

# Safeguarding the Puente-Chino Hills Wildlife Corridor: A Geographer's Journey

Melanie Schlotterbeck, CMP

*HillsForEveryone.org*

## Abstract

Weaving together Southern California's largest urban state park has been a generational adventure for the Schlotterbecks since the late 1970s. From setting out to create Chino Hills State Park to evolving the vision to protect the broader Puente-Chino Hills Wildlife Corridor—the story of saving land in one of the most highly engineered areas in the world has seen its ups and downs. Numerous lessons were absorbed including learning how to save land, working with legislators, and then growing those experiences when the science of conservation biology and wildfires came about. This article speaks to the conservation of lands at the juncture of the four fastest growing counties in California and how tenacity, geography, leadership, and science all meaningfully contributed to a growing understanding of how to get the job done in the face of numerous obstacles.

Keywords: land conservation, State Parks, fragmentation, conservation biology, wildlife corridors, wildfire science.

## Introduction

My first memories of Chino Hills State Park (CHSP) involved me and my twin sister wearing our red jumpers and white tops traipsing through the hills (Figure 1). Little did I know that these formative childhood experiences would lead to a lifelong passion and purpose to protect land throughout the State of California. In 1979, my mother, Claire Schlotterbeck, got involved in the effort to create CHSP, and it became, as they say, a family affair. My dad took me backpacking there, my siblings and I delivered flyers in the neighborhood and staffed event tables. This is a story, including my story, of the preservation of 28,000+ acres in the heart of the Los Angeles Basin—a story that is still unfolding and will be for some time. (Figure 2).

