PRIVATE LANDS FOR PUBLIC ACCESS:
THE SUTTER BUTTES OF CALIFORNIA

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The Sutter Buttes is both mountain and island

Set in the midst of the fertile, highly altered Sacramento Valley

The range has many faces, many stories
Goal today:
Describe an evolving approach to conservation & land management in a unique, privately owned landscape

Context
History
Successes
Challenges

This area has always been rich in wildlife

Winter 1832-33: John Work party of fur trappers in Buttes. “395 elk, 148 deer, 17 bears, & 8 antelopes have been taken in a month.” Irony: trappers brought in malaria, which wiped out 75% of Maidu (natives) in area; many villages abandoned.

Thousands of waterfowl slaughtered for the market
Livestock soon replaced much of the large native wildlife.

Pronghorn, elk, grizzly, mountain lion, wolf exterminated.

With the loss of major carnivores, bobcats & foxes became the reigning cats & dogs!

Maidu & Wintun peoples devastated by disease and direct persecution.

This range was, and still is, sacred to these native Americans.

Replaced by American settlers.
Recent history, as well as geological and ecological history, is imprinted on the land.
Coyotes & other predators persecuted

Other native species disappeared (e.g., a woodrat, an endemic kangaroo rat)

1960—Titan Missile Base—first generation of ICBM's armed with nuclear warheads. Ironically, not far from "Peace Valley."

Despite changes, the Sutter Buttes stood out as a semi-natural island in a sea of intensely altered lowlands.

Todd Quam
This was a “working landscape,” but one lacking public access (& support).

By mid-1960s, landowners cracked down on trespass. Access demand increased. Save the Sutter Buttes organization formed, and California considered creating a state park. Extreme polarization.

In response to threat of state parks, one landowner formed the West Butte Sanctuary Company. Walt & Rebecca Anderson hired to direct it.

Guided hikes & outings in Sutter Buttes & Butte Sink
Environmental education for school groups
College classes. Illustrated talks
Gallery of art, books, etc. based on place
A model of using private lands for public access

It worked!
Access demand satisfied by having legal entry (with guide)
Trespass elsewhere could be managed more effectively
More & more interest in Sutter Buttes—building constituency
Polarization between landowners & public declined

Sensitive wildlife areas (e.g., for bats, eagles) were protected from people

A government parks professional told me:
"Thank God we don't own this place.
We'd put in expensive roads & facilities.
Despite our brochures and warnings,
We'd lose the eagle nest each year."
Challenges:
Capacity limited: one access point
Only 2-3 employees
Summer inhospitable—no tours then
Limited exposure to new participants
Philosophical differences with owner

Feb. 1979—landowner abruptly closes WBSC

Andersons believe concept valid
& too important to depend on one property.
Formed Sutter Buttes Naturalists & gained access
to 40 properties within a year.

Concept maturing: many properties, many guides.
SBN carried liability insurance, paid for access.
Scientific studies encouraged.
Hundreds involved in education programs.
Landowners' only obligations:
Don’t cancel scheduled access
& don’t do anything hazardous for participants.

Ecology, open space, esthetics, education, exercise . . .
tremendous public response and support developed

Geology &
land forms

With expert instruction
Studying how soils influence vegetation.

“Geology is destiny.”
Wildflowers

Built good will toward landowners for their generosity and willingness to share

Recognition increased dramatically: Sutter Buttes & Butte Sink designated California Natural Areas Link in Cross California Land Heritage Corridor Featured in books, magazines, other media (1983 *The Sutter Buttes: A Naturalist's View* by Anderson)

1989: Heinrich & Freeman obtained non-profit status. Organization renamed Middle Mountain Foundation (based on Indian recognition of this sacred range).

MMF fought proposals for major housing development & toxic dump. Conservation activism.

Ranchettes & trophy homes exploit zoning loopholes.

Heinrich: "If we view the Buttes in parts or pieces, an impenetrable veil is drawn over their true nature . . . The Buttes' uniqueness, value, and very identity are, in fact, found only in their entirety, in their wholeness as one Place, one feature."
Environmental education emphasized

Hands-on experiences

1996: MMF received gift of 200 acres on iconic North Butte. Sets stage for MMF to be a land trust.

1997: Heinrich removed as director by MMF board; foundation goals unchanged, though emphases evolved.

MMF growing pains:
How to respond to state park
How to respond to competing enterprises
How to balance financial needs vs. human capital
How to stay neutral politically when issues have
direct impact on integrity of range

Through ups & downs, activities and events continued.
Credit a dedicated board, volunteers,
and cooperating landowners.

Interpretation extended through publications:
books, magazine articles, radio & TV, etc.
School group program remained significant.
(Currently over 1600 3rd graders visit each year).

Sunset Serenade a big fund-raiser for organization

Middle Mountain Foundation acquires historic West Butte School

Oakland Museum is featuring Sutter Buttes as 1 of 7 special places in state—natural environments & land management issues
MMF was a land trust, but the new name, Sutter Buttes Regional Land Trust, adopted Fall 2013, reflects the broader mission of strengthening regional land conservation efforts to include not only the Sutter Buttes, but Sutter, Yuba, and Colusa Counties.

