



History & Future of the Sutter Buttes Regional Land Trust

OPEN TO THE PUBLIC

For many decades the landowners in the Sutter Buttes allowed easy public access to their ranches. By the 1960's, population growth led to an overwhelming number of people wanting to access the Buttes and problems with visitors leaving gates open, painting graffiti on rock formations, fires, and other problems. Understandably, the landowners began to enforce rules against trespassing, and access to the Buttes was curtailed.

DEMAND FOR ACCESS

By the 1970's, California's continued population growth had increased demands for more outdoor recreational areas. In response, the state made the acquisition of the Sutter Buttes as state parkland a number one priority. This resulted in such strong controversy between the private landowners and the members of the public who wanted access to the Buttes that the state tabled the parkland plans.

WEST BUTTE SANCTUARY COMPANY

One landowner decided that a way to protect his land from being taken over by the state would be to provide the public some access. In 1976 he created the West Butte Sanctuary Company to allow egress in a controlled manner, and to realize income from the enterprise. He hired Walt and Rebecca Anderson to be directors of the Company.

EDUCATION PROGRAM BEGINS

The Andersons operated a gallery and gift shop, and led hikers into the Sutter Buttes, the nearby Sutter Sink waterfowl area, and other nearby wildlife refuges. They also conducted educational programs to increase public awareness of the uniqueness and value of the Sutter Buttes.

SUTTER BUTTES NATURALISTS

Expanding this concept in 1979, the Andersons set about establishing relationships with many of the Sutter Buttes landowners, and created The Sutter Buttes Naturalists. Through Walt and Rebecca's work, the public was given access to private lands within the Buttes in a controlled manner that protected the flora and fauna, provided economic compensation for the landowners while relieving them of legal liabilities, and facilitated educational activities and scientific research in the Buttes. During his tenure in the Sutter Buttes, Walt penned assorted magazine articles about the landscape, and even published in 1983 *The Sutter Buttes, A Naturalist's View*, a veritable one-volume encyclopedia of its geologic and natural history.

MIDDLE MOUNTAIN FOUNDATION EMERGES

When the Andersons moved to Oregon in 1985, they hired naturalist Don Schmoltdt to continue the operation of Sutter Buttes Naturalists. After two years Don, in turn, handed the organization over to Ira Heinrich. Ira partnering with Joe Freeman obtained non-profit status for the organization in 1989, which then became The Middle Mountain Foundation (SBRLT).

INTERPRETIVE PROGRAM ROOTS

Under Heinrich and Freeman's tutelage the organization expanded its role in the community. A modestly priced school field trip program was initiated. Busloads of young people now had the opportunity to experience firsthand the lessons of history and Mother Nature in the Buttes. Additional guides with varied backgrounds were brought into the organization. Outings continued to focus on the geological and natural aspects of a dramatic landscape, but a broader scope of thematic perspectives now included "Paths of the Heart, the sacred spirit of the Middle Mountain," and "The Mountain in our Midst, the history and culture of the Sutter Buttes." Overnight backpack treks and old ways workshops offered diverse experiences. Scores of outings each season enabled 1,000's to participate in educational experiences in the Buttes.

IMPORTANCE OF THE SUTTER BUTTES TO SUTTER COUNTY AND THE REGION

Taking more of an advocacy role, Heinrich spoke out against a planned housing development and a proposed ash dump that would have filled up one of the canyons in the Buttes. He addressed the county supervisors and planners about preservation of the Buttes as they updated the county's General Plan. In 1994, Ira prepared and delivered an impassioned report in which he effectively conveyed the unique qualities of the Sutter Buttes, the value in preserving them in their entirety, and their important role in the sense of community in Sutter County and surrounding counties.

NORTH BUTTE DONATED TO FOUNDATION

In 1996 Heinrich negotiated with McClatchy Newspapers, Inc. the donation of 200 acres of land, which comprises most of North Butte to the SBRLT. McClatchy had purchased the property intending to use it as an antenna site for future broadcast radio and TV operations, but by the 90's they no longer pursued that course and chose to preserve the mountains' integrity.

PUBLIC OUTREACH

Since 2000, new faces and increased community involvement have expanded our educational programs. Slideshow presentations and an information booth at area festivals have expanded exposure and public awareness of the Sutter Buttes historical significance. School field trips have been augmented with teachers' curriculum outlines and school presentations that bring the natural elements of the Buttes into the classroom. Public education programs are coordinated periodically, and there is an annual landowner appreciation reception to recognize those families whose stewardship of the rangelands has preserved a historical landscape.

WORKING AS A LAND TRUST

Depending solely on hike fees and donations, our organization has carefully built up cash reserves to hire staff and build its capacity as a land trust. The responsibility and charge of the land trust is to obtain Land Trust Alliance accreditation, to increase the public understanding of the benefits of land conservation, to solicit community and business involvement, to enhance outreach and educational programs, and to influence regional planning and mitigation efforts. We have built collaborative alliances with regional and national land trusts, we have facilitated conservation easement negotiations with landowners, and we are actively creating working partnerships with other land conservation organizations toward local, state and national land conservation efforts.

WORKING TOGETHER TO PROTECT THE SUTTER BUTTES

From the inception of the West Butte Sanctuary Company, the Sutter Buttes Naturalists, and The Middle Mountain Foundation, now carried on by the Sutter Buttes Regional Land Trust, one theme prevails. We have emphasized a faith in the ability of the people themselves to best protect and share the natural and cultural resources vital to the well-being of their communities. Our success depends upon a positive spirit of constructive collaboration. In seeking a way for the public interest and private land to converge for the benefit of all, we have always favored inclusiveness; the bringing together private landowners with scientists, educators, students, artists and photographers, and anyone who loves a natural environment. Our common ground is the Sutter Buttes, its surrounding properties and our heritage.

LAND TRUST WORKING ACCREDITATION STATUS ACHIEVED

In August 2015, SBRLT was recognized as an accredited land trust through the Land Trust Alliance. The accreditation seal represents excellence, trust, and permanence. Becoming an accredited land trust shows a commitment to land conservation and creating a sustainable organization. The application to become an accredited land trust was a long process, and SBRLT will be required to complete an accreditation renewal to ensure continued compliance every 5 years.

FUTURE PLANS

Future plans for the organization include negotiating several agriculture easements in Yuba and Sutter Counties, totaling 1,767+ acres. To effectively expand capacity of the stewardship program, specific organizational elements must be funded and initiated (ongoing management and monitoring of current easements, local and regional mapping, equipment purchased, and stewardship personnel hired) so that SBRLT can become a more sustainable organization and better represent the land conservation interests for the region. The land trust is currently working on developing a strategic plan to address organizational goals and land conservation priorities.