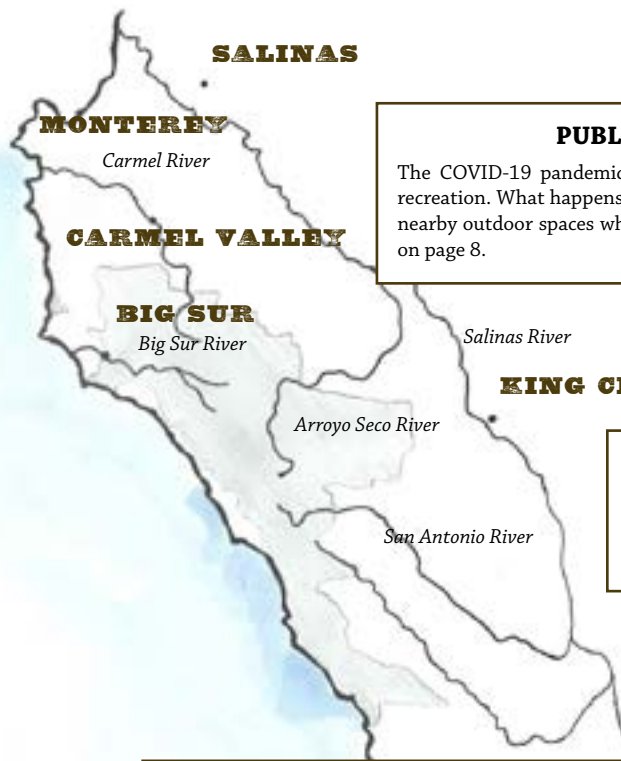


A topographic map overlay in a light green color, showing contour lines and peaks, positioned at the top of the page.

LOS PADRES FORESTWATCH

FALL 2020





SALINAS

MONTEREY

Carmel River

CARMEL VALLEY

BIG SUR

Big Sur River

Salinas River

Arroyo Seco River

San Antonio River

KING CITY

PUBLIC LANDS ARE AN ESSENTIAL NEED

The COVID-19 pandemic highlights the importance of public lands for solace and outdoor recreation. What happens to communities that have disproportional and inequitable access to nearby outdoor spaces when wildfires and other safety concerns prompt closures? Read more on page 8.

NEW DRILLING & PIPELINE IN THE CARRIZO PLAIN NATIONAL MONUMENT APPROVED

We're considering our next move following the Trump administration's approval of a new oil well and pipeline. See page 6 for more details.

MOUNTAIN LIONS PROTECTED AS CALIFORNIA ENDANGERED SPECIES

Southern California and central coast mountain lions earned temporary protection under the state Endangered Species Act as studies are conducted to determine whether permanent protection is warranted. See page 2 for more details.

TRUMP ADMINISTRATION PROPOSAL TO INCREASE OIL DRILLING IN NATIONAL FORESTS

The Forest Service is considering rule changes that will drastically decrease oversight of existing oil development and will cut public involvement and environmental review of new drilling and fracking in national forests, a move that is expected to increase drilling in the Los Padres, make current development less safe, and line oil industry pockets. Read more on page 6.

SAN LUIS OBISPO

Cuyama River

Carrizo Plain

NEW CUYAMA

SANTA MARIA

Sisquoc River

SANTA YNEZ

Santa Ynez River

PINE MOUNTAIN

Sespe Creek

Piru Creek

SANTA BARBARA

OJAI

Santa Clara River

VENTURA

SUPPORT THIS YEAR'S SANTA BARBARA WILD! @HOME

Join us virtually for this yearly benefit for Los Padres ForestWatch. Online auction November 9-13, live-stream celebration and live auction Friday, November 13th from 5:00-6:00pm with music, special guests, and more! Visit SBwild.org to learn more about this free event!

16,000 FORESTWATCH ADVOCATES SPEAK OUT AGAINST LOGGING ON PINE MOUNTAIN

The Forest Service proposes a logging project in an area important to the Chumash and popular for recreation, harboring rare and sensitive ecosystems and lands proposed for wilderness protection, skipping critical studies and community engagement normally required under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), a scenario playing out in national forests across the country. Read more on page 3.