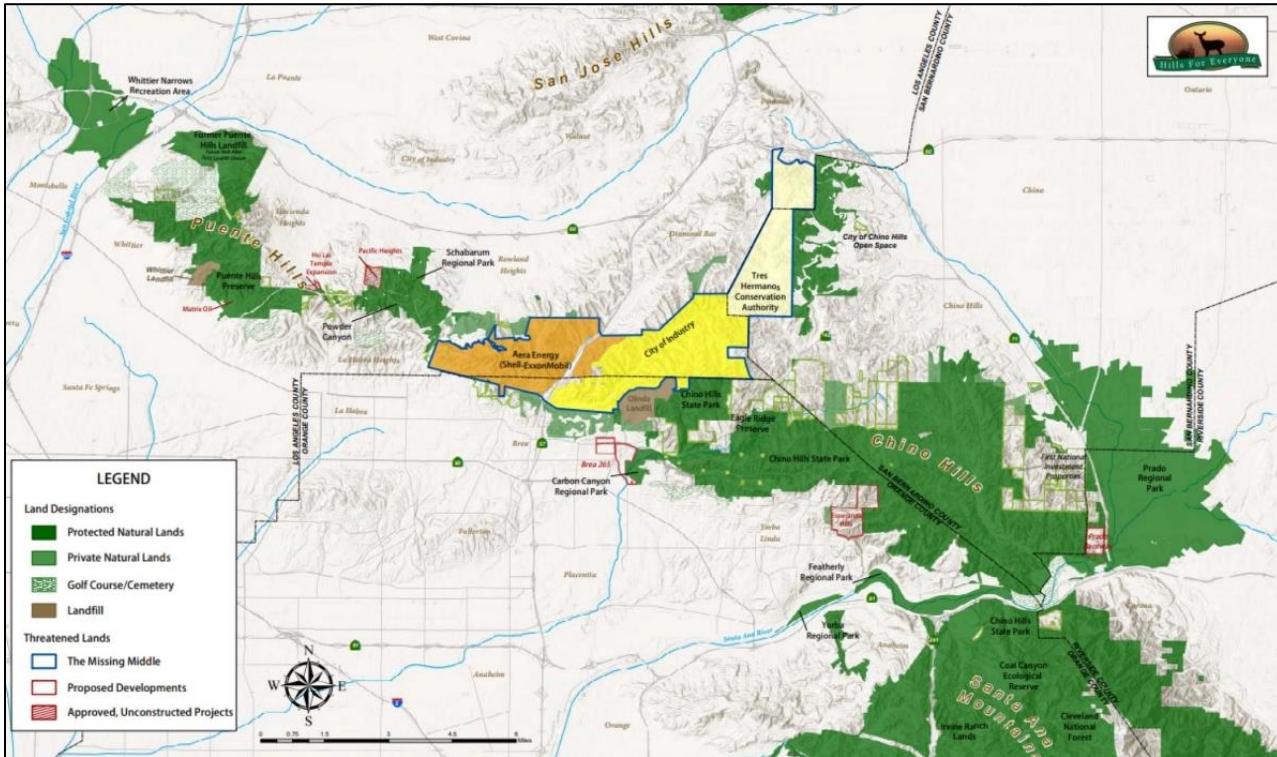


**Figure 1.** Melanie and Jennifer Schlotterbeck in the Chino Hills on a press tour. Image: Schlotterbeck family archives.



**Figure 2.** Map title: Chino Hills State Park within California. Published by: Hills For Everyone.

This narrative weaves together personal stories with professional outcomes related to the nearly five-decade long effort to preserve the Puente-Chino Hills Wildlife Corridor (PCHWC) (Figure 3). It has been a complex journey with many lessons learned along the way, including the role of science, leadership, and resolve, in land use planning.



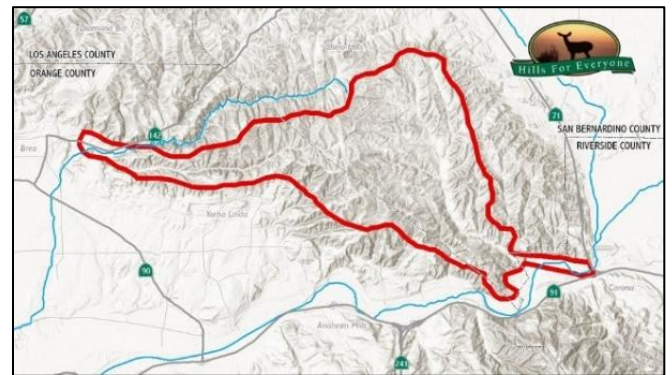
**Figure 3.** Map title: *Natural Lands of the Puente-Chino Hills Wildlife Corridor.* Published by: Hills For Everyone.

The creation of CHSP was led by one determined individual. Dave Myers grew up in La Habra exploring the hills. He witnessed ridgeline after ridgeline flattened for housing, and he just couldn't take it anymore. He wanted to stop the destruction. Dave became a self-taught biologist, birder, planner, strategist, geographer, and advocate (Schlotterbeck 2025).

In the mid 1970's, he initially looked at creating four regional parks since the hills straddled four counties: San Bernardino, Riverside, Orange, and Los Angeles. Four regional parks were too complicated, so Dave focused on creating the next best thing: a State Park. California hoped to protect representative slices of the ecosystems of the State and at the time, the many habitats in our hills were not well represented. Within a small geographic range we would be preserving five habitat types: oak and walnut woodlands, willow riparian, chaparral, coastal sage scrub, and grasslands.

Studying a topographic map, Dave drew his proposed State Park boundaries based on the ridgelines (Figure 4). Nobody had ever designed a State Park this way. By saving the ridges, the watersheds were contained and the water quality was safe and unpolluted for wildlife. The viewsheds were also protected for visitors. Once inside the Park, visitors couldn't see the nine million people on the other side of the ridges. Now, there are closer to 20 million people just outside the park (World

Population Review 2025). His hand drawn map was the foundation and guide for CHSP acquisitions (Figure 4).



**Figure 4.** Map title: *Original vision for CHSP.* Produced by: Hills For Everyone.

The State of California has a process that must be undertaken to determine the feasibility and advisability of creating a new addition to the State Park system. As it turned out, many values aligned. With local legislative help, the Legislature asked for a Feasibility Study to be conducted by the California Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR). With much of the field work already done by Dave and because he knew the land the best, he essentially authored the study in collaboration with DPR personnel (Schlotterbeck 2025).

