

# The mother of conservation efforts: Hornitos Ranch

Sierra Foothill Conservancy made history with major deal

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By GREG LITTLE Editor



This is the view of the Hornitos Ranch from across Lake McSwain in extreme northern Mariposa County. Photo by Greg Little

***Editor's note: This is the final of an eight-part series about the Sierra Foothill Conservancy.***

Anyone who has driven around Hornitos has seen it.

Many just don't know it.

"This project was a real relationship-building project," said Bridget Fithian, executive director of the Sierra Foothill Conservancy (SFC). "It was a catalyst."



Shown is the Gagliardo family store, which is a centerpiece of historic Hornitos. The store is still open on occasion.

Fithian is speaking of the Hornitos Ranch, a sprawling 6,971-acre piece of land that covers 12 square miles and borders the historic town of Hornitos.

A project more than 10 years in the making, and at times, neither Fithian or Lauren Miller, conservation director at SFC, knew if it was actually going to happen.

But that's kind of par for the course in their daily slog through working on conservation easements, dealing with a wide variety of people and, most important, trying to preserve land in Mariposa County as well as Fresno and Merced counties, where the organization has deep roots.

But for this particular project, the circumstances were different than in most for the conservancy.

For one, it's the largest project they have ever undertaken.

Second, it involved a lot of various groups in order to secure the funding to get the land in a conservation easement. Those agencies include the California Department of Fish

and Wildlife, California Department of Conservation, Wildlife Conservation Board, California Oak Foundation and the California Wildlife Foundation.



Lauren Miller of the Sierra Foothill Conservancy shows important points which are noted on a sign highlight the Hornitos Ranch. Photo by Greg Little

The history of the Hornitos Ranch is rich, beginning with the Gagliardo family, which was the group that got it all started. That family's namesake remains on the old store which still stands in the town. In fact, the store is open on occasion.

But in the year 2000, the land was part of a development company based in Kansas City, Mo. It still is, in fact, but what happened, or would have happened, with the land has change dramatically.

"This was a massive undertaking," said Fithian.

"It hits all the marks," said Miller.

That, however, was not on the table when the land was being considered for development. Massive development.