VENTURA COUNTY TO VOTE ON SAFER OIL DRILLING AND FRACKING

The Ventura County board of supervisors will vote on whether to update an ordinance that allows certain oil drilling and fracking permits to be granted over the counter, much like a garden gazebo or marriage license. The decision will impact drilling in the Sespe Oil Field in Los Padres National Forest. Read more on page 6

OJAI WILD! A MAJOR SUCCESS!

Thank you to all of our guests, vendors, and volunteers for helping to protect Los Padres National Forest and the Carrizo Plain National Monument.

LOOKING ACROSS THE FOREST

AN UPDATE ON HOW WE'RE PROTECTING YOUR REGION

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BASE CAMP



Jeff Kuyper
Executive Director

As this newsletter goes to press the day after the election, our nation's public lands—and indeed, our nation itself—teeter on a precipice.

It's not yet clear which way things will tilt, but we do know that we've all worked harder than ever over the past four years to defend our public lands. We've poured over thousands of pages of documents, spent hundreds of hours ground-truthing in the field, rallied hundreds of people to attend hearings, helped ForestWatch advocates send more than fifty thousand letters to decision-makers, and—when all else failed—filed no less than nine lawsuits.

We've also expanded our volunteer programs and introduced dozens of youth and families, from communities traditionally

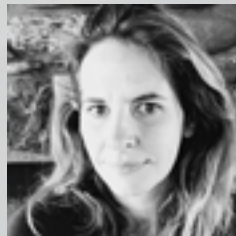
underrepresented in outdoor recreation, to the wonders of nature. We've begun to address the inequities in the environmental movement and are taking steps for our organization to become more diverse and inclusive.

All this work has been exhausting, hasn't it? We're all tired. Over the coming days, let's take some time to regroup and lay the groundwork for our strategy of how best to move forward in these unusual times. But let's also take some personal time to renew our commitment to the outdoors, to these natural treasures right here in our own backyard, and to ourselves and our will to keep moving forward—even when the odds seem insurmountable.

Make no mistake, regardless of what the final election results portend, we have our work cut out for us. You can count on our team to continue fighting to protect and defend our region's open spaces and wildlife and the communities that depend on them. We know you'll be right there with us, moving us all in a new, better, and bolder direction.

I hope to see you virtually at Santa Barbara Wild! on November 13 as we celebrate our hard work and discuss plans for the weeks and months ahead. Together we can continue to make a difference, no matter what challenges and opportunities we find. We have power, we have a voice, and we will continue to wield them to forge a better future for our public lands.

COMINGS AND GOINGS



ANNA DELASKI

Join us in congratulating Anna deLaski as she takes on her new role as Vice President of the Board of Directors. Anna has served on the ForestWatch Board since 2017 and never hesitates to contribute her time and talents to the organization through fundraising, events, advocacy, Board development, and expanding our network in the Santa Ynez Valley. We look forward to working with her in this new leadership position.



LINDY CARLSON

We also bid a fond goodbye to Lindy Carlson, who has helped organize our WILD! benefit events in Ojai and Santa Barbara for the past several years, first as a volunteer and then as our Events Manager. We will miss her commitment to protecting the natural world, and her cunning ability to juggle the many logistics involved with throwing large parties for hundreds of ForestWatch supporters. Thank you, Lindy. We raise our glasses to you!



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WILDLIFE VICTORIES In the Backyard and Across the State

Through our Room to Roam campaign, ForestWatch works to reduce human-wildlife conflicts and impacts and protect habitat and movement corridors by educating California residents and policymakers on ways to coexist with wildlife. This summer we have been hard at work with our allies, engaging the public to help ban dangerous poisons, win protection for mountain lions and bobcats, and protect habitat to allow our wildlife to roam safely and freely.



ROOM to ROAM

In March of 2019, the Ventura County Board of Supervisors adopted two ordinances—the first of their kind in California—to protect important wildlife travelways connecting the Los Padres National Forest, Santa Monica Mountains, and Simi Hills. These ordinances were developed over several years, working with landowners, business owners, local Native American groups, environmental organizations, and other stakeholders. Last year, these ordinances were challenged in court by industry groups. ForestWatch and our

conservation partners intervened in the lawsuit to help the county defend the ordinances. In an early September ruling, a judge formally granted us “intervenor” status, permitting us to fight to protect Ventura County's wildlife corridor ordinance in the courtroom in coming months. We are represented by the UC Irvine Environmental Law Clinic.

