NATIONAL PARKS CONSERVATION ASSOCIATION
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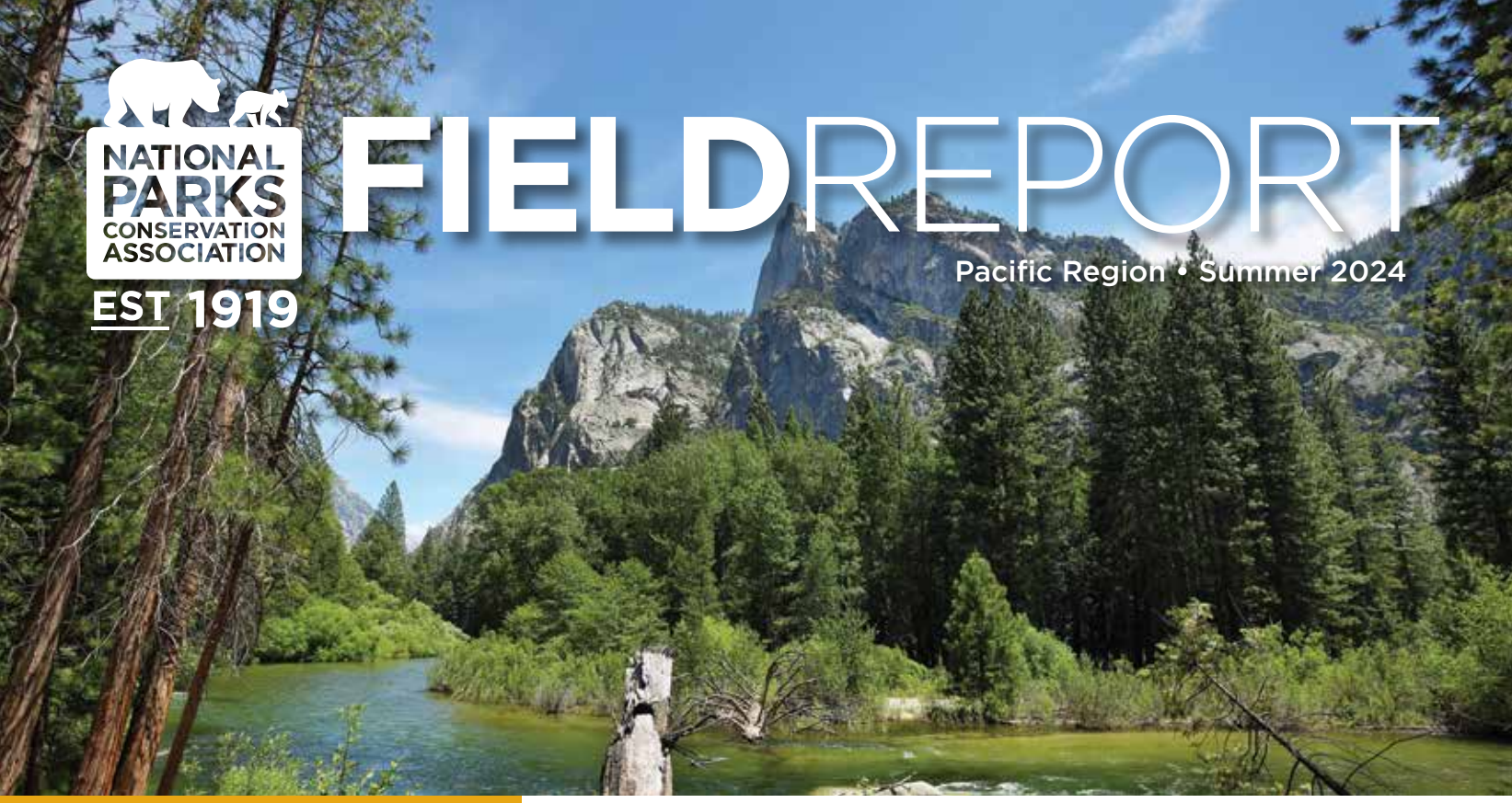
FIELDREPORT

Pacific Region • Summer 2024



Park Service Tule Elk Proposal a Win for Nature Lovers

By Neal Desai

The National Park Service's reintroduction of tule elk at Point Reyes National Seashore in 1978 has long been viewed as a tremendous success, especially after the species was thought to be extinct due to hunting practices in the 1800s. The elk exist at the seashore in two distinct regions: the Tomales Point region where they are confined due to a fence and the central region of the seashore where they are free roaming. The Tomales Point herd has been confined for decades to separate them from grazing operations within the seashore, but two historic droughts over the past decade and the impacts of climate change have led to hundreds of elk dying in this confined location. These unacceptable conditions have led the Park Service to consider taking down the fence in order to provide elk with access to suitable habitat.