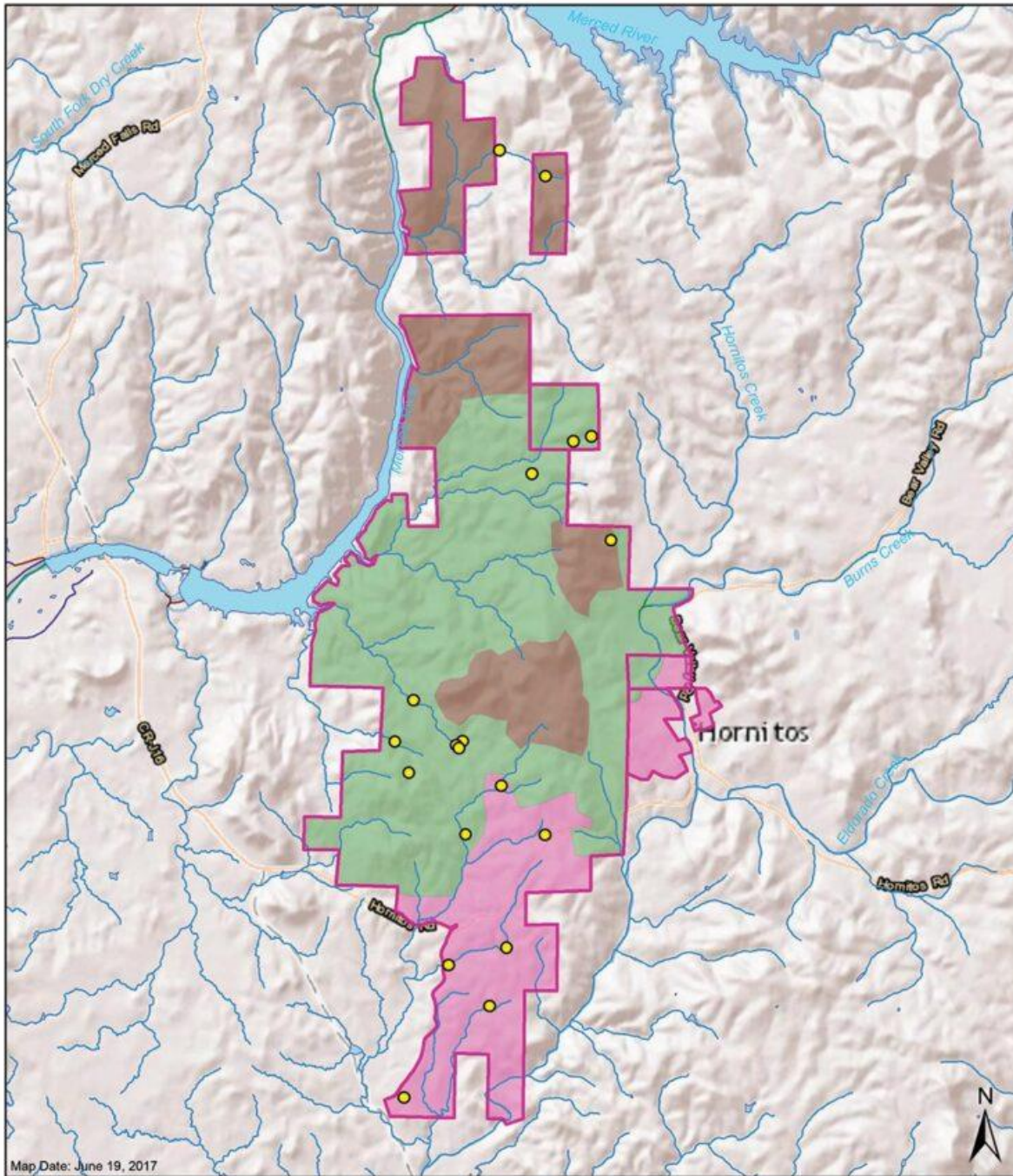
Incredibly, the landowners were considering developing 4,000 homes on the land, in harmony with the founding and growth of the University of California at Merced. They

reasoned the professors who would be coming to the university would want to live in the country. And as the crow flies, it's not far from Hornitos to the university.

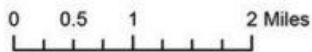


# HORNITOS RANCH

## Habitat Types and Water Resources



Map Date: June 19, 2017



- |                      |                                    |
|----------------------|------------------------------------|
| ● Ponds and pools    | <b>Habitats</b>                    |
| — Streams and Rivers | ■ Annual Grassland (~21% of ranch) |
|                      | ■ Oak Savannah (~55% of ranch)     |
|                      | ■ Oak Woodland (~24% of ranch)     |



This map shows the vastness of the Hornitos Ranch, as well as the many types of habitat, all crucial to wildlife as well as plants.

Fithian said the group had even developed maps which were presented to the county showing how the development would unfold.

And then came the Great Recession.

Interestingly, the recession became sort of a savior for this land.

“The recession was good,” smiled Fithian, meaning it was good for the conservancy as well as what it meant concerning the Hornitos Ranch.

Both Miller and Fithian stress they know development needs to take place in Mariposa County. It’s the only way the county can grow and thrive in the future.

How that development takes place, though, is their focus.

That is where the focus is for SFC. They have spent decades doing conservation easements. What that basically means is the land continues to be owned privately, but an agreement is made to make sure there will be limited development, if any at all.



A wildlife camera on the ranch captured this photo of a coyote nosing around at night. A wide variety of animals live on the ranch, and many more use it as a passage point. Submitted photo

In almost all cases, and especially in this case, it is “to preserve agriculture values,” said Fithian.

Both point out the importance of agriculture to the overall economy, but also to how it is integral in preserving land and making sure nature can literally run its course.

As you drive through the property, it becomes obvious cattle are a big part of the picture. The Sloan family currently leases the land and runs many head of cattle.

