

PAW PRINTS

Newsletter of the Eaton Canyon Nature Center Associates

Docent /Member Calendar

BAG LUNCH MINI-INSERVICE:

Bag Lunch is on hiatus indefinitely.

ECNCA Board Meetings

ECNCA Board Meetings are held on the second Wednesday of the month at 7 pm via zoom. If you are interested in joining a meeting, please send an email to ecncamembership@gmail.com at least 2 days prior to the meeting.

Public Calendar

■ **Pasadena Audubon Society**

For meeting info see their website:
www.pasadenaaudubon.org

■ **California Native Plant Society**

For meeting info see their website:
www.cnps-sgm.org

■ **Pasadena Group Sierra Club**

For meeting info see their website:
www.sierraclub.org/angeles/pasadena

■ **We Explore Earth**

For meeting info see their website:
<https://weexploreearth.com/>

Paw Prints Production

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Photo: Diana Gonzalez

PARK IS CLOSED UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE

Photo: William Hallstrom



Alluvial sage scrub: A most interesting plant community

by **WILLIAM HALLSTROM**

What is alluvial sage scrub? Since you're reading this newsletter, chances are you know—those of us who frequent places like Eaton Canyon, Santa Fe Dam, or Hahamongna Watershed Park are familiar with this plant community. The name is recent, though. It was only around the 1980s that the term came into use; before that, alluvial scrub was just considered coastal sage scrub. But alluvial scrub is quite unique.

Coastal sage scrub, as you know, consists typically of smaller shrubby plants like black sage, buckwheat, and sagebrush, living on sandy, nutrient-poor substrates. "Alluvial" refers to the assortment of rocks, gravel, sand, and other rocky materials that makes up much of places like Eaton Canyon. It is material that erodes from the mountains, flows through the canyons, and ends up in the washes below. Because the San Gabriels are made up of such crumbly rocks, there is a lot of material continually flowing from their slopes, at least in a geological timeframe.

While I had heard the term alluvial scrub already, it was only a couple of years or so ago that Mickey Long handed me a diagram during a California Native Plant Society field trip at Santa Fe Dam, showing the three stages of alluvial plant succession (pioneer, intermediate, and mature). That was a catalyst for me to learn more about the research into this unique plant community. The diagram was one element of the botany that was being done in alluvial scrub by people like Ted Hanes, Richard Friesen, Kathy Keane, and Robin Lee Smith. *Continued on page 4*

The new nature center is designed to be resilient and to complement the surrounding natural landscape.



New nature center design presented at “From Ashes to Action” event by LINDSAY BREMNER

Sparano + Mooney Architecture unveiled details of their fire-resilient design for the new Eaton Canyon Nature Center at the recent “From Ashes to Action” program held at the LA Arboretum. The event was attended by over 100 people and included guest speakers, an in-depth presentation, and a Q&A session.

The architects’ bold design features a horse-shoe-shaped building that curves around a central courtyard and has floor-to-ceiling windows on the north side, showcasing views of the San Gabriel Mountains.

A deep, research-focused approach to rebuilding was emphasized throughout the evening. In her introductory remarks, County Director of Parks and Recreation Norma Garcia-Gonzalez made clear the need for studies of local fire, wind, and flood patterns, as well as input from community stakeholders. This data-gathering has been taking place over the last 18 months, paid for by money from the nature center insurance policy.

Front and center of the main presentation was the desire for fire resiliency: How can we ensure this is the last time the nature center is rebuilt, while also keeping cost and functionality in mind? Architects Anne Mooney and Ludwig Juarez outlined a three-pronged approach to building back better, grounded in modern building science:

1) Noncombustible building materials. The construction of the previous nature center included wood studs and plywood; by contrast, the new nature center will be made from 100% noncombustible materials, predominantly concrete masonry units (CMUs) clad with natural stone and weathered steel.

2) Fire suppression. Foam sprinklers will be mounted on the roof (30’ spray radius) and eaves (5’ spray radius), with supplemental water stored nearby. This two-part system has off-grid capabilities and is designed to proactively protect the building and adjacent areas before fire reaches it.

3) Ember reduction. Analysis of local wind patterns shows that strong winds—and the greatest fire danger—come almost exclusively from the north. Intentional windbreaks and trees planted to the north of the building will slow winds and divert embers away from the building. Similarly, the aerodynamic shape of the building is designed to reduce the impact of winds and ember build-up.

During site selection, areas were ruled out one by one—because of existing infrastructure, trails, steep slopes, surviving tree canopies, or proximity to the wash—until just one suitable location remained. The new location on the terrace past the north end of the parking lot has the additional advantage of being more prominent than the old location.

The footprint of the nature center will be approximately 11,800 sq ft, compared with 8,000 sq ft previously. Inside, the floorplan includes an exhibit space with large windows; an adjacent lockable gift shop; a “learning lab” for classes and story time; a large multipurpose space for events, demonstrations, and classes; a research lab for visiting artists, educators, docents, and naturalists; and public restrooms. Several areas will connect directly to the courtyard space to encourage indoor/outdoor flow. Workspaces not open to the public include a designated staff area, a maintenance space, and a dedicated animal care room.