Wildlife corridor protections are a critical step toward ensuring the long-term survival of southern California and central coast mountain lions. These majestic cats roam throughout the Los Padres National Forest and Carrizo Plain National Monument, but they face threats of isolation and habitat fragmentation. Studies show that these mountain lions could face extinction in less than 50 years.

In April, the Fish and Game Commission voted unanimously to place southern California and central coast mountain lions under the protection of the California Endangered Species Act (CESA) while their candidacy for permanent protection is being considered. ForestWatch advocates sent over one thousand letters supporting the action and our staff testified at the hearing. Under CESA, the survival of mountain lions must be considered in planning decisions

for projects proposed in mountain lion habitat. The vote initiates a peer-reviewed study of these specific populations, to be concluded within one year, and an additional hearing to determine permanent protection.

And this fall, these iconic cats—as well as bobcats, the San Joaquin kit fox, owls, and other animals—are safer from the constant threat of second-generation anticoagulant rodenticides (SGARs), poisons that stay potent in the food chain, killing not just the targeted rodent but their predators and scavengers as well. California passed a bill that bans the use of SGARs, except under certain circumstances, including the protection of public health, until a study is completed to better understand how they impact non-target animals. ForestWatch advocates again stepped up, writing thousands of letters to legislators and the governor to urge the bill's passage. In August alone, a bobcat and mountain lion died from rodenticide poison in the Santa Monica Mountains.

Bobcats also earned additional protection this year with their addition to the list of regulated nongame animals. Again, ForestWatch supporters took action to urge the passage of AB 1254, a bill that bans bobcat trophy hunting in California and requires the implementation of a science-based bobcat management plan by 2025.

Early next year, we'll be launching a series of workshops with landowners throughout San Luis Obispo County to help them identify non-lethal ways to coexist with wildlife.

Through the work of our dedicated advocates and our coalition partners, wildlife in California roam a bit freer and have a better chance in their struggle to adapt to a changing climate.



PINE MOUNTAIN

LOCAL ISSUE, NATIONAL PROBLEM

In late May, the U.S. Forest Service released a proposal to selectively log old-growth forest and clear chaparral across 755 acres atop Pine Mountain in the Ventura County backcountry. In line with two other recently-approved logging projects in the Los Padres National Forest, the agency sought to approve the project using loopholes to avoid preparing an environmental assessment or environmental impact statement.



ForestWatch Conservation Director Bryant Baker showing the size tree that can be logged without restrictions on Pine Mountain.

The project would allow the use of heavy equipment to log large, old trees—up to five feet in diameter under some circumstances—and clear rare old-growth chaparral along six miles of Pine Mountain Ridge stretching from Highway 33 to Reyes Peak. The area is a popular recreation destination beloved by hikers and climbers, and it continues to be spiritually and culturally important to local Chumash tribal groups. Over 30% of the project area is within two proposed additions

to the Sespe Wilderness approved by the House of Representatives.

Through the use of loopholes, further environmental study and public involvement are avoided.

Despite the project's massive scale, location, and potential impacts, the Forest Service intends to use two controversial loopholes to bypass requirements under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) to conduct a detailed study of potential impacts to the area's unique ecosystems. These loopholes would also limit the public's ability to voice their concerns while eliminating the official objection process that helps reduce the potential for litigation.

The ridge is home to some of the most diverse and unique habitats in the Los Padres National Forest. Pine Mountain hosts the greatest diversity of coniferous tree species in Ventura County, which occur next to large expanses of rare old-growth chaparral. Altogether, the ridge is home to over 400 species of native plants, including dozens that are rare or sensitive. As a biodiversity hotspot, the area is also home to several species of wildlife that depend on the mountain's unique ecosystems. Mountain lions, black bears, bobcats, and numerous species of birds and small mammals can be found in and around the project area.

Businesses, tribal groups, and organizations joined over 16,000 individuals in opposition.

The project's location is exactly why it has become the largest public campaign against a single project in the Los Padres National Forest. Over 16,000 people submitted official comments in opposition to the project. More than 70 conservation organizations and Chumash tribal groups came out

against the project, and 60 businesses submitted a joint letter of opposition. Numerous elected officials in the region also opposed the project, with some such as U.S. Rep. Brownley (D-CA) and U.S. Rep. Carbajal (D-CA) submitting letters to the agency requesting that an environmental study be conducted before the project moves forward.

