

Outdoors

"The mountains are calling and I must go."
—John Muir

Photo by Greg Little

Rancher Diane Bohna inspects one of her bulls on ranch land located along Cunningham Road in eastern Merced County.



GROWING THE HERD

Diane Bohna raises cattle — and preserves land

Editor's note: This is the fourth in an eight-part series about the Sierra Foothills Conservancy. The stories will run monthly through the end of the year.

By GREG LITTLE
Editor

Anyone who meets Diane Bohna for the first time can make some pretty quick assessments.

Dedicated.
Passionate.
Maybe a little sassy.
A love of what she does.
"It is instilled in my blood so deep," said Bohna one day last week while she was working bulls on a ranch off of Cunningham Road in eastern Merced County, not far from the western border of Mariposa County.

Bohna is a fifth-generation cattle rancher from the Raymond area. She still operates a large ranch in Raymond and also leases the 2,000 acres along Cunningham Road. In total, she has more than 1,000 head, but she talks about over 500 "pairs."

"I run cows and calves," said Bohna. What might be different for her, though, is the all-out dedication to land preservation and part of that is through the Sierra Foothills Conservancy (SFC).

That group works with landowners throughout this region to preserve land — yet still allows traditional uses like raising cattle.

For Lauren Miller, the conservation director of SFC, those partnerships go to the core of their goal to conserve land.

As Miller was taking a long look at the land along Cunningham Road, she became reflective. Rightly so, as almost everyone who lives in this area has driven that road, kind of a shortcut to Fresno. Most, though, don't have any idea what lies within that land.

Miller said this particular region is "the richest vernal pool land in the world."

Vernal pools, also called vernal ponds or ephemeral pools, are seasonal pools of water that provide habitat for distinctive plants and animals. Those plants and animals, in turn, contribute to a healthy overall environment.

Miller said that has been happening long before settlers came to this region. Back then, buffalo and other animals slogged through the land, carrying actual life with them on the bottom of their hooves. Today, the cattle perform that same function.

Miller says what Bohna does is critical. "There is a traditional way of life that is slowing disappearing," said Miller. Bohna agrees, though she has no intention of stopping anytime soon. She just loves it too much.

Bohna was born and raised in Coarsegold; Grub Gulch to be exact. In fact, her grandmother was the last person to have an address that was simply "Grub



Photo by Greg Little

Lauren Miller of the Sierra Foothills Conservancy is shown with a horse during a visit with Diane Bohna and her cattle last week.

Gulch, California." To this day, there is a marker noting the place.

She said that both her mother and father were brought up in ranching families.

In fact, Bohna said she knew what she was going to do with her life since the age of eight.

"I wanted to raise cattle," said Bohna. "I have always loved cows. I was always at my father's side."

She recalls "back in the day" when they used to take cattle to the high country of the Sierra Nevada. It was seven days driving the cattle to their grazing grounds.

Each year, it took them an entire day to make a dangerous crossing of the San Joaquin River.

Bohna tells the story of how her father would use a white tarp on the other side of the river. There was one steep spot the cattle had to cross. They would basically push them into the river, she said, and the cattle would "come up as wet as could be. There was water drip-

ping out of their ears."

As soon as that happened, they began swimming and it was always toward that tarp, which they thought was a wall where they could find safety.

"I can't swim a lick," said Bohna, who just hung onto her horse.

That, however, did not deter her. "It got into my system," said Bohna. "I didn't realize what a unique childhood I was having."

That childhood consisted of going to school and then during the summer, working cattle.

"I didn't see any of my friends, hardly anybody, in the summer," she said.

But she saw her future. "Tenacity," said Bohna. "I believe that is important."

One story which Bohna remembers vividly happened late in the year — and almost cost Bohna her life.

It was around Thanksgiving and some of the cattle, including calves, were stuck, huddled around a large tree. There was 15 to 20 feet of snow on the

ground.

Bohna said they ended up utilizing a helicopter to locate the cattle. The chopper dropped some hay and about four days later, they got in Arctic Cat vehicles and headed to get the stranded animals. They had to wait so the cattle could eat and regain strength.

