

# Sonoma Mountain Journal

Volume 22, No. 1

This year's Journal highlights the relationships of people, fire, and wildlife on the mountain

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The Indigenous people of southern Sonoma County, placed *oona-pa'is* — Sonoma Mountain in the Coast Miwok language — at the center of the world, imagining its summit as an island in the primordial ocean at the beginning of time.

Geologists tell a similar story — that Sonoma Mountain's layers of volcanic and sedimentary rock, pushed upward by tectonic forces, rose from the depths of a shallow sea.

**Our mission is to preserve the Sonoma Mountains' scenic, agricultural, and natural resources by cultivating a sense of place, engaging people in the landscape, and inspiring them to become mountain stewards.**

## BIG OAKS, BIG VIEWS & BIG STORIES: A HIKE IN LAFFERTY PARK

Tracy Salcedo

The big oaks bring us in; the views open us up. The first oak is a massive old grandmother, her boughs resting on the ground all around, a billowing parachute of leaves crackling in the wind. We clasp hands around her girth and place our palms on her furrowed bark. One among us observes we're like children that way, in our need to touch and wonder. Then we step out from under the canopy and onto a grassy knoll, looking down onto the Petaluma River as it curls through the lowlands to San Pablo Bay.

The second oak is at the top of our guided hike in Lafferty Park, Sonoma Mountain's newest public open space. The crown of this tree is cauliflower-perfect, with the fading sunlight of an October afternoon filtering through. Overhead, the contrails of jets have shadows. The horizon spreading before us now embraces a broader palette of highlights—the river delta, of course, but also the skyscrapers of Oakland and San Francisco, Mount Tamalpais, and far away in the misty distance, Mount Wittenberg and the Inverness Ridge.

A hike in Petaluma's Lafferty Park, at this point in time, is a curated experience. Larry Modell, a member of the Friends of Lafferty Park, a Landpaths docent, and a Sonoma Mountain Preservation Board member, leads the way—which is a good thing because there are no formal trailheads, no trail signs, and the paths are little more than game trails. But the promise is there.



When the stewards— Landpaths, Friends of Lafferty Park, and the city of Petaluma — formalize public access and the trail system, including a wheelchair-compliant path down low, and a more rigorous trail to the summit ridge, this will be a first-class walk in the wild.

Efforts to preserve this 270-acre property for “public benefit” date to 1959, when the City of Petaluma purchased it as a watershed. A dam on Adobe Creek, which originates on these slopes, diverted water into a reservoir for the city's use, but by 1992 the facility had been deemed unsafe and the reservoir drained. Plans for an earthquake retrofit were abandoned in 1994. In the void, the city and

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## Letter from the Chair

Meg Beeler



I often take friends past former Sonoma Developmental Center's (SDC) Fern Lake on Sonoma Mountain to experience the amazing Grandmother Redwood tree. She is an ancient remnant of what was a vast redwood forest. Chain marks around her base show that she was used as the stabilizing tree when loggers harvested all the old growth.

Sonoma Mountain Preservation (SMP) advocates and speaks for the mountain because of ecological treasures like this tree. Her contorted limbs remind us that beauty comes in many forms. Her transfer from SDC to Jack London State Historic Park protected the land from becoming vineyards, thanks to SMP's advocacy. Her new status meant that marked trails, protective fencing, and informative displays were added, enhancing people's understanding.

We've never stopped paying attention to SDC lands. The last seven years we've been on the front lines, monitoring the transition from developmental center to what's become a rallying cry for protection of open space, Glen Ellen's rural character, creek and wildlife corridors, repurposing buildings to minimize carbon impact, and the need for scaled down, low-cost housing rather than urban infill.

It's been inspiring to co-create and craft our vision with the community and other conservation organizations. The impact of endless meetings, testimonies, letters, and learning how to read and comment on the SDC Specific Plan and Environmental Impact Report have been "mitigated" by the commitment and love of so many of you.

### Everything Changes

It's been a joy and honor to be the face of Sonoma Mountain for 10 years as Board Chair! At the end of 2022, I will pass the gavel to the wonderful Arthur Dawson (incoming Chair) and amazing Tracy Salcedo (incoming Vice-Chair). SMP will be in great hands.