A major issue for many is the possibility that the project will involve commercial timber harvest. In later meetings and statements, the U.S. Forest Service has made it clear that a traditional timber sale or other methods by which cut trees can be sold for profit are options for the project. The Los Padres National Forest has had its timber harvest quota doubled several times since the Trump administration took over management of the agency.

This same scenario is playing out in national forests across the country.

Like many such projects proposed in national forests across California and the West, the U.S. Forest Service is justifying the Pine Mountain



project under the guise of community protection from wildfire. Countless scientific studies have demonstrated that such remote vegetation treatments—Pine Mountain Ridge is several miles away from the nearest community—are ineffective against the fires that cause the most damage to towns and neighborhoods each year, and many scientists have found that



Donate to the Pine Mountain Defense Fund
ProtectPineMountain.org

Pine Mountain, Photo by Bryant Baker

these types of projects may do more harm than good for forest ecosystems. The agency even admits that the project will not help mitigate fire spread under extreme weather conditions. In a 2015 assessment of 163 similar existing or potential project areas, the U.S. Forest Service ranked Pine Mountain 118 in terms of priority for community protection and other factors.

Doubling down on a failed approach makes communities less safe.

In 2017 and 2018, just nine fires out of 16,600 throughout California caused 95% of the total damage to communities. All nine fires burned under conditions that render vegetation removal projects, such as the one proposed on Pine Mountain, useless for suppression purposes. Moreover, vegetation clearance projects can increase wildfire risk by removing fire-resistant trees, increasing heating and drying of the forest floor, and spreading non-native invasive grasses and weeds that ignite more easily and spread wildfire more quickly.

However, policymakers continue to double down on this failed approach to dealing with wildfire risk in states like California. Just this year, multiple bills have been introduced by members of Congress that would further weaken NEPA and other environmental laws to allow agencies like the U.S. Forest Service to approve vegetation removal projects more easily. Senator Feinstein

(D-CA) co-authored the Emergency Wildfire and Public Safety Act (S. 4431) with timber advocate Senator Daines (R-MT). This bill would create new loopholes for the U.S. Forest Service to get around NEPA for timber harvest projects and would outright exempt ecologically destructive post-fire logging projects from environmental assessment and public oversight.

Even the California state legislature attempted to pass a last-minute bill that would have put billions of dollars to new vegetation removal projects across the state over the next several years. The bill, AB 1659, was originally intended to address utility infrastructure-related wildfire risk but was gutted and amended after numerous lightning-caused fires broke out around the state in the late summer. Fortunately, the legislation did not have the votes to pass before the legislative session ended in August.

A focus on communities is science-based and will save lives.

Scientists and conservation organizations have long advocated that funding should be directed instead to community-based measures such as creating and maintaining smart defensible space directly next to homes, retrofitting existing structures with fire-safe materials (also known as home hardening), improving emergency alert and evacuation or shelter systems, and reducing development in the wildland-

urban interface. Only a small portion of the funds included as part of the state legislature's AB 1659 would have been available for home hardening, but the bill did not actually create any home hardening grant programs.

Some legislators are getting it right.

Among a barrage of bad legislation lately is a bright spot: Senator Harris' Wildfire Defense Act (S. 2822), which would help with home hardening and other community-focused wildfire mitigation measures.

The Pine Mountain proposal and ecologically damaging legislation all come at a time when the Trump administration is attempting massive rollbacks of regulations under NEPA and similar laws. Earlier this year, the president issued an executive order that would waive requirements under these bedrock environmental laws for a wide variety of projects on federal lands. The Forest Service has also been directed to ramp up vegetation removal projects across the country, especially those that involve timber harvesting. Last year, Los Padres National Forest approved two commercial logging projects near Mt. Pinos under loopholes that similarly allowed the agency to avoid conducting the level of environmental review that is normal for such projects.

All of this highlights the timber industry's influence over legislative efforts and project decision-making—a trend that has only worsened in recent years. The industry has capitalized on large wildfire seasons in the past and continues to do so this year amid record-breaking conditions. As members of the public become more aware of wildfire-related issues, they will also need to become more wary of "solutions" offered by the timber industry and its proponents.