NPCA strongly supports the Park Service's proposed plan, which is expected to be completed in the coming months. Along with a large coalition, NPCA has noted that the plan would:

Improve elk herd health: As an endemic species, the tule elk should be able to express

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NPCA's Polluted Parks Report Highlights Air Impacts to California Parks

By Mark Rose

This spring NPCA released its 2024 Polluted Parks report highlighting how air pollution and climate change continue to harm America's national parks. While the report showed some improvement compared to our previous report from 2019, 97% of national parks continue to suffer from significant or unsatisfactory levels of harm from air pollution.

The 2024 Polluted Parks report analyzed three separate air quality categories: visibility, which looks at how haze pollution cuts down on scenic views in our parks, unhealthy air, which looks at how ozone pollution impacts the health of park visitors and employees, and harm to nature, which looks at how pollution affects plants, animals and entire ecosystems.

Notably, the report found that numerous California national park sites such as Joshua Tree, Yosemite, Death Valley, Pinnacles and Mojave National Preserve were in the top 10 most polluted parks for at least one category. Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks stand out in particular as the single most polluted parks in the U.S. for all three air pollution categories. These rankings are obviously troublesome, but

not surprising considering that numerous regions in California like the Los Angeles Metro Area and San Joaquin Valley have long been among the most polluted air basins in the country.

The report also looked at four separate climate change indicators: drought, sea level rise, wildfire and invasive species, all of which have the potential to alter park ecosystems and resources fundamentally and permanently. The report revealed that 57% of all national parks face a high risk from at least one climate threat, with multiple California parks including Lassen Volcanic, Yosemite, Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks and Lava Beds National Monument currently facing three of these climate threats simultaneously.

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Top: Kings River in Kings Canyon National Park, California ©Estivillml | Dreamstime
Above: Haze pollution in Sequoia National Park ©Mark Rose

FIELD REPORT

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How Could It Be?

By Ron Sundergill

California prides itself on being on the cutting edge with its environmental initiatives, yet it comes in dead last in the nation regarding polluted national parks.

Unbelievable, you might say.

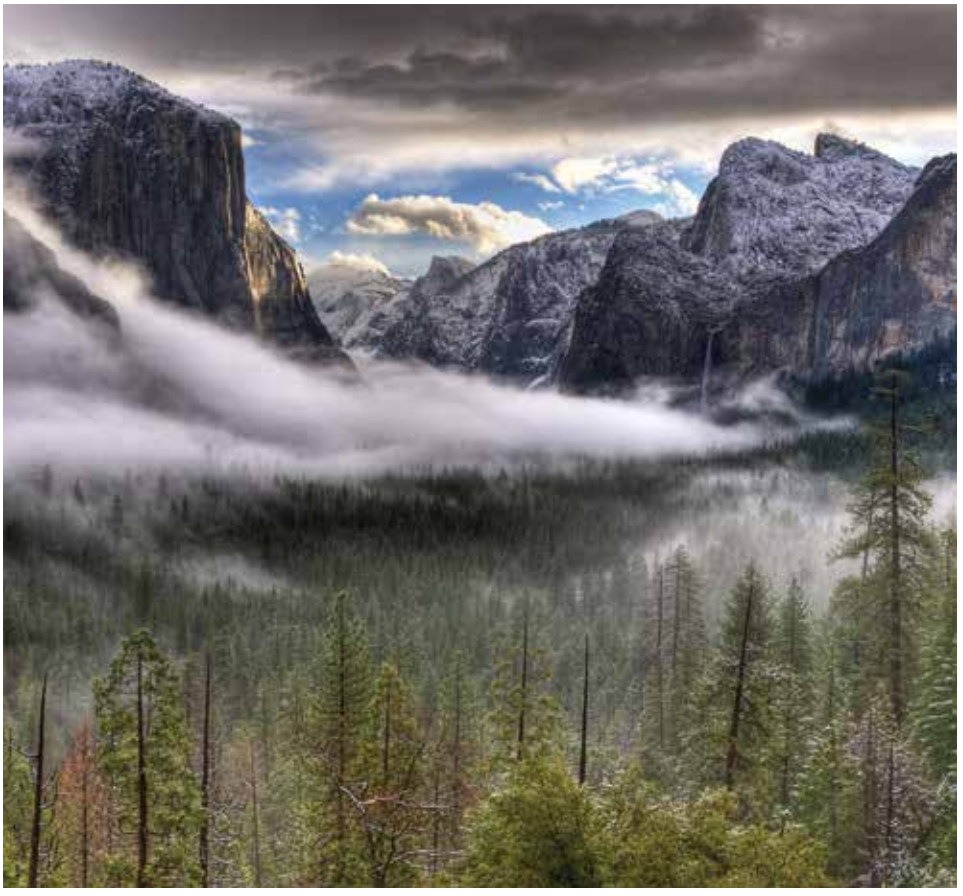
Well, if you look at the record when it comes to enforcement of air pollution laws in the state, it could stand improvement. Mark Rose's story about NPCA's 2024 Polluted Park's report covers this in detail.