In addition to wanting to protect these particular habitats, DPR liked this new park because it helped fulfill a need by providing access to an underserved population. At the time, the Cities of Ontario, Chino, and others were designated as “Economically Disadvantaged Areas” needing more attention from DPR. In the 1970s, the country was emerging from an oil embargo with long gas lines, and expensive and limited fuel (United States Department of State 2025). The State recognized that many people couldn’t afford long road trips to distant State Parks, most of which were up north.

The Feasibility Study was finalized in 1979, and it recommended establishing a State Park (California Department of Parks and Recreation 1981). During the time the Feasibility Study was being written, Dave formed Hills For Everyone (HFE). The original Board included Dave, his brother, his sister-in-law, and a local resident.

Within three weeks of moving back to California from Michigan in 1978, Claire Schlotterbeck began her lifelong involvement in this preservation effort. In an attempt to meet neighbors, she joined the homeowners’ association (HOA) board. A year or so later, the HOA asked her to represent it at a meeting of the fledgling non-profit, HFE. There, Dave outlined the next steps—it was time to advocate for acquisitions. Claire offered her phone number as a point of contact. By fall, Dave appointed her President of the Board. This simple offering turned into her life’s work (Schlotterbeck 2025). (Figure 5)



**Figure 5.** Claire Schlotterbeck, her son, and a friend looking at a sign with a trail named after Hills For Everyone. Image: Schlotterbeck family archives.

My maternal grandfather ran the Engineering Clinic at Harvey Mudd College in Claremont, California. In the Clinic, the College partnered with local companies to solve their real-world engineering problems. Interestingly, my grandpa believed that you should give the hardest tasks to the youngest students because they hadn’t learned yet that it couldn’t be done—so

they went ahead and did it. That is how HFE operated. The founders of HFE didn’t know it couldn’t be done, so they went ahead and did it.

During the effort to establish the Park, an international airport was proposed in the Chino Hills to supplement Los Angeles International Airport’s activity. Meanwhile, a well-funded Joint Powers Authority (JPA) was working toward developing the hills.

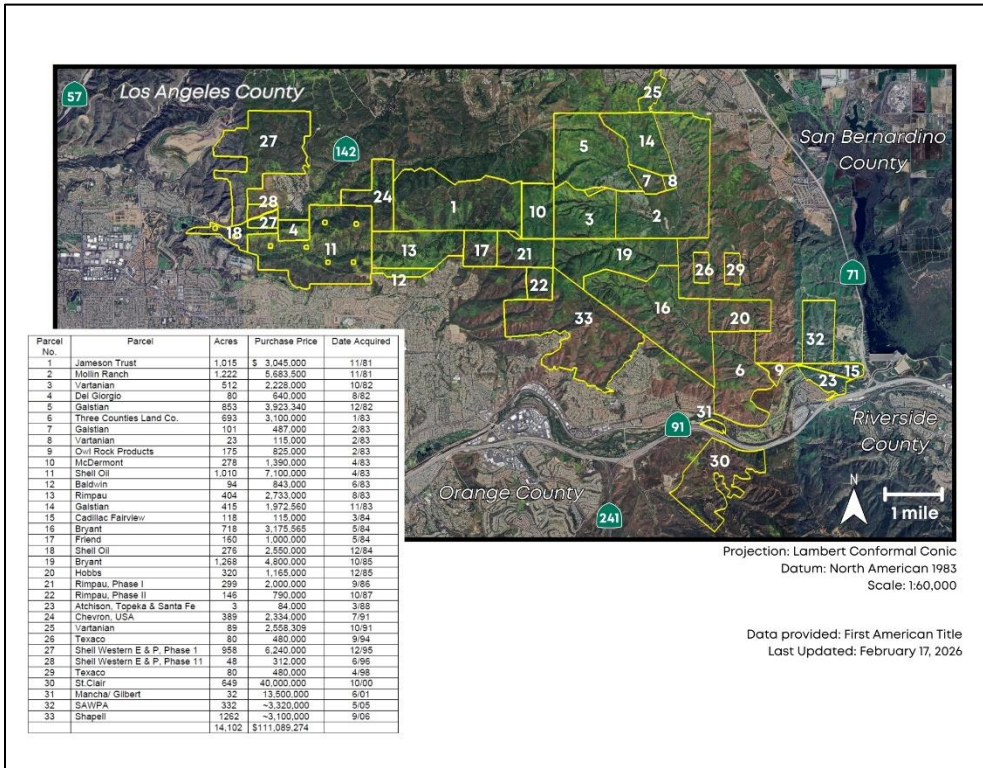
Dave visited communities and cities around the hills offering a better vision. He garnered public and formal support from many jurisdictions to stop the airport. Everyone backed the idea of a State Park and realized the benefit of this natural landscape and what it could bring to residents. A State Park was certainly a better idea than an airport.

