

Hills For Everyone

Friends of the
Puente-Chino Hills Wildlife Corridor



Newsletter No. 46

Spring 2022

Saving Coal Canyon (Again)



Melanie Schlotterbeck

Chino Hills State Park (left) connects to the Santa Ana Mountains (right) at the Coal Canyon underpass at the 91 Freeway.

To paraphrase a famous conservationist: “a park is never saved, it’s *always* being saved.”

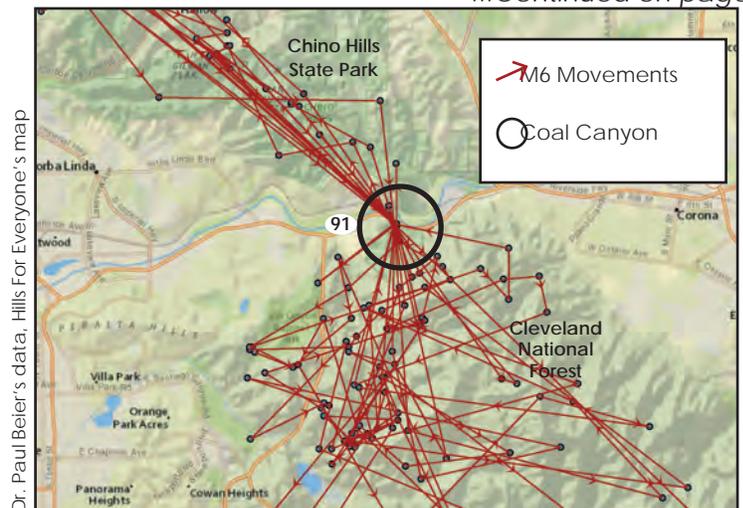
Over 20 years ago, a ground-breaking effort was organized to save the last connection between the 40,000 acres of natural lands in the Puente-Chino Hills and the 250,000 acres of the Santa Ana Mountains. While the underpass at Coal Canyon was originally built to accommodate housing and commercial developments planned on both sides of the freeway, the emerging science of conservation biology showed wildlife needed it for migration. If wildlife in the Puente-Chino Hills could not find more mates, they would eventually die out due to inbreeding. Experts were consulted, studies were conducted, meetings were held, and the new idea of connecting protected lands was envisioned at that underpass.

The photogenic Hollywood cougar, P22, may be more famous, but our radio-collared cougar, M6, made history. He showed us there was only one place left for wildlife to cross the 91 Freeway, proving we needed to act immediately. For the first time in State Park history, California wanted to buy parkland for its connectivity value.

The land on the south side of the freeway was approved for 1,550 houses. The landowner on the north side hoped to build an outlet mall. Educating decision makers in local and state agencies and in the Legislature

about this new idea of connectivity became paramount. We began assembling funds to buy the south side. Chino Hills Assemblymember Fred Aguiar (R) brought the first million to the table and that attracted the next \$39 million from Caltrans, the Wildlife Conservation Board, private donors, etc. The landowner also got a \$10 million tax write off by agreeing to a bargain sale. The 653 acres of land was purchased and added to the State Park in November 2000. Next, funds were assembled to buy the 32-acre north side. This property was added to the

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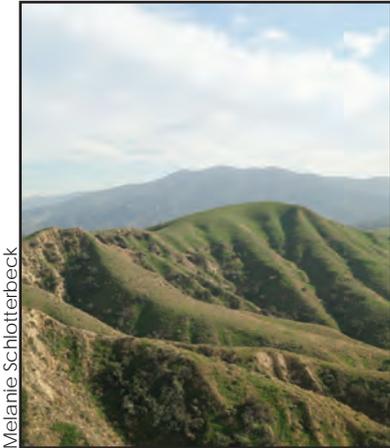


Dr. Paul Beier's data, Hills For Everyone's map

Park Grows Again

In 2021, we facilitated the preservation of an additional 410 acres of land. Since the Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR) has been unwilling to acquire land for many years to grow our park system, we needed to find an interim land manager even as we continued to acquire land for eventual addition to Chino Hills State Park (CHSP). The Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority, who provides ranger services for the Habitat Authority land on the western side of the hills, stepped in to take ownership.

We now know the land will eventually be added to CHSP because Senate Bill 266 was signed into law, requiring DPR to take ownership. Ten acres were donated



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by a local resident and another 400 acres were purchased. The donated acreage helped us comply with a settlement agreement with the Metropolitan Water District (MWD) that dates back to 2008 in which we were required to save walnut woodlands through funding provided by MWD.

