Palos Verdes Coastline

PHOTO: PVPLC

Filiorum: A Dream Fulfilled

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Abstract

This article describes the formation and evolution of a community-based organization, the Palos Verdes Peninsula Land Conservancy, which preserved critical habitat along the Los Angeles County coastline. The article highlights the organization's successful strategy for building community and statewide support that led to the preservation of more than 1,400 acres of spectacular open space over a 20-year period. Key to this preservation was the acquisition of the Upper Filiorum property in late 2009 that provided a critical link for maintaining diverse flora and fauna, including threatened and endangered species.

In the beginning . . .

Filiorum: Latin for, in this case, land belonging "to the sons."

Filiorum is the name given by previous owners to a 315-acre parcel of undeveloped land on the Palos Verdes Peninsula, 190 acres of which were recently preserved as open space. While the land is magnificent in its own right, its acquisition was even more significant because it marked the completion of a 20-year community effort to preserve coastal habitats. Filiorum, or more properly, Upper Filiorum as will be explained later, denotes the final link creating a preserve of nearly two square miles of open space on the Palos Verdes Peninsula.

Background

The Palos Verdes Peninsula is a prominent headland forming the southern boundary of Santa Monica Bay (Figure 1). Rising more than 400 meters above the ocean, the Peninsula hosts spectacular views of Santa Monica Bay and the local mountain ranges. The area's habitat, predominantly coastal sage scrub, is generally limited to coastal areas and hosts diverse flora and fauna, many of which are endemic (Rundel 2007). Adapted to the Mediterranean climate, coastal sage scrub belongs to the California floristic province that has been included as one of the world's 25 biodiversity hot spots (Conservation International 2011). As well demonstrated in California, including the Palos

Figure 1. Preserves on Palos Verdes Peninsula

MAP: PVPLC

Verdes Peninsula, areas in the Mediterranean climate zone have been enthusiastically colonized—much to the detriment of the native flora and fauna.

The Peninsula has been host to human habitation for perhaps thousands of years, but significant changes took place when Europeans began colonizing the area during the eighteenth century. At first, the Peninsula was used to graze cattle, but following droughts and overgrazing, the economic use shifted to farming starting in the late nineteenth century (Gales 1988). The introduction of non-native grasses and weeds combined with grazing cattle and farmers' cultivation resulted in significant habitat degradation (Figure 2).

As land use changed during the twentieth century, outright loss of habitat was incurred through the construction of homes, roads, and commercial buildings. Structures to direct stormwater away from houses and into Santa Monica Bay were erected, their volumes exacerbated by the hardening of the land surface. Yet after 300 years of ranching, farming, and construction, many unique animal and plant species persisted in the remaining patches of habitat. Most notable is the endemic Palos Verdes blue butterfly (*Glaucopsychae lygdamus palosverdesensis*; Figure 3) that was believed to be extinct before being rediscovered in 1994 at the U.S. Military's Defense Fuel Supply Point in San Pedro. Birds such as the California gnatcatcher (*Polioptila californica californica*) and costal cactus wren (*Campylorhynchus brunneicapillus*), and plants such as the California crossosoma (*Crossosoma californicum*), green liveforever (*Dudleya virens ssp insularis*), and south coast saltbush (*Atriplex pacifica*) found refuge on the Peninsula, albeit in reduced numbers.

Figure 2. Palos Verdes Peninsula in 1918

PHOTO: PVPLC

Figure 3. Palos Verdes Blue Butterfly

PHOTO: ANN DALKEY

Figure 4. Hiking in the Forest Preserve

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The rural characteristics of the Peninsula remained before World War I, for it was not the most convenient place to live. The Peninsula was remote and not close to highways. This feature attracted residents who were looking for something different: a more rural way of life where horses could be kept and where weekend activities included hikes on local trails (Figure 4).

As time progressed, the Peninsula became more attractive, surface streets improved, and more and more people were willing to accept the somewhat longer commutes. Development of the remaining open space progressed at a deliberate pace. The cities of Palos Verdes Estates and Rolling Hills Estates were formed and assumed their unique identities—Palos Verdes Estates as a semi-planned community where more than 30% of the land was preserved as open space, and Rolling Hills Estates, which prides itself on its semi-rural features, including miles of horse trails and equestrian facilities.

