



Landlines

FALL 2023

The Dixon Ranch: Laying the Groundwork for Future Generations

Driving to the Dixon Ranch is a surreal experience. According to Google Maps, the 200-acre property is less than seven miles and a 13-minute drive from The Land Conservancy's downtown SLO office, but for all intents and purposes it is worlds away. That's how its owner and caretaker, Dan Dixon, likes it.

Traveling down Orcutt Road, south-east of town, one passes the newly erected retaining walls soon to delineate a new neighborhood "Ranch". After turning onto Righetti Road you enter territory many in SLO can see, but few have explored. Sitting at the base of the Santa Lucia range and just inside the San Luis Obispo Greenbelt, the Dixons have had a hill-top view to changes that have slowly crept through the county; new development popping up in once unexpected places, like the wandering roots of the jujube tree that he plans to uproot and replace with several black oak.

The Dixon Ranch has been in Dan's family on his mother's side for over 130 years. It was split in the early 60s from a larger 700-acre parcel. "As the parcels get smaller, the potential that any agricultural operations can remain sustainable diminishes," Dan notes. Access to water, or lack thereof, has always limited the agricultural prospects of the ranch, which currently

sustains a small cattle grazing operation.

Observing the cost of living and state-wide development pressure rise in recent years, Dan and his wife Lori concluded that for their children and grandchildren to be able to keep the property intact, and in agriculture, they needed to lay the groundwork now - which is how they came to decide to put the land into a conservation easement.



Dixon cont.

After chatting about family history and current agricultural operations, Dan took our staff on a trek over the ridgeline to a canyon on the far eastern property boundary. From the wide-open grasslands of the western slope, this hidden oasis was a refreshing escape from the afternoon sun. Sycamore and coast live oak hugged a creek that, surprisingly, was still flowing in early September.

The signs of black bear were abundant. Pointing out a well-worn path, Dan explained how bears don't just use the same trails to get to and fro, but place their feet in the exact same spot each time, wearing individual footprints into the path. Near this particular trail was another clear sign – hundreds of deep gouges seven feet above the ground in the bark of a sycamore tree.

Dan might describe himself as an accidental forward-thinker. When he planted dozens of redwood trees on the property 30 years ago, he had no plan of propagating the understory with Polypody fern and native strawberries in 2023. But here he is. And when he describes the five species of oak he's sown to expand the overstory this March, he makes the throw-away remark that he knows he will never sit under them.

Whether it's more instinct than intention, the Dixon's vision for a healthy overstory mirrors the thoughtful groundwork they've laid for future generations of SLO County residents. "I'm grateful to be able to call this land 'home'," reflects Dan, "but it's as much a responsibility as a gift. I want to honor my mother's vision for this ranch by putting it in conservation." By making the decision to permanently protect this land, the Dixons have ensured that both local agriculture and wildlife have one more foothold in this ever-changing corner of the world, and we are all the better for it.

The Dixon Ranch conservation easement was completed in August, 2023, and permanently protects 200 acres of rolling grasslands, serpentine rock outcrops, and sycamore lined streams within the San Luis Obispo Greenbelt.

Dan looks forward to welcoming Land Conservancy members on limited, guided hikes and tours of the ranch beginning in 2024. Renew your membership or sign up for our e-newsletter at lcslo.org and never miss an invitation!

