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At the same time that we are earnest to explore and learn all things, we require that all things be mysterious and unexplorable, that land and sea be infinitely wild, unsurveyed and unfathomed by us because it is unfathomable. We can never have enough of nature.

Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*



Coast live oak (*Quercus agrifolia*),
on a perch overlooking the canyon.

PRELUDE TO A ROMANCE

Rattlesnake Canyon evokes a sense of mystery and fear, of wild nature and caution. The informal wilderness park in Santa Barbara, California overflows with coast live oak woodlands that spill steeply into a boulder-lined creek crowded with willow, bay, and alder trees. The quiet solitude of midday in the canyon is as alluring as the morning and evening choirs of Canyon Wren, Spotted Towhee, and California Quail. It suffers – and is nourished by – the same wild natural events that typify any Southern California canyon: floods, earthquakes, and fires.

Canyon Voices explores the joyful and uneasy relationship between humans and nature, the rivaling recreational and economic desires of the human community, and competition in nature itself. The book unfolds through the eyes of people who understand it deeply on diverse levels. A geologist, a monk, a botanist, an historian, a hang glider, a stream ecologist, an artist, and others reveal the many ways to comprehend a natural space.

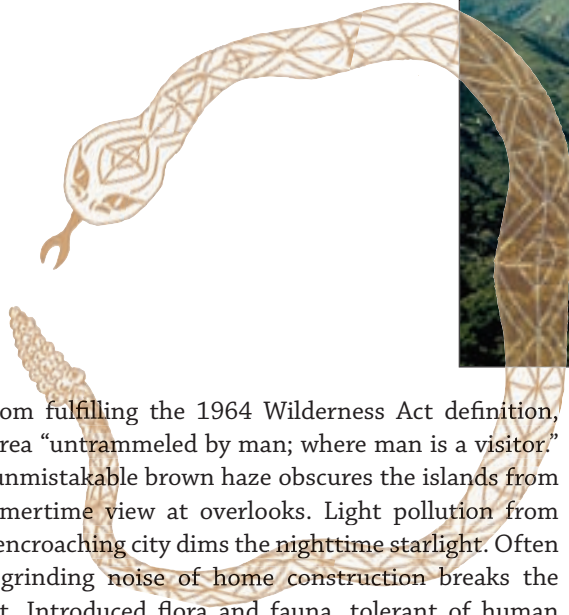
The canyon's story, though unique in some respects, parallels that of many natural gems adjacent to urban areas. It functions not only to provide for the needs of humanity, but also as a witness to the importance of habitat protection – and for wilderness itself. *Canyon Voices* weaves the fabric of people into the story of place.

Even the most casual visitor grasps that Rattlesnake Canyon is not wilderness, despite its natural beauty. The hard-packed paths, trail erosion, telephone wires, occasional trash or dog pile, and hillside houses prevent

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Left: Rattlesnake drawing by Vaughn Boyle.

Right: Rattlesnake Canyon looking north.
Photo by Scott Cooper.



it from fulfilling the 1964 Wilderness Act definition, an area “untrammeled by man; where man is a visitor.” An unmistakable brown haze obscures the islands from summertime view at overlooks. Light pollution from the encroaching city dims the nighttime starlight. Often the grinding noise of home construction breaks the quiet. Introduced flora and fauna, tolerant of human activity, usurp shier native animal and fragile native plant species.

Instead, Rattlesnake Canyon is a bridge to wilderness. City folk who explore can see what is worth saving and what lies beyond human management. They can recognize that it is simultaneously one of the city’s natural crown jewels *and* the canary in the mine – a warning about biodiversity loss.

Natural habitat serves the community by cleaning the air and water and protecting a tiny shelf of the earth’s library of genetic material – two of the many free services of an intact environment. Wild areas also harbor wildlife fleeing from the ever-encroaching neighborhoods, and provide the habitat necessary to keep some species from becoming endangered.

In our increasingly urbanized world, local natural spaces like Rattlesnake Canyon take on an even greater importance, especially for their accessibility. The idea is not new: Thoreau’s 19th Century writings suggested that

naturalistic parks could be more valuable in terms of readily accessible solitude and beauty than true wilderness areas. This is the purpose envisioned when Rattlesnake Canyon became a “wilderness park” in 1970.

Rattlesnake Canyon embodies both the uniquely sacred and the perfectly ordinary. Its uniqueness mirrors the natural habitat in any neighborhood, even space currently disguised as an abandoned building on a weedy lot. Wallace Stegner observed that “whatever landscape a child is exposed to early on, that will be the sort of gauze through which he or she will see all the world afterwards.” The gauze of wildness beckons within the reach of the reader’s nearest bus, bike, or hiking boot. The natural world is worthy of our protection not only for its beauty, its economic value, and its sanctity. It epitomizes the essential link to our own nature, whether we view that link as an historical and tenuous thread or a current force as powerful as a creek in flood.

One definition of “romance” is to attempt to influence or curry favor, especially by lavishing personal attention. My hope is that by romancing Rattlesnake Canyon with the voices of its many admirers, readers will romance the wild spaces near their own homes.

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