As open space was consumed for development, residents saw the very features that brought them to the Peninsula diminish, and land use conflicts increased. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, plans were in place that would have allowed extensive, high-density development along the Palos Verdes coastline, and the land was being modified to accommodate this development. A local organization, Save Our Coastline (SOC), was formed to stop the development and put forth a new vision, one of a low-density, primarily residential community that preserved as much open space as possible.

A local organization, Save Our Coastline (SOC), was formed. In 1973, SOC's efforts led to the incorporation of the City of Rancho Palos Verdes and the development of a Coastal Specific Plan (part of the City's General Plan) that captures the low-density, semi-rural vision for the City at that time. Although the new plan provided direction, the plan also allowed for development of several large areas of open space and failed to settle the discussion of land use matters. Many residents viewed the open space as "special," or important to preserve, because of the wildlife that called these acres home and the tranquil beauty these areas added to the community.

Use of open space became increasingly contentious—environmental groups filed lawsuits to ensure developers were sensitive to habitat and wildlife protection in their developments. Developers circulated glossy brochures trying to build public support for their proposals. Development became a significant issue in local elections.

A similar debate was held in San Pedro at White Point, where key U.S. military and Los Angeles fishing, harbor, and port facilities spurred more aggressive development. In this area, a 102-acre block of open space, a former military site, was unused, but was off-limits to residents (Figure 5). Eventually the parcel was transferred from the U.S. government to the City of Los Angeles, and demands for access to this parcel for hiking and other uses increased. However, the City had no funds to manage the property, and it sat surrounded by barbed wire.

In general, many agreed that open space should be preserved and made available for public access, but few good options were available for making this happen. Community members and leaders recognized that landowners had rights to develop their properties, rights that could not be denied. City planners and city councils did their best to ensure that environmental concerns were addressed when new developments were proposed, but open space land was being consumed at an alarming rate. The community needed some new options to ensure that large areas of remaining open space were permanently protected from development.

Land Acquisition

The Palos Verdes Peninsula Land Conservancy (Conservancy or PVPLC) was formed in 1988 to add a new dimension to open space preservation: land would be preserved by acquisition

Figure 5. Pre-Preservation White Point with Restricted Access & Derelict Military Building

PHOTOS: WILLIAM AILOR

from willing sellers or donors. Rather than fight with landowners about development proposals, the organization would work to acquire property in transactions favorable to both sides. Acquisition could be by the Conservancy alone, or the organization would work in partnership with local cities to help them acquire land. If the land was acquired by a city, the organization would accept a conservation easement over the preserved area to add a layer of protection, ensuring that the property's conservation values were maintained and preserved.

Table 1. Details of Key Land Preservation Projects from 1992 to 2009

Year	Property	Size (Ac)	Funding	Acquisition Details
1992	Lunada Canyon	22	Donation	Land owner took tax write-offs; no funds were required for the acquisition.
1994	Chandler Preserve	28	Donation/Bond purchase	Conservancy received a donation, and the City of Rolling Hills Estates purchased a portion with an LA County bond funds.
1996	Forrestal	160	Bond purchase	Conservancy facilitated and the City of Rancho Palos Verdes purchased property using LA County and CA State bond funds.
2000	Three Sisters	99	Bond purchase	City of Rancho Palos Verdes using LA County bond funds.
2003	White Point	102	Various grants for restoration	U.S. Military deeded property to City of Los Angeles in the late 1970s; Conservancy entered 25-year agreement to manage and restore the property as recommended by local residents.
2005	Portuguese Bend	399	Donation/Bond purchase	Conservancy raised $4 million in private donations, and the balance was obtained from LA County and State bond funds.
2009	Upper Filiorum	190	Donation/Bond purchase	$5.5 million in State bond funds augmented by $400,000 raised by the Conservancy, $607,045 from the City of Rancho Palos Verdes, and $10,913 from LA County.

In the beginning, land preservation was a dream—no one believed a small group of motivated individuals could raise the funds required to preserve land in an area where land values can approach $1 million per acre. One landowner was quoted as saying, "They're nice people, but they don't have any money."

Shortly after its incorporation, the Conservancy established a small committee to develop a map showing developable areas and to look at how development might progress. Some properties had features that made preservation more feasible: a few were owned by long-time residents who might find donation palatable; others included steep, unbuildable or difficult-to-develop areas that could put the per-acre cost in a reasonable range; and still others were government-owned, but were not actively managed or open to public access. The organization began tracking these areas and developed strategies for acquiring the various parcels of land.

