



The CSERC Newsletter

Like a stone tossed into still water, knowledge about environmental issues can ripple outward far beyond its beginning point, and perhaps return in a wave of concern, active involvement, and greater awareness of nature in the mountains and foothills around us.

Your input may help shape the new “Visitor Access Plan” that is intended to resolve the debate over traffic and congestion in Yosemite



Should Yosemite National Park allow unlimited numbers of visitors during the peak tourist season? Or should the Park manage the level of visitors to reduce traffic jams, crowding and congestion in Yosemite Valley, hour-long delays at entrances, and ecological stress on vulnerable resources?

Over the last decade, CSERC has been at the forefront -- advocated for treating Yosemite Park (and especially Yosemite Valley) as national treasures that should be managed to minimize harm to resources. Yet every year more businesses base their profits on marketing Yosemite, especially during the peak season. Just in Tuolumne County in recent years, numerous new lodging developments gained approval and could add nearly 1,000 Yosemite visitors a day when all are at full capacity. Other Yosemite-focused enterprises are sprouting up in other gateway communities around the Park. Too many people and cars are the result.

Yet profit-focused chambers of commerce and tourism bureaus have vigorously lobbied county supervisors and other politicians – urging them to demand that Yosemite eliminate day-use restrictions and visitor limits. In response, **Park officials canceled the day-use reservation system for summer 2023. And along with that decision, the Park announced a new visitor planning process** -- with the first public meeting co-sponsored by gateway interests. Will the new plan end up favoring commercial businesses over the need to protect the Park and provide a good experience for visitors? ([Learn how you can help – see page 2.](#))

Surging recreational demands since the COVID shutdown along with social media and online marketing draw visitors to the Park



(This couple was lucky to visit Glacier Point at a quiet time. Less crowding usually provides a better visitor experience.)

Yosemite officials recently opened a public comment period for what the Park calls its new “Visitor Access Management Plan.” Until February 3rd, you can provide views on what the Park should do to manage congestion, traffic, and crowding.

CSERC urges you to take 5 minutes to visit the official Yosemite National Park website at <https://www.nps.gov/yose/index.htm> and to click on **Get Involved**. Scroll down to **Planning** and click on **Visitor Access Management Plan**. You can view a short video or read a storymap. Be sure to click the link to allow you to “**COMMENT NOW.**”

Help the Park know that many people do support strategies to reduce crowds and traffic jams, especially in iconic Yosemite Valley.



We can probably all relate to the joy that comes from sharing photos or social media posts about a visit to Yosemite.

That sharing leads to friends and family often being motivated to plan their own visits. Combine that ripple effect with some lodging businesses having numerous staff who focus year-round on boosting business by marketing Yosemite visits. For many reasons, the numbers of visitors to the Park will continue to rise unless some limits are applied.

**This winter 2022-23 newsletter
is a quarterly publication of the**

**Central Sierra Environmental Resource Center
P.O. Box 396, Twain Harte, CA 95383**

Phone: **(209) 586-7440**
E-mail: **johnb@cserc.org**
Website: **www.cserc.org**

CSERC is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization working to protect the water, wildlife, and wild places of the Northern Yosemite region. CSERC relies entirely on grants and donations from people like you to do that critical mission.

Board of Directors

Tom Parrington
Cris Barsanti
Robert Rajewski
Jason Reed
Steve Hannon
Julia Stephens

Staff

John Buckley, executive director
Stan Dodson, program manager
Heather Campbell, website translator

Lessons learned - striving to get a Tuolumne County Climate Action Plan

Almost three years behind schedule, Tuolumne County finally passed a **Climate Action Plan** in November. A Climate Action Plan, or CAP, is a policy document that outlines actions that a government agency will consider taking to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions.