Air pollution is especially egregious in California's Central Valley. The record of a mostly laissez-faire attitude in the Central Valley region has resulted in negative consequences in those Sierra Nevada national parks just east of the Valley: Yosemite, Sequoia, and Kings Canyon national parks. Much of the problem in the Central Valley stems from pollution coming from mobile sources, including cars and trucks but also agricultural equipment.

We are working toward solutions by holding the local, state and federal agencies' "feet to the fire." We do that by working in collaboration with numerous community-based and national organizations. Collectively we are participating in many air pollution regulatory hearings, and we are also litigating the lack of action – and winning.

Please join NPCA's Pacific Region staff in fighting for clean air in our national parks and beyond. One way to do that is to weigh in with the California Air Resources Board and with the Environmental Protection Agency. And, of course, you can also make a difference by being a member of NPCA.

Above: Ron Sundergill



Above: Yosemite Valley ©Kreulen | Dreamstime

DESERT GALAPAGOS

Mining near Death Valley and the Threats to the Amargosa Basin

By Luke Basulto

When you envision our national parks in the California desert, a few things likely come to mind. The first is the heat; these parks are in one of the harshest environments on planet Earth, and, remarkably, life here has adapted to survive and thrive.

Next, you might think about just how expansive these areas are. Our desert parks are full of enormous mountain ranges and vast basins, covering hundreds of thousands of acres of open land. Despite the remarkable ecosystems found here, without protection, these areas could easily be disregarded as useless or void of life.

A third thing that may come to mind is just how dry these areas are. But are they? This is where many visitors set themselves up for a surprise. On the surface, it is a common misconception that this part of California

Despite the remarkable ecosystems found here, without protection, these areas could easily be disregarded as useless or void of life.

has little to no water. But beneath the surface, you'll find a completely different story. Consider Death Valley National Park, a place where all of those aforementioned assumptions are cranked up to 11. Death Valley is one of the most fragile parks in the country, if not the world. Life here exists on a razor's edge, having gone through evolutionary pressures that make for some of the most uniquely adapted life forms on Earth. So what happens when those delicately balanced systems get thrown into disarray?