As they herded them out, Bohna said some of them still couldn't make it through the deep snow. Some they had to put on the machines and take them out one at a time.

"When the last cow loaded, it was just about dusk," said Bohna.

But there was still a long way to go. She drove them over a 10,000 foot pass, but what she remembers the most is the scenery. She said the moonlight was glowing across the terrain.

"It was absolutely stunning," she said. She was also tired, having been awake almost 24 hours — and she was just the age of 12.

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"I sat down and almost fell asleep," she said.

Then her dog licked her face and she stayed awake.

"That saved my life," said Bohna.

Some wondered why her father would leave a young girl alone to bring back the lost cattle. Bohna said he was building a corral facility to house the cattle once they got to the destination.

"That's what was taking him so long," she said.

Bohna also said her father "had so much faith in me."

That, she said, is where that "tenacity" comes in.

It also is a reason Bohna wants to see the land preserved.

"That's why conservation easements were developed," said Bohna. "Perpetuity is priority one."

She said for cattle ranching to continue, it is "essential" that conservation leases be developed to save the land from development.

Bohna also said even if family members are not interested in continuing the business, others can because the land will be preserved because almost all agreements are eternal. It's the very thing she is doing along Cunningham Road and in Raymond.

Bohna began her relationship with SFC because of the easements and it has blossomed.

"They listen to the ranchers," she said.

"They are very good to work with and allow you to truly use the land."

Her late sister did an easement with SFC and Bohna carries on that tradition.

Tradition is something important to Bohna, who understands the importance of her occupation.

"It is a way of life," she said. "It is a tradition. An honest set of values."

With easements, she said "it will continue."

Miller said she believes helping ranchers and preserving the land go hand in hand. It is also a statement to others about the importance of ranching and the simple fact "people are not removed from where your food comes from."

Bohna agrees, but also sees the satisfaction of her work.

"If every morning when you get up you can go do what love, that's big," she said.

Indeed.

And it's not an easy task in the cattle



Photo by Greg Little

Diane Bohna is shown talking with Jim Cunningham, a member of a family that has owned land in eastern Merced County for generations. That seems obvious since he lives on Cunningham Road. He said it was a tradition years ago to name road after families who had settled in the area. But, he said, it's rare to have the family still living in the same place.

business, which is traditionally up and down when it comes to markets and, most importantly, the weather.

"I don't gamble, but I gamble every day," said Bohna.

She talks about "eternal optimism" when it comes to cattle ranching, or many things in life, including the weather. She's a strong believer in that concept.

"That's the way I live," said Bohna.

She also agrees with Miller, who often talks about the simple beauty of the landscape in this region and thinks that is important to preserve, as well.

"To retain this beautiful drive," said Bohna, looking over the grasslands of eastern Merced County. "To be able to keep that as open land. That is key."

Miller said there is currently "more of a push to have active management," something right in the wheelhouse of the SFC.

"When I look at a piece of land, I take

care of the land and water," said Bohna. "If I can manage it properly, naturally it takes care of me, the cows and the land as a whole."

Bohna also agrees that ranchers and farmers are some of the best conservationists on the planet.

And she is always willing to learn.

In one instance, she was visiting with an expert who talked about bird populations and how that is an indicator of land that has been well cared for.

"This must be great land," she said, pointing to areas where bald eagles live. "The middle ground is really big," said Miller.

She's talking about how people on both extremes get most of the publicity, but those in the middle are actually doing the work and preserving land.

"It just doesn't get the attention," said Miller.

Bohna said she has dealt "with a lot of public land circumstances" over the

years.

In what is probably the most notable, her family once owned what is now the government land (and water) at Eastman Lake. The government used eminent domain and acquired the land, reducing the size of their Raymond ranch area.

With conversation easements, eminent domain is still possible, but it is much more difficult, said Miller. She said that is another reason being able to help landowners and the environment is so critical for SFC and other groups.

Bohna agrees.

"We can create a better environment," she said. "You have to evolve."

Part of that evolution was partnering with the conservancy, something Bohna knows might be controversial in the eyes of some, but not her.

"For me to entrust this organization, that's a huge statement," said Bohna.

It is hard to argue that logic.

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