Even though the County's 2018 General Plan required the prompt adoption of a CAP, CSERC spent years pressing the County to take that step. We advocated for meaningful GHG reduction strategies that would result in the greatest benefit to County residents and that would actually be implemented - instead of just being a list of possibilities. While some of our suggestions were incorporated into the final version of the CAP, the Board of Supervisors and County staff were generally more concerned with appeasing a small, but highly vocal, group of climate change conspiracy theorists who opposed the plan.

Many of the opposition's arguments against the CAP were based on fundamental misunderstanding about the purpose and power of the policy document. County staff could have addressed this early on by **clarifying the scope of the CAP and how it would be used**. During the public process, opponents of the CAP repeated false claims that the CAP would take away their right to burn firewood or would force residents of the region to all drive electric vehicles. **They also claimed that the CAP was part of some global plot by the United Nations and environmental groups. Such statements often drew cheers of support.**

One valid criticism of the initial draft CAP was that it wasn't tailored to a rural mountain community. Certain policy recommendations, such as promoting the use of bikes and/or walking paths for commuting, didn't make sense in a hilly environment where people may travel long distances to get to work or school. Instead of using generic policy recommendations better suited for an urban environment, **the County could have avoided backlash by identifying GHG reduction measures that made sense for the community.**

Throughout the CAP process, the loudest voices in the room were given the most attention, even if they were completely misinformed. Conspiracy theory advocates showed up at every meeting and always outnumbered CAP supporters. **The CAP process could have been improved by having a strong, consistent presence of pro-CAP concerned citizens present at public meetings.** CSERC was the sole organization to show up consistently to press for passage of the CAP and to rebut the misleading claims.



As more mountain counties (such as Calaveras County) look to pass a CAP for their area, perhaps some of the lessons learned in Tuolumne County can lead to a smoother public process that results in a meaningful final CAP document. Climate change has already arrived. Actions to reduce further change are essential.

Winter hiking destinations – below the snowline

With snow in the mountains during much of the winter season, you may be looking for winter hiking options in the lower elevations. Here are some suggestions – easily accessible places where you can avoid the snow and where you can often see a higher number of active wildlife species.

DRAGOON GULCH

Accessible from Woods Creek Rotary Park near downtown Sonora, this 60-acre property offers about 2 miles of trails that meander through old-growth oaks, toyon, manzanita, and scattered ponderosa pines. Dogs are welcome, and there are no fees or permits needed.

The area has many visible signs of historic mining and for those who take the Ridge Trail to the upper area, there are scenic views across the foothills as the reward.



TABLE MOUNTAIN

This approximately 2.5-mile loop trail provides an amazing scenic vista if you make the steep climb to the wide, flat top of Table Mountain. You can park at the first gate on Shell Road (not blocking private driveways) and walk along the dirt road through oak woodlands to access the Table Mountain trail. Even during winter months, local climbers often practice at a site on a bluff on the north side. Raptors are usually present, and you can look out over New Melones Reservoir.



NATURAL BRIDGES

Located off Parrotts Ferry Road between Columbia and Murphys, this 1.5-mile trail takes you down to Coyote Creek where you reach a natural land bridge and unique limestone caverns. This site becomes so crowded during the spring and summer seasons that parking restrictions may put in place by the Bureau of Reclamation; but during the winter season it is usually nearly empty of visitors. It is open from sunrise until sunset. Like many low elevation hikes, staying on the trail can enable you to avoid the poison oak.



...and dispersed recreation destinations – above the snowline

Over the past three years, winter snows were either minimal or sporadic, with long periods in between storms. Hoping for more historic conditions of prolonged substantial snow cover, we share some options for getting out into nature on snowshoes and cross-country skis, or just to enjoy some family snow play.

CALAVERAS BIG TREES STATE PARK

Two popular options for snowshoeing or cross-country skiing in Big Trees Park are the **North Grove Ski Trail** and **Parkway Loop Ski Trail**. The North Grove Ski Trail is a relatively flat 1.5-mile loop trail that winds through the majestic Giant Sequoias. The Parkway Loop Ski Trail is a 3.5-mile trail that offers a scenic view of the Sierra Nevada. The Parkway Loop Ski Trail is rated as more advanced, and it traverses moderately steep slopes.