The first acquisition, Lunada Canyon, was a donation of 22 acres of developable open space by the E.K. Zuckerman family. Ken Zuckerman, the family's representative, noted that he strongly supported the Conservancy's concept for preserving land, and he promised to structure the donation to maximize the benefit to the young organization. The family took a tax write-off for the donation, and no funds were required for the acquisition—a great feature for an organization that had little money at the time. The donation became official in 1992, and the new Lunada Canyon Preserve was dedicated in a public ceremony. This first acquisition was a key step in the organization's evolution (Figure 6).

Since the organization had limited credibility and hence, limited fundraising potential, an alternative means for financing acquisitions was essential. At about the same time as the Lunada Canyon dedication, the Conservancy became aware that voters in Los Angeles County and the State of California had set aside funds specifically for land preservation and that new county initiatives were being proposed where funds could be earmarked for acquisitions in specific regions—but funds would go to cities only. Proposals were drafted by the Conservancy, and city councils for three Peninsula cities, although skeptical, approved submission of the proposals. Voters once again approved the measures, and funds were available.

In the ensuing years, the Conservancy collaborated with local cities and used county and state funds, augmented with donations (Table 1). Each acquisition was different. In one, the land was owned by eight family heirs, and a deal was structured where a portion of the property was acquired immediately and each heir would donate his or her share of the remaining property over time. This property was subsequently named the Linden H. Chandler Preserve (Figure 7). In another case, land was preserved when a citizens' committee developed recommendations that the

Figure 6. Volunteer Invasive Removal in Lunada Canyon Preserve

PHOTO: PVPLC

Figure 7. Linden H. Chandler Preserve

PHOTO: WILLIAM AILOR

Figure 8. People Enjoying a Monthly Nature Walk Event

land be maintained as a natural area, including the Conservancy's assurances that it would assume management responsibilities. Fulfilling its promise, the Conservancy entered into a 25-year management agreement with the City of Los Angeles to restore native habitat and manage the site, now called the White Point Nature Preserve.

Two parcel acquisitions stood out in their complexity and significance. The first, known as the Hon property after the developer who owned the land, contained 399 acres including areas of quality habitat and associated wildlife. This parcel is in the Portuguese Bend Landslide Moratorium area where restrictions exist on development because of a long-term, slow-moving landslide in the area. Development of this area had been a point of major contention for many years, primarily because many felt that development might aggravate the slide and threaten additional homes. A golf course had once been proposed for this slide area, but moving golf holes never gained wide acceptance.

In addition to securing State and County funds, the primary challenge of the Hon property acquisition was the requirement that the Conservancy raise $4 million in private donations in less than a year. With the acquisition completed at the end of 2005, the Palos Verdes Nature Preserve (PVNP) and its eight individual properties named as reserves became a reality. Only one major acquisition remained to complete the dream envisioned almost 20 years earlier: the Filiorum property.

Although not the largest parcel, the Filiorum property was perhaps one of the most difficult and essential. It was difficult because it closely followed the acquisition of the Hon property and fundraising would be a challenge. It was also difficult because the landowner had goals to develop some areas of the 315-acre property, some of which were inside the landslide moratorium area, and there was concern that a recent court decision related to properties in the Landslide Moratorium Area had possibly increased the development potential. Despite these difficulties, acquisition of this property was essential because it connected the Three Sisters parcel, acquired in 2000 using LA County funds, and its trail network to the larger Portuguese Bend and Forrestal properties (Figure 8), and would create a total preserve on the south side of the Peninsula of approximately two square miles in area.

The City of Rancho Palos Verdes and the Conservancy formed a negotiating team to work with the landowner to resolve issues, establish the acres to be acquired, and negotiate a price and agreement. After a year of effort, a final agreement was reached in September 2009 that called for the acquisition of approximately 190 acres of open space by the end of that year. Once again, voter-approved State funds were to be used to acquire this Upper Filiorum parcel, but the trigger was approximately $400,000 in funding from private donors.

Escrow closed on Upper Filiorum in December 2009, and the preserve was complete: the community had achieved the vision established by some of its first residents and made a large area of preserved open space a permanent part of its quality of life. After this purchase was completed, more than 1,400 acres were preserved as open space, including 850 contiguous acres within the nearly 1,100-acre PVNP (Figure 1). Under the Conservancy's helm, these lands are managed and native habitat restored while hiking, bicycling, and horseback riding opportunities were also provided for all.