You can speak out against the Pine Mountain project and some of the bad legislation currently moving through Congress by visiting LPFW.org/action.

13TH ANNUAL
Ojai Wild!
A BENEFIT FOR LOS PADRES FORESTWATCH

OJAI WILD GOES VIRTUAL! Exciting plans came together as we reimagined and reshaped this year's gathering into a virtual event we dubbed WILD @ HOME!, which launched online in late May, and was wildly successful! With the support of our sponsors, attendees, members, volunteers, and

community, we welcomed over 200 people online and raised over \$50,000 to protect our region's majestic landscapes.

While we deeply missed gathering with all our friends and supporters in a beautiful outdoor setting this year, we're excited and honored to have hosted a new type of gathering that brought our local community "together, while apart" for some much-needed fun and celebration. We had an exciting lineup of special guest video appearances, great music by The Salty Suites and Todd Hannigan with Sleeping Chief, and of course our online auction—all to benefit the protection and preservation of your local forest. We're also especially proud to have partnered with local businesses to help keep them afloat, and with HELP of Ojai to provide food deliveries for families in need. We're all still in this together.

All our attendees and vendors help to support our land conservation and advocacy programs. We are sincerely grateful to our team of volunteers for their enthusiasm, efforts, and time that made this event possible.

Many Thanks to Our Sponsors!

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PINE MOUNTAIN

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Russell Radom
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June + Shed Behar
Derek Booth + Stephanie Moret
Alasdair Coyne
Barry + Ann Dalkey
Nancy + Doug Garrison
Maureen Pearson Hannah
Anne Kaplan
Judi Kroeger
Peggy + George Melton
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Carol Pierce
Doc Pierce
Catherine Rossbach
Ellen Sklarz
Sandra + Charles Sledd
Sandy + Libby Treadwell
Betsy Vanleit

NORDOFF RIDGE

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Russ + Maureen Bishop
Charlie + Caryn Bosson

Wendy Darling + Stephen
Bryne
Lindy Carlson
Tom + Fran Chadwick
Sus Corez
Patricia Ebener
Val + Leland Endres
Susan Fouroat
Joy Fedele
Tim + Stephanie Fuhs
David + Cindy Garber
Green Goddess Gardens
Marie Graney
Christopher Hamma
Mary Hansen
Gary Hayes + Pat Roskowski
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Judith Oberlander
Kate Pond
Lu Setnicka
Virginia Siegfried
Aryna Swope
Linda Taylor
Terry + Cricket Twichell
Aiden Vondriska
Tyler Vondriska
Brady Vondriska
Michael Watling
Daniel Webster



East of Carrizo Plain National Monument, Photo by Rebecca August

The Trump administration's drive to escalate oil drilling on public lands directly impacts the Los Padres National Forest and Carrizo Plain National Monument—not to mention public health, water supplies, and the climate.

Targeting National Forests In 2017, the president issued an executive order directing agencies to identify regulations that impede oil and gas development. Accordingly, this September, the administration announced rule changes that would allow new oil drilling and fracking in national forests without consideration of impacts to the local environment or the climate, and for decisions to be made behind closed doors—even barring Forest Service officials from participating in the process. The proposal would also weaken oversight and compliance of existing oil development by allowing officials to give oil companies an unlimited amount of time to comply with the law.

As the only national forest in California with active fossil fuel extraction, the plan



would certainly result in more oil and gas development in Los Padres National Forest and would further threaten the small rural communities downstream of its three existing oil fields.

ForestWatch joined with 122 organizations in submitting technical comments opposing the rollbacks, and 1300 ForestWatch advocates demanded stronger—not weaker—protections for our national forest lands.

The Central Coast on the Auction Block In August, the Bureau of Land Management announced the first lease auction after finalizing its plan to open 1.2 million acres of federal land and mineral estate to oil drilling and fracking on the Central Coast. The agency plans to put 10-year leases for over 4,000 acres on the auction block—the first in California in eight years—despite nearly 100,000 area residents speaking out in opposition and ongoing litigation by ForestWatch and other parties including the state of California.

Some of the parcels proposed for sale are located within the Lokern-Buena Vista Area of Critical Environmental Concern. Others are close to the boundaries of the Carrizo Plain National Monument and Bitter Creek National Wildlife Refuge. All are in Kern County where communities already suffer some of the worst air quality in the nation. ForestWatch has filed technical comments and an administrative protest with allied organizations, challenging the lease sale,

and continues to work with our attorneys to challenge the underlying management plan.