Throughout his years of hiking the hills, Dave Myers photographed the landscape, collected plants, and inventoried ecological resources (Figure 6). This information substantiated the Feasibility Study’s findings. He also assembled slide shows, providing over 200 presentations to anyone and everyone that would listen—from elected officials to service groups, boy scout and girl scout troops, schools, HOAs, and more. He introduced people to the treasures within the nearby hills. The gathering of support and friendly press coverage helped convince local legislators to start finding funds to begin acquisitions.



**Figure 6.** A ringneck snake nestled in the leaves. Image: Dave Myers.

The stream of funds that followed was due to the commitment and leadership of Senator Ross Johnson. He worked tirelessly to ensure funds were secured, acquisitions were prioritized, that no delays stopped transactions, and he always protected the emerging Park in his Legislative role. This Park would not be possible without Ross and his Chief of Staff, Susie Swatt.



**Figure 7.** Map title: CHSP Acquisition Sequence Map. Published by: Hills For Everyone.

**Park Ecological Values**

Thirty-three separate acquisitions combined to arrive at CHSP’s current size of over 14,100 acres (Hills For Everyone 2025; Figure 7). The Park is near to or borders the Cities of Chino Hills, Chino, Corona, Anaheim, Yorba Linda, Placentia, Brea, and Diamond Bar. It encompasses several ecological communities that are considered rare, unique, or have limited protection. These include:

- Grassland habitat for the western burrowing owl (*Athene cunicularia hypugaea*) (Figure 8);
- Coastal sage scrub for the California gnatcatcher (*Poliophtila californica*);
- Willow riparian habitat for the southwestern willow flycatcher (*Empidonax traillii extimus*) and least Bell’s vireo (*Vireo bellii pusillus*);
- Natural springs, creeks, and ponds that provide habitat for the Southwestern pond turtle (*Actinemys pallida*) (Figure 9); and,
- California black walnut woodlands (*Juglans californica*), which include some of California’s largest remaining stands (California Department of Parks and Recreation 1999).



**Figure 8.** A Western Burrowing Owl in CHSP. Image: Tim Bulmer.



**Figure 9.** A Southwestern Pond Turtle. Image: Dave Myers.

Numerous special status species use these ecological areas, including but not limited to: red-tailed hawks (*Buteo jamaicensis*), Cooper’s hawks (*Astur cooperii*), red-shouldered hawks (*Buteo lineatus*), and American kestrels (*Falco sparverius*).

Once DPR started making acquisitions, the land was under the control of the Department of General Services. It had no funding for management of the accumulating acreage. HFE offered to step in and do it for the Department. The non-profit leased the land from the State for a dollar a year for two years. It is my understanding that this was the first time in state history that General Services entrusted a non-profit with managing state lands while in State ownership. It was fitting that Dave Myers lived on and stewarded the Park. He fought

poachers and off-road vehicles, while ensuring the safety of the state's investment. Ultimately, HFE and our work became an organization of firsts (Schlotterbeck 2025).

