

Peninsula fire eaters

Keeping the hill safe

by Stephanie Cartozian

Photos by Brent Alex

A herd of 280 Fire Grazer goats spent five days in late May clearing fennel and other non-native plants from land managed by the Palos Verdes Land Conservancy.

"The goats are our most popular weeders because they make very little noise and leave no trash behind," said Palos Verdes Peninsula Land Conservancy executive director Andrea Vona. The goats have been helping the Conservancy clear brush from its lands since 1992. This was the first year the goats have been funded by an "adopt a goat" program.

The goats grazed in Lunada Canyon on the 59-acre Agua Amarga Reserve. Lunada Canyon, once prime land for development, was donated to the Conservancy in 1992 by the E. K. Zuckerman family, creating the Conservancy's first protected natural area. The reserve was expanded in 2005 when the City of Rancho Palos Verdes donated Agua Amarga Canyon to the Conservancy.

Fire Grazer goats was founded by Mark and Penelope Choi. In 2012, the couple moved from Torrance to 80 acres of land in Mariposa County, where they created a farmstead with almost 300 goats, pigs, geese, ducks, cats and orchards.

"I went from being a city slicker to a farm boy

in less than one year," son Michael Choi said. Choi now manages the farm. "It was a different way of thinking and a different way of living. I was spoon fed this whole country living thing. With the goats it was a twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week job."

The Chois soon recognized that their goats could clear in a single day what takes a landscaping crew two or three days. The goats favorite feed was fennel, star thistle, grass and mustard. These pose significant fire hazards for cities, especially during droughts. When introduced to sandy or clay soils (which are prevalent in Palos Verdes), their droppings provide natural fertilizer that replenishes the top soil.

"There is something humanizing about the goats," Michael Choi said. "You can learn a little something about human nature by watching them. Goats have friends that they hang out with. They rely on one another. They prefer to be together rather than alone."

Choi views his goats as part of the environmental movement.

The goats will return to Palos Verdes next spring. **PN**



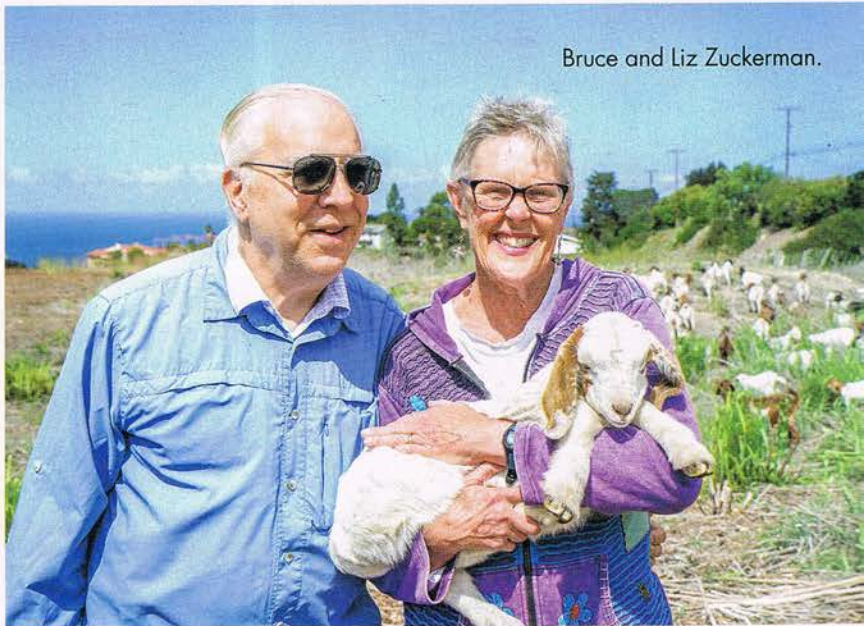
athy Christie.



Della Crochetiere
and Noel Park.



Bruce and Liz Zuckerman.



Virginia Cicoria.



Sue and
Steve Soldoff.