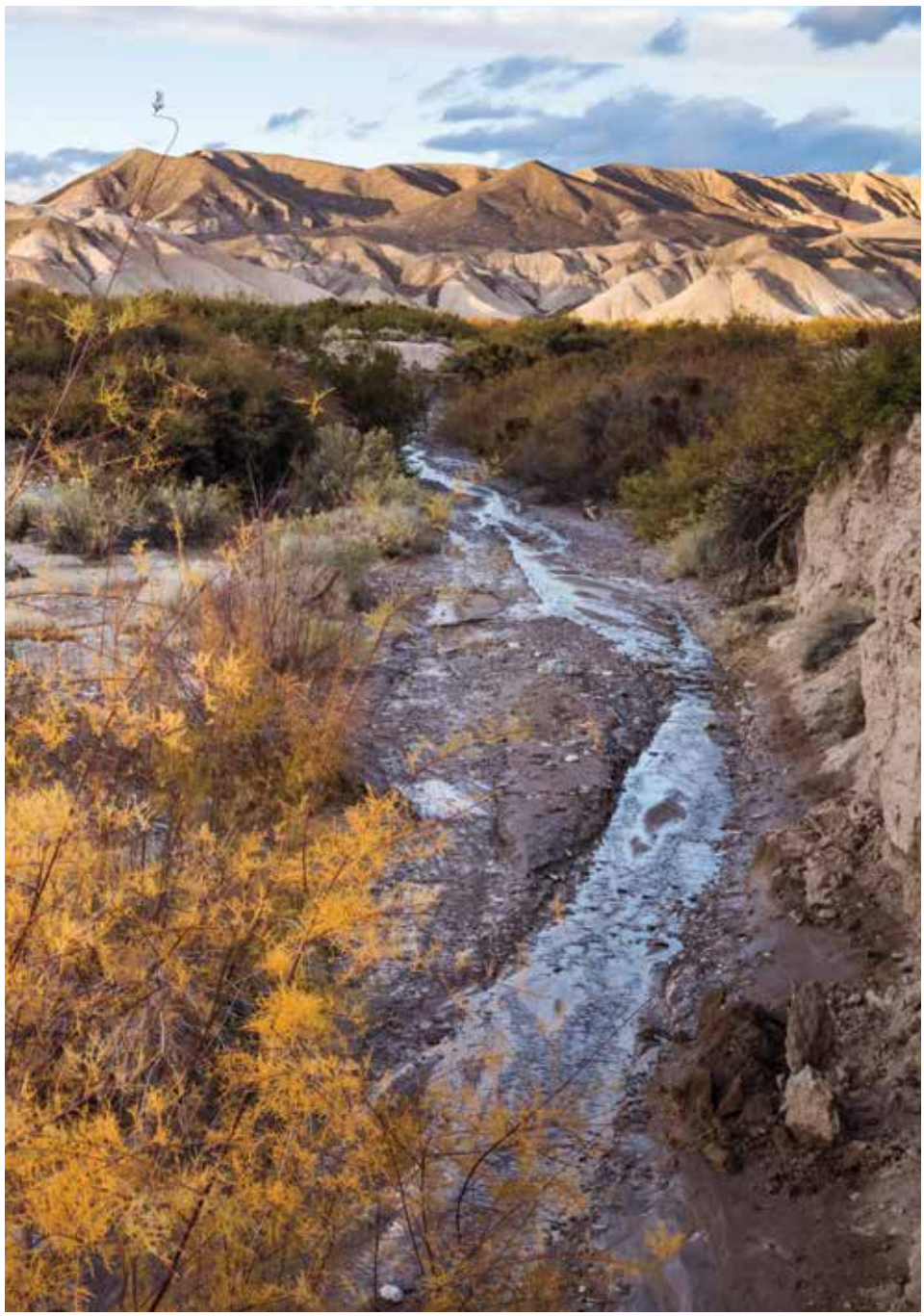
This is what Death Valley National Park and its surrounding landscape currently face due to irresponsible and potentially catastrophic exploratory mining. The mineral deposits found in underground areas like the Amargosa Basin are a target for massive strip-mining operations that seek profit off the resources found below ground in these beautiful areas. The stakes for Death Valley and the Amargosa are even higher when you consider the precarious water sources held in aquifers just beneath the surface.

These aquifers feed desert springs like those at Ash Meadows National Wildlife Refuge, home to endemic fish species found nowhere else on the planet. The simple fact that a fish can survive in a single shallow body of water in one of the hottest, driest environments on the planet should be enough to frame the delicate nature of this area.

Fish aren't the only endemics found in the area, though. Numerous endemic plants and animals like the Amargosa vole have also carved out an existence here.

NPCA is working with local partners like the Amargosa Conservancy and the Center for Biological Diversity to put a stop to these efforts and protect what to many has been deemed the "Desert's Galapagos."

For more information, please contact Luke Basulto, California Desert program manager.



