

# UC Berkeley

## Places

### Title

Los Angeles -- Making Big Wild [Roots]

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9t35b6vp>

### Journal

Places, 9(3)

### ISSN

0731-0455

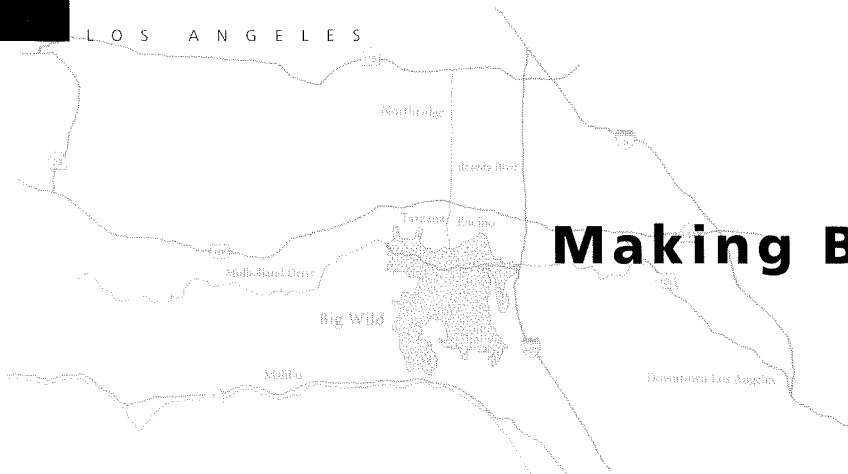
### Author

McNally, Marcia

### Publication Date

1995-01-15

Peer reviewed



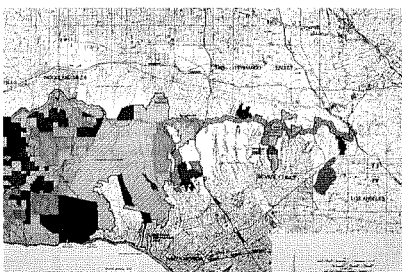
# Making Big Wild

*Marcia McNally*

Big Wild, 15 minutes from downtown Los Angeles as the red-tailed hawk flies, is an intact ecosystem within a network of mountainous open spaces between the San Fernando Valley and communities on the Pacific coast.

(Above) Location map. (Agnes Rozsnyoi)

(Below) Land protection plan for eastern section of Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area. (Marcia McNally).