That is part of the focus for the conservancy. Fithian said those entities which funded this project share those values.

“They have that shared mindset,” said Miller.

The ecosystem, which is always a focus for the conservancy, “thrives” with agriculture practices, said Fithian.

And when you talk to Miller and Fithian, they have a deep knowledge of everything nature, from vernal pools to the beaked clarkia, a federally protected species that does have habitat on this land.

There are also Western pond turtles, bald and golden eagles and the California tiger salamander.

And that’s just the tip of the species iceberg.

“One of the fortunate things is we were able to preserve a corridor,” said Miller.

Those corridors are crucial to the conservancy, and anyone who cares about nature for that matter.

Those corridors provide passage for all types of critters, including bears and deer and coyotes and foxes and, well, much more.

Another crucial part of the property is the oak trees. There are many, though some have been suffering recently because of the drought.

Miller said the vast land has three main habitat types: oak Savannah, oak woodland and annual grassland.

All of those are integral to the wildlife, which both passes through the land and lives there permanently.

“It connects lands,” said Miller.

She said with the easement of the Hornitos Ranch, there is now some 20,000 acres which are connected, including Merced Irrigation District Land, Bureau of Land Management property and more.

There are 21 miles of streams on the land, three miles of Merced River frontage and much more

“And the scenic value is important,” said Miller.

She pointed out the entire town of Hornitos butts up to the property, meaning a morning view out of a kitchen window on the main drag means looking at the Hornitos Ranch.

Another integral part of the process of getting an easement is working with the landowners after the purchase.

“We just don’t go in and get the land and say ‘see ya,’” said Fithian.

In fact, they actually get to know them better and find ways to work with them to improve the land.

Such is the case with the oak trees on the Hornitos Ranch, where the SFC has introduced the landowners to other groups which can help in saving as many trees as possible.

Fithian pointed out an interesting fact: A single oak tree can house up to 15 species. It might be birds or salamanders or frogs, but they all use the trees for the most important thing – living.

“They are like the mother of trees,” said Fithian.

There are thousands of the oaks on the property, so preserving as many as possible is a huge focus for the conservancy.

There is some good news when it comes to the oak trees, said Fithian, at least on the north facing slopes of the property. The trees seem to do better in those locations, so that has been another focus.

But don’t think trees are the only focus. Far from it.



One key ingredient, at least for nature loving Miller and Fithian, are vernal pools.

Oh, the vernal pools.

Both would probably admit to being “vernal pool nerds,” and rightfully so. They know all about these pools.

But what is a vernal pool?

“It is a specialized ecosystem,” said Fithian.

Fithian said vernal pools have “unique soils and hold water longer” than your run of the mill ponds or mud puddles.

And the most important thing about the vernal pools is how they are the key to life for many creatures.

“Hundreds of species only live there,” said Fithian.

As an example, she said a flower “goes through stages” when it grows in a vernal pool. The most important of these stages are “seeding.”

The reason is vernal pools only have water at certain times of the year. When the flower drops its seeds, those seeds lie dormant for as long as necessary. Then, when the rains return, those seeds sprout and a new flower is born.

The same is true for small creatures, including the “vernal pool fairy shrimp,” said Fithian, where eggs are laid and lay dormant until the water returns. The same is true for the California salamander.

In addition, the grazing cattle on the land can carry some of those life forms to other places, just like wild animals did before the land was developed. So in a way, the cattle are a replacement for what once roamed this land.

And the land itself has an enormous history – literally.

Driving along Hornitos Road in northwestern Mariposa County, if you would have tried to do that millennia ago, you'd have been at the bottom of the ocean. The "tombstone rocks" which dot the landscape are evidence of the watery past.

All of that adds up to success for the conservancy and for Miller, that is part of the lure of the job.

"I like the holistic approach we take," said Miller.

That approach might go against what some call "conservation," but for Miller and Fithian, it is the focus. They understand preserving the land also means preserving the wildlife and, most importantly, preserving a way of life in Mariposa County.

That's their mission and it is getting accomplished.