



Conserving the natural and agricultural legacy of the southern Sierra Nevada and San Joaquin Valley



Clockwise from top:
Alan George speaks at the Kaweah Oaks Preserve dedication in 1983. A Nature Conservancy banner filters the sunshine at the dedication. A crowd of more than 2,000 gathers for the Preserve dedication. Photos courtesy of Rob Hansen.

Kaweah Oaks Preserve: 25 years of putting nature within reach

On Highway 198 just outside Visalia lies a parcel of land that captures the history and spirit of California's southern San Joaquin Valley. Beginning with its use as a food gathering site for California Indians, to its preservation by local citizens 25 years ago, to its use today as a site for recreation and education, the Kaweah Oaks Preserve serves as both a window to the natural and cultural past and a portal to possible futures.

Past

Originally part of a 256,000-acre habitat that spanned the area from Three Rivers to the Tulare Lake basin in the San Joaquin Valley, the 322-acre Kaweah Oaks Preserve is the only part of that vast natural landscape that remains.

Yokuts California Indians were the first to use the land that is now Kaweah Oaks Preserve. Because the Kaweah River's biannual flooding made the land unsuitable for permanent village sites, the Yokuts used the land for hunting, foraging, and some farming.

European settlers took over the land in the mid-1800's, and "The Swamp," as it was called because of the damp environment caused by the flooding, was owned by three different families before it fell into the hands of the Davis family. The final owners of the land before it became a preserve, the Davis family used it mostly for cattle grazing, hunting, and woodcutting.

Three generations later, Myrtle Davis Franklin consulted with Alan George, the local farm advisor in Tulare County, about turning the land she inherited from her family into a walnut farm. The Terminus Dam was constructed in 1962, so flooding was no longer a problem, but when George surveyed the land, he discovered that the underground water table was too high for walnut farming.

George, a native Visalian with an interest in history and conservation, recognized the unique valley oak riparian forest on the land and saw the potential for a nature preserve. He encouraged Mrs. Franklin to forgo the idea of farming and, instead, sell the land to The Nature Conservancy. Serendipitously, The Nature Conservancy's California branch was very interested in valley oak riparian forests at the time. Through the combined efforts of Alan George, The Nature Conservancy and other community volunteers, Mrs. Franklin sold her land to The Nature Conservancy in February 1983.

VISTAS

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The Sequoia Riverlands Trust (SRT) is a local, community-based, 501 (c)(3) non-profit conserving the natural and agricultural legacy of the southern Sierra Nevada and San Joaquin Valley. A copy of the latest financial statement and registration filed with the Registry of Charitable Trusts may be obtained by contacting the SRT office. Contributions are deductible to the extent allowed by law.

The acquisition of Kaweah Oaks Preserve as a nature preserve aroused widespread and diverse support from throughout the community.

"The community was very supportive," said Ginger Bryant, the first Arborist for the City of Visalia. "Community members recognized Visalia's natural assets, the City Council was very oriented toward protecting the land, and there was a strong conservation ethic among local growers."

Tulare and Kings Counties raised approximately \$100,000 through community donations to help The Nature Conservancy pay for the land. More than 2,000 community members came to the Preserve's dedication, including future California Secretary of State Bill Jones and a well respected Senator, Rose Ann Vuich. Sequoia Riverlands Trust board member Robert Hansen remarked that the event was "multidimensional" because it touched almost every local family in a different way.

Mrs. Franklin was perhaps the most delighted community member at the dedication. Although she knew nothing of conservation until her interactions with George, Mrs. Franklin told George at the dedication that protecting the land and wildlife was "one of the most exciting things I've done in my life."

A group of local volunteers, including George, Hansen, Bryant and Dick Dooley, assumed care of the land and fourteen years later, TNC transferred the title of the preserve to a local conservation organization they created. Bryant credits this group and their efforts, saying, "There is a reason that those big trees are there and that is because of those guys [George, Hansen, Dooley]." Eleven years and more than 7,000 additional protected acres later, the local conservation organization is now Sequoia Riverlands Trust.

