

Building a Commitment to Partnerships in the Coachella Valley: the Santa Rosa Mountains—A Case Study¹

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Abstract: The Coachella Valley is situated in eastern Riverside County, California, approximately 100 miles east of Los Angeles. During the 1980s it was one of the fastest growing areas in the nation with an annual growth rate of 8.3 percent. As open space diminished, many governing jurisdictions, and environmental and educational organizations began looking for a commitment to open space for future generations. The Santa Rosa Mountains have become the focus of this intense effort by a multiorganizational partnership.

The California Desert Conservation Area (CDCA) was established by Congress in 1976. Four years later a plan was approved for the 25-million acre area running from Mono Lake Basin to the Mexican border and from the Nevada and Arizona borders to the eastern boundaries of the several National Forests in southern California. The Santa Rosa Mountains are within the CDCA, forming its western edge in Riverside County. The Santa Rosa Mountains are actually a geographic unit composed of portions of two mountain ranges. At Tahquitz Canyon, behind the city of Palm Springs, a fault divides the Santa Rosa Mountains Management Unit into two mountainous subunits. The northern half is the San Jacinto Range and the southern half is the Santa Rosa Range. The San Jacinto Mountains continue into the San Jacinto Ranger District of the San Bernardino National Forest and into Mt. San Jacinto State Park. The Santa Rosa Mountains terminate in Anza-Borrego Desert State Park in San Diego County.

As a result of the Bureau of Land Management's (BLM) California Desert Conservation Plan the Santa Rosas became a Habitat Management Area for Penninsular bighorn sheep. The California Department of Fish and Game (CDF&G) declared it a State game refuge. A Wilderness Study Area was designated and recommended to be included within the National Wilderness Preservation System. Through the efforts of the Wildlife Conservation Board, 27,000 acres of private land were acquired for management by CDF&G. Little else was accomplished during the 1980's.

As the Coachella Valley experienced a growth rate of over 100 percent during the 1980's, concern arose that the valley floor would eventually be fully developed and developers would begin to look towards the mountains for future home sites. Proposals to revise the 1972 Palm Hills General Plan within the mountainous portion of Palm Springs began to surface in the late 1980's. This rapid growth of the valley and the fear of mountain and hillside development stimulated concern that if action was not taken soon, the Coachella Valley's mountains would soon be in the same situation as the Santa Monica Mountains, engulfed by development and every inch of the private land threatened by development and escalating land values.

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The Process of Partnership

In 1989 the Coachella Valley Mountains Trust was able to get bipartisan legislation to then Governor Deukmejian to establish the Coachella Valley Mountains Conservancy, only to see it vetoed. On a concurrent track, the Bureau of Land Management began working with governing jurisdictions through the Coachella Valley Association of Governments (CVAG) to work towards a special designation for the Santa Rosa Mountains. After less than 1 year of intensive discussion and combined efforts of the citizens of the Coachella Valley, the Santa Rosa Mountains National Scenic Area (NSA) was established by Order of the Secretary of the Interior in March 1990.

The partners include the cities of the Coachella Valley—Coachella, Indio, La Quinta, Indian Wells, Palm Desert, Rancho Mirage, Cathedral City, Palm Springs, and Desert Hot Springs. Both Cahuilla reservations (Agua Caliente and Morongo) joined the partnership, as did the CDF&G. The County of Riverside Board of Supervisors passed a resolution endorsing the National Scenic Area. Other partners include the Friends of the Indian Canyons, Deep Canyon Research Station (University of California), the Sierra Club, Coachella Valley Archaeological Society, the Bighorn Institute, and Palm Springs Open Space and Trails Organization. Letters of support also came from the USDA Forest Service and the California Department of Parks and Recreation, as well as from hundreds of citizens. A dedication was held on May 5, 1990, on land donated by Westinghouse Development Company.