When I was elected, SMP was small, with a website, one brochure, and no social media presence. We had crafted scenic guidelines with Sonoma County to protect the mountain's view shed and night sky, and monitored Permit Sonoma to make sure the guidelines were enforced.

During my tenure as Chair we published our beautiful, award-winning book *Where the World Begins: Sonoma Mountain Stories and Images*. It's a tribute to our

## JOIN US IN 2023!

### Keep Up with Issues and Events

Monthly newsletter: Sign up at [www.sonomamountain.org](http://www.sonomamountain.org)

SMP on Facebook: [www.facebook.com/sonomamountain](http://www.facebook.com/sonomamountain)

SMP on Instagram: [www.instagram.com/sonoma\\_mountain](http://www.instagram.com/sonoma_mountain)

SDC Updates: [www.sdcspecificplan.com](http://www.sdcspecificplan.com)

remarkable authors and the Board—especially Nancy Kirwan, Mickey Cooke, and Arthur Dawson, with whom I spent hours choosing from about 3,000 photographs to use in the book—that we succeeded beyond our wildest dreams. The book is now in its second printing and we strengthened our fiscal stability by a factor of ten!

Our book launch parties in Santa Rosa, Petaluma, and Sonoma raised people's awareness of the mountain in their midst. Now in our monthly emails we let you know about many hikes and learning events on the mountain, and keep you up to date on the latest open space successes—like Lafferty Ranch—and SDC developments.

SMP encourages and stands with you, our community, for protection of the web of relationships—between humans, creatures, plant communities, fire, and water—held in the land. Our mountain provides us humans with space, solitude, and respite; in turn, we offer our reciprocity by preserving those experiences for others and speaking for those who don't have voices.

### Board Shout-Outs

Teri Shore and Tracy Salcedo are both remarkable advocates for SMP regarding SDC. Tracy writes about the SDC process for the *Kenwood Press*, and Teri for the Sierra Club and other conservation organizations. Board member Avery Hellman from Petaluma has finished her Board term; we thank her. We have many other amazing Board members; find interviews with them in the newsletter and at [sonomamountain.org](http://sonomamountain.org).

### What You Can Do

Get up-to-date info about what's happening on the mountain through our monthly emails, Instagram, and Facebook pages. Keep advocating for a scaled-down development at SDC with our Supervisors and the State. Hike. Fire-proof your bit of land. Find links and maps to 100 miles of publicly accessible trails at [sonomamountain.org](http://sonomamountain.org).

## DONATE

We're proud that we've stayed on top of so many issues, and encourage you to keep supporting us. You can donate securely through [www.sonomamountain.org](http://www.sonomamountain.org), or mail a check to PO Box 1772, Glen Ellen, CA 95442 (envelope in the paper journal).

Thank you!

## FIRE ON THE MOUNTAIN: Fuel Reduction & Habitat

Tracy Salcedo

The Nuns Fire licked its skirts in 2017, but Sonoma Mountain was mostly spared. That the mountain dodged the bullet was a small miracle, given the wildfire's intensity, wind-driven speed, and the dearth of organized firefighting on its slopes, as firefighters focused on getting people out of harm's way. Neither the blaze itself, nor efforts to contain it, did the widespread damage to habitats — human and natural — that occurred on the Sonoma Valley floor and in the Mayacamas range.

That said, impromptu neighborhood firefighting had impacts. In Glen Ellen, neighbors on London Ranch Road used tractors to carve improvised firebreaks to keep the blaze from progressing into Jack London State Historic Park. Off Sonoma Mountain Road, retired firefighters outfitted with shovels and hoses deployed in a meadow to ensure embers blowing off Bennett Ridge gained no ground. Adjacent to the Sonoma Developmental Center (SDC), more shovels, tractors, and person-power prevented the open space (and nearby homes) from burning.

At the time, some of us wondered if the deer were safe, and whether the birds would have trees to nest in. But no one was thinking about how our homegrown efforts might affect habitats and wildlife. These days, however, many are taking a critical look at what creating barriers to wildfire means for the plants and animals who inhabit Sonoma Mountain's wildland-urban interface.