Above: Amargosa River Basin ©Bureau of Land Management California

NPCA's Polluted Parks Report Highlights Air Impacts to California Parks

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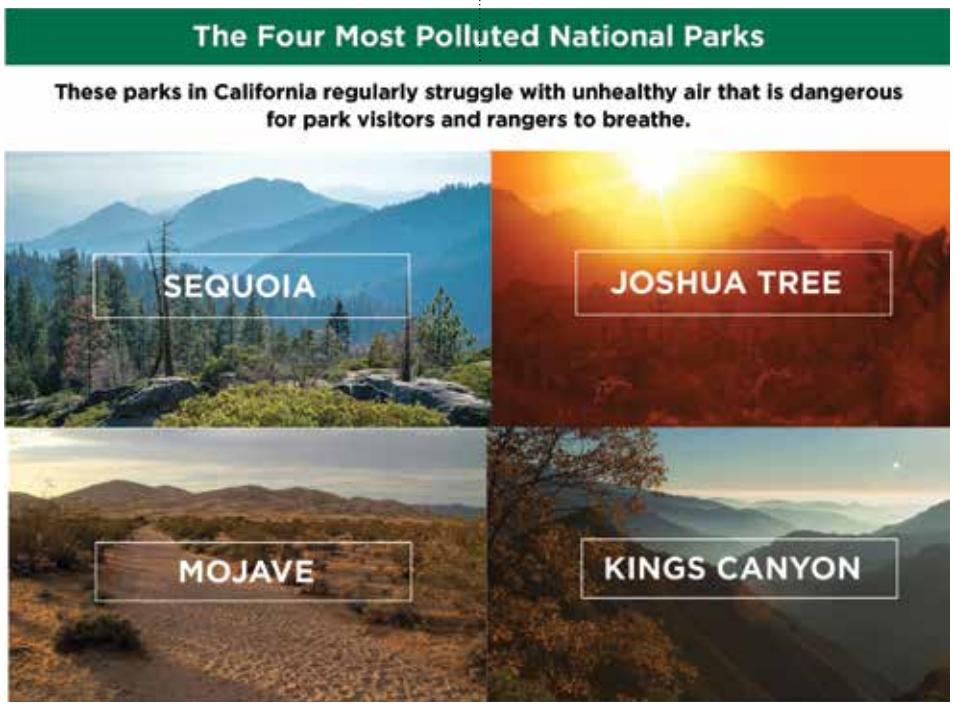
While the 2024 Polluted Parks report contains plenty of unfortunate news for California's treasured national parks, there is reason for optimism. NPCA's Clean Air Team and staff on the ground in California are engaged in various campaigns to limit air and climate pollution both at the state and national levels. NPCA is the leading organization in coalition efforts to improve visibility in national parks through the Clean Air Act's regional haze rule. We are also engaging in multiple federal rules to limit climate pollution from vehicles and power plants, while also focusing on targeted efforts here in California to improve air quality in places like the San Joaquin Valley.

Improvements to park air quality always come slower than we hope, but thanks to the extensive work of NPCA and our partners, we continue to make real progress for our parks and those who love them. NPCA's full 2024 Polluted Parks report can be found online at npca.org/reports/air-climate-report.