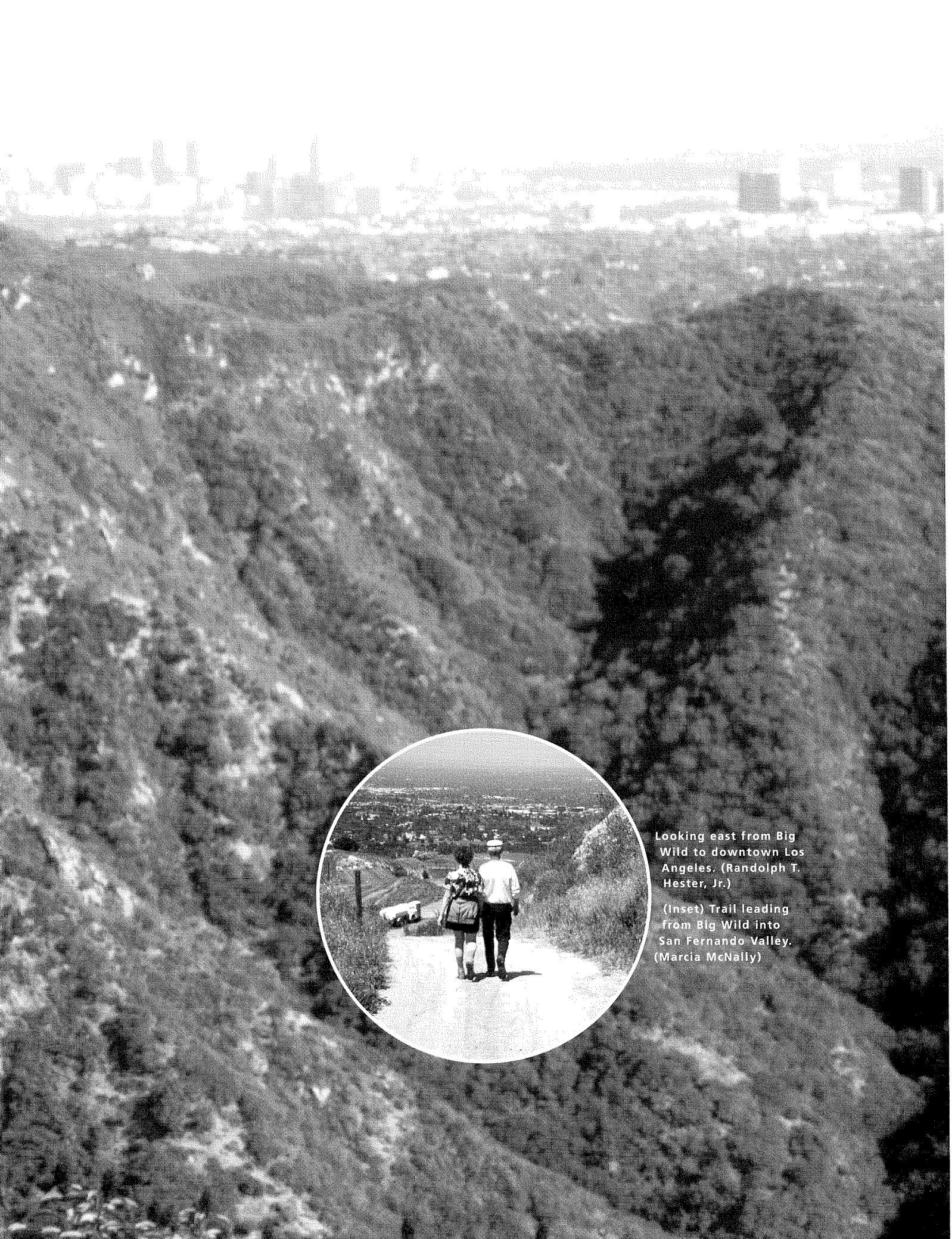
This is a story about Los Angeles. Predictably, it is about development pressures, an insatiable appetite for more roads, the struggle to preserve open space, mountain lions ... Wait a minute, mountain lions? In Los Angeles?!

Yes. This is a tale about creating a vision for 20,000 acres of urban wilderness, a place that came to be known as Big Wild. This is the story of how science reinforced the vision and solidified a politically acceptable argument for protecting an ecosystem in the face of extreme pressure to build roads right through it. This is a statement about reconnecting a city with its native landscape in order to achieve environmental stewardship.

Los Angeles always has been a place where big dreams gave shape to city form. As Mike Davis put it so well in his book *City of Quartz*, “Compared to other great cities, Los Angeles may be planned or designed in a very fragmentary sense ... but it is infinitely envisioned.”<sup>1</sup>

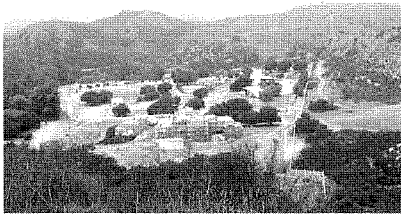
The people who fought and planned for the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area envisioned a continuous mountain park spanning from Dodger Stadium to Point Mugu. The recreation area was established in 1978 as a network of connected urban open spaces cooperatively managed by park agencies for similar purposes.<sup>2</sup>

Big Wild, one link in this chain, started with a big-picture thinker and doer, Joe Edmiston, executive director of the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy (created in 1979 to acquire land in the national recreation area). Edmiston and the conservancy, racing against encroaching development, have successfully aggregated more than 21,000 acres of wilderness into public ownership.

