

Redwood Times

GARBERVILLE NEWS

Save the Redwoods brings redwoods and people together, says new CEO

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Sam Hodder, who became the chief executive officer of Save the Redwoods League last September, comes to the organization with 20 years experience in conservation, and he is a passionate believer in the importance of connecting human beings with the natural environment.

Hodder, who was born and raised in New England, felt a deep connection with the natural world from an early age. "I loved being outdoors since I was tiny," he told the Redwood Times in a phone interview last week.



While his Princeton University classmates spent their summers interning with attorneys and financial firms, Hodder went to work building and repairing trails in the White Mountains of New Hampshire.

Vacationers from the urban Northeast "pile into New Hampshire in the summertime," Hodder said, seeking escape from the pressures of urban life. "I got a front row seat to see how special forests can inspire a wide public. Urban and rural populations alike connect through outdoor recreation and special places," he said.

After graduation, already determined to spend his career working to bring people and forests together, Hodder applied for and got a job with the Trust for Public Land, a San Francisco-based nonprofit organization that purchases land or conservation easements to create parks.

During his 20 years at the Trust for Public Land, Hodder was instrumental in the creation of many parks for public recreation in both urban and rural areas. During that time he became familiar with similar work, but with a narrower focus on redwood forests, being done by Save the Redwoods League.

"Save the Redwoods League is the gold standard," Hodder said, pointing to the League's nearly 100 years of preserving redwood forests and partnering with California State Parks, community organizations, and nonprofits to create public access and recreation. The League's founders "inspired conservation movements throughout the United States," he said.

The League was founded in 1918 by conservationists John C. Merriam, Madison Grant and Henry Fairfield Osborn, who were sent by Stephen Mather, head of the National Park Service at the time, to investigate the impact of logging, tourism, and the newly-built Redwood Highway on the ancient redwood forests of Northern California.

"The League began in what is now Humboldt Redwoods State Park," Hodder pointed out.

In the area where Bull Creek joins the South Fork Eel River, close to the confluence of the South Fork with the main stem Eel, Merriam, Grant, and Osborn discovered huge groves of ancient redwoods more than 300 feet tall. The sight inspired them to form an organization, Save the Redwoods League, to raise money to purchase the groves and preserve them from logging and development.

With the help of many donors, including, most famously, John D. Rockefeller, significant groves were purchased from their owners and eventually turned over the state Department of Parks and Recreation to manage for conservation and public recreation.

According to its website, www.savetheredwoods.org, the League has purchased over 190,000 acres of land stretching from the Oregon border at Jedediah Smith State Park south to the Big Sur area, as well as groves of giant sequoias in the southern Sierra Nevada.

Humboldt Redwoods State Park was put together over the decades from 300 different transactions with willing landowners, Hodder said. Other local parks, such as Richardson Grove State Park and Standish-Hickey and Benbow State Recreation Areas, were also created from purchases made possible by donors to the League.

Most recently, in the northern part of Humboldt County, the League purchased the former Green Diamond mill site and forest lands near Orick, connecting Tall Trees Grove and Lady Bird Johnson Grove, and including over a mile of Prairie Creek.

But buying land is only the beginning of the League's mission, Hodder pointed out. "At this point in our history, we're looking ahead to what the redwood forests need from us more than from new purchases," he said.

At the Orick site, for instance, the League will fund a study of wetlands and groundwater while working with the local community and the Yurok tribe to plan for the best uses of the former mill site.

The League funds and assists with numerous studies of redwood forests and their watersheds. The research provides the foundation for restoration programs and projects to help State Parks and surrounding communities benefit from the lands the League protected.

Restoration is becoming an increasingly large share of the League's work. Hodder recently visited Shady Dell, a recently-acquired 957-acre area near Usal Beach. Shady Dell is home to a grove of the rare "candelabra" redwoods, as well as salmonid habitat that has been badly damaged by erosion from poor logging practices.

Following restoration, the League plans to open Shady Dell to public access. When Hodder visited last month, onsite staff were already designing and planning the construction of a trail through the candelabra grove that will add another two to three miles to the Lost Coast Trail.

The League also sponsors redwood education in the schools, including hikes and field trips, and they make an effort to bring inner-city children to parks for outdoor experiences.

In hard economic times, the League has helped existing parks challenged by shrinking budgets to maintain their infrastructure and to keep serving the public.

Last year the League donated \$50,000 to install a new summer bridge over the South Fork Eel, linking the main campground at Standish-Hickey with the hike-bike campground, miles of trails, and the iconic Standish Tree on the west side of the river.

Farther north, the League gave \$20,000 to Grizzly Creek State Park on Highway 36 to help meet the maintenance and operations costs of their campground and day use area.

When a tunnel collapse threatened permanent closure of the famous Skunk Train between Willits and Fort Bragg last summer, the League stepped in with a \$300,000 donation for tunnel repairs.

Nevertheless, Hodder acknowledges that the League could "do a lot more" to improve its relations with local communities. One common complaint is that the League's work removes land from the tax rolls and closes it to logging, once the mainstay of the North Coast economy.

"We need to do more investment to turn that around," Hodder said. "We can improve the visitor experience" and draw more tourists into the area.

Preserving the redwood ecosystem serves a dual purpose to the human community, he added, both through the economic benefits of tourism and by enhancing the local quality of life with recreation, beauty, and inspiration.

"Redwoods tell a unique story about the American landscape and the human psyche," Hodder observed. "People find peace and inspiration at the foot of a giant redwood.

"There's a self-preservation element, too," he admitted. Hodder has four sons, ranging in age from 9 to 16, and they recently spent a wonderful vacation hiking and camping in the redwoods.

"At the end of the day, we're working on behalf of the community to protect special places that define the character of where we live," Hodder said.

For more information about Save the Redwoods League, including details of their projects and contact information, see their website, www.savetheredwoods.org.

photo captions:

1. Sam Hodder, the new chief executive officer of Save the Redwoods League, believes that people from all backgrounds find peace and inspiration from being among giant redwoods.
2. Save the Redwoods League donated \$50,000 to Standish-Hickey State Recreation Area near Leggett to install a new summer bridge over the South Fork Eel, linking the main campground with the hike-bike campground across the river.

http://www.redwoodtimes.com/news/ci_25172354/save-redwoods-brings-redwoods-and-people-together-says