UC SANTA BARBARA
THE Current

November 28, 2022
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A Legacy of Research

Just before the pavement gave way to gravel, Marion Wittmann pulled over to take in the view across Sedgwick Reserve. From a wooden bench at the overlook, her gaze lifted from the valley floor and Figueroa Creek to the sandstone ridgelines climbing toward Zaca Peak deep in the Santa Barbara backcountry.

From her vantage point, it's easy to see why Wittmann, who serves as the executive director of UC Santa Barbara's Natural Reserve System, described Sedgwick as "a crown jewel" attractive to researchers, educators, students, artists and volunteers alike.

For the past 25 years, she explained, Sedgwick Reserve has been a safeguard of California oak woodland and other rare habitats, protecting nearly 6,000 acres for cutting-edge natural science and education across a wide range of native ecosystems, from vernal pools to chaparral to coastal sage scrub and more.

Sedgwick is among seven reserves managed by UCSB as part of the statewide UC Natural Reserve System that features 41 sites across California, providing access to more than 765,000 acres for research and education. Systemwide, Sedgwick stands out for its diversity, size and — because it's just a 45-minute drive from campus — accessibility.

Coinciding with Sedgwick's 25th anniversary, a benefit art show hosted by SCAPE (Southern California Artists Painting for the Environment) will take place from 2–8 p.m. Saturday, Dec. 3, and from 10 a.m.–4 p.m. Sunday, Dec. 4, at the Music

Academy in Montecito (1070 Fairway Road). Original paintings of reserve landscapes — including Sedgwick — will be for sale, with a portion of the proceeds donated to the ongoing management of UCSB's sites. An awards reception will take place from 5–7 p.m. Saturday. The event is free and open to the public.

Looking Back

While artists regularly support Sedgwick Reserve as it exists today — essentially a world-class field station — their commitment dates back to when the property's fate was far from certain.

In the 1960s, owners Francis "Duke" and Alice Sedgwick gifted half of their ranch to UCSB, whose chancellor at the time, their friend Vernon Cheadle, was a Harvard-trained botanist. Duke willed an additional 25% to the university upon his death in 1967. But Alice held onto the remaining acreage (roughly 800 acres), which included the family home, outbuildings and cattle ranch headquarters. In the 1980s, Alice decided to sell her remaining portion of the tract to provide an inheritance for her children. UCSB moved to sell its portion as well, with the idea of building a new museum on campus, in part to house the Sedgwicks' considerable art collection.

In the early '90s, when scientists and activists discovered that the university might offload this near-pristine piece of Santa Barbara backcountry, they spread the news and rallied like-minded community members, including plein-air artists — most notably the Oak Group — dedicated to painting endangered landscapes.

Calling themselves Friends of the Sedgwick Ranch, they fought to stop the sale, buy out Alice's portion and keep the property intact as a nature preserve and research center. They had a lot of help.

On a deadline set by the heirs, the Land Trust for Santa Barbara County orchestrated a fundraising effort that included state and private grants, an $800,000 bridge loan from The Nature Conservancy, support from Santa Barbara County, and a flood of individual donations. In 1997, with an 11th-hour check for $85,000 from a neighbor who owned a home adjacent to the ranch, the land trust sealed its $3.2 million deal with the Sedgwick heirs.

UCSB alumna Judy Stapelmann joined that initial fundraising effort and has remained a steady benefactor.

“This is definitely part of my overall interest in protecting open spaces and maintaining rangeland and ranchland, because I think those are important things that we’ll lose if we’re not vigilant,” said Stapelmann, a trustee of the UC Santa Barbara Foundation.

“It took the community working together really hard to stop the development threat and then to protect the land as nature and open space,” remembered Linda Krop, an attorney with the Environmental Defense Center, hired at the time to help uphold the original intent of the Sedgwicks’ gift to the university.

The Sedgwick success story, Krop added, fits a pattern throughout Santa Barbara of environmental watchdogs, community activists and fundraising experts working with willing sellers to protect large swaths of open space from development. Other examples, she added, include Ellwood Mesa, Douglas Family Preserve, Carpinteria Bluffs and, most recently, San Marcos Foothills Reserve.

Back on the Land

At Sedgwick headquarters on a recent visit, Wittmann checked in with the facilities crew about accommodations for visiting scientists and preparations for the annual appreciation party for volunteers and supporters.

“There’s always a lot going on,” she said.

The stats are impressive. Since it became a reserve in 1997, Sedgwick has hosted approximately 60,000 visitors, including 6,000 researchers, 8,000 university students, 10,000 K-12 students, and more than 1,000 volunteers. In addition, there’s the day-to-day upkeep of 28 miles of roads and trails, the LEED Platinum-certified Tipton House headquarters, the renovated original ranch house, historic barn and native plant nursery, among other features.

Currently, she added, there are about 90 active volunteers and docents. It’s not uncommon to spot volunteers clearing coyote brush along the roads or to share birding stories with docents who’ve been guiding hikes as long as Sedgwick has been a reserve.

“And, of course, there’s the science,” Wittmann said. “We have about 30 research projects per year, and many of these projects are long-term, with scientists and students returning year after year to understand our changing world.”

Recently, Wittmann added, a handful of projects have stood out.

Among them is a partnership between Sedgwick, the nearby Jack and Laura Dangermond Preserve and NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory. Gathering data with a cutting-edge imaging instrument on a series of flyovers, researchers have been able to assess vegetation biodiversity and health. The study, carried out in the spring, was also designed to help our understanding of how these regional ecosystems are impacted by a climate that's becoming increasingly drier.

The Sundowner Winds Experiment (SWEX) was another springtime study, this one by UCSB professors Leila Carvahlo and Charles Jones in the Earth Research Institute and Department of Geography. The SWEX team is looking at the atmospheric conditions that produce the wildfire-stoking sundowner winds across coastal Santa Barbara County. Their findings aim to improve computer simulations that may help forecasters better predict coming sundowner events.

"It's the most important fire-weather regime we have in coastal Santa Barbara," Carvalho said. "All the major wildfires that have affected Santa Barbara have been influenced by sundowners."

Any list of notable projects at Sedgwick Reserve must include the ongoing research of woodland regeneration and restoration, Wittmann said. Long-term study areas are still focused on various species of oaks, including trees planted in the mid-'90s by Frank Davis and his colleagues, including professor emeritus Bruce Mahall of the Department of Ecology, Evolution & Marine Biology, and Claudia Tyler, a lecturer in UCSB's Environmental Studies Program and the College of Creative Studies.

Today, Davis is the director of the La Kretz Center for Research at Sedgwick Reserve and a professor of landscape ecology and conservation planning at UC Santa Barbara's Bren School of Environmental Science & Management.

The La Kretz Center was established with a generous gift by alumna and UC Santa Barbara Foundation trustee Linda La Kretz Duttenhaver and her father Morton La Kretz.

Through his work at the La Kretz Center, Davis is also overseeing closely monitored prescribed burns across 50-acre tracts. This study explores vegetation management techniques to reduce wildfire risk while aiming to uncover new information about wildfire impacts on oak woodlands and chaparral.

“Sedgwick is a really special place,” Davis said recently. “There are a lot of different lenses to look through on that, but from my perspective, it’s the sheer diversity of what’s there.”

“When we first started working there,” he added, “we found it rich and well-maintained; its ecosystems in good shape. And the history of Sedgwick ever since has been about great interactions between the campus and the community.”

Tags
UC Natural Reserves

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