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## Focus on the Sonoma Developmental Center: Preserving the Sonoma Valley Wildlife Corridor



Source:

Sonoma Land Trust

**By Tracy Salcedo**

“We cannot bridge the growing gulf between economics and ecology until we see personal wellbeing as being inseparable from the planet’s health.” —Hank Lentfer, Raven’s Witness

I saw them before the dog did, which was a good thing because I could lock the leash and keep her still.

One deer, then two, then three, then ten, then twenty or more. They pranced through the heart of the former Sonoma Developmental Center campus, right down the road in front of the iconic Main Building, like they owned the place.

Because they do.

It's not yet a done deal, but if all goes as intended, and as legislated, the bulk of the SDC property will become parkland, with open space on the east side of Arnold Drive becoming part of Sonoma Valley Regional Park and open space on the west becoming part of Jack London State Historic Park. But, as with the mandate for provision of affordable housing on the site, the legislation doesn't say how much open space should be preserved, or delineate its boundaries. Drawing the lines is the job of the Sonoma County planners and consultants tasked with developing a specific plan for the property. In a process that's community driven, responsibility also falls on local residents and others who use the SDC's open spaces for recreation, and who care about the natural values of those wildlands.

A critical element of the preservation process is protecting the Sonoma Valley Wildlife Corridor.

### **What is a wildlife corridor and why does it matter?**

The Sonoma Land Trust (SLT) says it succinctly: "Wildlife (or ecological) corridors are the natural pathways or routes used by animals and plants of all types to move or disperse from one place to another. Such wildlife movement is absolutely essential for maintaining the health and function of entire ecosystems on which our community's well-being depends."

Richard Dale, executive director of the Sonoma Ecology Center (SEC), elaborates: "It's important not to isolate [wildlife populations]. This reduces the gene pool, isolating animals from mates. Animals need to connect to sustain diversity. Larger carnivores need wide ranges to be able to access mates." If those ranges are fragmented, biological islands are created, resulting in inbreeding, loss of vitality, and possibly loss of the animals themselves.

Connection is important for flora as well. "In terms of plants, when things warm up, habitat changes," Dale said, noting that locally, trees are dying because of drought and heat caused by global climate change. "[The conditions] that plant community thrived in are changing," he said. "They need to move too; they can move uphill to a cooler spot, or around the corner to a different aspect. Plants can find another place to survive."

In a region pressured by development or redevelopment, such as the SDC, preserving an established wildlife corridor, or habitat corridor, as Dale prefers, is key. Sonoma

Valley's wildlife corridor has shown up on maps used by a number of groups, including the SDC Coalition Land Committee, for decades. These maps delineate the corridor as a swath that sweeps over Sonoma Mountain, narrows to maybe a mile in width on the valley floor in Glen Ellen (roughly bounded by Chauvet Road and the regional park on the north side and the developed footprint of the SDC campus on the south), and then fans open again into the Mayacamas range. It encompasses a number of protected and private open spaces on the valley floor and over the mountain and range, including Jack London SHP and the regional park, Glen Oaks Ranch, the Bouverie Preserve, Calabazas Creek Open Space Preserve, and Oak Hill Farm. Ultimately, Sonoma Valley's wildlife corridor is one fragile link in a chain that hitches habitats in Point Reyes National Seashore to those in Berryessa Snow Mountain National Monument.

Drawing lines on a map, however, does not ensure deer, bobcats, opossums, foxes, snakes, newts, and birds will stay inside those lines. Take the turkeys (please): They walk down the middle of the streets of Glen Ellen like flocks of oblivious tourists. Murders of crows, nurseries of raccoons, rhumbas of rattlesnakes, and solitary mountain lions have been seen or tracked throughout Glen Ellen, Kenwood, Oakmont, and Eldridge, both inside and outside the designated wildlife corridor.

That's one reason the corridor matters — because people living in and visiting the region cherish the wildness it confers. From the grandmother redwood to P5, the hummingbird to the poppy, these things make this place golden.

