

Cal French, 1937-2020

Cal French passed away on March 16 at the age of 83, after a long battle with cancer.

While a recitation of Cal's career as a volunteer with the Sierra Club at the local, state, and national level would make for a decades-long compendium of award-winning dedication and achievement, we feel that the story of a trek that Cal undertook from Needles, CA, to Morro Bay at the age of 74 does the best job of taking the measure of the man.

The following is reprinted from the April 2011 issue of the *Santa Lucian*.

Cal's Trek

On March 20, Cal French, a member of the Santa Lucia Chapter's Executive Committee and a resident of Paso Robles, began a seven-week trek across California – covering more than 500 miles from Laughlin, Nevada, to Morro Bay — to call attention to the need for protected wilderness lands.

“Aside from the personal challenge, I want to demonstrate by walking across them that the ecosystems from the Eastern Mojave Desert to the Pacific Ocean are linked together by public and conservancy lands,” said Cal. “Without the protections afforded by the Tejon Ranch Conservancy, the Wind Wolves Preserve, the Mojave National Preserve, and other public lands, plants and wildlife would face a fragmented maze of development when they try to adapt to climate change. The public needs to know what a wonderful treasure has been saved.”

To highlight the need to protect wild places and connect them together, Cal and a rotating cadre of companions will trek from the Colorado River through the Tehachapi Mountains to the coast. The trek crosses some challenging landscapes, including 220 miles of desert. “I see the desert as a demonstration of how nature can produce animals as resilient as desert tortoises, big horn sheep and kit foxes as well as colorful cactus flowers and 10,000-year-old creosote bushes,” said Cal. “My larger purpose is to show that someone can walk on public and conservancy land, avoiding roads and highways, over an area that still looks natural.

“It is through this personal connection with the land across about 530 miles that I hope to speak for the necessity of preserving and protecting what wildness remains. If this wildness is isolated, it will eventually die of starvation when connections are severed. Biologists have told me that the San Joaquin Valley kit fox population on the Carrizo Plain National Monument — through which the trek will pass — could die out unless it maintains connections with populations to the north and south of the Monument. Joshua trees in Joshua Tree National Park are starting to suffer from excessive summer heat; meanwhile, other groves of these picturesque spiny plants are extending west of the hottest deserts.”

Lesli Daniel, an organizer with Sierra Club California, said “As we prepare to launch the Sierra Club's Resilient Habitats campaign here in California, Mr. French's journey will help call attention to the essential role of protecting healthy natural systems.”

The Sierra Club's Resilient Habitats campaign is a national effort, which seeks to protect, connect and restore wild places as healthy natural systems, not isolated pieces, to create resilient habitats where plants, animals and people can survive and thrive in a changing world. Two of the ten main areas of focus for the campaign are in California: the California Coast and the Sierra Nevada.

"Cal's journey is an inspiration to everyone to explore, enjoy and protect California's amazing wild places," said Sarah Matsumoto, Senior Field Organizer with the Sierra Club. "With the threat of climate change, it will be even more important to preserve these natural systems so they will continue to provide us with pure drinking water, clean air, a thriving tourist economy and an unparalleled wild heritage to pass on to future generations."

You can follow Cal's trek on Sierra magazine's web site. Go to <http://sierraclub.typepad.com/explore/across-california/>