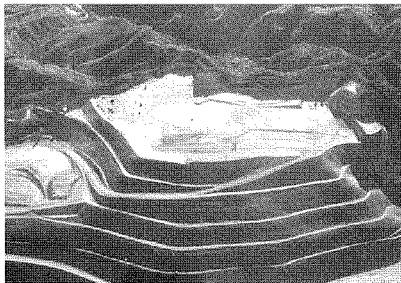


Looking east from Big Wild to downtown Los Angeles. (Randolph T. Hester, Jr.)

(Inset) Trail leading from Big Wild into San Fernando Valley. (Marcia McNally)



Development near Big Wild.  
(Randolph T. Hester, Jr.)



Terracing in preparation for new construction near Big Wild.  
(Randolph T. Hester, Jr.)

The lands are beginning to form an edge to urban growth, a natural container for this seemingly limitless city.

In October, 1989, about a week after the Loma Prieta earthquake, I was sitting in my office and got a call from Joe. He was having trouble with a project in the central Santa Monicas and wanted us to come down and look. "You just have to see it to understand," he said, so we went to LA.

The first part of the meeting was conducted in a helicopter flying over thousands of acres of mountain tops being cut off and graded for suburban estates. We talked about Mulholland Gateway Park, 1,081 acres of land in the mountains acquired through developer donations. But the majority of the tour consisted of driving along Dirt Mulholland, a seven-plus mile stretch of Mulholland Drive that has never been paved. I remember spotting a bobcat up on a knoll, backlit by late afternoon sun. In my most vivid memory we are standing at the top of Rustic Canyon, gazing out at the chaparral and talking about the big picture — only 15 minutes from downtown Los Angeles, as the red-tailed hawk flies.

## The Problem

The conservancy's immediate focus was on Mulholland Gateway Park. The developer of an adjacent parcel, Harlan Lee, was under pressure to satisfy the remaining condition of development before he could put his lots up for sale. The city had required Lee to extend Reseda Boulevard to Dirt Mulholland and make it as wide as a secondary highway. Time was of the essence.

Why such concern over this seemingly small detail? First, the extension would blast through Mulholland Gateway Park and Topanga State Park before it hit Dirt Mulholland. A 60-foot peak on the ridge would be flattened; all of the land available for a park gateway would be consumed by Reseda. Second, to satisfy city fire department standards, Dirt Mulholland would have to be cut down 10 feet at the point where it joined Reseda, undermining the stability of the southern rim of Caballero Canyon. Third, it was feared that the road requirement was a plot to give Los Angeles County Sanitation vehicular access to Rustic and Sullivan Canyons, which would become landfills. Fourth, it was assumed that once the Reseda connection was made, it was only a matter of time before Dirt Mulholland would be paved and other parts of the mountains would be opened for development. Fifth, a city-owned right-of-way on the other side of Dirt Mulholland intersected with the proposed extension, raising the possibility of another cross-mountain freeway (it already had a name, Reseda-to-the-Sea).

The community was actively lobbying the conservancy to intervene. Friends of Caballero Canyon was pulling out all the stops to shut down the road and protect the canyon. Assisted by other local environmentalists, the group had staged a protest earlier in the year to halt construction; some of the demonstrators had even chained themselves to the bulldozers.

On the other side, the Encino Hillside Traffic Safety Organization was fighting to uphold the road condition. Several canyons to the east, this neighborhood had been discovered as a short cut by commuters seeking alternatives to standstill traffic at the junction of Highway 101 and Interstate 405. The homeowners were convinced that extending Reseda and paving Dirt Mulholland answered their problem. Further, several regional agencies were demanding this dirt remnant be paved, including the Southern California Association of Governments, which felt it was a factor in achieving regional mobility goals, and the South Coast Air Quality Management District, which sought to reduce the emission of particulate matter into the air.

In August 1989 the two sides clashed at a community meeting that erupted into a brawl, as the *Los Angeles Times* reported:

*Some members of a crowd of about 300 that had gathered outside the auditorium of Lanai Road Elementary School ... began shouting*



(Left) "Dirt Mulholland"; unpaved section of Mulholland Drive. (Randolph T. Hester, Jr.)