Present

Kaweah Oaks Preserve has transformed from a heavily grazed private property to a carefully maintained nature preserve that offers a multitude of recreational and educational opportunities for the more than 10,000 community members that visit the Preserve each year. As Hansen puts it, "Even people who don't know about nature do a double take when they drive by."

Besides providing daily access to the community, Kaweah Oaks Preserve has also evolved into an outdoor educational center where students, community members and teachers are able to learn, have fun and create unique memories while developing a lasting personal connection to local lands. Sequoia Riverlands Trust offers curriculum-based educational tours of Kaweah Oaks Preserve to approximately 1,500 local students each academic year. For many of these students, this is their first exposure to nature even though they live in one of the most naturally diverse areas in the world.

Kaweah Oaks Preserve is also a research base. In the early 1990s, The Nature Conservancy conducted studies focusing on the development of the valley oak riparian forest and the effects of grazing on native and non-native species. More recently, Sequoia Riverlands Trust staff and community volunteers have gathered baseline data for the Preserve's management plan, including information on birds and vegetation. This year, environmental science students from Tulare Union High School assisted Sequoia Riverlands Trust in taking inventory of the large valley oak trees on the Preserve.



Environmental science students from Tulare Union High School measure the circumference of a valley oak as part of a service learning project at Kaweah Oaks Preserve. *Jane Allen © 2008*

This research will help Sequoia Riverlands Trust understand the development of the trees over time.

Hansen also takes his College of the Sequoias biology students to the Preserve every semester. "When I see former students years later," says Hansen, "they always ask, 'how is Kaweah Oaks Preserve doing?'"

In addition, Sequoia Riverlands Trust offers several guided nature walks and educational programs at Kaweah Oaks



Biologist and Sequoia Riverlands Trust board member Rob Hansen leads a bird watching tour of Kaweah Oaks Preserve in January 2008. *SFT* © 2008

Preserve each year, allowing community members of all ages to immerse themselves in nature while learning about birds, plants, and animals that are native to the Valley.

Finally, there are always opportunities for volunteerism at Kaweah Oaks Preserve. In 2007, El Diamante High School student Andrew Hoover completed his Eagle Scout service project by building two benches on the Sycamore Trail and constructing a registry box at the entry of the Preserve. Sequoia Riverlands Trust also offers volunteer opportunities throughout the year for community members interested in doing restoration work or becoming volunteer naturalists.

“Spend time enjoying, learning about, and caring for the natural world,” Hansen encourages. “While we work to restore the area, it restores us.”

Future

Like most 25-year-olds, Kaweah Oaks Preserve still has many exciting plans in store for the future. Sequoia Riverlands Trust is eager to unveil new Kaweah Oaks Preserve visitor amenities, including a new gateway pavilion with benches and educational signage; updated trail guides; permanent restrooms; and a modest living space for the Preserve Caretaker. In

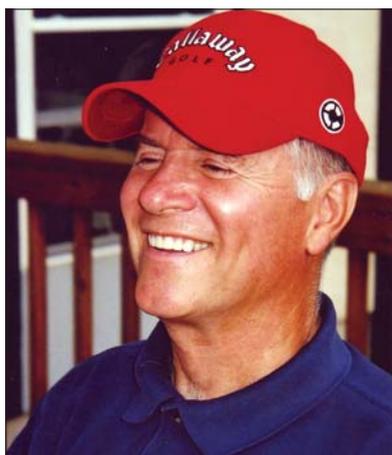
addition, Sequoia Riverlands Trust is working on integrating six conservation targets at Kaweah Oaks Preserve which will focus on maximizing sustainable grazing and public enjoyment while protecting the Preserve’s natural communities, aquatic habitats, the endangered Valley Elderberry Longhorn Beetle and sources of native plant materials.