### New Science of Conservation Biology

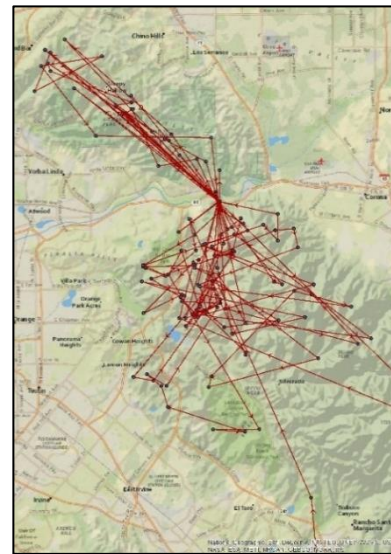
By the mid-1990s, we were getting close to acquiring all of the ridgelines from Dave's original vision. We thought we were almost done when Geary Hund, the Resource Ecologist for CHSP, introduced Claire to a book called *Song of the Dodo* by David Quammen. It is a deeper dive into an earlier book by Robert MacArthur and E.O. Wilson called *The Theory of Island Biogeography*. The authors determined that the larger the island, the more species it could sustain over time—the smaller the island, the fewer species. This theory had huge implications for protected areas, which appeared to be becoming islands on the mainland (MacArthur and Wilson 1967). Quammen's book (1997) demonstrates that even parks as large as Yellowstone will eventually be confronted with size-related species extinctions. Without wildlife corridors, habitats like CHSP will not only lose the species these protected lands sought to save, but also suitable habitat will decline without the suite of species there to keep the ecosystem functioning fully. All of this is because of habitat fragmentation.

As the science of conservation biology evolved, it revealed that wildlife corridors needed to be established, connecting parks and wildlands to each other in order to facilitate an exchange of new genes into populations. And, these corridors needed to be large enough to also accommodate the needs of the largest predator. In the Puente-Chino Hills, that top level predator is the mountain lion (*Puma concolor*). When we looked, we found that there was only one place that could connect the Puente-Chino Hills to the greater Santa Ana Mountains.

Located at an off-ramp and underpass called Coal Canyon along the 91 Freeway—this was the last viable connection. Dr. Paul Beier had already proven this was the last remaining linkage through a mountain lion study that he conducted in the late 1980s (Beier and Barrett 1993; Figure 10). Securing these passageways was necessary to preserve the diversity in the Park and beyond. Saving Coal Canyon was needed to save all levels of species across the PCHWC.

### Coal Canyon Biological Corridor

Now aware of the need to connect our landscapes together, HFE and Geary Hund collaborated to ensure we saved the connection under the freeway. There were two parcels under consideration for acquisition, and both were slated for development. The first one, south of the 91 Freeway, was known as the St. Clair property in Anaheim Hills. The second



**Figure 10.** Map title: *Cougar (M-6) Use of Coal Canyon*. Data from: Dr. Paul Beier. Produced by: Hills For Everyone.

one was situated on the north side adjacent to the Santa Ana River called the Mancha property in Yorba Linda. Each one had their own unique set of conservation values, and each came with a high price tag (Figure 11).



**Figure 11.** Coal Canyon looking south toward the 91 Freeway and the Santa Ana Mountains from CHSP. Image: Melanie Schlotterbeck.

Geary Hund worked diligently to educate Rick Rayburn, the Chief of Resource Protection at DPR. Coincidentally Rick was a long-time Schlotterbeck family friend and Claire was able to pick up the phone anytime to have a chat with her former double's volleyball partner.

With trust already established, we easily but urgently convinced Rick to read *Song of the Dodo*. Since the St. Clair property was fully entitled, we had to convince a development hungry landowner to understand the importance of his property to the region. This is where Rick's savvy came in. He hired three exceptional conservationist biologists to take a look at Coal Canyon and write a report. Dr. Reed Noss, Dr. Paul Beier, and Dr. Bill Shaw toured Coal Canyon and wrote an "Evaluation of Coal Canyon Biological Corridor" quoting fellow conservation biologist Michael Soulé in the paper's opening: "There are no hopeless cases, only people without hope and expensive cases (Noss et al. 1998, 1)."

