

Annual Report

2023-2024



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Mission & Services

Mission

The mission of the Resource Conservation District of the Santa Monica Mountains is to promote land stewardship and resource conservation through ecological research, conservation planning and design, habitat restoration and environmental education, while adhering to the highest standards of transparency and accountability as a public agency.



Services

Current services and projects of the RCDSMM include:

- Restoration of Topanga Lagoon
- Wildfire resiliency information and services to homeowners and land managers
- Permit reporting and compliance assistance for landowners
- Watershed restoration
- Oak monitoring and restoration
- Wildlife inventory and biodiversity studies
- Regional and local conservation planning
- Natural science education programs

Our Team



Clark Stevens
Executive Officer



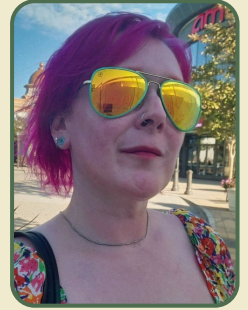
Dan Cooper
Deputy Executive Officer



Lisa Rand
HR & Office Manager



Terence Coleman
Accountant



Erin Sweeney
Accounting Specialist



Rosi Dagit
Principal Conservation
Biologist



Jamie King
Senior Conservation
Biologist



Alyssa Morgan
Conservation Biologist



Isaac Yelchin
Biology Technician



Shelly Backlar
Community Resilience
Director



Pauline Allen
Community Resilience
Project Manager



Arezo Sarwary
Community Resilience
Specialist



Danielle Picciano
Community Resilience
Specialist



Marilyn Brody French
Education Director



Jelly Kahler
Education & Engagement
Supervisor



Bella Isles
Environmental Designer



Luke Benson
Watershed Stewards
Program Member

Topanga Lagoon Restoration -

Public Meetings, Environmental Impact Reports and More

The Topanga Lagoon Restoration Project is a multiagency cooperative effort that seeks to protect and restore precious biological and cultural resources, create an integrated program for coastal access, emergency response and interpretation, and proactively address the effects of sea level rise.

We have had a busy and productive year when it comes to the Topanga Lagoon Restoration Project! The RCD is both the grant and project manager for this important multi-agency restoration.

The Topanga Lagoon Restoration Project Draft Environmental Impact Report (DEIR) dropped on February 12th, 2024. We invited the public to provide feedback on the DEIR and the various project alternatives during a 60-day review period. We hosted two public meetings in Topanga and Santa Monica to share the details of the project.

Separate focus group meetings were also held to encourage and incorporate a diverse set of opinions, including tribal groups, surfers, adjacent homeowners, beach maintenance workers, elected officials and fellow environmental non-profit organizations.



As a result, we received over 130 public and agency comment letters. We will be hosting an online meeting on August 5th, 2024 to inform the public about which restoration design has been selected based on public comment and partner feedback and the reasons why. Comments and questions will be welcome. You can submit your feedback and learn more about this important restoration effort via the project's website at: [TopangaLagoonRestoration.org](https://www.TopangaLagoonRestoration.org). We anticipate a Final EIR will be completed and submitted to California State Parks for review and approval in Fall 2024.

Annual Highlights in 2023-24



Education in the 2023-24 School Year

During 2023-24 the RCD led over 300 education programs for nearly 6,900 students. The RCD has been successfully leading education programs since the 1980s and we look forward to continuing to build upon this legacy of success.

The RCD's Office Has Moved

The RCD office officially changed in August of 2023. Our new home is nestled in the hills of Calabasas. We hope with this change in location we can offer new services to a diverse and growing community. While our office may be in Calabasas, many of our programs and projects occur throughout Los Angeles and the Santa Monica Mountains. We look forward to continuing to grow our sphere of influence.

Home Ignition Zone Evaluations

Our Community Resilience team has continued to increase their capacity. This year we continued to offer Home Ignition Zone Evaluations to homeowners. Through this program, we have increased our communities' collective resilience to wildfire risk. If you live in the wildland urban interface, consider signing up for a Home Ignition Zone Evaluation at rcdsmm.org/home-ignition-zone-evaluations.

Diversity Equity and Inclusion Committee

The RCD's Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) Committee began anew after some staff turnover. The Committee has been hard at work to set yearly goals for the organization, develop plans to reach more diverse communities, offer DEI enrichment for staff and more.

Western Pond Turtle Update

This year we continued to restore and monitor refugia ponds to benefit local Western Pond Turtle populations. We'd like to give a special thank you to donors that supported this unique project. Because of your generosity, we can continue to ensure Western Pond Turtles will not be extirpated from our mountains.



