

OPINION FROM COMMUNITY VOICES

# *Don't rush the trails: Conservation must come before recreation*



BY DAVID RUBIN  
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Along the trails at San Vicente Redwoods in 2023. Credit: Land Trust of Santa



**Quick Take**

David Rubin, retired geologist and board chair of the Rural Bonny Doon Association, takes issue with Mickey Rush's Lookout op-ed urging Santa Cruz County to immediately open damaged trails for recreation. Rubin and the RBDA board believe recreation is not benign, and research shows that human presence and human voices — even on simple roads — harm wildlife and fragment habitat. Land managers like the Land Trust of Santa Cruz County have a responsibility, he writes, to protect ecosystems, not just provide access, and their intentional, science-driven approach deserves support. In an era of climate crisis and crowded trails, preservation — not instant gratification — must guide decisions about when and how public lands are opened.

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Mickey Rush's [recent Lookout op-ed](#) argues that damaged trails across Santa Cruz County should be open for public access immediately.

He backs his argument up by insisting “life is short” and suggesting that the public should not have to wait years for trails to reopen safely. He points to specific examples along Empire Grade, Old Haul Road in Pescadero Creek Park and East Zayante Road. He insists trail users don't need “curated outdoor spaces with groomed trails, fancy signage, campgrounds, bathrooms and ranger stations.” He just wants roads to ride and objects to the slow, meticulous way the [Land Trust of Santa Cruz County](#) manages and conserves land, including the San Vicente Redwoods.

The [Rural Bonny Doon Association](#) (RBDA) board and I disagree.

Rush's view – like that of the Trump administration – fails to value conservation. Federally, the Trump administration wants the Bureau of Land Management to consider only “productive uses” (grazing, logging and extraction of fuels, minerals and other resources) when making decisions regarding public land use. Rush's worldview is more enlightened as he does recognize and celebrate the value of recreation, but both perspectives are disturbingly human-centric. They prioritize a view of nature with value derived from extraction of products or instant gratification for human activities.

Not everyone shares such a worldview.

Some people — including some donors to land-preservation efforts — prefer that a portion of preserved lands remain unused by humans. They want it reserved for wildlife habitat, species diversity or as a buffer against climate change.

In his 1960 [“Wilderness Letter,”](#) Wallace Stegner wrote: “We simply need that wild country available to us, even if we never do more than drive to its edge and look in. For it can be a means of reassuring ourselves of our sanity as creatures, a part of the geography of hope.”

Recreation is not a benign activity. We know recreational activities like hiking and biking, which don't involve harvesting of resources, can still have harmful effects on species, their habitat and efforts to protect them. In fact, a [2016 study](#) shows that recreational activities had a negative impact on wildlife in more than half of 274 published studies worldwide.

In the Santa Cruz Mountains, [Chris Wilmers](#) and his group of puma researchers at UC Santa Cruz found that mountain lions' fear of people results in lions fleeing kill sites when humans are nearby, [possibly requiring the lions to kill up to 50% more deer a year](#) due to reduced feeding time at kills. This stresses

the animals by requiring greater energy expenditure. The [Puma Project](#) has also documented that mountain lions typically require a buffer of at about 2,000 feet from human activity to establish nurseries to raise their kittens. [A 2019 publication in Ecology Letters](#) shows fear of humans – even without changes in roads or infrastructure – has an impact on wildlife from mountain lions to mice.

In other words, people on trails — not just the trails — have a quantifiable negative impact on wildlife.

Noise isn't the only negative impact of recreation on wildlife. Access on authorized trails also sadly too often leads to the ad-hoc creation of unauthorized trails, which often aren't as well designed to inhibit erosion as official trails. Trail access also creates an opening for illegal camping and campfires.

Rush doesn't take any of this into account.



Post-CZU fire regrowth in the San Vicente Redwoods in 2023. Credit: Will McCahill / Lookout Santa Cruz

In his op-ed, Rush specifically objects to the Land Trust's management of San Vicente Redwoods. I am a retired geologist with 50 years' experience at the U.S. Geological Survey and UC Santa Cruz, and I see the Land Trust's management as exemplary.

RBDA hosted a 2023 public meeting at which staff of the the Land Trust explained how the San Vicente Redwoods trail system was designed to minimize habitat fragmentation by leaving large

swaths of the park free of trails, while strategically concentrating multiple trails near each other, but also out of sight of each other.

Because the Land Trust is a private organization, it has the flexibility to close trails when they are too wet (as it did twice in the past few weeks). Land Trust staff also told us that the permit system (that Rush objects to) allows the Land Trust to block access for specific users or classes of users who violate rules. In contrast, managers at Wilder Ranch State Park seem to be unable to prevent unauthorized trail-building or prevent access during wet weather.

Land-preservation organizations and public agencies have responsibilities other than providing access. Some land is valued for its natural, historical or ecologically important qualities, and human intrusion often conflicts with that.

Most of the properties that have been saved from development in Santa Cruz County took many hours of lobbying, organizing and fundraising by people trying to preserve them in their natural state, with recreation (sometimes) as an additional motivation. The main intention was not to create a wonderland for bikers, although biking was usually seen as a healthy activity and a good way to get the public to appreciate nature.

But the advent of electric bikes, online maps of unauthorized trails and promotion by the biking and tourism industries have led to crowded trails. Opening a property to recreation, especially biking, comes with a cost to the landowner. Monitoring, signage and trail maintenance are expensive, and often the funds are not available.

Our planet is on the brink of catastrophe, in part due to the belief of some people that they have the right to exploit any resources they see as profitable or enjoyable. Rush endorses this

belief with his call to immediately open trails/fire/logging roads to recreation.

I embrace his love of the outdoors, but believe recreation is not a right, but a privilege, and not always a benign activity. Land managers must value not only extractive uses and recreation but also value benefits that aren't human-centric.



David Rubin hiking in southern Utah, October 2025. Credit: Michelle Rubin

I've been hiking for 66 years (including 100 miles last month), and I've never seen hikers collide. The collision problem is caused by too many bikes — not too few trails. To reduce collisions without more intrusion into wildlife habitat, bikers should slow down.

*David Rubin is chair of the Rural Bonny Doon Association, a local environmental organization founded in 1957 to advocate for preservation of lands in Bonny Doon and neighboring Santa Cruz Mountains. He is a retired geologist with 50 years' experience at the U.S. Geological Survey and UC Santa Cruz. His 1977 discovery of an active offshore fault led the Nuclear Regulatory Commission to permanently close the Humboldt Bay nuclear reactor. He co-designed experimental restoration floods in the Grand Canyon.*