### *St. Clair Property*

With this study in hand and with legislative support (funding), Rick approached Steve St. Clair, the developer of the southern parcel. St. Clair listened and ended up hiring consultants, Dan and Linda Mitrovich, to determine whether or not this truly was a significant conservation issue. The Mitrovich's hired their own experts and determined it was—indeed—significant. With St. Clair agreeing to sell the land, the quest for funding began. We also had to convince two additional agencies (California Department of Fish and Wildlife [CDFW] and the Public Works Board) of the need for this acquisition—despite the high cost. HFE and the Mitrovichs flew to Sacramento on behalf of the acquisition before the Public Works Board (Schlotterbeck 2025).

The St. Clair property was 653 acres nestled up against the CDFW's Coal Canyon Ecological Reserve. Ultimately, St. Clair sold the acreage for a discounted price. It had been appraised for \$50 million and he sold it for \$40 million, while also getting a \$10 million tax write off. He earned a long-standing ovation at the dedication ceremony.

### *Mancha Property*

The next property on the list to purchase, which would complete Coal Canyon Biological Corridor, was the northern side of the 91 Freeway. Known as the Mancha Property, this 32-acre lot had a BMX dirt bike facility already on it and an outlet mall proposed there. The parcel abutted the Santa Ana River immediately adjacent to CHSP. This acquisition was completed for \$13.5 million in 2001.

The protection of Coal Canyon was history making in many ways. Long before the preservation of Liberty Canyon, now known for its famous Wallis Annenberg Overpass over the 101 Freeway in Agoura Hills, Coal Canyon was 20 years ahead of the game. Not only was this the first time in State Park history that land was purchased for the primary purpose of connectivity, but it also became the filter by which future acquisitions across the state were assessed.

To protect the state's biodiversity, Rick directed that all California State Parks reassess their park for connectivity. Where could they make it functionally bigger or connect it to other protected lands? This began the process of reconnecting California. The acquisition of Coal Canyon also included the removal of on-and off-ramps along the 91 Freeway. It was the first time in state history that the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans), removed freeway on-and off-ramps to help advance wildlife connectivity (Schlotterbeck 2025).

## **The Puente Hills**

Once Coal Canyon was protected, we turned our attention to the larger landscape of the 31-mile-long Puente-Chino Hills. We knew we had to keep connecting the lands we had saved over the last 30 years or all would be for naught. Species inbreeding would inevitably take its toll without a broader influx of genes. Together with fellow conservationists on the west, we coordinated agencies, elected leaders, and non-profit entities in four counties and 12 cities and communities to ensure connectivity and reduce habitat fragmentation.

A collaboration began—with Friends of Whittier Hills and the Puente Hills Landfill Native Habitat Preservation Authority (aka the Habitat Authority), which in partnership with the City of Whittier was protecting lands in Whittier, Hacienda Heights, Rowland Heights, and La Habra Heights. The City of Whittier emerged as an open space leader. The Habitat Authority, a JPA, was created due to a tipping fee added to the Puente Hills Landfill. For every ton of trash, a dollar was collected to buy land for preservation purposes. Nearly 4,000 acres were protected with these funds. (Figure 12)



**Figure 12.** *Sycamore Canyon is part of the Preserve stewarded by the Habitat Authority. Image: Melanie Schlotterbeck.*

We began an evaluation of the entire Puente-Chino Hills. It didn't matter to us whether the lands were publicly owned or privately owned. What mattered was that the wildlife was able to safely move across the hills. HFE found three critical chokepoints northwest of CHSP:

1. Tonner Canyon at the 57 Freeway (Brea)
2. Harbor Boulevard (La Habra Heights)
3. Hacienda Boulevard (Hacienda Heights)

Meanwhile, the Habitat Authority also knew about the connectivity lessons of Coal Canyon and jumped into action to not only identify connections that needed to be made in the Puente Hills, but also to begin advocating for other connections. It was successful in securing funding and approval

to retrofit Harbor Boulevard with a 30-foot tunnel (Figure 13) that connected the Aera Energy lands on the east to the Authority's protected Preserve on the west. It was anticipated it would take months for wildlife to utilize the tunnel. Wildlife proved they were smarter than that; they began using it within weeks (Figure 14).



