

## Marin Conservation League at 90

If one can tie Marin Conservation League's birth to a specific date, it would be **November 6, 1934**... that, and the looming towers of the soon-to-be-finished Golden Gate Bridge...



On the evening of November 6, minutes of the Marin Garden Club meeting reveal that Caroline (Mrs. Norman) Livermore was appointed to lead a special committee to look into “doing some planting and planning and zoning. . . in Marin County.” Three others (Sepha Evers, Helen Van Pelt, and Portia Forbes) volunteered to join the committee.

That is the *official record*, said Bill Evers, son of co-founder Sepha Evers, “but the bridge was the real catalyst.” Within three years the bridge would open and forever transform Marin—the scenic lands of Marin were at risk! The small group of women who volunteered at the Marin Garden Club were among those few who foresaw how extensive the change in Marin might be when the bridge was completed in 1937. They were among an even smaller number who recognized the need to plan for this change, and who immediately and effectively did anything to make that planning a reality.

In a society that makes constant demands of the land, the risk has never really disappeared, nor has MCL ever failed to carry out the commitment its founders took on that evening. Thus, the beginning of a legend...



### **In the beginning, it was simply about beauty!**

Conservation in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century began with the experience of beautiful places – like Mt. Tamalpais or Tomales Bay or a Pacific Ocean beach. “Ecology” was an emerging theory in academic circles, and “environment” would not find common usage until the 1960s. Terms like “sustainability”, “biodiversity” and “resilience” would not enter the vernacular until decades later.

What, then, prompted four women in 1934—women who had the privilege of simply enjoying the experience of beauty all around them—to dedicate their energies and intelligence to conserving it for others? What motivated them to confront and overcome often hostile, and routinely skeptical, attitudes toward both conservation *and* women in politics?

MCL has been seen as trying to pull up the drawbridge to others. Quite the contrary, the purpose of the founders was *not* to exclude the public. Rather it was to preserve beautiful places *FOR* the public. Most of the open spaces that were gained in Marin were set aside as public lands for public use.

### **Name, plan, and mission**

By December 12, The newly formed committee had organized and selected a name: “**Greater Marin Planning Survey Committee**’ for the research of recreation, land uses and resources.” By January all areas of Marin County were represented on the committee. Their first task, using their own funds, was to have the entire county surveyed. By the end of 1935, the first Marin County “Recreation” Plan, directed by well-known Planner, Mr. Hugh Pomeroy, had been completed. The Plan showed an

inventory of special lands to be acquired for the public and detailed priorities for taking action.

As the committee set about the task that would develop into four decades of successive public land acquisitions, the name evolved into '**Marin Planning and Conservation League**,' and then '**Marin Conservation League**' by 1938. Incorporation followed on May 20, 1940.

The League's first attempt to define its *purposes* began in 1936:

*To support an active County planning program, and to cooperate with County and local planning commissions;*

*to foster acquisition of beaches and other recreational areas;*

*to protect roadsides against billboards and unsightly shacks and encourage good roadside architecture and well-studied highway planning;*

*to preserve and protect the natural assets of the County;*

*to serve as a clearing house for information and activities and to cooperate with all organizations interested in these purposes; and*

*to conduct an active educational campaign.*

These purposes, prescient in their day, remain relevant to this day.

But it was the fourth purpose – "*To preserve and protect the natural assets of the County*" – that persisted as the most encompassing and became the League's core mission statement. The wording has changed in minor ways over time, and with shifting priorities. At one time the mission called for "... preservation and *development* of the natural assets of Marin County," and for many years, it concluded with: "...*for all people*." The latter phrase was later dropped as the board felt the mission did not adequately reflect the broader concern for all living creatures. A few years ago, to reflect the threats of a changing climate, massive species extinctions, habitat destruction, and other urgent threats, MCL's mission statement changed to: "*The mission of Marin Conservation League is to preserve, protect and enhance the natural assets of Marin County in a changing environment.*"

### **But what are "Natural Assets"?**

We frequently refer to "natural assets" in MCL's mission without considering what the term encompasses. In fact, the term's meaning and policy implications have been debated over time. Note the 1961 Memo from then-President Sepha Evers to the Board of Directors.

TO THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS  
November 10, 1961

The purpose of the League is stated on our letterhead, namely, "To Preserve and Develop the Natural Assets of Marin County."

- (1) What are the Natural Assets of Marin County?
- (2) How can they be developed and preserved?
- (3) What are the problems facing them?
- (4) How can they be solved or at least modified?

NATURAL ASSETS (A partial list)

- |                               |                      |
|-------------------------------|----------------------|
| (1) Land                      | (5) Recreation       |
| a) Soil Conservation          | a) Parks             |
| b) Forests                    | b) Green Belts       |
| c) Grazing                    | c) Open Space        |
| d) Agriculture                |                      |
| e) Disposal of Public Lands   | (6) Transportation   |
|                               | a) Freeways          |
| (2) Water                     | b) Scenic Highways   |
| a) Domestic Supply            | c) Roadside Controls |
| b) Irrigation                 |                      |
| c) Flood Control              | (7) County Planning  |
| d) Navigation                 | a) Zoning            |
| e) Small Craft Harbors        | b) Subdivision       |
|                               | c) Excavations       |
| (3) Minerals                  | d) Slope Policy      |
| a) Sand, Gravel, Crushed Rock |                      |
|                               |                      |
| (4) Fish and Game             |                      |
| a) Fisheries, Wildlife        |                      |

Categories of "natural assets" have also changed over time, some dropped and others added in later years, but the example indicates that MCL's conservation priorities had gone far beyond the initial focus on preserving scenic beauty. In addition to embracing habitats ("Fisheries, Wildlife"), they grew to include water, physical geography, land use and planning, and transportation.

The years leading up to 1970 mark that year as an inflection point. Land acquisition was becoming increasingly expensive and complex, far beyond MCL's limited means. Plans were in play that would transform West Marin into an urban center. At the same time, environmental disasters were being reported from all corners of the globe, stirring broad public awareness. The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) were born, along with other legislative acts in the early 1970s, all aimed at protecting an increasingly fragile environment.

MCL responded, as did others. Thus, "natural assets" came to encompass not only creeks, wetlands, and coastal resources, but also a wide array of environmental concerns, including air quality, solid waste and resource recovery, and pollution in many

forms. The range of “natural assets” has broadened to span the land, waters, air, and biota, including humans—presenting broad opportunities to engage in protecting the earth and its riches.

### **Essential needs become existential needs**

Urgency now drives MCL’s advocacy into action promoting complex strategies for: reducing greenhouse gas emissions and sequestering nature-based carbon; re-planning shorelines to adapt to rising sea levels while sustaining wetland habitats; strategically managing forests to support wildlife habitats while fostering resilience to future wildfire; continuing a decades-long history of restoring waterways and wetlands; and conserving and enhancing biodiversity even as species losses escalate. It is no longer enough or even possible to *uncritically* promote access to public lands, a touchstone of MCL’s original conservation efforts. At the same time, MCL is responding to basic human needs by supporting equitable affordable housing where it meets exacting environmental standards.

At 90 years, MCL, with its unique capacity to cross disciplines, continues to respond to environmental needs out of both moral and practical responsibility. Preserving, protecting, and enhancing natural assets in a changing environment means leaving them as intact and rich as possible for generations of the next 90 years and beyond.

<sup>1</sup> Excerpted from unpublished manuscript by Barry Spitz, 2009, with edits and updates by Nona Dennis