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March 12, 2019

Dear Ventura County Board of Supervisors,

I write in support of the proposed ordinance to protect the wildlife corridor connecting the Santa Monica Mountains and the Los Padres National Forest, via the critical linkage of the Simi Hills. This ordinance is about more than a bridge: it's about protecting regional connectivity as an ecological, social, and cultural imperative.

We must consider regional habitat connectivity first in view of Southern California's special place in a global ecological context. Our region is one of only five on the planet to possess the Mediterranean-style climate. These regions take up just over 2% of the planet's surface, but they host an astonishing 16% of the planet's biodiversity. For this reason, we are regarded as a "biodiversity hotspot," which is defined as a region whose high levels of endemic (species unique to our region) is matched only by high levels of human disturbance (Rundel and Tiszler, "Santa Monica Mountains in Global Context." *Flora and Ecology of the Santa Monica Mountains* 2007).

Places of greatest diversity are also places of greatest vulnerability. Therefore, our region demands expert management as part of the responsibility of living here. The chief causes of human disturbance in the region are habitat fragmentation and loss of connectivity between habitats. These are two of the chief causes of biodiversity declines globally. As patches of remaining wild lands diminish, they become too small to sustain viable populations of wildlife. As corridors for migration disappear, diversity becomes trapped in "islands" that are vulnerable to local changes and disturbances that can cause local extinctions. One fire can eliminate an endemic species. One development project can cut off an essential migration corridor.

As local extinctions accumulate, large-scale extinctions are increasingly likely. The data now suggests that biodiversity declines as a result of fragmentation and loss of connectivity are significant contributing factors to an anticipated human-caused "6th extinction", which is predicted to reduce biodiversity by half—that is, half of all species—by century's end (Kolbert, *The Sixth Extinction* 2014). Once lost, a species will never appear again. The interlinking of species means that the loss of one may affect many others, like the fall of dominoes.

Ecologists regard biodiversity as the chief measure of environmental health: the greater the biodiversity, the better the quality of the environment. But habitat and biodiversity are also measures of human and social health. Access to healthy environments is essential for human beings: healthy environments lower the risk of childhood obesity and diabetes and the risk of psychiatric disorders (Engemann, et al, "Residential Green Space in Childhood Is Associated with Lower Risk of Psychiatric Disorders." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 2019; "Parks and Public Health in Los Angeles County." County of Los Angeles Public Health, 2016). Neighboring Los Angeles has some of the lowest park-per-person ratios in the country. There, human health suffers for lack of fair and equal access to safe, clean parks and

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open spaces. There, the hard work is in restoring environments to some measure of health: for example, the LA River, once a vital corridor for native species like steelhead trout and red-legged frogs, and source of life and community for indigenous peoples, now must be reimagined and restored at enormous expense. And it will never be what it was.

This is not yet the issue in the Santa Monica Mountains and Simi Hills. There, we have not yet lost those vital links to the environment: we still have the chance to preserve them before they disappear under concrete and development.

The Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area itself began as a response to the unequal access to healthy places: Created in the 1970s, it was intended to "meet the needs of people of color...who otherwise lacked the ability to access the 'national park experience'" (Byrne, "When Green Is White." *Geoforum* 43 [2012]). The park was designed to bring the National Park experience within a few short miles of park-poor Angelenos, linking humans to what has been called "America's best idea." Now that Ventura County has developed around the Santa Monica Mountains, we have an obligation to protect it for the people whom the park was intended to serve. By protecting habitat, we protect ourselves and our communities.

The indigenous Chumash understood the wisdom of connection: for thousands of years they regarded this region as a vital link between earth and sky. They called it 'Alalpay, meaning "the heavens," and a site of great power and cosmological significance.

Chumash cosmology regards the habitat corridor in the terms of otherworldly wisdom, harmonious linkages between human and divine wisdom. But as development continues to encroach on wildlife habitat, we find ourselves increasingly at war with nature rather than at one with it. We fancy ourselves masters of nature, but this is an illusion: The effects of this war against nature are felt most painfully by us, as the most recent—but certainly not the last—wildfires have devastated our communities. As we continue to fail to understand the natural facts of our environments, whether fire or loss of biodiversity, we place ourselves and our future at risk.

Connectivity is not only an ecological necessity: it's a social and cultural imperative. Ventura County, with its approach to preserving open space, presents a unique opportunity to preserve a oneness with wildness. I urge you to continue to exercise the foresight that has made this region a natural wonder and to continue to demonstrate Ventura county's forward-thinking approach to living better with our nonhuman partners by supporting the wildlife corridor.

Sincerely,

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