### Fire Plays a Part

Understanding fire's role in maintaining a healthy landscape helps guide Sonoma Mountain's public and private landowners cope with the challenge of avoiding a repeat of 2017. To protect human and natural resources, some draw on Indigenous traditions around cultural burning, others on modern forestry and firefighting expertise.

Research at preserves and parklands on Sonoma Mountain and neighboring public lands demonstrates how low intensity fire refreshes forage for grazing animals, enables fire followers like whispering bells and toyon to propagate, and clears brush and understory clutter so predators can better track prey and saplings can flourish in unfiltered sunshine. Prescribed burns, such as those at Bouverie Preserve, Van Hooser Wildflower Preserve, and Sonoma Valley Regional Park, seek to reintroduce the benefits of low intensity wildfire, with bonus points for providing some degree of protection to the surrounding human footprint.

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## CULTURAL BURNING & INDIGENOUS WISDOM: Fire as a Community Member

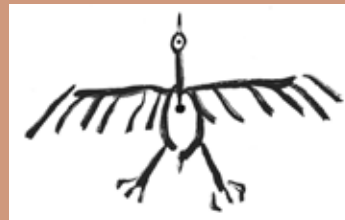
Arthur Dawson

"We consider fire to be a member of the community, one who is much wiser and more powerful than we are," explains Sara Moncada (Yaqui/Irish), director of Heron Shadow. Stewarded by the Cultural Conservancy, the seven-acre site is dedicated to "Indigenous agriculture, Native Sciences, and healthy lifeways." As Sara, and Heron Shadow's Land Steward, Redbird Willie (Pomo, Paiute, Wintu, and Wailaki) generously showed me around, they laid out the vision for the land, which includes "nourishing Indigenous and intercultural relations." [see Box]

Fire, a member of our community? How can we square such an idea with Smokey the Bear's admonition, "Only You can Prevent Forest Fires"? Acknowledging that fire belongs here is a stretch for most of us. Virtually everyone in Sonoma County, experienced fire fighters included, has been humbled by the recent firestorms. Can wildfires really be

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### AN INDIGENOUS BIOCULTURAL OASIS



"Heron Shadow is a Native place of refuge and learning for community engagement, connection to the land, growing Indigenous

foods, and nourishing Indigenous and intercultural relations.

"After 37 years of growing our organization and implementing our mission to protect and revitalize the sacred relationship Native peoples have with ancestral lands, we now have purchased **7.6 acres of land in Sonoma County, on the ancestral lands of the Coast Miwok and Southern Pomo Peoples of the Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria.**

"We were able to become stewards of this land and make this purchase thanks to the discount offered by the former owner, the generous support of key funders, and with the permission and partnership of Graton Rancheria.

"We invite you to connect with this land, engage in the dream, and experience the potential of Heron Shadow."

Text from: [www.nativeland.org/heron-shadow](http://www.nativeland.org/heron-shadow)



### Making a Break

Come springtime, property owners in neighborhoods across the mountain wind up the weed-whackers to create at least one hundred feet of “defensible space” around their homes and other structures. These fuel breaks are widely acknowledged to be the most effective way to protect property from wildfire. Little thought is given to who is displaced by these efforts — ground-nesting birds, rodents, reptiles — because the priority is clear: No one wants their house to burn down.

Humans have also been clearing fuels away from structures to create shaded fuel breaks—thinning the understory so fire can’t climb into the tree canopy. Created by hand (saws and shovels), grazing (goats, sheep, and cattle), and machines (bulldozers and masticators), the intent is to slow and calm wildfire before it sweeps into developed places. In some cases, a combination of methods is employed. In Sonoma Valley Regional Park, for example, breaks have been created by hand and machine, prescribed burns take place annually (conditions permitting), and a roving pod of sheep have trimmed the verge both on parkland and around Lake Suttonfield in the neighboring SDC.

Each method has its limitations: Weather, fuel moisture, resource availability (including person-power), and other considerations dictate how fuel reduction is conducted at any given time and place. October’s controlled burn at Jack London State Historic Park factored in the site’s elevation, slope, and aspect, as well as temperature, wind direction, wind speed, relative humidity, and fuel moisture. The munching sheep in Sonoma Valley Regional Park were corralled by a movable fence and shepherded from place to place before they munched the grass down to bare earth. And mechanical clearing—especially with masticators, which does to brush what your teeth and jaws do to salad—is timed so it doesn’t interfere with the nesting seasons of birds. A number of “...ologists” typically survey sites before work begins to identify nests, plants, or other natural or cultural values that should be protected.