THE PINECREST LAKE AREA

Snowshoers and cross-country skiers can access miles of snow-covered national forest roads at the Crabtree Road cross-over, just below the beginning of the Dodge Ridge Ski Area parking lot. Or you can go out Gooseberry Road (at the far end when leaving the parking area). It also provides access to many miles of other snow-covered forest roads. Many visitors enjoy snow play on the drained lakebed of Pinecrest Lake. Just up Highway 108, the Herring Creek Road also leads to miles of snowy forest roads for snowshoers and cross-country skiers.



BEAR VALLEY AREA

In addition to a wide range of snow-covered routes accessible in this especially scenic area, the Bear Valley area offers some of the best available winter recreation services. The Bear Mountain Adventure Company provides a Nordic center and snowshoe trails, as well as sledding and tubing. The area is a major destination for a wide range of winter recreation opportunities, including hiking, skiing, or snowshoeing alongside Lake Alpine. While a longer distance to drive than other options, the snow conditions and scenery can be extra rewarding.



“Frogsicles” is one way to think of winter survival by frogs

Manny Eichholz – ecologist

Those of us living above the snowline have been experiencing the winter season these days. It has been a mixed season of intense snowfall, rain, freezing temperatures, and thawing afternoons. We humans have a refined strategy of surviving through the winter. A cup of hot chocolate, slippers, and indoor heating certainly goes a long way. Wildlife species have their own approach to braving the winter, and few are more curious than the frog.

When temperatures drop in our mountain region, the Sierra Nevada yellow-legged frog will begin the winter by moving to the bottom of a lake, pond, or stream where it will hibernate. The location must be deep enough so the habitat does not freeze solid. When hibernating the frogs bring their metabolism (the rate at which a body uses energy) to a crawl by lowering their body temperature and slowing their heart rate - until thawing ice and rising water temperatures finally arrive in spring. By dropping their metabolism, frogs can survive over the long winter months when there's little or no food available. Depending on the weather, the Sierra Nevada Mountain yellow-legged frog may hibernate for up to 8 months out of the year!



Although the Wood frog is not one of the native amphibian species in our region, any discussion of frog hibernation should mention this amazing frog. Wood frogs will often hibernate under a layer of leaf litter near the surface, where they freeze solid once temperatures drop. Proteins in the frog cause the water in their blood to freeze before everything else. This pulls most of the water out of the frog's cells. High amounts of a concentrated sugar solution (glucose) are produced in the frog's liver. The glucose is packed into cells and protects the cells from being destroyed. Frozen, the frogs survive until thawing in the spring.

Even without being quite that extreme (literally freezing solid), frog species in the local mountains still endure severe conditions simply to over-winter until spring. Despite the intense challenge of enduring such a long period of hibernation, the Sierra Nevada yellow-legged frog actually faces far more significant threats. **The Chytrid fungus – a fungal disease fatal to the frog – was introduced into the region two decades ago and has devastated frog populations. And stocked fish (such as various trout species) feed on frog eggs, tadpoles, and juvenile frogs, often completely extirpating frogs from high country lakes that are stocked with fish. Due to all of these threats, frog numbers in our mountains have plummeted from historic levels.**

So -- just seeing one of these frogs after snowmelt might prompt you to consider how much the frog must endure simply to get to the warm season... when you may have the good fortune to view one.

DIRECTORS REPORT: Thanks to so many who continue to partner with CSERC to make a difference for the Northern Yosemite region

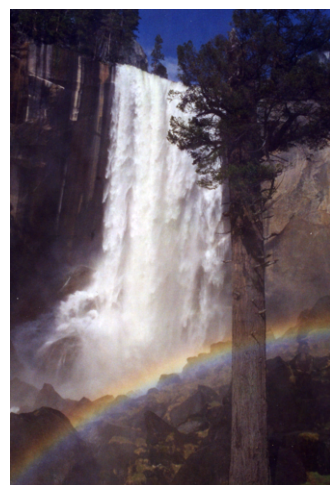
After 30 years at the same office location, our recent move to an office site one block away led to sorting through decades of files, planning documents, boxes of photos, and years of CSERC materials. That effort spawned memories of so much past work done to preserve wild, roadless areas and efforts that helped end clearcuts on USFS lands in the region, along with so many other key conservation campaigns.