The Methane Rule Also this summer, a federal judge ruled with ForestWatch and a broad coalition of groups, rejecting the Trump administration's cancellation of an Obama era rule requiring oil and gas companies operating on federal land to restrict the release of methane, a dangerous greenhouse gas. Unfortunately, that decision was repealed in November, just before the rule was to go back into effect. ForestWatch will continue to work with allies to see its restoration.

Drilling Carrizo Plain This spring, after withdrawing its original approval, the administration approved plans to drill a new well and pipeline on Carrizo Plain National Monument for the first time since its establishment in 2001. The original approval was reversed when ForestWatch and the Center for Biological Diversity filed an objection over threats that the project posed to the environment. The new decision was made without further study and continues to disregard significant impacts. ForestWatch will continue to pursue every avenue to block new oil development on Carrizo Plain.



But there is some cause for hope. This summer, Ventura County's planning commission voted 4-1 to update an old ordinance that allows certain oil drilling and fracking permits to be granted with no more process or oversight than a garden gazebo or marriage license. The board is expected to issue its final approval this fall.

Thousands of wells operate under these "antiquated permits," issued up to 75 years ago—long before most environmental laws were established. Many are dangerously close to communities and hundreds have been drilled within and near Los Padres National Forest including the Sespe Oil Field—one of the most environmentally sensitive areas in Ventura County.



STELLAR INTERNS

We were fortunate to have two wonderful interns from UCSB's Bren School of Environmental Science & Management this summer. Jonathan Hart served as our Conservation GIS Intern, working on issues related to wildlife protection and community development in fire hazard areas. Our Conservation Intern, Julia Dagum, helped out with various research projects that will help ForestWatch better advocate for native ecosystem protection in the region moving forward. Both students are set to graduate with their master's degree in 2021. We wish them the best of luck!

WILD THINGS

Most who have hiked through the chaparral have come across chaparral yucca. Its long, sharp leaves and massive flower stalk make it nearly impossible to miss. However, few know about this plant's amazing ability to regrow after wildfire. Take a careful walk through a post-fire area with yuccas and you'll see what look like barbecued pineapples sticking out of the ground—but most are still alive. Within months of burning, they will leaf out making for a beautiful sight of bright green leaves on a blackened base. See below for an example of one yucca that survived the Cave Fire near Santa Barbara last fall.

Photo by Bryant Baker.

THE FINE ART OF ADVOCACY



Painting by August Whitney in support of Pine Mt.

Thousands took action to oppose the Trump administration's proposal to log and clear chaparral on Pine Mountain, but a surprising number of people took their advocacy to the next level. People contributed to the Pine Mountain Defense Fund, offered their services, hung banners and posters, and helped amplify information about the project on social media. Artists designed stickers, jewelry, and patches and donated the proceeds. Artist Monique Martinez teamed up with Island View Outfitters and Hig Desert Print Co. to sell hundreds of Protect Pine Mt. tee-shirts. Others volunteered filmmaking, design, and photography.



Pine Mountain is artist August Whitney's favorite local camping, hiking, and painting spot. He hosted an auction

of his artwork on Instagram and raised several thousand dollars for the Pine Mountain defense Fund.

"This donation ... was raised through several paintings I sold that were based around Pine Mountain and intended to bring more awareness to the work LPFW is doing to protect that area. I hope it will be helpful in whatever means necessary."

You can see more of August's paintings on Instagram @augustwhitney.

Weshoyot Alvitre is Tongva, from the Los Angeles Basin, and is well established in the Indigenous art community as an illustrator. Born in the San Gabriel Mountains, she grew up close to the land and was raised with traditional knowledge that inspires the work she does today.



Weshoyot made the above illustration to "bring awareness to the fact that Pine Mountain, Reyes Peak, and all surrounding lands are CHUMASH Lands ... land that has been in their keeping for thousands of years, and to protect Pine Mountain from the threat ... to plants and animals, artifacts, and sacred sites." Hundreds of people liked and shared the piece on social media. Weshoyot gave us permission to share her work as well, which gave Chumash concerns even more visibility.