(Below) William Mulholland and other officials with construction plans for Mulholland Drive. (Los Angeles Times)

(Bottom) A 1989 public meeting about connecting Reseda Boulevard with Dirt Mulholland led to fist fights. (Joe Vitti/ Los Angeles Times).

*and shoving each other ... About 10 Los Angeles police officers and a police helicopter were dispatched to the scene, but there were no arrests ... The meeting marked the latest battle in the dispute between Tarzana and Encino homeowners over the question of whether Reseda Boulevard should be extended to connect with Mulholland Drive.<sup>3</sup>*

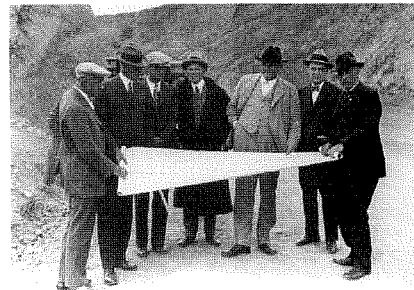
When we started on the project a year later, the hostility was as strong as ever. It became clear that our role was to negotiate the Reseda extension issue as part of preparing a master plan for the park.

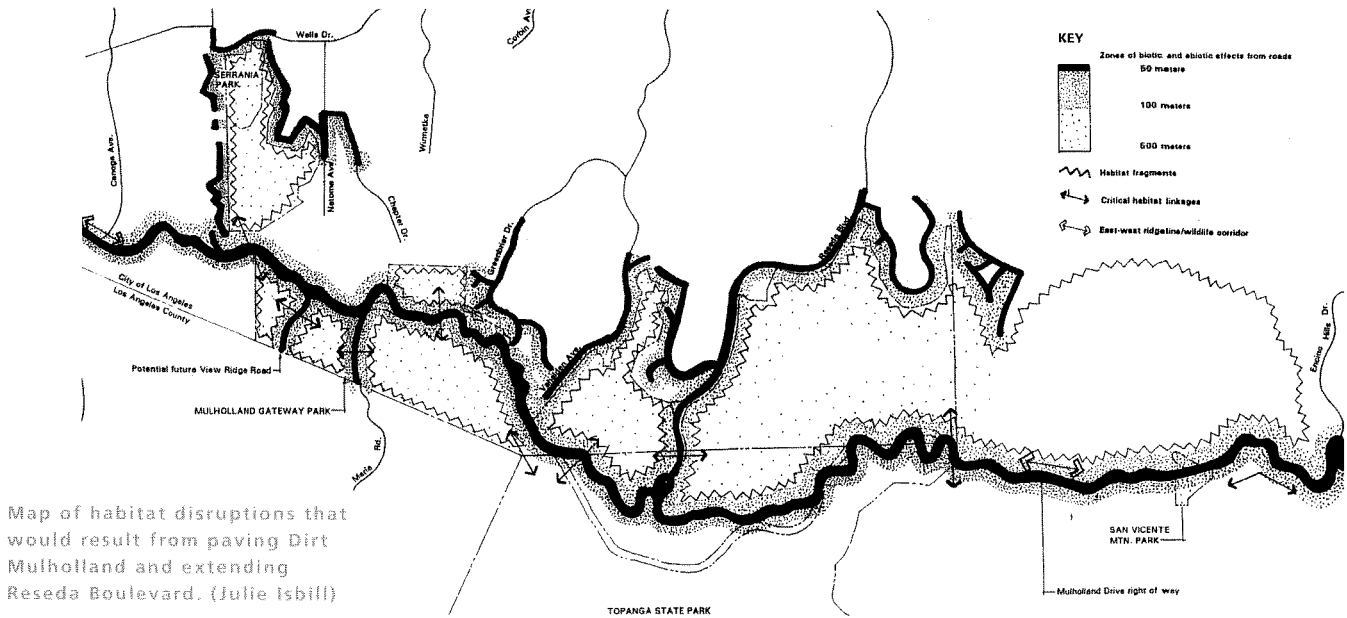
### Creating a Gestalt

Our early analysis convinced us that we had to include Dirt Mulholland in our thinking, even though it lay mostly outside the Mulholland Gateway Park planning area. When William Mulholland conceived this scenic ridge-top road in 1913, he imagined it to be continuous. Years of debate had yielded proposals ranging from a trail to a six-lane highway, but Dirt Mulholland remained unpaved.<sup>4</sup>