Changing Responsibilities

Each conserved parcel has unique features and requirements that must be addressed. In the Chandler Preserve, habitat is restored with the goal of returning the Palos Verdes blue butterfly to the wild (Figure 9). In 2009, this was accomplished successfully, as demonstrated by the appearance of progeny in 2010 and again in 2011. The White Point Nature Preserve, formerly a 102-acre parcel covered with tons of debris and very little native habitat,

Figure 9. Chandler Preserve Habitat

Figure 10. Post-Preservation White Point

now features grassland surrounded by hillsides with coastal sage scrub habitat (Figure 10). The previously absent, but now abundant, California gnatcatchers at this site are joined with many coastal sage scrub denizens, including migrants and winter visitors, such as Western meadowlarks (*Sturnella magna*) and burrowing owls (*Athene cunicularia*).

As the largest preserve, the PVNP contains many species of special concern—plants and animals that have been imperiled by loss of habitat throughout the Peninsula and elsewhere in Southern California (Table 2). To provide additional protection for these species, the Conservancy participated in developing the Natural Communities Conservation Plan (NCCP), written for the City of Rancho Palos Verdes by the California Department of Fish and Game (DFG) and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). The plan provides for protecting and managing the natural wildlife, including species protection and habitat restoration, while specifying lands that might be used for development. The purchase of the Portuguese Bend property initiated the NCCP development, and the purchase of the Upper Filiorum parcel moved plan development to the final stages. The PVNP constitutes the conserved land in the NCCP within the City of Rancho Palos Verdes.

Table 2. List of NCCP Covered Species and Their Listing Status

Common Name	Scientific Name	Status
Aphanisma	*Aphanisma blitoides*	California Native Plant Society (CNPS) List 1B
South Coast Saltscale	*Atriplex pacifica*	CNPS List 1B
Catalina Crossosoma	*Crossosoma californicum*	CNPS List 1B
Island Green Dudleya	*Dudleya virens* ssp. *insularis*	CNPS List 1B
Santa Catalina Island Desert-thorn	*Lycium brevipes* var. *hassei*	CNPS List 1B
Woolly Seablite	*Suaeda taxifolia*	CNPS List 4
Palos Verdes Blue Butterfly	*Glaucopsyche lygdamus palosverdesensis*	Federally Endangered
El Segundo Blue Butterfly	*Euphilotes battoides allyni*	Federally Endangered
Coastal California Gnatcatcher	*Polioptila californica californica*	Federally Threatened, State Species of Concern
Cactus Wren	*Campylorhynchus brunneicapillus*	NCCP Focal Species

Table 3. Past and Present NCCP and Grant-Funded Restoration Projects

Preserve	Acres Restored or Enhanced	Date	Project
White Point	80 plus	2003–ongoing	Coastal sage scrub (CSS), grassland habitats
Chandler	5	2006–2012	Palo Verdes blue butterfly (PVB) habitat (USFWS grant)
	0.15	2003–2008	Riparian habitat
Forrestal	2	2003–2006	Riparian habitat
Lunada	2	2001–2003	CSS (USFWS grant)
	1	2004–2005	Wetland restoration
Friendship Park	8	2008–2009	PVB habitat
McCarrell Canyon	2	2009–2010	CA Coastal Conservancy upland sediment reduction grant
Fishing Access	1.5	2009–2010	CA Coastal Conservancy upland sediment reduction grant
Alta Vicente	5	2008–ongoing	Phase I NCCP restoration (CSS, PVB, cactus scrub)
	5	2009–ongoing	Phase II NCCP restoration (CSS, PVB, cactus scrub). To be planted/seeded this year.
	5	2010–ongoing	Phase III NCCP restoration (CSS, PVB, cactus scrub). Site preparation only in 2010.
Three Sisters	21	2008–ongoing	Los Angeles World Airports mitigation project
Portuguese Bend	15 plus	2010–ongoing	Wildfire recovery, NCCP restoration
Portuguese Bend	9.5	2010–2015	DFG mitigation grant for wildfire recovery

Note: This is a general overview of restoration projects initiated by the Conservancy. It is not comprehensive and does not include volunteer or scout projects.

The NCCP prescribes management of existing PVNP resources and facilities and defines restoration goals and monitoring programs. The Conservancy is the designated preserve manager and is responsible for restoring 250 acres of habitat that focuses on species of special concern, also known as covered species (Table 2). In moving from acquisition mode to conservation, the Conservancy endorsed its role under the NCCP well before the document's completion. In 2006, the process began with a Conservancy-managed DFG grant to comprehensively survey the property for all but the still privately-held Upper Filiorum parcel, including focused surveys of covered species, their locations, and their populations. The survey data were incorporated into the NCCP and serve as a benchmark for assessing change within the PVNP, whether from restoration activities or natural events. In fact, the discovery during the survey of the endangered El Segundo blue butterflies (*Euphilotes battoides allyni*) on the cliffs at Vicente Bluffs prompted the species' inclusion in the covered species list.