In 2023 “old “issues such as Yosemite Park policies or debates over river flows are as intense and as timely as they have ever been. For some issues, our success in the coming year will depend on the relationships that CSERC has built with those who might normally oppose environmental measures.

Our focus will continue to be on trying to find balanced solutions to issues so that middle-ground outcomes can minimize conflicts and polarization.

As Executive Director, our wide range of efforts frequently remind me how (as John Muir noted) *“Tug on anything in nature, and you will find it is connected to everything else.”* CSERC is somewhat unique because we engage in so many different key issues that all add up to affect the region. -- *John Buckley*



Agencies consider how to best conserve and manage federal forests to reduce threats to “mature and old growth” trees



It is easy to feel a sense of awe and reverence when we're next to an old growth tree that has endured centuries of wildfires, storms, wind events, insect outbreaks, and drought. Giant old trees are a tie to hundreds of years of life unfolding in that part of a forest. For generations, ancient forest groves have provided spiritual and cultural connections to the natural web of life for people who otherwise live in a world dominated by human activities and constant change. Old growth groves provide a glimpse of natural processes persisting over an incredibly long period of time.

CSERC originally formed with a priority to preserve wild places, protect at-risk wildlife species, and defend the remaining ancient forest areas within our vast local region. Some of our initial achievements in the early years included halting plans for clearcut logging projects by the Forest Service that would have cut down large, old trees across thousands of acres of the local national forest.

For the past 20 years, national forest policies in the Sierra Nevada have evolved to protect trees 30" in diameter or larger. That spares most old growth trees. But nationally, debates over the logging of large trees have resulted in intense controversy over what truly deserves protection, and for which reasons.

Last spring, President Biden signed an executive order directing the Forest Service, BLM, and Park Service to “...define, identify, and inventory mature and old-growth forests on Federal lands...” within one year. That order requires the agencies to identify threats to older trees -- such as wildfire and climate change -- and develop policies to protect them.



Some environmental groups immediately interpreted that order as a policy that might halt the logging of mature or old growth trees on federal lands; but the administration made it clear that the order was not a ban on the cutting of old or mature trees. The order explicitly called for applying ecological forest treatments to reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfires.

Nevertheless, a campaign by numerous national conservation organizations publicized a call for a halt to logging trees 80 years of age or older on federal lands. CSERC does not support that strategy, and instead we've submitted different old growth policy recommendations.

Fieldwork, post-fire monitoring, and viewing the effects of drought lead CSERC to support treatments in managed areas to protect old trees



If you were asked “What’s the main threat to old growth trees?” you might immediately think of logging. **Yet over the past two decades, far more centuries-old trees in the forests of our region have died from wildfires and the combination of bark beetles and drought than from chainsaws.**

Recent scientific papers have looked at tree inventories from a century ago and then assessed what the tree stocking of those same sites is today. In general, the forest sites have 6 or 7 times more trees than under historic conditions. That not only means far more fuel for wildfires, it means much greater competition for water during drought periods. Stressed trees have less resistance to attacks by bark beetles.

Forest scientists have promoted the need to restore the open and parklike conditions in Sierra Nevada forests that existed prior to logging and forest management. Selective thinning of small and medium-large trees is the most effective way to reduce overly dense forest conditions. Prescribed burning is definitely a valuable treatment, but fire is also less-than precise; and iconic old growth trees can suffer cambium scorch under their bark from burns – killing the old trees. Thinning prior to burning can help to reduce burn intensity.