During this early phase we met Suzanne Goode, a state parks ecologist, and Paul Edelman, a conservancy consultant investigating wildlife corridors in the mountains. Suzanne detailed the interconnectedness of the various plant communities; Paul showed us local habitat fragmentation and told us about recent mountain lion sightings. We learned that some of the most valuable habitat, particularly the riparian and walnut plant communities in Corbin Canyon and the grasslands on Serrania Ridge, was on the verge of development.

After three months we held an in-house charette. This is when Big Wild was first imagined, almost by accident. Big Wild came about because it was impossible for us to develop a convincing gestalt for Mulholland Gateway Park, which kept





appearing in our minds as it was, four land dedications with abutting property lines, no unifying integrity, just acreage scalped off in the development process, snippets of natural landscape that didn't add up to any ecological unit. Mulholland Gateway Park didn't offer the user any kind of wilderness experience — you were always right smack up against development.

Our minds started to wander. We looked at an aerial photo and saw the large amount of undeveloped land surrounding our site. We were reminded of other canyons we knew from previous projects, hidden spots in the city that would envelop and captivate us with natural wonder. Uninhibited by jurisdictional lines, we looked at maps and saw an ecosystem — a unit of land that could sustain the range of organisms found in this part of the Santa Monicas. With care, it could survive and interact with the human ecosystem of Los Angeles.

We quickly calculated that while half of the 20,000 acres in this ecosystem was in public ownership, the remaining land was vulnerable. And we knew our client would want to acquire it. Convincing Edmiston to change our scope of work to address the entire 20,000 acres was easy — Big Wild would give him defensible borders to protect, something he could envision.

Not all of our planning team was convinced that Big Wild was the proper unit of analysis, however. Some of the team wanted scientific answers before expanding the local fight into a debate about biodiversity, before creating a forum for negotiation with the warring communities while arguing for the protection of Big Wild. This required answering two questions: Would extending Reseda Boulevard and paving Dirt Mulholland provide adequate additional road capacity to solve the Encino Hillside traffic problem? What would be the impact of paving Dirt Mulholland on wildlife? We hired a transportation planner (Bob Conratt) and biologists from the University of California Davis Wildlife Resources Group (Ray Sauvajot, Marybeth Buechner and Christine Schonewald-Cox) to pursue the answers.

The wildlife biologists established that Big Wild provided an essential buffer from highly developed areas and protection from road-associated impacts. From ground surveys they identified pieces of habitat that would be fragmented by proposed roads or development. They also determined that as long as Dirt Mulholland remained unpaved it would serve as a crucial wildlife corridor, providing a connection to open spaces east of Interstate 405, west to Malibu and north to the national forest. Having calculated that Big Wild's mountain lions needed to be able to roam 640,000 acres of relatively-remote land in order to sustain a healthy gene pool, we knew this corridor was critical.

The biologists confirmed that paving Dirt Mulholland would expose wildlife to road-generated impacts (road kills, intrusive biotic changes, access for other animals, pollution, barriers and habitat removal). If the roads were paved, abiotic effects (e.g. pollution, such as lead poisoning) and biotic effects (changes in species composition and/or numbers) would impact much of the area. The roads would fragment habitat, leading to the isolation and decline of species (especially those that did not do well in edge habitat, were sensitive to human contact, existed at low densities, were unlikely to cross roads, sought out roads for heat or food, or required considerable space).