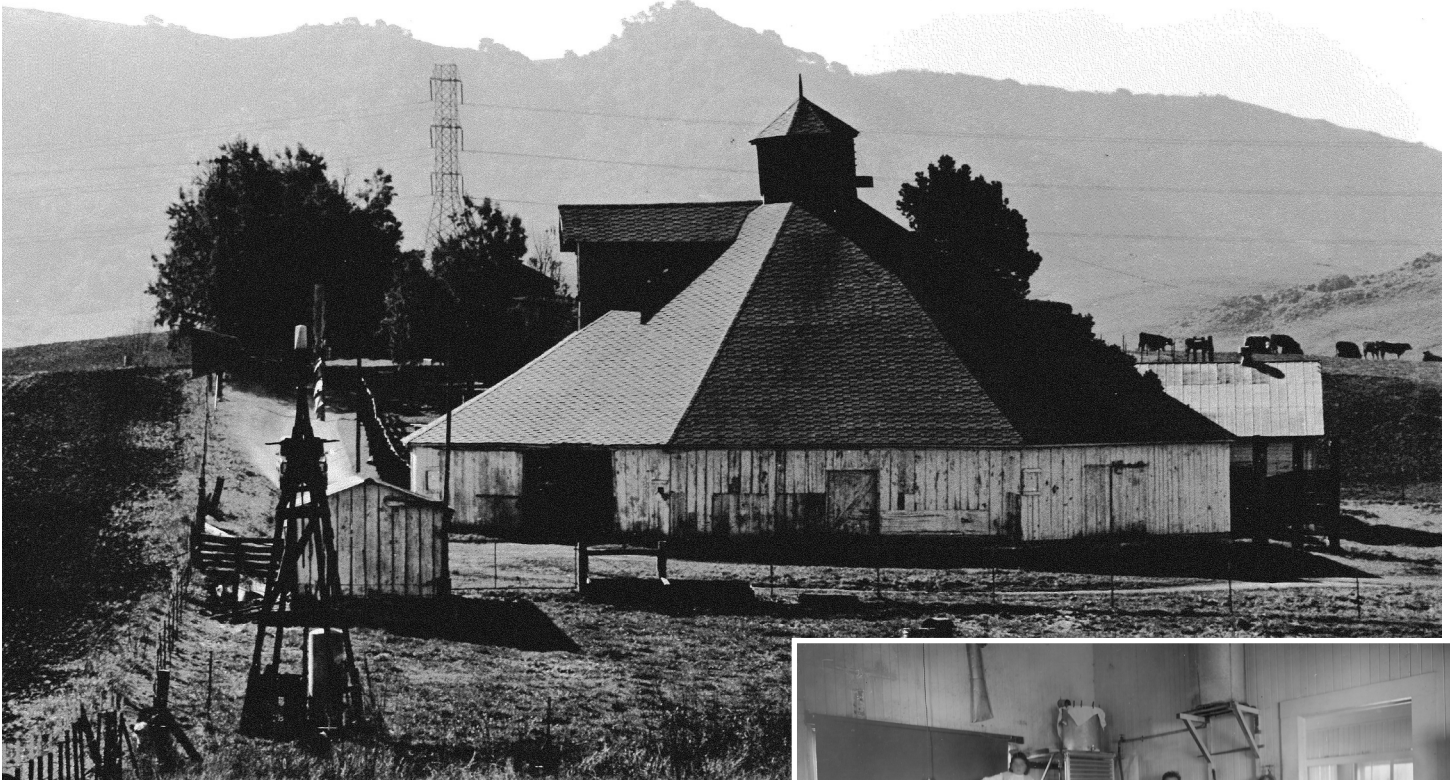


Planting a Seed

Are you also the kind of person who will plant a tree under which you may never sit?

The Land Conservancy has partnered with FreeWill to provide complimentary estate planning services to our members and supporters. Get started today by scanning the code or visiting lcslo.org/planned-giving.





THE PAST REVISITED

Docent Tours Revive History at the Historic Octagon Barn

By Marilyn Darnell

History has been made as the first trained docents are offering regularly scheduled tours of the Octagon Barn. The Land Conservancy volunteer docents have a passion for history. Their training included the role of the land trust in restoring the structures and wetland habitat on-site, studying the history of the property from its days as a Spanish land grant to the present, as well as skills of a docent.

As historian of the Octagon Barn, I drew upon my extensive experiences at the historic Jack House that included docent training to make this new era possible.

It is a pleasure to introduce our docents; Donna Young, the granddaughter of one of the builders of the round barn, who comes with years of experience as a docent of Mission San Luis Obispo; Shanda Gibbs who is a retired State Park Ranger who dedicated herself to researching the historic Spooner Ranch at Montana de Oro State Park; Jennifer Gray whose background is from Rancho La Patera and Stow House in Goleta; and Lauri Rainwater-Quinn who comes with



Photos (Top) the Octagon Barn with dormer on roof circa 1973, photo by Lynn Watkins. (Inset) 3-year old Josephine Garcia Avila at the Home Dairy on Higuera St with dairy worker, date unknown.

a passion for the Octagon Barn and an eagerness to share its story. We welcome and thank each for their time and dedication to sharing local history through the Octagon Barn on Ranchita de Santa Fe

Complimentary tours are offered on the 2nd and 4th Sundays at 2pm and 3pm through the end of October. Tours will take a break for the holidays and be back next spring!