**Figure 13.** The Harbor Boulevard underpass as viewed from above. Image: Melanie Schlotterbeck.



**Figure 14.** A deer looks at a motion sensor camera while using the Harbor Boulevard tunnel. Image: Habitat Authority.

### Defense of the Hills

Over the years there have been numerous threats to the hills. Ironically, being in protected status doesn't actually mean the land is safe. It is usually coveted for other uses. The pressures from neighboring properties directly and indirectly impact protected lands. From housing developments to roadways, HFE has defended CHSP and the greater PCHWC from an onslaught of threats. Each one had their own lessons learned, partnerships gained, and new strategies developed.

That said, the most important defense of the hills came with a wildfire study that HFE conducted after a multi-county

conflagration. If the hills are burning too frequently, the habitats we fought so hard to protect would be lost to a changing vegetation pattern.

Because of our longevity, we became aware that CHSP was experiencing an assault of wildfires. After the devastating 2008 Freeway Complex Fire (Figure 15) which burned more than 95% of the State Park and more than 300 structures (mostly in Yorba Linda) (Orange County Fire Authority 2008), HFE undertook a mapping exercise to plot wildfires and ignition points in and around CHSP. The data were collected from fire agencies and went back to 1914. It included historic fires, ignition points, perimeters, and other relevant data (Hills For Everyone 2012 and 2018).