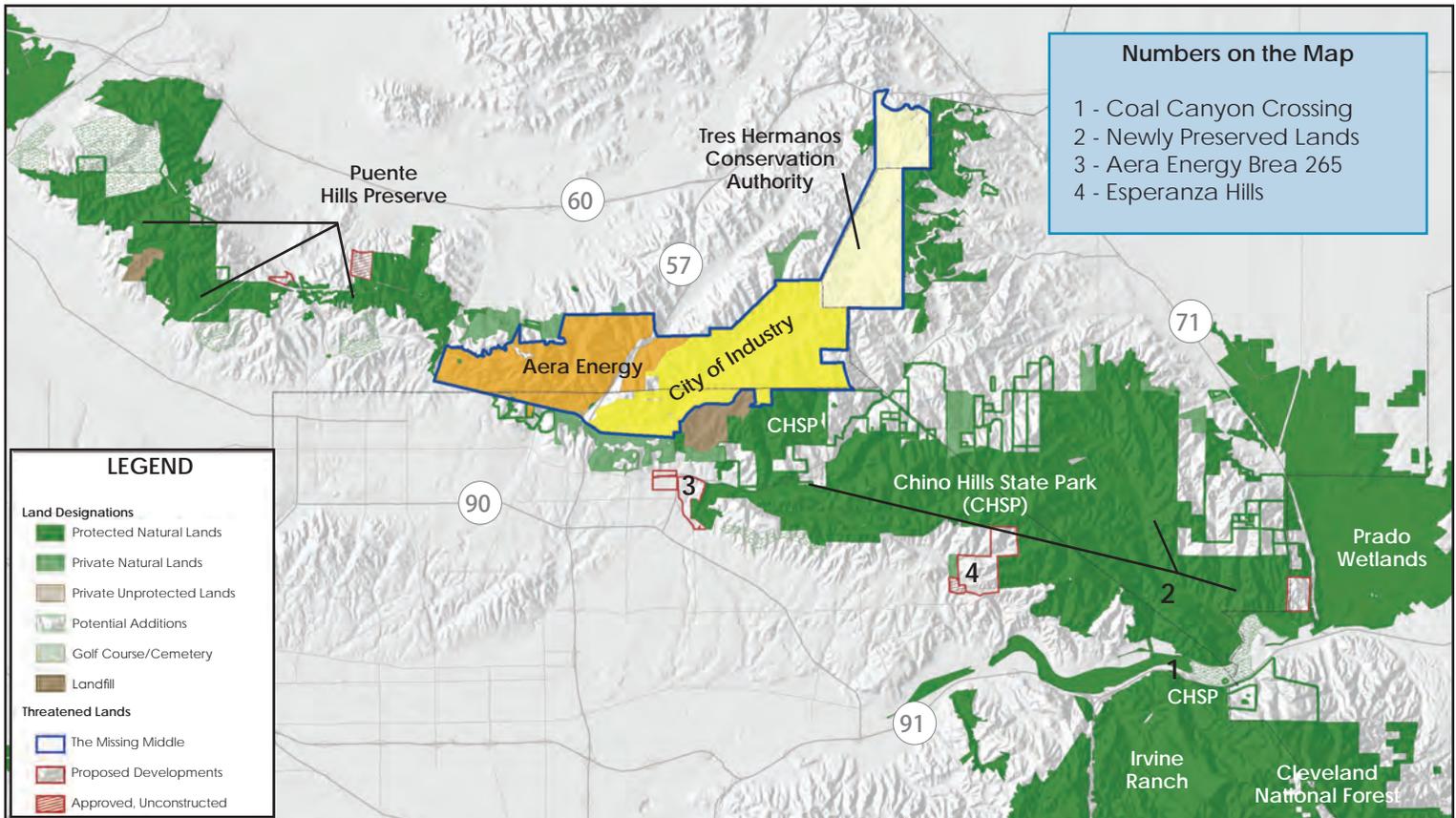
Brea Housing Project



Cathie Flanagan

An Environmental Impact Report (EIR) was just released discussing the impacts of an 1,100-unit housing project proposed on 262 acres of land on the eastern edge of Brea owned by Aera Energy. The project is located on the oil fields on both sides of Lambert west of Valencia and on the east side of Rose where the strawberry fields are and the Christmas tree farm was. The hilly part of the project is governed by Brea's Hillside Management Ordinance. No vehicular access is proposed onto Carbon Canyon Road. Visit www.Brea265.com for an early look. The EIR is now available on Brea's website.

