

Protectors of the Land

Led by Cal Poly Alumni, The Land Conservancy of SLO County Marks 25 Years

By Matt Lazier

Wind stirring the tree leaves above their heads, Cal Poly alums Brian Stark and Bob Hill occasionally paused from talking to greet the hikers and cyclists headed to the Lemon Grove Loop trailhead at Cerro San Luis.

Little did most of those people know how big a role the two men and their nonprofit group played in conserving these 120 acres in San Luis Obispo and thousands more around the county.

Another well kept secret is how closely the Land Conservancy of San Luis Obispo County is tied to Cal Poly.

In addition to the co-directors, seven of the conservancy's 14 staff members are Cal Poly grads, and four of its 10 board members are alumni.

Stark and Hill describe the conservancy as a bridge-building group working with landowners and government to protect land in agreements that are beneficial for everyone. "We try to transcend politics; that's what makes sense," Hill said.

Stark said the group does not get involved in activism. "Our work is best done in a non-political way that is respectful of the needs of all landowners. Activism has a part to play in conservation, but it is best done by other organizations. I think we all want to see a well-planned community that balances the needs of the rural and urban communities with the needs of wildlife."

The conservancy is celebrating its 25th anniversary this year. So far, it has helped set aside more than 10,500 acres in San Luis Obispo County for recreation, wildlife, ranching and farming. The conservancy's first major project is the ongoing Lodge Hill Restoration Program in Cambria, in which the group is buying and protecting antiquated subdivision lots that contain parts of the town's famous Monterey pine forest.

The conservancy also continues to help the city of San Luis Obispo create a "greenbelt" of undeveloped land around its borders. The city and conservancy have partnered to preserve more than 1,300 acres in the greenbelt, including the Lemon Grove Loop (one of the first areas preserved). Stark has been with this effort since the start, writing the city's first greenbelt plan in the mid-1990s. Hill helped revise the plan in 2002.



On the trail - Executive Director Brian Stark (left) and Conservation Director Bob Hill of the Land Conservancy of San Luis Obispo County at the entrance of the Lemon Grove Loop Trail at Cerro San Luis.

Photo by Matt Lazier

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The group also works to restore damaged land and resources, including streams, wetlands and coastal dunes. And it is restoring the century-old Octagon Barn in southern San Luis Obispo, a local cultural icon.

Stark, the group's executive director, graduated from Cal Poly in 1989 with a bachelor's degree in social sciences. Hill, the conservation director, obtained his master's in city and regional planning in 2002. Stark and Hill became the organization's co-directors in 2004. Both started as volunteer interns – Stark in 1994 and Hill in 2001, while earning his Cal Poly degree.

Both men said studying at Cal Poly and experiencing its hands-on focus prepared them well for their work with the conservancy.

"Both of our careers, you can link directly to the learn-by-doing culture of Cal Poly," Hill said. "We started at the Land Conservancy as volunteers. I just came here and got an internship and started doing the work."

With so many Cal Poly grads involved, he added, that "get it done" attitude defines the conservancy today.

"That's still how we do things," he said. "For any project that we work on, we come up with a hypothesis, then test it in the field, and then determine whether it's successful."

Stark and Hill continue to be involved with Cal Poly – teaching guest lectures and occasional classes and leading student field trips to some of the parcels the conservancy has protected.

Stark said keeping the communication channels open between the nonprofit and the university is important, as the Land Conservancy hopes to continue to be a landing spot for some of Cal Poly's brightest graduates.

"We want to get the best of the best," Stark said. "And Cal Poly cranks out some really talented people."

LAND CONSERVANCY OF SAN LUIS OBISPO COUNTY

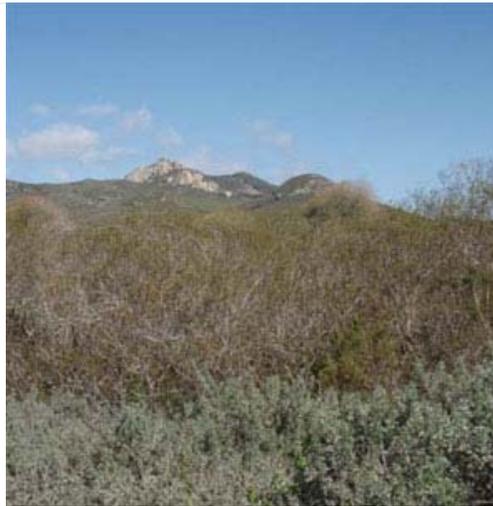
The Cal Poly connections

Cal Poly alumni on staff:

- Brian Stark – Executive Director – B.S. Social Sciences, 1989
- Bob Hill – Conservation Director – Master of City and Regional Planning, 2002
- Kaila Dettman – Restoration Program Manager – B.S. Animal Science, 2002; M.S. Watershed Hydrology/Soil Conservation, 2003
- Daniel Bohlman, Restoration Ecologist – B.S. Ecology and Systematic Biology, 2003
- Michael LeBrun – Project Manager – B.S. Environmental Engineering, 1993
- Mark Skinner – Project Manager – B.S. Landscape Architecture, 1984
- Margo Clark – Conservation Planning Associate – B.S. Animal Science, 1975
- Ryan Ihm – Restoration Specialist – B.L.A. Landscape Architecture, 2007
- Paul Valley – Restoration Specialist – B.S. Recreation, Parks and Tourism Admin., 2008

Alumni on the Board of Directors:

- Gary Felsman – President – Electrical Engineering, 1978
- Lisa Wise – Treasurer – Master of City and Regional Planning, 2001
- Beverly Gingg – member at large – M.S. Biological Sciences, 1989
- Alex Rothenberg – member at large – B.S. Business Admin., 1998; MBA, 2003



Hollister Peak is part of the San Luis Obispo 'greenbelt.'

Photo by Bob Hill, courtesy The Land Conservancy

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