
California's low-key coastal keeper blazes a 40-year trail

By Nate Seltenrich | January 1, 2017

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Photo: Michael Macor, The Chronicle

IMAGE 1 OF 5

Visitors hike along the California Coastal Trail above the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco.

You don't have to walk from Mexico to Oregon to appreciate the California Coastal Trail, but Morgan Visalli and Jocelyn Enevoldsen did anyway. The young marine scientists spent three months last summer exploring a proposed 1,200-mile route that many consider a symbol of California's approach to managing its coastline.

A short stroll across scenic bluffs, shifting dunes or sandy beaches is equally worthy of protection, says Tim Duff, a project manager with the California State Coastal Conservancy, the state agency in Oakland that serves as primary architect of the trail.

"Public access is not just a north-south coastal trail — it's all of the spur trails off of that," Duff said. "The goal of the conservancy is to maximize public access to the coast. We want to make it as easy as possible for people to get to the coast."

Many Californians take this level of access for granted. But 40 years ago, during the flurry of environmental legislation that also gave Americans the Clean Air, Clean Water and Endangered Species acts, it was an edgy idea amid a wave of coastal development and privatization.

The California Coastal Act of 1976 reserved for the public all land below the mean high-tide mark, and required local jurisdictions to identify an alignment for a contiguous trail that would run from one end of the state to the other.

More broadly, it outlined the philosophy of land management that is still shaping California's coastal policy 40 years later. That philosophy was built on the twin pillars of regulation and promotion, and implemented by two discrete agencies.

The better-known of these is the California Coastal Commission, a regulatory body empowered to say no to development — occasionally resulting in newsworthy fines and lawsuits. The California State Coastal Conservancy, on the other hand, is an executive body supporting environmental restoration and public access.



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Photo: Michael Macor, The Chronicle

Visitors along the California Coastal Trail above Baker Beach in San Francisco.

Over the past four decades, the California State Coastal Conservancy, whose seven directors are appointed by the governor and state Legislature, has quietly invested more than \$2 billion in public funds and leveraged another \$3.5 billion in investments. Its portfolio includes more than 1,600 completed projects and 400,000 acres of land that has been conserved for habitat and recreation.

“One agency keeps things out and another brings things in,” said Coastal Commissioner and San Diego County Supervisor Greg Cox. The authors of the 1976 coastal act, he said, “made sure we had not only the stick but also the carrot.”

Only with these two entities working together, Cox says, could the state produce something as ambitious as the California Coastal Trail. Its proposed route runs through more than 100 different jurisdictions along some of the planet’s most valuable land.

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Yet despite all that the trail represents, the coastal trail — with about only about one-third of its length completed with signage — still lacks the name recognition of a Pacific Crest or Appalachian trail. Its low profile parallels that of its closest patron.

Visalli and Enevoldsen say they were motivated to hike the route by more than a desire to celebrate the grandeur and variety of California’s coast. They also sought to call attention to the trail itself.

In its current state, the often-unmarked route flits from beach to bluff to highway shoulder and back: evidence that although simple in concept, the trail represents an incredibly complex endeavor. In the Bay Area, it can be found in state parks in Sonoma County, on the steep headlands of Marin County, in the Presidio and along Ocean Beach in San Francisco, and on oceanfront prairies in San Mateo County.

A 2003 state report said additional acquisition and construction to complete the trail was likely to cost at least \$320 million. More recent figures are unavailable, but per-mile costs have surely increased. Much of the funding and work needed to expand the trail flows directly through the coastal conservancy.

“The conservancy has taken a big idea and made it a reality one piece at a time,” said former Coastal Commission chairman and outgoing Marin County Supervisor Steve Kinsey. “They have the perseverance and the persistence to see the big picture.”

That’s true beyond the trail as well, he says. As the conservancy’s budget and ambition have expanded over the years, so has its jurisdiction, which now reaches upstream into watersheds and sources of water that flow to the coast.



FEMA to assess threat to delta fish



Ducks Unlimited to help restore wetland



Photo: Michael Macor, The Chronicle

The coastal conservancy led the tidal wetlands restoration project that reclaimed 15,000 acres of former salt ponds in the South Bay.

The agency has played a lead role in the largest tidal wetland restoration project on the West Coast, **the reclaiming of 15,000 acres of former salt ponds** in the South Bay. It was also a central player in the nation’s largest beneficial reuse of dredged sediment — a project that delivered 6 million cubic yards of mud from the Port of Oakland to wetlands in the North Bay — and the largest dam removal in California history, **the dismantling of San Clemente Dam** on the Carmel River in the mountains above Big Sur.

And that’s just in the last decade.

Sam Schuchat, executive officer of the conservancy since 2001, says the agency is both mandated and uniquely qualified to tackle such challenges.

“Our main tool is people skills,” he said. “That’s the core competency we have, really. Certainly we have lots of technical expertise ... but that’s how we’re viewed as an agency: This is an

agency that can make things happen.

“Having money is necessary,” he said, “but not sufficient.”

And public funding, despite amounting to \$2 billion over the past four decades — including \$1 billion in the 2000s alone — also represents the agency’s core vulnerability.

The conservancy has never had a single, sustained source of funds. It is now chewing its way through \$100 million in competitive grant funding from Proposition 1, the 2014 state water bond worth \$7.5 billion. By 2018 it will be on the lookout for more. If none comes, Schuchat said, “2020 is when we start running on fumes.”

That has happened before, in the relatively lean 1990s. “There is interest in continuing to fund natural resources with bond money,” Schuchat said. “Whether that will come to pass in time for the 2018 election is very hard to predict.”

Schuchat says he’s also unsure of the agency’s immediate prospects at the federal level, where typically 10 to 15 percent of its administrative budget originates. “My assumption is that this administration (of President-elect Donald Trump) is not going to be very friendly to conservation generally,” Schuchat said.

Regardless, work on the coastal trail will continue. Visalli and Enevoldsen say they hope to help by sharing insights gleaned from their 96 days walking the route. In a recent presentation to the conservancy board, they advocated for improvements to signage and access, safer highway sections where necessary, and the development of an online map, which doesn’t yet exist.

“Building the California Coastal Trail is the conservancy’s Goal 1A, so it’s time for a digital map,” Enevoldsen said. “Being able to hike the full length of the coastal trail gives you an appreciation of the scale of beauty, open space and sacred places that we have in this state.”

Freelance writer Ariel Rubissow Okamoto contributed to this report.

Nate Seltenrich is a Petaluma freelance writer. Email: metrodesk@sfchronicle.com

Coastal Commission member resigns

Wendy Mitchell, a member of the California Coastal Commission who supported the controversial ouster of the agency's executive director last year, has resigned.

The Los Angeles Times reported Mitchell sent a resignation letter Friday to Gov. Jerry Brown, saying she would step down immediately after six years on the powerful panel.

Mitchell, a government affairs consultant and former legislative aide, was one of seven of the 12 voting commissioners who voted in February to fire Executive Director Charles Lester, a 24-year veteran of the agency.

Mitchell and other panel members accused him of unspecified management issues and leadership problems. They declined to comment in detail because personnel matters are confidential.

Associated Press