Mapping the Corridor Projects



State Park in July 2001. Freeway on- and off-ramps were removed, directional signs were altered, and fingers were crossed. Hopes were high.

Over time, we learned we needed to do more than just buy the land. While State Parks owned land on both sides of the freeway, Caltrans owned the land *under* the freeway. Because freeway widening projects were planned, Caltrans didn't want to add vegetative cover for animals at the crossing because it would eventually need to be removed and they may need to pay for the mitigation.

Numerous infrastructure projects emerged, eyeing the north side as a staging area for the repair of the sewer line in the river, realignment of the river, bouldering of the river to prevent erosion, improvements to the Santa Ana River Trail, on and on.

California Highway Patrol (CHP) was originally allowed one off-ramp and lane as a turnaround for *emergency use only* for eastbound patrol cars to make a U-turn. So, one lane was fenced off from the wildlife movement area. Early on, wildlife cameras were mounted, then stolen. When they were better secured and finally started capturing data, the use of the underpass by wildlife was disappointing. Boulders were added for wildlife to use as cover as they crossed underneath the freeway. The cameras also showed that CHP, and truck drivers were using the underpass frequently, and not just for emergencies.



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We know that Coal Canyon is being used by a suite of creatures including small birds, raccoons, bobcat, coyote, and occasionally deer. We know it has served as an escape route from fires on the north and south sides of the freeway, allowing wildlife to recolonize unburned habitat and establish new home ranges. But we still need to minimize the barriers that discourage usage.



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We are looking anew at what we must do to ensure that Coal Canyon reaches its full functionality as a wildlife movement crossing. Is the incessant background noise of the freeway a problem? How can such noise be buffered? Is the constant light from cars at night interfering with the animals' nocturnal movements? How best do we screen that light intrusion? How can we motivate CHP, Caltrans, and others to comply with the original agreement?

Public and scientific understanding and acceptance of the need for wildlife corridors and crossings has grown by leaps and bounds over the last 20 years. Biologists, who actually deal with the design of them, now consider the needs of many species in addition to larger mammals, going all the way down the food chain to insects, which are critical to pollination and serve as a food source for species higher up the food chain. Depending on the type of wildlife crossing, biologists are looking at design features that provide water sources, cover/hiding areas, and even elevated "walkways" for smaller shy animals who won't traverse a crossing where a predator has been.

Hills For Everyone is working to solve these problems with partners like The Nature Conservancy and State Parks and is seeking the expertise of wildlife experts from throughout Southern California to develop and implement strategies to improve the function and long term success of the Coal Canyon wildlife crossing.

Dispatch Phone Numbers

If you see illegal or dangerous behaviour in the State Park, please report it to one of these two rangers:

Ranger Ken Gordon
(951) 503-3347

Ranger Chad Adriano
(951) 933-6354



It is worth noting that e-bikes are illegal in the Park, despite what some user group websites state.

Esperanza Hills Update

The developer won his lawsuit against the City of Yorba Linda hands down. The Statement of Decision is final, but what is proposed is a land grab—ignoring state and local planning laws and taking all future rights by the City away and handing them over to the developer. We are waiting to see if the City appeals the decision. Even with this win and final approval of the project, the developer still needs to figure out how he is going to get his access road over the MWD pipeline.



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We changed our newsletter font. This font is more easily read for those with visual impairments and dyslexia.

Fire Damage Repair

Thanks to three generous grants from the California State Parks Foundation, a lot of the structural damage from the October 2020 Blue Ridge Fire has been repaired. State Parks, the Chino Hills State Park Interpretive Association (CHSPIA) and Hills For Everyone each received individual grants, but cooperated throughout the last year ensuring the repairs were made. Burned signs and fencing were replaced and made more resilient. The native plant nursery was replanted and will be labeled, and the campground will have six new concrete picnic tables instead of wood ones. Many thanks to Eric Johnson from CHSPIA for managing the team and to Ian Bernstein, Enrique Arroyo, and Ben Spiva of State Parks for doing much of the work.



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Get Involved

There are many ways to support Hills For Everyone's work. In addition to these platforms, you can join our email list. We send out about one email a month and never sell, trade, or share our list. Subscribe on our website:



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