Cattle at Sonoma Mountain Preservation Ranch, where grazing is used for grassland restoration and fuel reduction.

### Habitat Protection

Both wildfire and containing wildfire have short-term effects on wildlife: Some critters must evacuate, some lose their homes, some lose the materials they need to rebuild those homes. On the other hand, the Sonoma Ecology Center reports that successive burns at Van Hoosier, in 2020 and 2021, have reduced medusahead and other invasive species that can smother or out-compete native grasses and wildflowers. Controlled burns at Bouverie Preserve and Sonoma Valley Regional Park have shown similar results, enabling native wildflowers to thrive. The spiritual connections may be lacking, but these fires endeavor to mimic Indigenous burning practices and secure some of its benefits to the land.

Mechanical clearing, particularly farther afield in the wildland-urban interface, is more controversial. Some experts are skeptical of creating fuel breaks far from human habitation. Jack Cohen, a retired research scientist with the U.S. Forest Service, observes that while clearing in the “home ignition zone” — that 100-foot defensible space — is protective, more remote fire breaks “are typically not effective at stopping or helping control extreme wildfires and thus are not a reliable method of protecting communities.”

Others challenge creating remote fire breaks, particularly via mastication, because of the havoc it wreaks on habitats. This issue was highlighted last year when firefighting and parks agencies collaborated on a mastication project in the Old Orchard at Jack London State Historic Park. The intent was to restore the orchard, enhance habitat within it, and create a fuel break above Glen Ellen. One concerned environmentalist, Glen Ellen’s Mark Newhouser, noted that, whether by hand or machine, “the destruction of habitat is still a loss, and the result is an overall reduction of productivity and viability of this land as wildlife habitat...”

Newhouser points out that ongoing maintenance of the orchard/fire break will be accompanied by “more noise, more risk for injury to resident and migratory wildlife” and “succession of non-native invasive annual grasses that will dominate the orchard understory.” Thickets like those remaining on the edges of the Old Orchard, he maintains, are part of a successional forest that “supports significant biodiversity.” Those same thickets, unfortunately, are also often dismissed as simply brush, hard to navigate and fodder for wildfire.

“In our post-catastrophic wildfire lexicon,” Newhouser says, “Brush is now interpreted as highly flammable vegetation that is universally dangerous to us humans and therefore must be a target for removal to defend ourselves from wildfire. Unless removal of any vegetation is done judiciously and strategically, we do so at the peril of the environment, of biodiversity, and our own humanity as caretakers of the planet.”

prevented? We can adapt, but in the end, fire is more powerful than we are. Our hopes must grow out of that humility—whether we like it or not, fire is here to stay.

If fire is a community member, then we know it as the uncle who gets drunk at the holidays and causes an ugly spectacle. You can stop inviting them, but often they'll show up anyway. Trying to exclude them only makes the situation worse. If fire is wiser than we are, what does it know that we don't? It knows that destruction is only part of a long cycle that also nourishes the earth with ash that allows many plants to sprout back greener than ever. Recent megafires have likewise strengthened, deepened, and nourished our human community. Facing a common threat, neighbors suddenly realize how much they need each other. Fire seems to know the importance of community, the need for belonging.

But here's the thing—fire doesn't need disaster to deliver its gift. Cultural burning, an Indigenous tradition practiced at Heron Shadow and elsewhere, brings communities together in a much gentler way. Sara described how, for the first couple of years after acquiring the land, they listened for what it needed and wanted. The vision that emerged included carefully and consciously returning to a practice that had been part of the place for millennia.

Respectful of their neighbors, they slowly built support for the idea, gently weaving it into conversation. Eventually Heron Shadow applied for the required permits. They prepared the land so that the fire would go where they wanted it to, lined up a burn boss and a fire crew, and then waited for the right weather. On the day of the burn, Heron Shadow's stewards began with a water ceremony, to balance fire's frightening and destructive aspects. The neighbors lined up along the fence to watch. Drip torches were lit and the grass ignited.