Exploring a Hidden Part of Manzanar's History

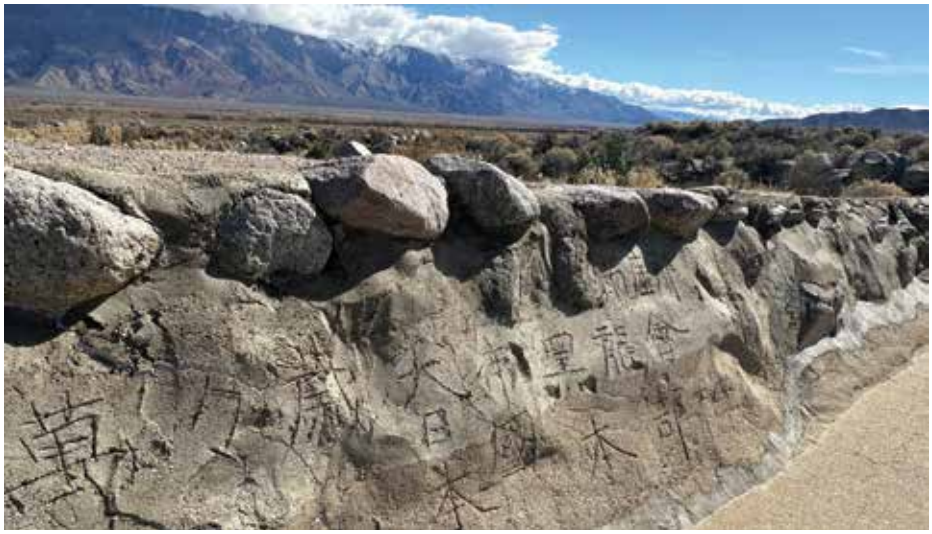
By Dennis Arguelles

On a given afternoon, volunteer Bryan Wright might be clearing brush from the signs and markers that help visitors navigate the Manzanar National Historic Site, one of several parks that tell the story of the unjust incarceration of over 120,000 Japanese Americans during World War II. Today, however, Wright is using his deep knowledge of the park to help a family – and a camp survivor who was there as a young boy – find the location of a specific residential block, resulting in both a joyous and tearful reunion for the family.

Wright was moved by his first visit to Manzanar, particularly since he is of Japanese descent on his mother's side. He soon became a trusted park volunteer and found himself supporting the Park Service on a wide range of maintenance and restoration projects. It was through this work that he became aware of a critical piece of the park's history: a 900,000-gallon reservoir that channeled runoff from the nearby Sierra Nevada mountains and supplied water to the camp, which at its peak held over 10,000 prisoners. The reservoir was built by camp labor, and a visit today reveals numerous inscriptions by workers revealing various attitudes and emotions toward the wartime hysteria and racism that led to their incarceration.

Wright was surprised to learn that the reservoir actually lay on federal land outside the current boundaries of the park site. He felt it was worthy of inclusion in our National Park System, along with nearby archaeological treasures related to the Indigenous Paiute people and the historic town of Manzanar. This caused him to reach out to NPCA, and together we are exploring the potential of expanding the park site boundary to include the area containing the reservoir.

"To me, Manzanar represents something we need to understand so that it does not happen again," said Wright. "At one time, I would have said that was an inconceivable notion. But as George Santayana said: 'Those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it.' I consider it a privilege to have the opportunity to work there."



Right: Inscriptions by laborers who built the reservoir capture important attitudes about their incarceration at Manzanar. ©Dennis Arguelles

Veterans in Parks

By Jimi Shaughnessy

Over the past two years, NPCA's Veterans Program has doubled in size, bringing more veterans into the dynamic conversation about protecting our parks for future generations. In May 2023, Andrew Yip was appointed as the first senior veterans fellow. Residing in the San Gabriel Valley of Los Angeles, Yip collaborates with Veterans Program Manager Jimi Shaughnessy to engage more West Coast-based veterans in our efforts.

The NPCA Veterans Council has been renewed for a second term. Established in 2022, the Council is comprised of 12 individuals from across the country, representing each branch of the military and a range of ranks.

The council met in person for the first time last Halloween in Joshua Tree National Park for a week of planning, strategy sessions, park visits and meetings with community members. Council members will continue to guide NPCA's initiatives at the intersection of the military community and park protection. Learn more about our members here.