Reservations can be made at lcslo.org/events or eventbrite.com.

Interested in becoming a docent? New volunteers welcome! Please contact Volunteer and Events Coordinator, Niki Uyemura at nikiu@lcslo.org for more information.



© Judy Neuhauser

A NORTH COUNTY OASIS:

Restoring Aquatic Havens for Southwestern Pond Turtles

Santa Rita Ranch's diverse population of wildlife is one of The Land Conservancy's driving motivations for conserving its 1,715 acres. The southwestern pond turtle (*Actinemys pallida*) is one of the many species that calls the ranch home. Listed as a California Species of Special Concern, the population decline of the southwestern pond turtle has prompted our organization to take action to ensure suitable habitat for the reptile's success.

In May 2022, David Germano Ph.D, a Professor Emeritus at California State University Bakersfield, began trapping southwestern pond turtles at the ranch's reservoir to study the population.

Germano caught only fourteen turtles in 2022 - a low count compared to other sites he has studied within the turtle's range. However, when he returned to Santa Rita in the spring of 2023, Germano caught twelve turtles, of which eleven were new captures not identified in 2022. This has led him to believe there "may be a fairly large" population in the reservoir.

Germano notes that the relatively low number of turtles captured may be due to the lack of structures for them to bask. Without basking sites, there are no "focal

points" for the turtle population in the reservoir, making trapping more difficult.

While the southwestern pond turtle population at Santa Rita may be larger than LCSLO and David Germano initially believed, it is an older population, with the youngest of the captured turtles estimated to be eight years old.

What does this mean for the pond turtles of Santa Rita? This may be an indication that young turtles are facing predation at an unsustainable rate for a healthy population. Germano speculates that the higher predation may be due in part to a lack of emergent vegetation along the reservoir's edge. Emergent vegetation refers to aquatic plants that are rooted underwater with shoots extending above the surface. This type of vegetation helps pond turtles by creating habitat for young, vulnerable turtles to hide from predators like non-native largemouth bass.

Actions to create better habitat have already been taken by The Land Conservancy's stewardship and restoration team. Adaptively managing the ranch to enhance wildlife habitat, staff have fenced off the northern portion of the reservoir from cattle using



© Chris Lobdell

Photos (L) pond turtles basking on a log in the reservoir. (R) Land Conservancy staff construct additional basking and shelter areas at the water's edge. (Inset) Turtles seen using the new basking site in late September.

wildlife friendly fences. This fencing consists of a smooth top wire that is lowered for larger animals to jump over, along with a smooth bottom wire that is raised for smaller animals to pass under. These simple changes to the way the fences are constructed make them less hazardous for passing wildlife. Blocking the water's edge from cattle using this fencing has allowed emergent vegetation to grow, providing more suitable habitat for young pond turtles.

In addition to taking steps to improve the vegetation in the turtle's habitat, the organization has also enhanced habitat by creating the first of three focal basking sites. These basking sites are created by placing large logs along the shore with finer branches submerged in the reservoir. Basking sites create habitat for adult turtles to sunbathe while providing underwater shelter from predators for younger turtles.

While The Land Conservancy doesn't yet know how impactful these measures will be, we are hopeful that these two simple actions will make Santa Rita Ranch a haven for a species in decline. We look forward to updating our supporters on the project's results in the coming years.

More Ranch News

Giddy-up Cowboy!

The Land Conservancy is excited to partner with Central Coast Trail Rides to offer guided horseback rides at the Santa Rita Ranch. Guests can book a tour with knowledgeable guides on gentle, family-friendly horses to explore the adventurous terrain and stunning views of the property. Visit www.cctrailrides.com for more information and to book your adventure.