The partnership was sealed with the Santa Rosa Mountains NSA extending from One Horse Spring on the Morongo Indian Reservation in the northwest to Anza-Borrego Desert State Park in the south. The western boundary of the NSA is coterminous with the San Bernardino National Forest. The eastern boundary is more difficult to define but is approximately the toe of the slope, where the mountains meet the valley floor. Of the roughly 200,000 acres within the NSA, 90,000 acres are administered by BLM, 27,000 acres by CDF&G, 20,000 acres by the University of California Natural Land and Water Reserve System, 15,000 acres by Indian reservations, and the remainder are privately owned acreages or Indian allotment lands.

The Commitment

In early 1991 Governor Deukmejian signed the legislation creating the Coachella Valley Mountains Conservancy, with a Board of Directors representing the citizens of the valley. Involved agencies (BLM, USDA FS, CDF&G) became nonvoting members of the Board.

The BLM established an Executive Steering Committee (ESC) of the Santa Rosa Mountains NSA consisting of 15 members representing all governing jurisdictions in the valley,

CDF&G, the Building Industry Association, Southern California Edison, and the development community. The purpose of the ESC is to develop a comprehensive umbrella plan embracing the needs of all, but dedicated to protecting the scenic values while allocating uses and user space and opportunities consistent with natural resource management goals. The plan, designed to be undertaken as a Comprehensive Resource Management Plan (CRMP), is in its second year of development. Subcommittees have been designated and are headed by citizens. These include: (1) Recreation, headed by Southern California Edison, (2) Cultural and Native American resources, headed by the Agua Caliente Indian Reservation Chairman, (3) Planning, headed by the Building Industry Association, (4) Land Tenure Adjustment, headed by a City Attorney, (5) Biology, headed by the Nature Conservancy, and (6) Minerals, headed by a professor of geology at the College of the Desert. BLM specialists serve as staff to the various committees. A geographic information system provides computerized graphic and analytic tools to examine potential allocations of resources.

During the planning process management of the NSA continues. The Scenic Area Visitor Center was approved with land donated by Westinghouse Development Company, and the City of Palm Desert serves as the lead agency for compliance with the California Environmental Quality Act. Both the City of Palm Desert and the Agua Caliente Reservation have entered into a cost reimbursement agreement for the BLM to provide law enforcement on their lands within the NSA.

A private real estate agent has purchased several sections of land within the NSA to exchange for developable lands on the valley floor. BLM continues to explore opportunities for additional land exchanges within the mountains. The Forest Service has nearly completed their consolidation of their Santa Rosa unit to eliminate threats of development.

For Fiscal Year 1992 the BLM was allocated \$1 million from Land and Water Conservation Funds (LWCF) to begin the acquisition of private parcels. An additional \$5 million may be

provided in Fiscal Year 1993. Hundreds of letters supported allocation of the LWCF funds.

Conclusions

From here the following steps are needed:

1. Finish the CRMP and make it consistent with the general plans of the cities and the county.
2. Continue consolidating the land base to eliminate the threat of development. About \$60 million will be needed.
3. Continue meeting regularly and allow the community to be the decisionmaker through a permanent ESC established through the CRMP or through legislation.
4. Dedicate staff to the National Scenic Area perpetually so that on-the-ground realizations are consistent with management philosophy.

The process of partnership is complex and difficult. It requires sincere commitment on the part of all. In this case the BLM has been used as the prime mover for the preservation of the Santa Rosas because it had the legislative authority necessary and the commitment to do so. Partnerships, to be effective, must be nurtured. They must have economic commitment from everyone. Philosophy is not enough. And they must have donated volunteer time from everyone from mayors and tribal chairs to agency resource staffs. A partnership must be adopted by local citizens and be locally institutionalized. It must transcend individuals and groups or it will not succeed.

If the above steps are taken in a reasonable amount of time, the "Santa Rosa Mountains National Scenic Area ... where sharply defined mountain peaks create a near-perfect scenic backdrop for the communities and resorts of the Coachella Valley, where palm trees spring up from fault lines to dance in the breezes, where the rare Penninsular bighorn sheep struggle to survive in a harsh environment" will be protected forever.