The new exhibits are yet to be planned in detail but previous popular features, such as the live animals and the topographical map, are set to be included.

The presentation generated many questions from the engaged audience, including on energy efficiency (no solar panels planned at this point), shade (solar patterns were studied—there will always be some areas in the shade), back-up power (exploring options for this), window shutters (sprinklers should be sufficient protection), and customizability of the exhibit space (important, but exhibit

planning is still in the early stages).

Funding was also touched upon: Although Assemblyman John Harabedian has helped secure \$16m in state funding toward rebuilding the nature center, that is only about half of the estimated \$30m that will be needed for the project. Garcia-Gonzalez explained that fundraising for the remainder will begin in earnest in November, after groundbreaking begins for other parks projects related to the fire (e.g., restoration of Charles White Park and Farnsworth Park).

Donations can be made at
<https://www.lacpf.org/eaton-fire-recovery>

The next “From Ashes to Action” program will focus on landscape design for the outdoor spaces:

LA Arboretum, Wednesday, October 7, 5 pm – 7 pm.
 Studio MLA landscape architects will present the latest conceptual diagrams and renderings for the terrace area of the park, followed by a Q&A.

RSVP at <https://arboretum.org/events/from-ashes-to-action-reimagining-eaton-canyon-2/2026-10-07>

THE NATURE CENTER

Learning From What Endured

The design draws inspiration from the mature live oaks and sycamores that endured the Eaton Fire. These trees have experienced fire before and continue to support the ecosystem around them. Their resilience is rooted in adaptation rather than resistance.

The Nature Center draws from this example. It is designed to be protective, responsive, and resilient while continuing the Canyon's tradition of education and stewardship for future generations.

BUILDING ORGANIZATION

The public, educational, and staff functions are organized around a central courtyard. This shared outdoor space plays an important role in the experience of the Nature Center.

COURTYARD

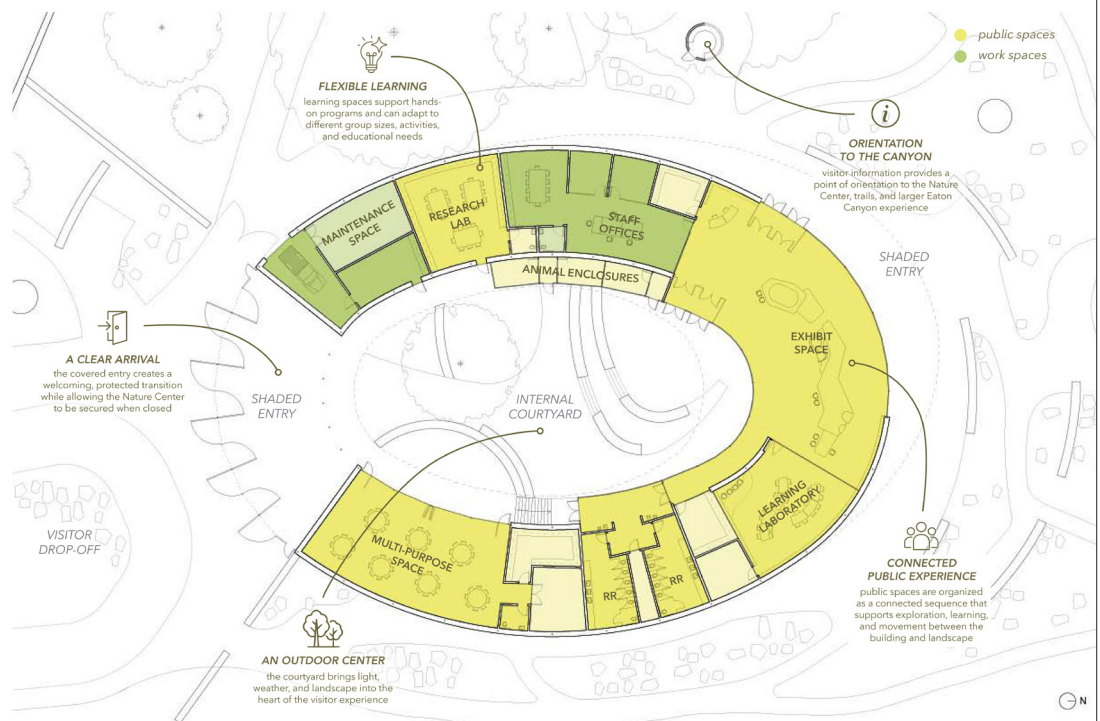
The courtyard is part of the drop-off and arrival experience as visitors move through it to enter the Nature Center. The courtyard also provides gathering spaces for individuals and groups while bringing daylight into the building.

PUBLIC + LEARNING SPACES

The Nature Center brings together exhibition, education, research, and community programs within a connected series of spaces. The main exhibit introduces visitors to the stories and natural systems of Eaton Canyon, while adjacent learning spaces provide opportunities to explore those ideas in greater depth.