The traffic study confirmed that the Encino Hillside neighborhood's problem was critical; two thirds of the homes fronted on streets functioning as routes for cut-through traffic. It also found that Hayvenhurst was classified by the Encino-Tarzana District Plan as a secondary highway and was expected to provide highway-level traffic capacity, even though it went through a residential neighborhood. The projected outlook was bleak. Conratt predicted that the use of the neighborhood as a short cut would not be solved by paving Mulholland Drive. The proposed Reseda-Mulholland bypass was too far west and provided too little capacity to solve the problem.

We had the answers, and they were clear. Extending Reseda Boulevard and paving Dirt Mulholland would have a negative

impact on the ecosystem of Big Wild and would not solve the Encino-Hillside traffic problems. We could argue confidently and effectively that the road should not be built and that Mulholland Gateway Park should be considered as a larger, ecosystem-scaled open space — Big Wild.

### Creating a Constituency

Having compelling scientific evidence to argue against extending Reseda was not enough. We knew there had to be a political will to reverse the development condition. We had to engage the public in thinking about, in knowing, in loving Big Wild.

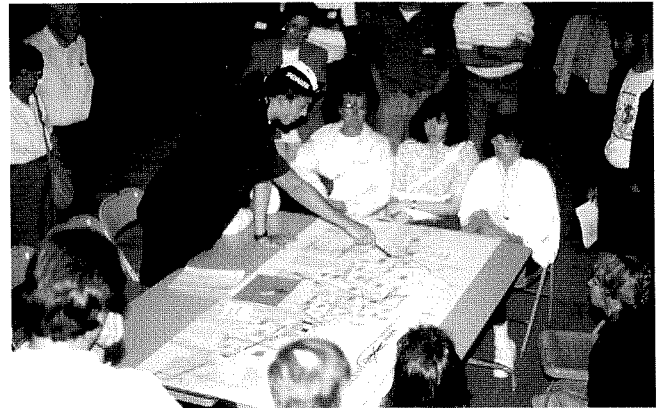
Several steps were necessary. First, we had to get people to the land (while many had very strong opinions about Reseda Boulevard, very few had ever been to the park). Second, we needed to expand the debate beyond the warring factions to include citizens of Los Angeles who had no vested interest, who could envision a broader public good and support Big Wild for its recreational potential and natural resource values.

A site tour was the logical solution. We knew from experience that citizens could more readily understand complex technical issues on site than in a public meeting. The event included seven stops, each illustrating a key issue: preserving wildlife habitat and corridors, protecting archaeological and historical resources, transportation planning, neighborhood traffic problems and park facility planning. We developed a script for tour leaders that both informed and educated participants and built their excitement. We prepared a score for participants to fill out at each stop, posing questions that ranged from “What is your most memorable wildlife experience in LA?” to “Did you ever short cut in this neighborhood?”

The first stop was Corbin Canyon, which, we explained, supported a more diverse plant community than neighboring canyons and was a wildlife corridor. We pointed out that while the canyon appeared to be part of Mulholland Gateway Park, it was privately owned and slated for development. Another stop was a sandstone cave that had been created by years of water dripping and carving out the soft rock. Participants gathered close together to talk about the sacred rituals of the Chumash and Gabrielino Indians, the mountains’ former inhabitants.

The impact was overwhelming. People were excited! All day we heard comments like “I’ve lived here all my life and I never knew this existed” and “It’s like I’m a million miles from LA — this is fantastic.”

We forged on with the planning process. We held a community meeting to present the wildlife and traffic findings. We held a design charrette to debate and develop plan alternatives. Conrardt met with the Encino Hillside neighbors to work on a

