also created a 27-member Advisory Committee which assists the Board in its monthly deliberations, and includes a broad array of local governments in addition to state appointees. Thus, the Conservancy has large political and community constituencies which participate and feel so engaged in the work of the agency that they have “buy-in” to the land protection objectives and projects. This support from the Conservancy Board and Southern California communities has been an essential factor in the Conservancy’s successes, especially since the agency has only a very small staff (five full time personnel equivalents).

Partnerships

Also essential to its successes are the partnerships the Conservancy by necessity formed with other state, federal, and local agencies. Most notable is the partnership that resulted in the formation of the Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority (MRCA), a separate agency pursuant to California’s Joint Exercise of Powers Act: In the 1980’s the Conservancy joined with two longstanding local park districts, the Conejo and Rancho Simi Recreation and Park Districts, to provide the land management capabilities that the Conservancy on its own was not authorized to expand. The MRCA now employs about 140 individuals: wildfire-trained park rangers with law enforcement capabilities, park maintenance staff, planners, biologists, landscape architects, legal counsel, and financial staff. The National Park Service and California Department of Parks and Recreation (State Parks) are also important partners to both the Conservancy and MRCA. All four are parties to a cooperative management agreement for the federally-designated Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area and work together. Seven other joint exercise of powers entities have been formed between the Conservancy and a number of cities and counties to achieve specific local and state objectives.

Wildlife Linkages

The Conservancy and National Park Service recognized early on in that simply protecting land as public parkland would not in and of itself be sufficient to preserve long term ecosystem health and viability of large mammal populations. Science indicated that managing the land program for maintaining the apex predator-- mountain lion-- and its primary prey, mule deer, would be key. Housing developments, freeways, roads, and landfills, all threatened to permanently cut off or alter the ability of lions and other wildlife to move and breed in the Santa Monica

Mountains and into other mountain ranges and large habitat blocks, particularly the Angeles and Los Padres National Forests to the north.

Identifying and then acquiring key chokepoints near roads and freeways became an urgent Conservancy goal in the late 1980's. Since then, the agency has worked to put the most critical habitat linkage parcels into public parkland ownership. National Park Service animal tracking studies using radio-collars, GPS tracking devices, motion-sensing cameras, and footprint tracking, have since proven that coyotes, bobcats, and mountain lions, among other species, are indeed moving through those protected lands, giving biologists some hope that genetic exchange and diversity can persist to ensure the long term viability of predator and prey wild species in the state, federal, and locally protected lands in the region. Having a beautiful mountain park devoid of deer and predators may otherwise worthwhile for scenic open space or picnic, but the mission is to ensure that the Santa Monica Mountains and adjoining mountain ranges persist as ecologically functioning, linked habitat blocs.

River and Urban Natural Park Restoration

Creating and managing parkland in the wilderness that still exists around Los Angeles has been only a part of the Conservancy's multi-decade effort. Priorities for land acquisition and site development are set by the Conservancy which emphasize protection of wildlife habitat linkages and ecologically sensitive property. But there has been an ever-increasing realization that there is great benefit—social, ecological, economic, environmental—in the Conservancy's and other partners' work to bring nature *back into* otherwise urbanized areas of the city. Restoration of the mostly concrete Los Angeles River seemed a silly dream to many when it was being espoused in the late 1980's and early 90's. But the Conservancy became part of a growing coalition with a vision of a "gray to green" revitalized urban river corridor. The agency purchased small urbanized parcels along the river, then demolished decrepit buildings and restored the sites as river parks. The "pocket parks" became an early catalyst, showing elected officials and other agencies that a little bit of nature and beauty with a riverfront bikeway as a recreational linkage, not only was achievable at reasonable cost, but created a demand by underserved, park-poor communities for more parkland and more nature in their neighborhoods. The idea of bringing nature back into the city has taken wing as the Conservancy embarked on the creation of urban natural parks out of otherwise degraded sites, including the Augustus F. Hawkins Natural Park started in one of the poorest (park-wise and economically) parts of Los Angeles. (see "A conservation agency creates inner-city "natural parks" in Los Angeles," by Ted Trzyna, in *The Urban Imperative: Urban Outreach Strategies for Protected Area Agencies*, edited by Ted Trzyna, IUCN, 2005).

The Los Angeles River Center and Gardens, the Tujunga Wash Greenway and the Vista Hermosa Natural Park have further expanded the restoration realm of possibility. Tujunga Wash is one of the concrete tributaries of the Los Angeles River, engineered as flood control channels to tame and control raging seasonal winter storm event flows that would otherwise flood miles of homes and businesses. The Conservancy teamed with Los Angeles County Public Works and the MRCA to create a natural streambed atop one side of the levee, fed by gravity flow from street run-off and light rain events, with a bikeway and park features on the opposite bank. Vista Hermosa Natural Park, opened two summers ago, was the first new park in

downtown Los Angeles in over 100 years, created on hilly land owned by the Los Angeles Unified School District. The 10 acre site had the onus of being near an old oil field with methane and other toxic issues. The Conservancy and MRCA designed and built a rolling hillside park with native plant materials, campfire and other nature interpretive programs for the neighboring kids and community, and a spectacular view of the Downtown LA skyline. It too has in its short existence become an icon of *what can be done* to restore at least a hint of nature back into the inner city, and foster appreciation for open space by making it accessible to city residents. Birds actually started building nests in the boxed California sycamores and coast live oaks as they were planted by the Conservancy and MRCA; red-tailed hawks have been hunting ground squirrels in the park, to the delight of children who come for ranger-led interpretive programs.

Funding

State bonds, voted on by the citizens, provide some funds for acquisition, park development, planning, and environmental interpretation. However, no state funds are provided to operate or maintain the parklands acquired. MRCA provides all management duties, and has been adroit in securing other funding, such as through local voter-approved measures at the County and even neighborhood levels. Other sources of funding include mitigation dollars paid to the agencies for restoration purposes, revenue from television and movie filming on agency parklands, cellular phone antenna leases, and events such as weddings in the parks. Occasionally the agencies receive cash donations and bequests. The Conservancy and MRCA's land acquisition program has been greatly enhanced at no cost, however, from outright land donations and dedications of land from city and county conditions placed on development projects. Examples are too numerous to list, but two high-profile ones are the 23 -acre gift from Barbra Streisand of her Malibu estate, and a 7,700-acre dedication of land formerly owned by actor/entertainer Bob Hope. The latter dedication was from a bank that needed to maintain its development rights to another property (the former Ahmanson Ranch), which five years later was bought out by the Conservancy for \$150 million because of its extraordinary environmental value as protected land.

Summary

The Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy is a somewhat unique government agency that continues to marshal resources to pursue a vision of real nature and wilderness in the Los Angeles metropolis, that can be accessible and enjoyed by the many millions of current and future residents and visitors to Southern California.