The wildlife corridor has also long been a local playground for humans, for better or worse. Access is important; everything about the corridor supports the well-being and quality of life of the people who walk, ride, or even just sit near the corridor. Additionally, according to the SLT, “[b]iological diversity of wildlife ... protects us from the species most likely to make us sick, like the smaller animals (like rats) that overpopulate in the absence of their natural predators, like bobcats, foxes, and coyotes. Thus, landscapes with more kinds of plants and animals have stronger ‘immune’ systems, protecting us by reducing the likelihood of zoonotic diseases (like Lyme),” and now, COVID-19.

### **One woman's legacy; a gift for the Valley**

For Dale, the SEC's executive director, the Sonoma Valley Wildlife Corridor is also the Christy Vreeland Wildlife Corridor.

Vreeland was an artist, a longtime Sonoma Valley resident who worked at the SDC, and a volunteer with the ecology center, according to Dale. She was also masterful at bringing people together on conservation projects, envisioning and then helping facilitate the transformation of Sonoma's Nathanson Creek corridor into a refuge for both people and wildlife.

In the mid-1990s, Dale said, Vreeland came to a “strategy summit” at the SEC with an idea. She’d been looking at a AAA map and realized that, because of human development, Sonoma Mountain was in danger of becoming biologically isolated. The only place where wildlife could make the connection between the mountain and the Mayacamas was through the SDC. Her vision: A unified corridor of land connecting the two ranges.

From that moment, Dale said, the SEC made preservation of the wildlife corridor a priority. Vreeland was at the forefront of the effort, gathering materials, organizing meetings, and bringing people together — biologists, PhD candidates, California’s fish and wildlife department, CalTrans, other environmental groups — “a bunch of players, a bunch of citizens,” Dale said. “Christy saw [the value of the wildlife corridor] and got everyone to come to the table. She was really nice, but very determined and kept everyone on task.” The end product was a “first of its kind — and one of the first in the world — citizens-led wildlife corridor.”

Vreeland may have seen what others hadn’t before, but the wildlife corridor has since attracted other champions, including the late Anne Teller of Oak Hill Farm; the folks at the SEC; Tony Nelson, John McCaull, Wendy Eliot, and others from the SLT; and Mickey Cooke, Pat Eliot, and members of Sonoma Mountain Preservation.

### **Redevelopment of the SDC and preserving the wildlife corridor**

“I hope that we can very quickly dispense with the idea of false choices—i.e. that economic growth/housing/jobs are somehow pitted against the health of our natural world, and that human needs are so pressing that we can overlook or override environmental values,” said John McCaull when asked why preservation of the wildlife corridor should carry as much weight as affordable housing in planning the future of the SDC.

“I would liken the wildlife corridor to clean air and clean water: We can’t actually live without them, and we have already stressed our systems so much that if we compromise these last few wild places in Sonoma, we will tip the scales toward a much bigger ecosystem collapse,” he said.

McCaull’s point of view is backed by science. In 2015, when the SDC was still operational, a paper prepared for the land trust by researchers from the University of California, Berkeley, not only documented how the SDC’s wildlife corridor maintains connectivity, but also addressed what it will take to ensure its integrity.

The SDC “has high potential for landscape permeability and therefore is expected to allow for free passage of wildlife if left undisturbed,” the researchers wrote. They also cited a state mandate — “a cornerstone of California’s State Wildlife Action Plan” — that places a priority on making sure development does not encroach on such corridors.

The researchers noted that protecting the corridor “will require preventing further development, especially in the northern portion of the SDC; as well as reduction in traffic speeds, artificial lighting, invasive species and domestic animal control, limiting human access, and a move toward wildlife-friendly fencing throughout the corridor.” All of these issues have been cited by the community as well, and are issues that should be addressed in the three alternatives slated for release in November by the consultants preparing the county specific plan.

In the meantime, when I walk the dog on the property, I'll stick to the path most traveled and keep the pooch on her leash. Not that the leash was needed on the day we saw the deer crossing. She knew: This was their turf. She and I were content to stand back and watch them pass.