All Aboard, Explorers

For the first time ever, Outside Now, a local organization whose skilled mentors bring children of all ages into the sensory experience of deep nature connection, will host portions of its 2023-24 programming at the north county ranch. We are excited to provide this opportunity and location to inspire a passion for conservation in the younger generations.

AN AirBnB FOR MIGRATING MONARCHS

After over a year of collaboration with Central Coast State Parks Association and the Western Monarch Trail Working Group, a children's version of the Western Monarch Trail interpretive sign panels are ready to go in at the Santa Margarita "Gateway to Nature"!

The Western Monarch Trail (WMT) follows the migration route of the western monarch butterfly. Sites along this route provide shelter for butterflies during the winter, nectar to nourish migrating monarchs and native milkweed to feed their larvae.

Located along the H St. entrance to Santa Margarita Elementary School, the Gateway has been a special project of The Land Conservancy's Learning Among the Oaks program for years. Featuring a meandering trail with nectar-rich flowers and native milkweed, the trail serves as an important way station for migrating monarchs. The path is also frequented by hundreds of children, families and community members each week.

As a WMT location, we will host a series of four informative, kid-friendly education signs to serve as trail markers and tools to promote public understanding and support for monarch habitat conservation. The panels, including Spanish translation, describe the importance of the monarch, what it needs while it is at our location and the best ways for people to protect and preserve this species.



Get Involved!

Giving Tuesday is November 28th, and we need to raise \$6,000 to cover the cost of four sign panels and pedestals. We hope you will join us in making this happen for the children and families walking the trail this school year!

Scan this code with your phone, or visit tinyurl.com/lcslowmt to contribute!



YOU'RE AMAZING!

VOLUNTEER CHEERS

- Alison Jackson is on the Pismo Preserve as part of the gate crew every Monday. She's always up for a fun task, including using her own weed-wacker sometimes. Her smile is infectious and her love of the property is obvious!
- Ross Chenot generously gives his time and energy to preserve the natural beauty of two of our cherished properties: Kathleen's Canyon Overlook (KCO) and the Pismo Preserve. Whether it's weeding at KCO or picking up litter on the trails, Ross is always willing to help with anything needed to ensure our preserves thrive for generations to come.
- As a retired 2nd and 3rd grade teacher, Virginia Baker has been a dedicated docent since The Land Conservancy's Learning Among the Oaks program's inaugural year at Vineyard Elementary school in 2018. She is an integral part of our program, helping in both the classroom and out on the trail.
- Daphne Boatright is our lead Wildlife Camera volunteer at Santa Rita Ranch. As a retired nurse at a local outdoor summer camp, Daphne brings a vibrant energy and thirst for adventure needed to manage the cameras out on this wild ranch.

WELCOME

- Finance Director: Joni Martinez
- Learning Among the Oaks Program Manager: Zarah Wyly
- Learning Among the Oaks Educator: Kylie Schubert
- Preserve Program Supervisor: Mat Wernet
- Octagon Barn Venue Manager: Madison Giger
- Facilities and Grounds Maintenance Supervisor: Lindsay Best
- Conservation Project Manager: Kendall Gilstrap
- Community Engagement Coordinator: Christa Stoll
- Field Coordinator: Chris Lobdell

WISH LIST

Support our volunteer and stewardship programs with items from our Amazon wishlist! Scan the code or visit <https://a.co/i78bj4O>



Central Coast State Parks Association will host their annual Butterfly Ball at the Octagon Barn for the 3rd year in a row on October 14, 2023!

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EVENTS CALENDAR

WHEELCHAIR WEDNESDAYS AT PISMO PRESERVE

Fourth Wednesdays of the month, weather dependant, 11 AM to 3 PM

Join our partners at Positive Ride at the Pismo Preserve to go for a hike on one of their Freedom Trax wheelchair attachments. Positive Ride provides this free service to wheelchair users. For more information or to make a donation, visit www.positiveride.com.

BARN LIGHTING

Thursday, December 7, 5:30-7PM

Get in the holiday spirit by celebrating with The Land Conservancy as we officially flip the switch on thousands of twinkling lights at the Historic Octagon Barn Center. Enjoy sweet treats and hot drinks as we kick off the holiday season. SPACE IS LIMITED: Visit www.lcslo.org/events to reserve your complimentary ticket.

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