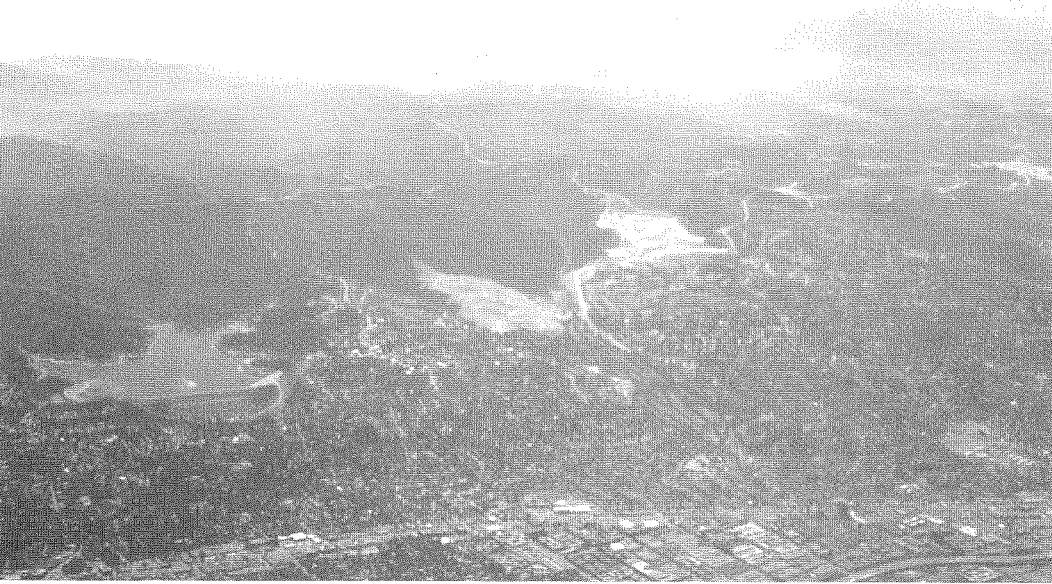


The constituency building process included a design charrette (pictured here), public meetings to discuss research about traffic and wildlife, and tours of Big Wild. (Randolph T. Hester, Jr.)

traffic mitigation plan. The city began looking at proposals for rerouting traffic away from the neighborhood using internal diverters and one-way streets. We presented a draft plan for Mulholland Gateway Park, including a section on the acquisitions necessary to protect Big Wild, to the conservancy board. The *Times* ran a lead article announcing “‘Big Wild’ Access Plan Unveiled.” The idea was taking hold.

Then a funny thing happened. We were asked to meet with Councilman Marvin Braude (Big Wild is located in his district) to present the plan. Braude arrived while we were hanging a 20-foot drawing of Big Wild. He looked surprised and asked if we knew that he was involved more than 25 years ago in the fight to create the national recreation area, that his first campaign ran on an environmental platform.

We had drawn his vision. Yet in the meeting he brought us up short. He was very concerned that we were overemphasizing the importance of preserving the area for biodiversity. “You have to serve the broad public interest,” he admonished. But he was so taken with Big Wild that he was willing to reverse the condition of development on Harlan Lee requiring the extension of Reseda Boulevard.



Big Wild, with the Encino Reservoir (lower left) and San Fernando Valley (foreground). (Randolph T. Hester, Jr.)

Things started to happen fast. State Assemblyman Terry Friedman (Big Wild was located in his district as well) introduced a bill (AB 1152) to preempt locally-imposed roadway conditions and release Lee from compliance. It passed and was signed by the governor on October 13, 1991, despite heavy lobbying by the Encino Hillside neighbors. To many, Big Wild was created that day.

### Evaluation and Future Prospects

How were notions of the proper form of Los Angeles advanced? Certainly for “a city without boundaries, which ate the desert ... and dreamt of becoming infinite,”<sup>5</sup> AB 1152 set a precedent by giving priority to public parkland and biodiversity over traffic mobility, highways and development. Creating a scientific basis to determine the amount of land needed to sustain Big Wild provided the political justification necessary for state intervention and local acquiescence. Examining competing arguments for the best use of the land established that no matter how much people wanted a new highway to solve traffic problems, it wouldn’t. The calculation of wildlife acreage needs provided a planning principle that could be used as systematically as parking requirements for an office building.