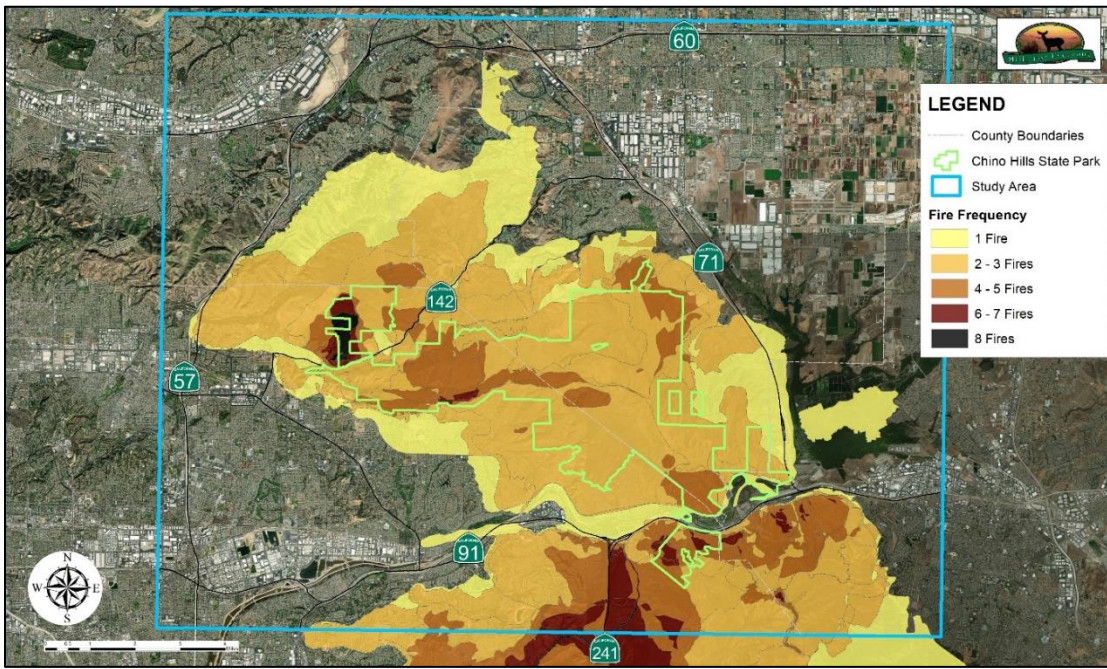


**Figure 15.** The Freeway Complex Fire in CHSP from Olinda Village in Brea. Image: Claire Schlotterbeck.

As wildfire science evolved, we worked to keep up—just like we did with conservation biology. We learned that as increasing fire frequency burns natural lands, it begins to keep native vegetation from regenerating. Frequent fires take away the stored energy that plants use to re-sprout after a burn. If plants burn over and over again, they may not be able to mature enough to produce seeds. Or, they may use up the stored energy in their root crown to resprout. When this happens, the landscape experiences what is called habitat “type conversion.” Type conversion means that instead of maintaining the suite of native plant species that are adapted to fire, after repeated burns, the landscape converts to non-native grasses. These grasses ignite easier, dry out earlier in the season, and spread fire faster (Halsey 2008). We needed to reduce the burn cycle.

Using data from fire agencies themselves, our study revealed three hotspots:

1. The 91 Freeway (Anaheim)
2. Rimcrest, an unauthorized entrance to CHSP (Yorba Linda)
3. Carbon Canyon Road (along Highway 142) (Brea) (Hills For Everyone 2012) (Figure 16)



**Figure 16.** Map title: *Fire Frequency in and around CHSP.* Produced by: *Hills For Everyone.*

After many of the devastating fires in 2017, including the loss of the community of Paradise in Northern California, HFE updated its fire study to include another seven years. From this work we found a fourth hotspot emerging along the 57 Freeway just north of Lambert Road, again in Brea (Hills For Everyone 2018).

**What’s Left to Do**

Hills For Everyone remains committed to its original and expanded mission. We’ve been deeply engaged in and are a leader within the movement to protect 30% of California’s lands and waters by 2030 (i.e. 30x30). Through the statewide Power In Nature Coalition where we lead Southland conservation groups and through appointed positions, we hope to find success in protecting the remaining PCHWC landscapes.

With this in mind, we continue to work with landowners to protect the eastern ridgelines of CHSP. Since 2020, 720 acres of the eastern ridgelines have been protected and are presently being held by a JPA called the Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority. Throughout the entire Wildlife Corridor, around 9,430 acres remain in need of protection, including: the State Park’s eastern and northern ridgelines, and the Missing Middle.

**Table 1.** Properties Needing Protection in the PCHWC.

| Property Name                        | Location                 | Acreage |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------------|---------|
| First National Investment Properties | CHSP Eastern Ridgelines  | 800     |
| McDermont Bonnett                    | CHSP Northern Ridgelines | 130     |
| Aera Energy                          | Missing Middle of PCHWC  | 3,000   |
| Tonner Canyon                        |                          | 5,500   |

**Conclusion**

The majority of my life has been spent working to connect, protect, and restore the PCHWC. But much work remains to be done. Understanding the landscape and especially the science has been critical, and we have applied it by knowing the importance of maps. Our constant use of geographic information systems gives us an advantage in showing the public and decision makers what’s at stake when trying to protect additional lands for future generations.

The only reason these landscapes are protected is due to the dedication of many individuals, members of the press, funders, civil servants, legislators, and their staff. These landscapes face enormous pressures, especially from human-caused wildfires and developments, which prompt the loss of species diversity—especially if we are not able to maintain habitat connections. Thus, our work continues.

Our vision is not yet complete. These tasks are critical to the functioning of the entire 40,000-acre ecosystem connected to the Santa Ana Mountains in the heart of one of the most highly engineered places on the planet—Southern California’s Los Angeles Basin.

This has been a story of leadership, tenacity, and learning. May it inspire you to engage with conservation at the local, regional, or statewide level. Together we can continue to protect precious landscapes. Without the biodiversity contained in these important habitat areas—humans will suffer dire consequences. Protecting biodiversity is not just protecting the planet, it is protecting human life as well.

**Acknowledgements:** A special thank you to my mother, Claire Schlotterbeck, for her years of dedicated service to the community and the greater good—without whom this article would not be possible. And, her editing skills are second to none. To my father David Schlotterbeck for purchasing my first ArcView software after graduating with my Geography Degree from CSU Fullerton. This software has been the foundation for mapping my conservation work. Finally, to the reviewers of *California Geography* for your time and talent.

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