I wasn't surprised that the burn was conducted with an appropriately serious attitude. It did surprise me that it also sounded like fun. It brought Heron Shadow and



Clint McKay and family, preparing for a cultural burn at Pepperwood Preserve.

their non-Indigenous neighbors together. Under close supervision, Indigenous kids were invited to light Douglas fir cones and chuck them into the dry grass. For many a twelve-year-old, that's living the dream. As someone who's home burned in 2017, it still sounds scary. But Heron Shadow's neighbors generally affirmed it as a positive and inspiring event—many even asked, "When can you do this on my property?"

There are no known records of cultural burning on Sonoma Mountain. But in 1823, Sonoma Mission's founder, Padre Jose Altimira, mentions coming across "Indians preparing to burn the long grass" in the southern Mayacamas. And as late as the 1850s, there's a report of Indigenous burning near the Russian River. No doubt cultural burning was practiced on Sonoma Mountain as well.

At Dry Creek Rancheria near Healdsburg, that thread continues unbroken right up to the present. Tribal elder Clint McKay (Wappo/Pomo) grew up there, within that tradition of cultural burning. Today he serves on the Native Advisory Council at Pepperwood Preserve, northeast of Santa Rosa. Clint draws a clear distinction between cultural burning as practiced by his people and controlled or prescriptive burning as practiced by modern fire crews. "It comes down to who it's intended to benefit," he says, "human beings or all the living things on the land."

Terms like "land management" and "resources" don't aptly describe Clint and his people's relationship with the world. It's more akin, I think, to a marriage of equal partners. Clint describes how his people use fire for reasons far more specific than "fuel reduction" and "infrastructure protection." Hunters used to burn chaparral to provide food and cover for deer; basket makers still use fire to tend sedge beds; families burn around the black oaks, which returns nutrients to the



Controlled burn at Sonoma Mountain Preservation Ranch.

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soil and keeps acorn worms in check. In Clint's lifetime, his people have never been able to burn more than a few acres at a time. But in the past, they sometimes burned as much as a couple hundred acres. Fire was also used to maintain travel corridors, many miles long, including one that extended from modern day Geyserville all the way to Clear Lake.

In the past, though weather and season were considered, cultural burning followed no calendar. Instead, the decision to use fire in a particular place was based on observation and generational wisdom. Carried out on a fine scale by families and small groups, frequent, low intensity fires created a landscape that was more

biodiverse and arguably healthier than today's. Rather than tracts of overgrown forest (catastrophic fire's favorite and Smokey's nemesis), vegetation was open and patchy—with woodland, chaparral, grassland, and wetlands forming an intricate mosaic on the land. All that variety supported an abundance which benefited humans and many other living beings.

We can't go back to those days or fully return to those practices. But knowing that humans can have a more positive relationship with fire gives me a little hope—a kind of hope I haven't felt since before 2017. We've seen the power of fire, now we need to learn from its wisdom.

## Indigenous Stewardship on the Mountain

The mountain's oldest trees provide a living link to the era before 1823, when the Sonoma Mission was founded. The eldest must be the "Grandmother" or "Ancient Redwood" in Jack London State Historic Park. At fourteen feet in diameter, it could be two thousand years old. "Jack's Oak," near London's cottage, is estimated at 350 years. The "Umbrella Tree," a huge bay laurel on a grassy ridge in North Sonoma Mountain Regional Park, must also count its lifetime in centuries. On the East Slope Trail are several enormous black oaks. With open canopies and drooping limbs, they have the distinctive look of pruned and tended trees—which would not be surprising, considering that black oak acorns were a favorite of the region's Indigenous peoples.

Humans have been tending and altering the mountain's vegetation for millennia. It's a relationship that plays a larger role than we often realize. In recent times, logging, woodcutting, and grazing have been responsible for much of what we see today. Before that time, cultural burning was a common practice. In 1823 Padre Jose Altimira described its east slope as "heavily wooded" with oaks, redwoods, and Douglas fir. Yet there were "numerous expanses bare of timber"—presumably grassland and chaparral created by a long tradition of cultural burning.