You can find more of this artist's work on Instagram at @weshoyot or visit her website at weshoyot.com.

JOIN FORESTWATCH'S EVERGREEN LEGACY

"The true meaning of life is to plant trees, under whose shade you do not expect to sit." Nelson Henderson

There is no greater dedication to wilderness than to ensure its protection after you're gone. Members of our Evergreen Society are a special part of the Los Padres ForestWatch donor family, who will be long remembered and support our long-term health. Leave a legacy to your public lands by joining LPFW's Evergreen Society with a planned gift.

A planned gift is a pledge or contribution that is made today, for the future, and is one of the best ways of supporting a nonprofit. This method of giving enables an individual to make an even bigger contribution than they may have otherwise been able to make. Many types of planned gifts also provide tangible tax benefits to donors during their lifetime.

One of the most common types of planned gifts are bequests. You can make a bequest to LPFW by naming Los Padres ForestWatch in your will. Oftentimes, supporters will set aside a certain percentage or a set amount of their total estate to support the future of Los Padres ForestWatch. There may be various planned giving strategies to consider for other forms of assets, such as real estate, life insurance, or retirement accounts. Los Padres ForestWatch does not offer legal, tax, or financial planning advice. You are encouraged to consult your legal counsel, tax advisor, and/or financial planner.

Please contact Jody Brown at jody@LPFW.org or 805.617.4610 x2 to discuss membership in our Evergreen Society. You may also visit our website at LPFW.org/legacy for more information.

No matter what you choose or the size of your donation, your planned gift will make a lasting impact, helping to ensure protection and preservation for the wildlife, wilderness, waters, and trails of the Los Padres National Forest for future generations.

PUBLIC LANDS PROVE TO BE AN ESSENTIAL NEED

Our public lands are at the forefront of the current health crisis as places the community consistently turns to for solace. When the COVID-19 stay-at-home orders went into effect, many people looked to the nation's wealth of natural open space as safe to visit. But what happens when our forests and other public lands close, or people are discouraged from visiting them?

Recent wildfires and other serious public safety concerns prompted public lands closures throughout California.

For some, visits to the forest for camping or other recreational use might have been the only vacation or time of respite they had this year. For others, it meant their outdoor access options were limited. While closing certain public lands was understandably done in an effort to reduce human-caused wildfire ignitions, the closures came during a time when outside exercise was one of the only recommended activities (aside from going out for essential needs) for staying safe, healthy, and preventing the

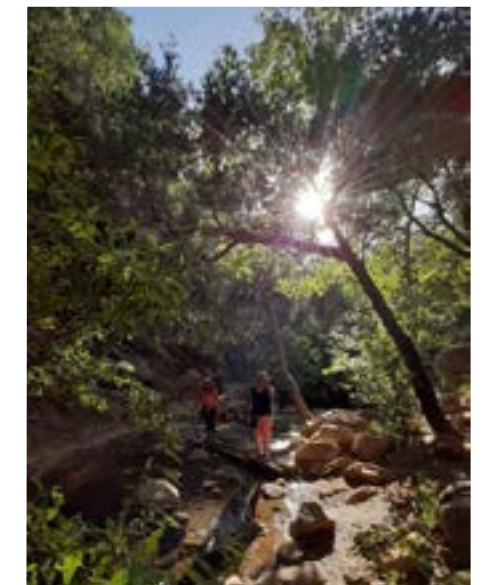
spread of the virus. It was also a time when much of the public was at home more, working longer hours, and when children's screen time had increased exponentially.

During normal times, visiting a national forest or other federal lands may only be accessible to those who live close or have transportation to reach these places, but the pandemic further revealed the impact on communities who have disproportionate and inequitable access to nearby outdoor spaces.

Several research studies indicate that, particularly in low-income neighborhoods and in communities of color, residents have fewer parks, coastline, or natural open spaces that can be used safely for recreation. During a time when physical distancing was required and fresh air was most needed, many local parks closed. To compound the problem, communities further from the few open public places were discouraged from traveling through a "stay local" messaging that was well-

intentioned to protect local medical resources, but based on the assumption that everyone has outdoor access.

The pandemic has taught us many things about how we connect to our public lands for recreation, education, exercise, mental health, and social connection. It has taught us that public health and public lands are intrinsically connected and we must assign them the same value that we attach to other essential needs.





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