Over the last two decades, devastating wildfires have wiped out countless old growth trees and forest habitat across vast areas. CSERC supports forest management that spares large trees while allowing for forest thinning treatments in managed forest areas to reduce wildfire risk.

To create a national old growth policy that can be effectively implemented means selecting a strategy that can be both measurable and simple to apply. CSERC recommends defining a basic age-based criteria such as 200 years for “old growth” and 120 years for “mature” trees.

Then using science inventories and tree coring, Federal agencies can find the average diameter of “old growth” sugar pines or cedars or other trees at that age (as an example, perhaps 42” for “old growth” and 34” for “mature”). This would allow for policies to fully protect old growth and limit the cutting of mature trees. To reduce risk to large old trees, policies would allow for the thinning of small/medium-size trees to reduce overly dense forest conditions.



Initial treatments in new SERAL Project created miles of fuel breaks as anchor points for prescribed burns and to help crews manage wildfires

They look good. Over months of work this past summer and fall, contract crews treated forest stands along miles of strategically placed fuel breaks within the “large landscape” SERAL Project area. Those treatments are the first visible project actions that the public can see in the vast area authorized for thinning logging, biomass removal, prescribed burns, invasive weed treatments, and fuel breaks.



CSERC staff visited the fuel break sites at various stages of work during the long field season. Different contractors used different types of equipment to meet the prescriptions required for the fuel breaks, but all the various fuel break areas showed that the treatments could reduce flammable fuels while limiting impacts to habitat, soils, and scenic values.

Our CSERC staff openly shared with the media and at public meetings our praise for how Tuolumne County and the Tuolumne River Trust on behalf of Yosemite Stanislaus Solutions (YSS) jointly administered and monitored the fuel break treatments in coordination with Forest Service staff. Years ago, there never would have been local County and YSS management of such extensive treatments within the national forest. That same approach will be needed to get the huge amount of SERAL work done as planned within the next 5-7 years because the Forest Service continues to be understaffed and over-stretched.

One reason CSERC strongly endorsed the SERAL project was the collaborative planning process that enabled the YSS forest stakeholder group to help design the overall project so that it minimized controversy. **Now the Stanislaus Forest staff is preparing to start the next planning process for a new even-bigger “large landscape” project that would treat public forest areas located south of Highway 108.**

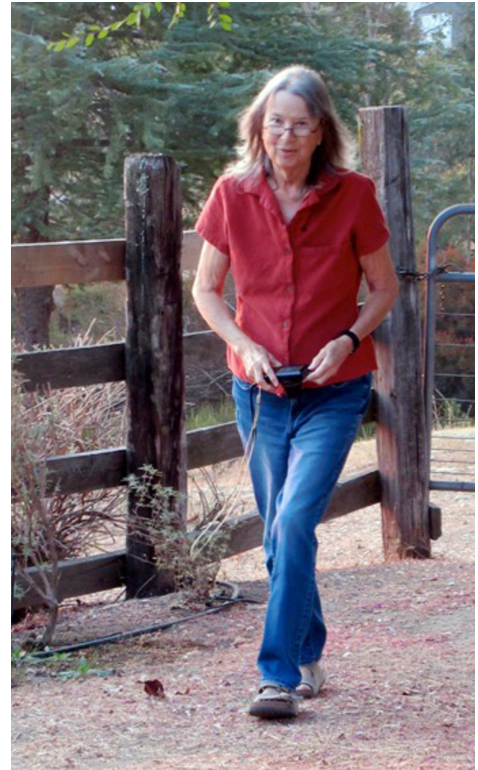
It is not as clear as before to what degree the YSS forest stakeholder group will influence the new project and whether the project will build upon the collaboration that made SERAL a success. In early discussions with Forest staff, the potential was raised for the Forest Service to apply controversial new planning approaches that could spark strong opposition from the conservation community. CSERC hopes to work with YSS to minimize controversy in the next large landscape plan and to help the Forest Service focus on building trust and broad support for its forest management.