WORK SPACES

Staff and support spaces are organized to meet the day-to-day needs of the Nature Center. Offices, maintenance areas, and other operational functions are integrated into the building while remaining distinct from the primary public experience.



SPARANO + MOONEY ARCHITECTURE



ROOF SPRINKLERS

The roof is one of the main building surfaces that is exposed to wind-driven embers during a wildfire. Roof-mounted sprinklers provide proactive wetting before embers arrive.

By maintaining wet conditions during a wildfire event, the system helps reduce vulnerability at the roof surface. This active layer of protection works alongside the building's noncombustible construction and ember-resistant design.



SUPPLEMENTAL WATER + PERIMETER PROTECTION

Wildfire resilience relies on multiple layers of protection working together to strengthen the Nature Center's preparedness.

Fire water storage provides a supplemental resource as part of the broader fire suppression strategy. Eave-mounted sprinklers provide proactive pre-wetting along the perimeter and adjacent areas before embers arrive.



WIND ANALYSIS

Wind plays an important role in wildfire behavior by carrying embers ahead of a fire and increasing building exposure.

Wind studies helped identify how prevailing winds and extreme gusts move across the site and around the Nature Center. Understanding these patterns helped locate areas of greater exposure and informed the building's form, and overall wildfire resilience strategy.

While buckwheat and black sage are found in alluvial scrub just like in coastal sage scrub, what makes alluvial scrub so interesting, I think, is the diversity of the plants found there, which cross over into many adjacent ecological niches. Bigger chaparral plants can be found in alluvial washes for instance, such as laurel sumac, which the research says is typically found in both intermediate and mature alluvial scrub.

Riparian plants like mule fat can be found in the pioneer stage of alluvial scrub, which is the most frequently flooded part, but I have a hunch that if conditions are right, they can persist in later successional areas. Sycamores, which are riparian-adjacent trees, can be found at Eaton Canyon on higher ground, away from the creek, and even intermingled with oaks.

Seasonal annual wildflowers also appear in alluvial scrub: You may remember the appearance of phacelia and suncups, among others, scattered throughout Eaton Canyon in springtime. Chaparral yucca, prickly pear cactus, and juniper are also commonly found in alluvial scrub.

Alluvial sage scrub, then, appears not to just be a subset of coastal sage scrub but a plant community that is also inclusive of species from the chaparral and riparian ecosystems as well. It is one of our most dynamic plant communities: It exists in places subject to both flooding and prolonged drought, and its constituents are adapted to these extremes. Alluvial scrub, like most of our local plant communities, is adapted to fire as well.

Alluvial scrub sits in the middle of many ecological phenomena. It lies between the mountains and the valleys, and it exists in the places where water flows in yearly cycles, and debris flows periodically as well. It straddles the slopes between stream channels at the center, and chaparral or woodlands at the edge. It is a most interesting landscape and one that those who frequent Eaton Canyon are lucky enough to see through the seasons.



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NCA President: Laura Nicholson

Eaton Canyon Nature Center Associates (ECNCA) is a chapter of the Nature Center Associates (NCA), a non-profit support group of the natural area park system of Los Angeles County. Founded for educational and scientific purposes, its primary mission is to develop in children and adults an appreciation of the natural world and to preserve Eaton Canyon as a natural area for future generations.

The Eaton Canyon Nature Center and Natural Area Park are located within the unincorporated area of Los Angeles County in the Supervisorial district of Kathryn Barger. The Natural Area and Nature Center are operated by the County of Los Angeles, Department of Parks and Recreation, in partnership with the Eaton Canyon Nature Center Associates.

 **Call for Submissions!** *Paw Prints* welcomes (and encourages!) text and visual content submissions from the ECNCA community at large.

We're a small editorial team here at PP and we want to hear from you!

Please send submissions to Amanda Getty at ajgetty@gmail.com. Questions?

Please reach out! Help us keep your monthly newsletter filled with great local nature content in the months to come.



Become A Member of the ECNCA (Eaton Canyon Nature Center Associates)

To join the Eaton Canyon Nature Center Associates, visit www.ecnca.org/become-a-member, or fill out the form below and mail with your check, **payable to the ECNCA, 1355 N. Mentor Avenue, Box 40167, Pasadena, CA 91104-9998.**

Name: _____ **Email:** _____

Address: _____

City: _____ **State:** _____ **Zip:** _____ **Phone:** _____

Please check appropriate box and mark return envelope "Membership"

- ☐ Individual \$30 ☐ Family \$45 ☐ Senior \$15 ☐ Senior Family \$30 ☐ Student \$15
☐ Friend of the Canyon \$75 ☐ Sage Saver \$100 ☐ Chaparral Contributor \$250 ☐ Riparian Guardian \$500
☐ Oak Woodlands Protector \$750 ☐ Wildlands Angel \$1000 ☐ NEW ☐ RENEWAL

Enclosed is my MEMBERSHIP in the amount of \$_____ Enclosed is my additional DONATION of \$_____

All contributions are tax deductible.