Moving Forward

With a 50-year completion goal for restoring the 250 acres under the NCCP, the Conservancy realized that grants enabling restoration of additional acres would greatly benefit the habitat and wildlife. Indeed, this has been the practice of the Conservancy for not only PVNP but also all its managed preserves (Table 3). At White Point Nature Preserve, for example, grants and volunteer help enabled the Conservancy to transform a debris-laden, tumbleweed landscape into coastal sage scrub and grassland habitat (Figure 11). Over the years, the Conservancy has built upon this success and pursued a diversity of projects.

Knowing that quality habitat benefits water quality in Santa Monica Bay, two restoration projects were targeted in specific watershed areas at Fishing Access and McCarrell Canyon. Funded through the Santa Monica Bay Restoration Commission, these

Figure 11. Volunteer Restoration at White Point

PHOTO: PVPLC

Figure 12. Three Sisters Reserve

two projects enhance the quality of native habitat while providing better stabilization to reduce sediment loading. Additionally, El Segundo blue butterflies benefited by sowing host plant seeds and adding container plants in the Fishing Access area. In McCarrell Canyon, native lemonade berry (*Rhus integrifolia*) has begun to re-sprout following the removal of non-native acacia trees. More of the native lemonade berry are scheduled for planting and will provide additional forage and cover for the spotted towhee (*Pipilo erythrophthalmus*) and other wildlife.

In addition to the Palos Verdes blue butterfly habitat added to the Chandler Preserve, a grant enabled the Conservancy to release the butterfly in the wild at San Pedro's Friendship Park in 2010. As a direct result of this grant, the official number of places on the Peninsula with Palos Verdes blue butterflies rose to three, helping assure the long-term preservation of the species in the event of a fire or other problem at one of the other sites.

Within the PVNP, mitigation funds from Los Angeles World Airports allowed for a 21-acre restoration in the Three Sisters Reserve (Figure 12). As the newly planted coastal sage scrub and grasslands mature, the habitat will become host to California gnatcatcher, cactus wrens, and more. Already, removal of non-native black mustard (*Brassica nigra*) and fennel (*Foeniculum vulgare*) has encouraged the return of western meadowlarks to the site.

Following the 2009 Portuguese Bend Reserve wildfire, the Conservancy's Upper Filiorum Capital Campaign included funds targeted for NCCP habitat restoration within 15 acres of the burn area. The planned coastal sage scrub habitat restoration was supplemented with an additional grant from DFG to add more to the Palos Verdes blue butterfly habitat and expand the existing cactus wren habitat.

Between the Three Sisters and Portuguese Bend reserves lies the newly incorporated Upper Filiorum Reserve containing 190 acres of quality coastal sage scrub habitat tucked within a mix with tracts of ruderal and non-native vegetation. The opportunities that this key piece represents to the overall health and robustness of local native plants and wildlife cannot be overstated. The future of the natural inhabitants of the PVNP, and of the quality of the open space experience for preserve visitors, becomes brighter as restoration activities move towards fully-integrated linkages between existing islands of coastal sage habitat.

Summary

A motivated community with a clear focus can preserve land, even in a very challenging environment. Key factors in successful land preservation within the Peninsula include the following: the basic, but initially unfocused, support in the community; the group of dedicated and creative volunteers who established and maintain a non-confrontational, preservation-focused nonprofit organization–the Conservancy; the new preservation strategies introduced by the Conservancy; the strong support provided by elected officials and staff as the Conservancy developed and as preservation opportunities arose; and the generosity of South Bay individuals who provided and continue to donate their talent and resources to the cause. Over the past 20 years, the Conservancy has emerged as an integral part of the Palos Verdes community. Major land acquisitions goals have been met, and the Conservancy is at the forefront of the property's evolution–a steward for natural resources committed to enhancing educational and enjoyment opportunities for visitors (Figure 13). In the years to come, coastal sage habitat, along with bluff, grassland, and even riparian habitats, will increase in extent and quality to support a diverse, natural community. Best of all, the preserves, with their spectacular views and rich flora and fauna, are open for all to enjoy.

Figure 13. PVPLC Educational Program

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