Kaweah Oaks Preserve has come a long way since its founding in 1983. Throughout its 25 years, dozens of partners have worked together for the preservation and management of Kaweah Oaks Preserve, including The Nature Conservancy, College of the Sequoias, the Tulare County Office of Education, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, the Visalia Rotary Foundation, local Eagle Scouts, Centex Homes, the Alcoa Foundation, and Southern California Edison. Kaweah Oaks Preserve is truly a grass-roots, community effort.

“It just shows you that when you are motivated to do something, you just don’t give up” said founder Alan George. “There are parks that have benches and picnic tables, but that is not the idea behind Kaweah Oaks Preserve. The idea behind Kaweah Oaks Preserve is to preserve a natural area— and that is very significant.”



This rendering portrays the new gateway pavilion, which will be constructed this fall near the entrance to Kaweah Oaks Preserve. Interpretive panels will be mounted between the river rock posts. *Thom Black, Architect* © 2008



George Mahon *Photo courtesy of the Mahon family*

Remembering George Mahon

For those of you who knew George Mahon, you knew he was most comfortable in the Great Outdoors. Sequoia Riverlands Trust would like to honor the memory of George Mahon, a dedicated volunteer naturalist who passed away in April.

Mahon hiked the Pacific Crest Trail, Mount Kilimanjaro, Mount Shasta, Mount Aconcagua and Mount Rainier. He moved to Three Rivers after he retired in 1997 to pursue his passion for hiking the Sierra. He also became involved as a volunteer with Sequoia Riverlands Trust, leading educational tours for hundreds of local students each year at Kaweah Oaks Preserve.

“The kids absolutely loved him,” said Jane Allen, Education Director at Sequoia Riverlands Trust. “George always had their undivided attention.”

Mahon was a remarkable person and a great help to Sequoia Riverlands Trust’s education program. His enthusiasm for sharing the outdoors with local youth will always be remembered.

Kaweah Oaks Preserve 25th Anniversary Celebration

Volunteer, hike and celebrate on Saturday, November 1, 11:00 am - 3:00 pm

Mark your calendar for November 1 from 11:00 a.m. until 3:00 p.m. to celebrate the 25th Anniversary of Kaweah Oaks Preserve. Bring a picnic lunch and your family and friends. Plan to come for all or just part of the activities we have planned for the day:

11:00 am - noon – Volunteer Stewardship Opportunity

Spend an hour planting seeds that will be propagated in Sequoia Riverlands Trust's native plant nursery. Land Steward Nathan Higgins, who runs the nursery, will teach you the proper method for planting seeds in containers for propagation. Your efforts will truly make a difference; these plants will eventually be used in restoration projects at Kaweah Oaks Preserve and other Sequoia Riverlands Trust nature preserves.

Noon - 1:00 pm – Picnic Lunch and Birthday Cake

Bring a picnic and a blanket and enjoy your lunch under the oaks. Sequoia Riverlands Trust will provide birthday cake and a short program.

1:00 pm - 3:00 pm – Guided Walks

Sequoia Riverlands Trust has invited local plant and animal experts to lead guided walks. Choose the tour that interests you most, and embark with others to learn more about Kaweah Oaks Preserve.

11:00 am - 3:00 pm – Native Plant Sale

Besides adding beauty to the landscape and preserving our natural heritage, native plants require little long-term care, demand less water, and stay green longer than non-native plants. Native plants provide an economical, environmentally sound choice for both the commercial and consumer gardener. Stop by any time during the event to purchase native plants to use in your yard. All proceeds from the sale benefit Sequoia Riverlands Trust.

Send us your email

If you would like to be notified about special events, tours, volunteer opportunities and breaking news from Sequoia Riverlands Trust, please send your email address to info@sequoiariverlands.org and ask to be added to our email news list.

Web site

Please visit www.sequoiariverlands.org and click on Calendar & News for current information and additional programs, or call 559.738.0211.

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