The loss of a special person can remind us to savor our times together

Years ago, Kathy and Lew Mayhew were part of a grassroots effort by Calaveras County residents who opposed the approval of an illegal golf course in their rural area. After years of debates and hearings, citizen activism prevailed, and the unauthorized golf course was denied permits to operate. That campaign, partnering with CSERC, led Kathy to join our Board of Directors and eventually serve as chair.

When confronted with significant health challenges, Kathy was an inspiring example of someone who chooses to live life to its fullest. Her upbeat attitude, her transparent sharing about her health issues, and her frequent check-ins to hear about CSERC kept our Center connected to her.

In October Kathy's passing led our staff to look back with gratitude at some of the many nature photos that Lew and Kathy took to create photo calendars and inspire friends and family. Kathy's photo below is especially compelling.



You may know other champions for nature

At the start of a new year, a look back at times shared with loved ones can motivate us to treasure the moments in the year ahead that we spend with those who matter in our lives. It can also motivate us to treasure especially precious places that have enriched us and brought us joy, adventures, and a connection to nature.

Thanks to all of you who partner with us.

Name _____ E-mail (optional) _____

Address _____

Donation: ☐\$30 ☐\$50 ☐\$100 ☐\$250 ☐\$500 ☐other (monthly giving option is available on website)

[Donations can be mailed to:](#)

**CSERC
Box 396
Twain Harte, CA 95383**

[or you can donate online at](#)
www.cserc.org

Questions? (209) 586-7440

Central Sierra Environmental Resource Center (CSERC)
P.O. Box 396
Twain Harte, CA 95383
(209) 586-7440 e-mail: info@cserc.org

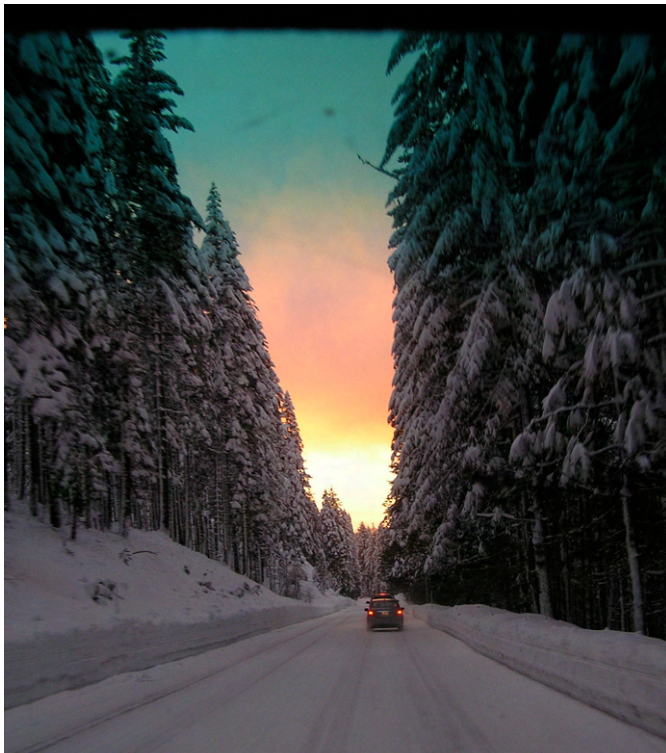
Nonprofit Organization
U.S. Postage Paid
Permit #113
Sonora, CA 95370

ADDRESS SERVICE REQUESTED

What lies ahead for our region?

There are special moments when nature can unexpectedly provide stunning beauty that brings a sense of wonder. This scene is magical, but with snowy conditions, what lies ahead for those driving up the icy road? At the least, it may be an adventure.

As 2023 begins, snow and rain are refreshing the drought-stressed forest, streams, and rivers.



What lies ahead in coming months? This newsletter covers timely topics from frogs to Yosemite to winter destinations. We hope it inspires you to find many new outdoor adventures. Enjoy!