



Native wildflowers thrive in a Preserve grassland two years after the Soberanes fire, indicating the benefit of low intensity fire in the local ecosystems.

Photo: Rodrigo Sierra Corona, Santa Lucia Conservancy

A Force for Nature for 25 Years

Santa Lucia Conservancy
Protects Wildlife and Wildlands

BY RENEE BRINCKS



CARMEL VALLEY RESIDENT CHERYL THIELE HAS FOND CHILDHOOD MEMORIES OF RIO ROAD BIKE RIDES AND ADVENTURES UNDER THE SKYLINE FOREST CANOPY. AS AN ADULT RETURNING TO THE REGION AFTER 30 YEARS IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA, SHE WANTED TO RECAPTURE THOSE CONNECTIONS TO NATURE. THIELE VIEWED HOMES IN SEVERAL MONTEREY PENINSULA NEIGHBORHOODS BEFORE VISITING THE SANTA LUCIA PRESERVE, A PRIVATE RESIDENTIAL COMMUNITY SET WITHIN NATIVE GRASSLANDS, COASTAL CHAPARRAL, PINE FORESTS AND RIPARIAN HABITATS.



Over 40,000 children have participated in the Conservancy's free education programs since 1999, many ran by educator Julie Sigourney, pictured here.

ing habitats, and helping us all become good stewards of this place we call home is remarkable," says Thiele.

This year, the Santa Lucia Conservancy celebrates 25 years of stewardship, community engagement and environmental research. Staff members work with residents like Thiele to implement science-based land management plans that prioritize habitat health, biodiversity and wildfire safety. From removing invasive weeds to installing owl boxes to monitoring wildlife with cameras placed on individual properties (Thiele's lenses have filmed bobcats, deer, wild boar, California mice, mountain lions, a blue heron and a bear), the Conservancy team aims to be a resource for homeowners and the broader community.

After exploring the Preserve's backcountry trails and old-growth redwoods, Thiele purchased a home on an oak-dotted ridge framed by San Clemente Creek. Since then, she's participated in wildflower walks, redwood research demonstrations, trout spotting strolls and plant-

ing projects. Each is organized by the Santa Lucia Conservancy, the nonprofit land trust that supports conservation efforts across the 20,000-acre Preserve.

"To live somewhere with an organization so committed to learning about the land, protect-

"The Santa Lucia Preserve supports roughly 12.5 percent of the Carmel watershed, so the conservation work that we do in partnership with our landowners sustains and benefits the



Photo: Kyle Meyer, Santa Lucia Conservancy

Dr. Christy Wyckoff in the field with interns Avery Calhoun and Katie Mung, measuring the impact of conservation grazing in helping restore native grasslands. Early indications show an increase in native species where targeted cattle grazing was applied.



Photo: Adam White, Santa Lucia Conservancy

This field crew is one integral part of the Grasslands Initiative launched by the Conservancy in 2019 to recover historic grasslands within The Preserve. Left to Right: Ryen Wright, Austin Robertson, Brett Scott, Chris Terry and Isidro Blanco.

Monterey Peninsula water supply," says Santa Lucia Conservancy Executive Director Christy Fischer. "The Preserve also provides important wildlife habitat and connectivity between various regional public lands."

Set between protected areas and parks such as Garland Ranch and Palo Corona, the destination is centered in what Christy Wyckoff, Ph.D., calls "a biodiversity hotspot."

"This is an incredibly rich area with more than 900 plant and animal species, including some listed by state and federal agencies as threatened or endangered. We think critically about how to manage the land as a whole, but also how to address the needs of specific species such as California tiger salamanders, Smith's blue butterflies and steelhead trout," says Wyckoff, director of conservation science for the Santa Lucia Conservancy.

The protection of native California grasslands is another significant priority within the Preserve. Grassland ecologist Rodrigo Sierra Corona, Ph.D., the Conservancy's director of stewardship, oversees a conservation grazing initiative that moves cattle across the grassland corridors. The animals control brush, dead



Photo: Christy Wyckoff, Santa Lucia Conservancy

Conservancy intern, Caitlyn Barrera, communing with one of California's endangered amphibians, a red-legged frog, found during a pond survey on The Preserve.

organic material and weeds in a low-impact way, reducing fire risk while improving conditions for pollinators, birds, wildflowers and rare species.

Sierra Corona's team maintains 27 small, non-grazed plots to compare species density, soil health and other data before and after the cattle come through.

"When you walk through the land, you can see the difference," he says. "The benefits are

right there. When we bring visitors through and they see these results, they really understand why this work matters."

Those visitors include area elementary school students who attend free workshops in the Preserve. Children learn about natural history, ecology and art at sites under redwood groves and along the Carmel River. The Conservancy provides financial assistance for



Photo: Adam White, Santa Lucia Conservancy

Planting precious valley oak trees with residents of The Preserve to give these iconic natives a helping hand are: Peter and Donna Gordon, Conservancy Executive Director Christy Fischer, and Ginger and Jim Andrasick.

districts that lack a travel budget.

“Education lies at the heart of everything that we do, whether it’s working with Preserve owners or the 3,000 school kids a year who visit our lands for science-based outdoor education. Helping people understand what’s so special about this place, and how they can help care for it, is always our beginning point,” says Fischer.

Older students assist Conservancy naturalists during independent studies and internships. As they contribute to the nonprofit’s research efforts, participants gain experience and knowledge that they can take to other organizations. California State University Monterey Bay graduate Caitlyn Barrera collected water samples, banded tricolored blackbirds and managed studies related to endangered California tiger salamanders as a Santa Lucia Conservancy intern. She now works for an Ojai Valley environmental nonprofit and will soon pursue graduate degrees in environmental policy and envi-

ronmental research.

Barrera says the Santa Lucia Conservancy takes a distinctive approach to habitat and species preservation.

“That they are working to protect so many listed species is unique. In most cases, groups focus on one or maybe two, and mostly they

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conduct restoration projects,” she explains. “The fact that the Santa Lucia Conservancy also pursues population numbers and shares species-related research, both locally and across wider communities, is even more unique. It makes an important impact.”

Working on private land positions the Conservancy to conduct long-term research

that can be difficult to fund and execute in a public setting.

“We can place monitoring equipment on the land for protracted amount of time. We can return and restudy the same site, year in and year out. We can collect the data that answers really robust scientific questions,” Wyckoff says.

As she and her colleagues explore innovative ways to address climate change, population growth, sustainable development and other conservation-related concerns, sharing their findings remains a priority.

“This is a unique landscape, but many elements of the Preserve’s design and the Conservancy’s role can be exported,” Wyckoff says. “In an era where there are so many challenges in the worldwide conservation realm, we need every tool in the toolbox.”

To learn more about the Santa Lucia Conservancy’s educational programs and stewardship, please visit slconservancy.org.