Today the east slope is still "heavily wooded" with those same trees, but due to fire suppression in recent times, those "numerous expanses bare of timber" have become uncommon and small. Indigenous peoples often burned from the base of a slope to the top. Because flames move more easily uphill than down, ridgetops make natural fire breaks (due to high fuel loads, modern prescribed burning generally works downhill.) The upper ridge is mostly grassland. Elsewhere, Indigenous people used similar ridges as travel corridors. Here the ridgetop would have provided an unimpeded route from San Pablo Bay to the county's interior. As far as we know, the west



Black oaks on the East Slope Trail, Jack London State Historic Park.

side of the mountain has always had been more open. Whether this can be attributed to past cultural burning is an open question.

Fire scars studied at Annadel-Trione State Park show that before 1823 burning happened regularly about every five to eight years. With lightning so uncommon, most of these must have been cultural burns. Such burning both encourages certain plants and restricts others. Early surveys recorded bay trees only on the northeast slope of the mountain—today they are all over. Likewise, Douglas fir has become widespread. Both trees have benefited from modern wildfire suppression.

Burning also favors chamise, manzanita, and other chaparral shrubs. Once more widespread, these have mostly been replaced by woodland. Chaparral, and the wildlife that depends on it, has not benefited from fire suppression. Of course, there is no 'correct' mix of vegetation on the mountain—the pattern at any time is the result of many forces, including human culture and our relationship with fire.

advocates revived long-standing plans to preserve the land as a regional park.

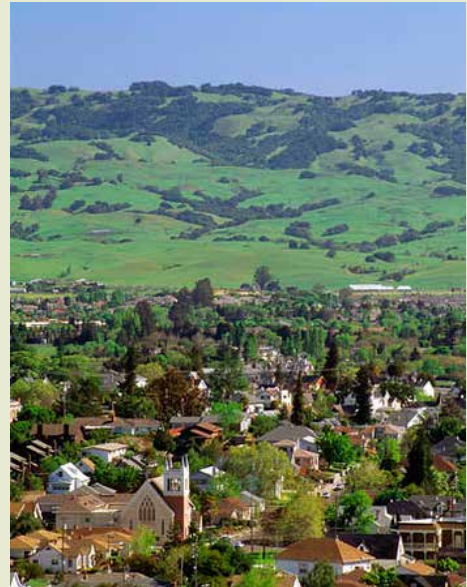
The land cradles many stories, some written by natural forces and some by people. The Rodgers Fault transects the lowland meadow, remodeling and creating. Black soil deposited by a wetland that swells and retreats with the seasons nurtures swaying expanses of cattail and an incongruous patch of prickly pear. The remnants of a homestead, no more now than foundation stones, are sheltered from north and west winds by a rocky knoll, with scraggly orchard trees—pear, persimmon, fig—tangled in oak scrub. In late season the tarweed blooms and the star thistle fades; the seeds of the former used by Native Americans for food; the latter a noxious weed.

The Pfendler mansion, barricaded by a 7-foot chain-link fence and a line of redwoods completely out of place on this part of the mountain, is the legacy of the property’s more current, and more controversial, history. Peter Pfendler, former owner of the neighboring ranch, blockaded public access to the property for decades, miring plans to open the park in litigation and ill will. The story of the years-long battle, including “hush-hush” and “backroom” deals, “bruising” public hearings, “acrimonious debate” about a contested and unsuccessful land swap, forgeries and extraditions, “pseudo-environmental canard[s]” and, of course, lawsuits, is detailed on the Friends of Lafferty Park website.

The upshot: While public right-of-way onto the property has been established, stewards like Modell remain wary of further challenges. For now, public access is limited to

guided walks hosted by LandPaths. These not only provide a way to explore this hard-won public asset, but also help build the park’s constituency should more advocacy be needed.

To join a guided walk at Lafferty Park, visit [www.landpaths.org](http://www.landpaths.org) or call (707) 544-7284. To learn more about Friends of Lafferty Ranch, visit [www.laffertyranch.org](http://www.laffertyranch.org).



Sonoma Mountain, including Lafferty Park, above Petaluma.

Petaluma River, San Pablo Bay and San Francisco, from Lafferty Park.





*Sonoma Mountain Preservation*

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