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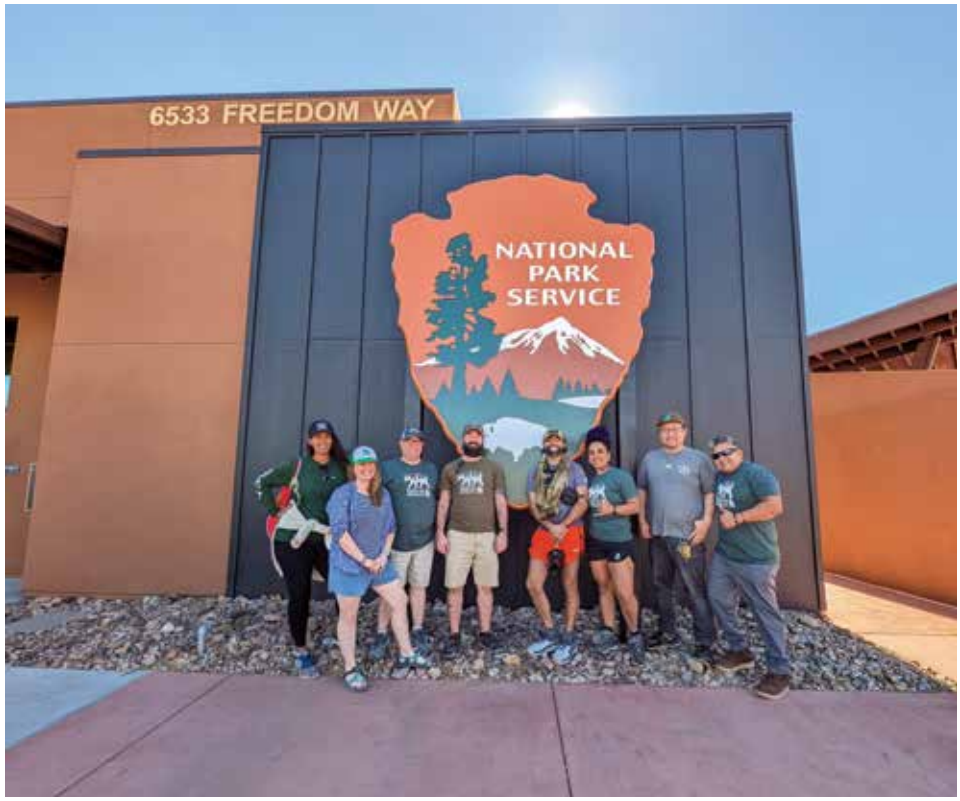
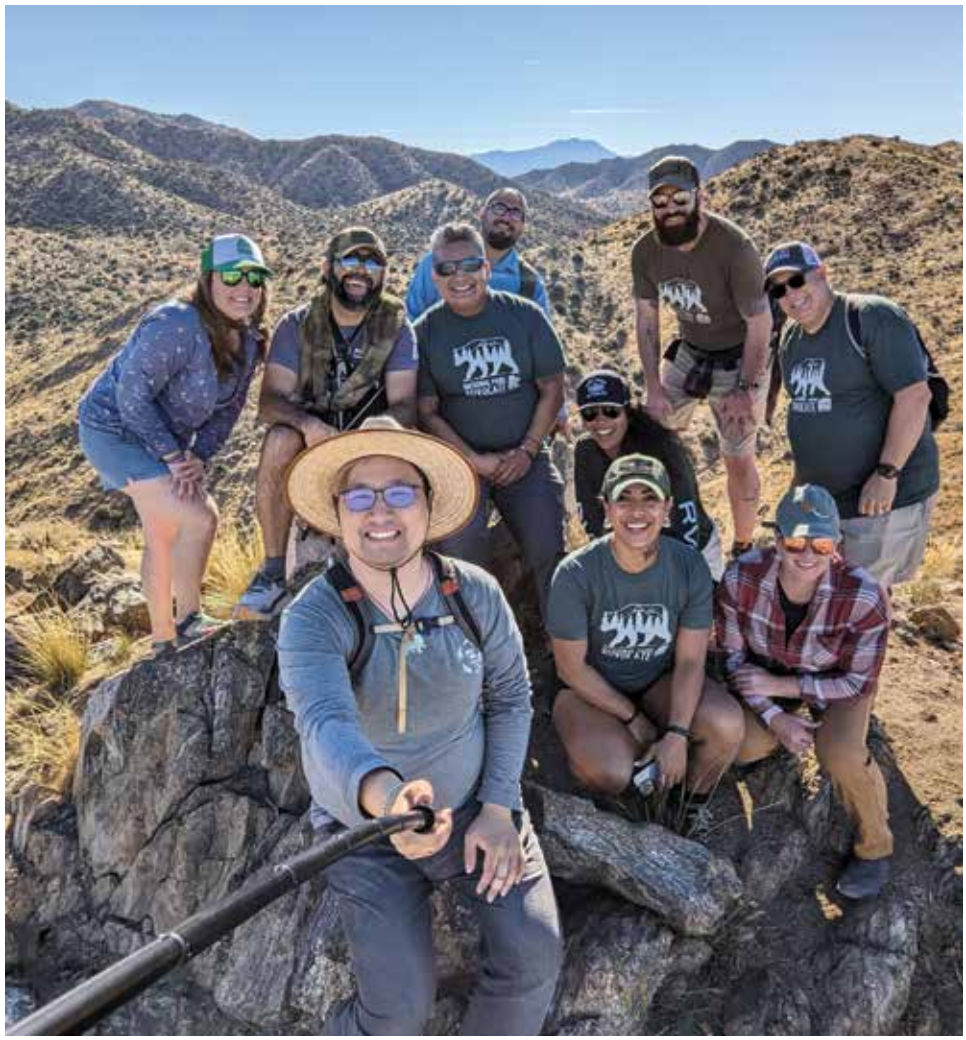
During this past Lobby Day, LA resident and Veterans Council member Patrick Ketchum attended to discuss the importance of increased funding for the Park Service budget, the passing of the Rim of the Valley Corridor Preservation Act, and the protection of our cultural resources. Previous invitees for Lobby Day have included Los Angeles-based Regional Council member Col. Irma Cooper.