Giving Big Wild a memorable name and suggesting tangible, defensible borders were acts of place creation that allowed people to envision what Big Wild could be. The range of places and programs proposed — parks, educational and training programs, overnight facilities — will provide opportunities to develop new constituencies for environmental protection and stewardship and to forge a political connection among communities surrounding Big Wild, from the San Fernando Valley to the Santa Monica Bay. Big Wild can be an essential common ground for Los Angeles’ diverse population.

Has Big Wild been saved? Stopping Reseda was only a first step. The conservancy is negotiating or has already acquired three parcels (more than 1,100 acres), including the critical

walnut and riparian habitat in Corbin Canyon, a wildlife corridor to Malibu Creek State Park and a site that will provide a gateway park at the west end of Big Wild.

An additional acquisition in the works will provide an exciting home for the Earth Adventure Camp, a proposed regional environmental education facility for at-risk youth. We took a group of high school students from East and South Central Los Angeles on a tour of the site this spring. They were thrilled with Big Wild, the prospect of meeting a mountain lion on the trail, the ecological principles, the views, just being in it. The conservancy is considering extending the educational concept to include a family retreat for central-city residents.

These days, face-to-face interaction with nature and park land in Los Angeles is scary. The earthquake and the fires, the riots, gangs ... the sum total shakes one’s faith in the vision. Which leads to the more important point. No amount of good science will ensure a sustainable landscape. Individual and community commitment are irreplaceable ingredients.

While Big Wild is powerfully understood in its name and concept, at some level it is an abstraction that remains motivating to only a few of its conceptual parents. For Big Wild to survive, the constituency has to grow. Education will be key.

In 1989, the conservancy created the Mountains Education Program to provide interpretation of the mountains’ natural and cultural resources as well as “to form a community united by environmental stewardship.” One of the goals is for every Los Angeles school child to go to the Santa Monica Mountains at least once before they graduate from high school. In 1993, 15,000 children and adults participated.

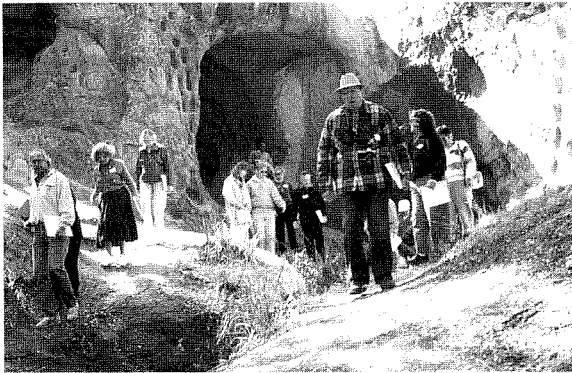
Providing opportunities for daily use of Big Wild by more than just adjacent neighbors is also critical. What kind of uses? For some, it is trail use. But for many more, it is being in a space at the edge of the urban wilderness — a piece of grass to sit on, a place to have a picnic, a vista to view and put one’s neighborhood in a regional context. The gateway parks will help; they will draw people to the mountains and invite them in. But the challenge remains to share the vision.



## Notes

1. Mike Davis, *City of Quartz* (New York: Vintage, 1990), 23.
2. The agencies primarily include the National Park Service, the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy, the California Department of Parks and Recreation and the Los Angeles Department of Recreation and Parks. The boundary includes approximately 150,000 acres, about 60,000 of which are currently in public ownership.
3. Greg Braxton, "Fistfights Erupt at Meeting on Street Extension," *Los Angeles Times*, 18 August 1989.
4. Mulholland Parkway Citizens' Advisory Committee, *Report of the Citizens' Advisory Committee on the Mulholland Scenic Parkway* (Los Angeles: 1972).
5. Davis, 12.

The plan for Big Wild was done by Randy Hester, Julie Isbill and Marcia McNally with the assistance of Laura Lawson, Nancy Nelson, Stephanie Schipper, the staff of the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy and the community participants. The author wishes to thank Liz Cheadle, Tedra Fox, Myron Levin and Joe Vitti for their help in updating information.



Building a constituency for Big Wild depends on getting more people to experience the space. In these photos, visitors take part in a "scored walk." (Randolph T. Hester, Jr.)

