



Conservation Groups Celebrate the Purchase of Sierra Buttes for Public Ownership

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By Laura Brown
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The snow-covered Sierra Buttes as seen from Washington overlook on Highway 20 east of Nevada City in January, 2011.
Photo for The Union by John Hart

A favorite run of hardcore mountain bicyclists and a spectacular backdrop for hundreds of thousands of hikers, campers and cross country skiers, the Sierra Buttes and surrounding landscape will remain open to the public and protected from development for years to come thanks to a series of land acquisitions totaling nearly \$7 million.

Recently, representatives from local, state and national government agencies and conservation groups celebrated on the banks of Sardine Lake to toast the preservation of a California mountain view as dear to locals as Yosemite.



Upper Sardine Lake and Lower Sardine Lake as seen from the lookout of the Sierra Buttes, Sierra County, CA.

A series of grants supported the acquisition of seven private parcels, securing 1,525 acres of premiere land, including the face of the Sierra Buttes, into public ownership.

“That’s really an iconic landscape. To us it’s like buying Half Dome,” said Laurie Oberholtzer, executive director of Sierra County Land Trust.

When a \$4 million deal closed earlier this year, the last portion of the face of the Buttes was acquired in a package of 835 acres that included: Young America Lake and Volcano Lake, a segment of the Pacific Crest Trail, the

popular Sierra Buttes Lookout Trail, and lakeside frontage on Upper Sardine and Lower Sardine Lakes.

Success came when the land trust teamed up with The Trust for Public Land, a national organization that has protected more than 4 million acres in 47 states since it’s founding in 1972.

Supporting the most recent \$4 million Butte purchase was a \$5.6 million Sierra Nevada Cascade

Conservation Grant Program from the State of California Natural Resources Agency.

It is the largest, single grant ever made by the resource agency. California taxpayers funded the grant through Proposition 50, passed by voters in 2002.

“The Sierra Buttes sold itself. It's just important,” Oberholtzer said of the property surrounded by U.S. Forest Service land.

“That's why the state was interested in giving such big grants,” she said.

Through additional grants from Sierra Nevada Conservancy and other donors, the Sierra County Land Trust and The Trust for Public Land raised a total of nearly \$7 million to purchase property around the Sierra Buttes. Sierra County Land Trust will own and manage the land.

“We feel we've purchased most of the remaining premiere properties,” Oberholtzer said.

Recreation, water quality and wildlife corridors

The Sierra Buttes is a huge draw for recreation year round, a place where families come to camp, hike and enjoy high alpine lakes in the summer months and enjoy “Old Tahoe” style hospitality at area mountain lodges built after World War II.

In the winter, high snowfall attracts winter sport enthusiasts who come to snowmobile and cross-country ski. Recreationists who play in the area won't see any changes because of the land deal.

Despite a common misconception that the Sierra Buttes and surrounding land was already protected and public, much of the high country region, including the craggy face of the Buttes, were locked into a checkerboard pattern of private ownership dating back to 1800's era gold claims.

During the height of the Gold Rush, thousands of miners worked hard rock sites like the Mountain Mine and the Young America Mine. A number of these parcels remain in private hands.

“Our goal is to purchase the remainder,” Oberholtzer said.

Several years ago, locals involved with the Sierra County Land Trust became concerned when it became known that proposals were in the works to build fairly large vacation homes on two private parcels on Sardine Lake and Upper Sardine Lake.

In 2007, those two parcels were purchased with a portion of the hefty Cascade Conservation Grant, paving the way for a gradual retirement of the old checkerboard pattern while making headway on a long term goal to open up a contiguous wildlife corridor.

Grants awarded for the acquisitions were in part designated to enhance watershed quality. The Sierra Buttes rise above the headwaters of the North Fork of the Yuba River.

One of the purchased properties extends to the confluence of the North Fork of the Yuba River and Salmon Creek, 50 miles above Englebright Dam where a number of agencies including South Yuba River Citizens League is working to restore salmon runs.

Protecting the raw beauty of the chiseled peaks, helps guarantee economic security for the isolated communities of Sierra County that are heavily dependent on tourist traffic and dollars. The Sierra Buttes and Lakes Basin are the largest tourist draws for the county.



Each year, 133,000 people visit the Lakes Basin, according to data from the Tahoe National Forest and tourism provides one-third of all employment in Sierra County, according to the California Trade and Commerce Agency.

Also a significant destination for extreme mountain bicycling crowds, the starting line of the Downieville Downhill race begins on what is now Sierra County Land Trust land.

The Sierra Buttes define Sierra County, Oberholtzer said.

“The locals are extremely happy about it... It really is the view of Sierra County. It really is their calling card,” Oberholtzer said.

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