The veteran voice is a crucial, often overlooked component in the protection of our parks and environment. Involving veterans in these discussions brings a multifaceted perspective that might otherwise be missed. If you know a veteran interested in this work, please contact Shaughnessy at JShaughnessy@npca.org to see how their voice can contribute to park protection.





Above: Veterans Council members pose in front of the new visitor center in Joshua Tree.
Below: Veteran Council members take a selfie in Joshua Tree. Photos by Andrew Yip | NPCA

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Park Service Tule Elk Proposal a Win for Nature Lovers

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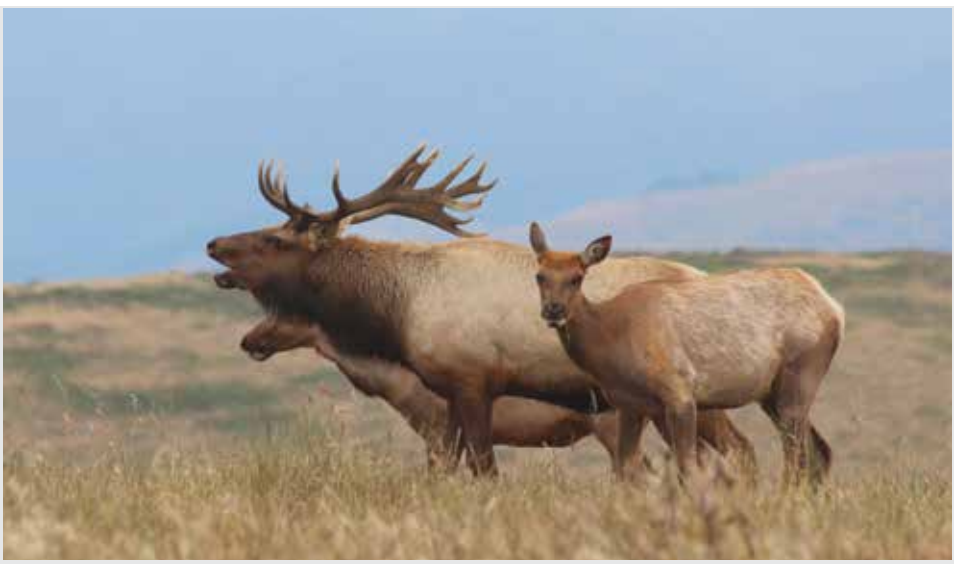
their natural movement and foraging behaviors unimpeded by the 3 miles of artificial 8-foot elk fencing. Removing the elk fence restores their ability to roam freely and find sufficient food and water sources throughout the national seashore.

Increase genetic diversity: The current confined conditions increase the risk of inbreeding depression and reduce genetic diversity for this unique herd. Providing access to a larger range helps maintain gene flow and genetic variability of the free-ranging tule elk herds of the Point Reyes peninsula.

Respect cultural significance: The tule elk holds great cultural and spiritual importance for the Coast Miwok peoples, who are indigenous to this region. The Park Service's plan provides opportunities for further consultation and coordination with Tribal partners, building on opportunities such as employing prescribed fire and incorporating Traditional Ecological Knowledge to steward natural and cultural resources at Tomales Point.



Enhance visitor experience: Many visitors come to Point Reyes to view wildlife in their natural state. The removal of the elk fence and permitting the tule elk to roam free creates more opportunities for visitors to observe and appreciate these magnificent animals in an open, natural setting.

NPCA is encouraged by this effort to ensure the iconic tule elk is protected for present and future generations, in line with the Park Service's mission.

Top: A bull tule elk and two females on Tomales Point ©NPS

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