Malibu Lagoon Together

A Coastal Experience for All

In 2021, the RCD was awarded a Whale Tail Grant from the State Coastal Conservancy, the goal of which was to offer a safe and welcoming experience for community members who typically encounter barriers to accessing coastal spaces.

Inspired by the RCD's well-established environmental education program at Malibu Lagoon State Beach, *Malibu Lagoon Together* (MLT) kicked off in July of 2022, and for the first time, invited entire Los Angeles and Ventura County families to learn about this unique coastal environment and enjoy some fun in the sun and sand!

Guided by RCD Educators, families kicked off their experience by watching and learning about estuarian birds, then assessing the health of lagoon waters, and finally getting an introduction to endangered, threatened and sensitive marine species. Then, with their supplied lunches and beach blankets, umbrellas and toys in hand, families gathered in the sand to enjoy the wonders of the Malibu coast.





With a beautifully designed bilingual webpage, fliers and participant guides, the RCD Education Department was able to reach 500 families from historically underserved communities spanning across 35 Title 1 schools throughout Los Angeles and Ventura Counties. Many groups consisted of multi-generational families including children as young as one year, and for some participants, it was their first time ever visiting the beach. From July 2022 until May 2024, the RCD led a total of 47 programs welcoming 1,493 participants to enjoy Malibu Lagoon Together.

Participants and RCD Educators alike provided positive and thoughtful feedback regarding this valuable grant-funded program, and voiced their desire to attend again or see similar projects offered in the future.

The RCD would like to formally thank the Coastal Conservancy for supporting this unique idea and helping bring it to life. We look forward to designing more programs like Malibu Lagoon Together as your RCD continues to grow and diversify its services.




Grow a Tree with Your RCD

The coast live oak is a keystone species that not only supports over 250 different kinds of insects, amphibians, reptiles, birds, and mammals but with its majestic canopy, and rambling branches, is an icon of California ecosystems. These oaks do more than just provide critical habitat for plants and animals, they help maintain water quality in streams and rivers, protect soil from erosion, and lessen the devastating impact from wildfires. With oak numbers dramatically declining due to habitat loss, fire, drought, and invasive pests, protecting and cherishing these trees is more important than ever.

After a successful restoration in 2022, which established over 200 new oak trees in Topanga State Park, your local RCD is once again planting and caring for coast live oaks. Starting in the spring of 2024, the RCD planted and maintained an additional 500 oak seedlings across the Santa Monica Mountains. These new oak planting locations have been specifically chosen to fill in oak canopy, recover tree loss from fire, and extend woodland habitat. These locations include:

- Trippet Ranch at Topanga State Park, an extension of a previous restoration site. With 235 established plantings and 150 new plantings this year, there are hundreds of healthy young oaks sprawling across this park.
- Nicolas Flat trail in Leo Carrillo State Park, an area that was devastated by the 2018 Woolsey Fire. The RCD has planted 200 oaks neighboring the trail and are caring for an additional 100 oaks to help this ecosystem recover from the fire.
- Tapia State Park Day Use Area, a restoration site initially planted by partners at Treepeople, who established 150 oaks to ensure a more dynamic ecosystem. The RCD is now assisting State Parks and Treepeople with watering to ensure these oaks flourish.





The importance of informed conservation cannot be understated. The RCD has conducted research on previous restorations to better understand these complex ecosystems and maximize planting success. Through this research, it's been discovered that there is a key difference between planting and growing a tree, with each oak tree taking roughly 15 hours of work to establish. These studies would not have been possible without funding from CA State Parks, partner organizations, and community members who volunteered their time to water trees.



The RCD will once again call upon dedicated community members to care for baby oaks through 2026. If you cannot attend a volunteer event, bring extra water on your next hike to nourish parched young oak trees. Become a part of this dynamic, interconnected, living system, enjoy the magic of a thriving oak woodland and help grow a tree with your RCD.

If you're interested in volunteering, reach out to the RCD's Engagement Manager at outreach@rcdsmm.org.



Annual Highlights in 2023-24

Snorkeling the Streams

This year our Research & Restoration team resumed monthly steelhead trout snorkel surveys in both Topanga and Malibu creeks! These surveys serve not only to protect and preserve endangered steelhead but also to inform work around the eventual removal of Rindge Dam.



Trout populations also receive indirect benefits from projects like stream surveys, oak woodland restoration, bad beetle monitoring, wildfire resilience, the restoration of Topanga Lagoon, the construction of the Wallis Annenberg Wildlife Crossing, conserving other endangered and threatened species, and educating our community through immersive programs like WiLD CiTY.