SBRLT Mission:
Long-term land protection in Sutter Buttes and surrounding region.

SBRLT Values:
1. Protect natural, cultural, geological, historical, & scenic qualities

SBRLT Values:
2. Identify prime agricultural lands & natural areas that preserve and enhance the unique characteristics of the region.
SBRLT Values:

3. Build partnerships with landowners, community leaders, & developers to balance conservation with economic growth, flood protection, & water quality

SBRLT Values:

4. Respect landowners’ rights; provide info to those wanting to conserve their land

SBRLT Values:

5. Increase awareness of the foundation’s dedication to education, interpretation, & land conservation programs

SBRLT Values:

6. Maintain an efficient, effective, & sustainable organization
Actions in past 18 months:

1. Hiring permanent Executive Director, Land Steward, Outreach & Fund Development Coordinator, Administrative Services Coordinator
2. Updating governance policies & procedures
3. Advancing strategic planning & information technology: new website
4. Expanding Education Program—record 1600 students
5. Continuing workshops & hikes—more than 1000 participants/year
6. Managing 5 land trust projects, over 600 acres
7. Joining Sacramento River Watershed Rangeland Conservation Project

Immediate charge:

1. Obtain Land Trust Alliance accreditation
2. Increase the public understanding of the benefits of land conservation
3. Solicit community and business involvement
4. Enhance outreach and educational programs
5. Influence regional planning and mitigation efforts
Regional Planning means attention to local politics.

Sutter County General Plan: “The County shall preserve the Sutter Buttes as an important agricultural, cultural, historical, and ecological reserve.”

But what does “reserve” mean here? County doesn’t own the land. Primary tool is zoning, which is set by county supervisors. Vulnerable to politics & loopholes.

Sutter County General Plan also says: “The County shall support the preservation of natural landforms, natural vegetation, and natural resources as open space to the maximum extent feasible.”

Emphasis on “maximum” or “feasible”?

Challenges for a land trust like SBRLT:

1. Many view land conservation as impediment to profit & progress (vital: education of farmers, ranchers, hunters, general public)
2. Actions adjacent to trust lands can threaten integrity (e.g., feral or trespass animals, weeds, poachers, development, trophy homes)

3. Nature herself sets limitations (e.g., summer heat, fire, drought)

4. Virtues like patience and tolerance can conflict with need for action

5. Inertia: resistance to change (potential clients & non-profit itself)
Long-term sustainability is a concern:
Volunteer burn-out
Staff turnover
Adequate revenue

Sources of Revenue:
Events, donations, memberships, product sales
Interpretive hikes & workshops (>-$40K/yr.)
New events: Fun Run, Bike the Buttes, Beers for Buttes
Signing up with non-profit funding organizations
Easement agreements
Potential mitigation funds

Income since recession is again growing

Where the money goes
If accredited by Land Trust Alliance (LTA):

- Can apply for funding from state & federal agencies
- Can join other trusts in larger campaigns
- Can gain credibility for other sources (e.g., planned giving)

Challenges for an interpretive program:

When does a “working landscape” lose its appeal?
How many cowpies can be tolerated?

When do noxious plants become simply too much to take?

Can you speak out against encroachment without jeopardizing landowner relationships?
When does “collaboration” become capitulation?

What do you do when a cooperator allows devastating overgrazing?

Is it a landowner’s right to release feral animals like pigs or sheep that spread everywhere and cause enormous ecological damage?

Commercial hunting of feral pigs in Northern California

Courtesy Kirk Portocarrero, SacRiverGuide.com
Are you ready to adjust to climate change?

My advice:
1. Continually seek to refine your identity
2. Welcome dissent as an opportunity for growth
3. Beware the dangers of self-congratulation
4. Value humility over hubris

Since I guided my first hike some 38 years ago, I have watched generations fall in love with this special place.

My advice:
5. Put the health of the land above organizational stability
6. Recognize your debt to those who came before (including the Native Americans who called this home)
7. Always seek to understand the big picture
This island-mountain will continue to share her stories.

The Sutter Buttes, this singular range, retains a sense of wildness.
I celebrate 68 years as a non-prophet, but I can tell you this:

If we listen, if we understand, and if we employ our powers of informed imagination, we can act with wisdom and firm resolve. If we do, the Inland Island of the Sutter Buttes will continue to be the heart stone of the valley, our beacon and guide.

Success depends on maintaining a positive spirit of constructive collaboration.
Inclusiveness: landowners, scientists, educators, students, photographers, anyone who loves nature.

This landscape, sacred to local Indians, is again a meeting place, a place of connection & renewal.

Wildlife and human livelihoods share new possibilities.

This takes vision, imagination, hard work, and sometimes compromise.
It takes landowners who see the land as more than commodities, who see the land as a heritage essential to future generations.

The Sutter Buttes is an island, after all—an island of enlightenment, of vision.

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Photos by Walt Anderson, Sutter Buttes Regional Land Trust, & Todd Quam