A New Take on Educator Fall Trainings

The RCD's education department has continued to offer unique opportunities to our team of environmental educators. This year our traditional Fall Training underwent a small change as we offered social emotional focused enrichment training in addition to ensuring educators feel confident in leading field programs for our diversifying and growing student population.

Community Resilience Movie Premiere

This year saw a first of its kind event for our Community Resilience team, and for our organization in general. Thanks to the hard work from our Community Resilience Staff, we were able to host a movie premiere for over 40 community members and project partners. Our team created a series of educational videos to help homeowners increase the resilience of their land and homes to wildfire. Check out the videos at our [YouTube channel](#).



A Change in Funding for Education

A longtime partner and supporter of RCD education programs recently folded their non-profit, so we are actively searching for funding to support programming and ensure environmental education remains accessible for all. If you feel inspired to give, you can do so on the [RCD's website](#).

WiLD CiTY

an immersive workshop series

Born in the Spring of 2023, WiLD CiTY Workshops invite community members to learn and explore natural landscapes alongside local environmental and creative professionals. For over 40 years, the RCD has served Los Angeles and Ventura County schools through hands-on environmental education programs, and through WiLD CiTY, have now expanded educational opportunities to adults, building deeper connections to the natural wonders that surround our urban landscapes.



Since its inception, WiLD CiTY participants have adventured into unique, often under-explored wildspaces throughout the Santa Monica Mountains and beyond. This growing group of thoughtful and engaged community members have so far enjoyed a variety of activities including fish dissections, paper making and plant-based cloth dyeing, hands-on restoration and invasive species removal, plant propagation, photography, painting, singing, creative writing, bird watching, historical hiking, and plant connection through storytelling. Participants of WiLD CiTY also have an opportunity to further engage with one another and with workshop leaders by enjoying post-event light bites or adult beverages at a local establishment.

The RCD Education Department is currently seeking sponsorship for WiLD CiTY, as our hope is to be able to offer these workshops free of charge - connecting a greater diversity of our community members with the wildspaces to which we all belong, and deepening the human-nature relationship that ultimately heals us both.

Learn more about WiLD CiTY at rcdscmm.org/wild-city

A Modern Way to Prepare for Wildfire

This past year, our Community Resilience Team undertook a first-of-its-kind endeavor, producing a 12-part educational Wildfire Defense Video Series. Video topics range from home hardening and defensible space to the fire resilience of oak trees. The goal of this video series was to give residents living in the WUI (wildland urban interface) confidence when it comes to preparing their homes for wildfire.

“There are a lot of videos out there telling residents that they need to upgrade their vents, they need to have defensible space, but we didn’t see many showing HOW to retrofit a vent, HOW to create defensible space. Our Wildfire Defense Video Series strives to provide that information,” said Pauline Allen, the RCD’s Community Resilience Project Manager.



The videos come at a time when many residents living in high fire risk areas are searching for more information on how to better protect their homes from wildfire. With the introduction of AB 3074 in January 2021 and anticipated enforcement of defensible space in zone zero, many people are asking What is Allowed in Zone Zero, the 0-5ft Zone? With the rising cost of home insurance, many people are asking How to Create Proper Defensible Space and How to Harden a Home for Wildfire: Vents, Gutter Guards, and Gaps. Our videos seek to answer all these questions.



At the RCD, we strive to empower residents to find a balance between protecting important habitat and protecting communities. Our wildfire resilience website, defensiblespace.org continues to offer guidance on this matter. Our [How are Oak Trees Fire-resistant?](#) video helps to reinforce the importance of native oak trees' role in protecting communities from wildfire. When properly cared for, oaks can create a buffer to protect your home from flying embers.

The community resilience team also offers free Home Ignition Zone Evaluations to residents of high fire risk areas. To sign up for your free consultation, [register on our website here](#). Want to know what sort of recommendations are given during an HIZ evaluation? Check out the [How to Prepare Your Home for Wildfire: Home Ignition Zone Evaluation video](#).

The entire [Wildfire Defense Video Series](#) can be found on RCD's website and [YouTube channel](#).



A Parting Message



Your RCDSMM thanks you for checking out our annual report and staying connected to local conservation! Without the support of our community, we could not hope to accomplish all the incredible environmental protection and advocacy we do.

If you felt inspired by the words you read within this report, consider supporting local conservation and donating to your RCD.

Whether your RCD is the Santa Monica Mountains, Ventura, Inland Empire, San Diego, or any of the other 92 RCDs located throughout California, they likely need your support. Most RCDs operate on grant funding acquired by hard-working biologists but many of us are at capacity when it comes to applying for these competitive grants. Consider supporting your RCD today. You can donate to us at rcdsmm.org/donate.