

PAUL ROGERS ~ HONORARY RANGER ACCEPTANCE ADDRESS

Thanks for this wonderful award. I'm really touched and honored. It's great to be here. Want to thank Denzil and Lynn and Dave Carle for the invite and for the opportunity to visit with you today.

Nearly 40 years ago, James Watt -- remember him? -- was asked by a reporter what he thought about the news media. "They take perfectly good trees and turn them into bad newspapers," he said.

Some of you may agree. But that's not our goal. Our goal is to produce timely, accurate, compelling coverage of issues that affect society so that the public can be better informed. That was the original idea of the framers of this country. They believed that for the American experiment in self-governance to succeed, the public had to be informed, and journalists had to be free to question and challenge the government and hold leaders accountable. It's why the press is the only business named in the Bill of Rights.

What is a resource worth? Anything it costs.

The San Jose Mercury News is the oldest newspaper in California and the oldest business in Santa Clara County. We were founded in 1851 and named not for the Roman god with the winged helmet, but

for the quicksilver mercury mines in the hills south of San Jose.

Those mercury mines, by the way, are today, Almaden Quicksilver County Park. They sit a few miles west of Henry Coe State Park and a few miles east of Castle Rock State Park on the eastern flank of the Santa Cruz Mountains.

I like to tell people that we are the only newspaper in the country named after a Section 303 (d) pollutant under the Clean Water Act. Not too many audiences get that joke.

Even though Yosemite seems to get much of the attention, I've always felt that California's state parks system is one of its greatest treasures. Whether families are hiking around Emerald Bay, gazing out over the Pacific Ocean from the bluffs at Andrew Molera State Park in Big Sur, gasping at the timeless giants at Humboldt Redwoods, relaxing on the beach at Crystal Cove, or learning about the state's amazing history at Hearst Castle, Bodie Ghost Town, or Angel Island, state parks protect the best of California's natural and cultural history.

They truly embody one of the most democratic ideas that America has ever had -- that the most spectacular places, the most important places, the most awe-inspiring places -- should not be locked away behind gates for the few



wealthy elites, but rather open and available to everyone, no matter their station in life or their background.

Journalists make mistakes. We miss stories. We don't always see the most important trends.

But despite that, from the very beginning of California's modern state parks system, media coverage has been important in sounding the alarm when special places were in danger or the public's interest was threatened. Reporters have shined a light on the need to protect unique landscapes, and prodded public officials when they moved too slowly or not at all.

Most of us know the story about how Andrew P. Hill, a San Jose photographer, drew attention to the ancient redwoods in the Santa Cruz Mountains, which in the 1890s were being clear cut for fence posts and railroad ties.



But in 1901, just before the state legislature was set to vote on the bill to provide the money that could buy the Big Basin redwood forest and set it aside, Hill urged Harry G. Wells, the editor of the San Jose Mercury, to write an editorial championing the effort. He did. The night before the vote.

Shortly after the papers came rolling off the printing press in the wee hours of the morning, Hill bundled up 150 copies and took them on a 4:30 am train to Sacramento. He placed one on the desks of every state senator and assemblyman hours before the big vote.

The bill passed. The money was appropriated. And California's state park system was born.

I've been at the Mercury News now for 33 years. I've covered the environment beat for nearly all that time. I honestly believe we are writing the first draft of history, and that far too many of you, along with the people who help save and fund our amazing state park system, get far too little credit for what you accomplish.

In the decade ahead, California's state parks system has some amazing opportunities. And it has considerable challenges. It needs a permanent funding source. It needs more rangers, scientists, and other staff. It needs to do a better job welcoming people of all backgrounds. It needs more champions in the Legislature, more vision from state leaders, more interest from the largest environmental groups, and more attention from journalists.

And perhaps most of all, it needs to keep growing to meet the needs of the state's growing and changing population. One cannot say that they are in favor of diversity and inclusion but add no

new parks to the places with the fewest parks. Other parks agencies, like East Bay Regional Parks, have shown it can be done.

Previous generations, even during the Great Depression, found the will and the money. In the 1930s, when the economy was wrecked, California created nearly 40 new state parks, including Mount Diablo, DL Bliss, Will Rogers State Beach, Anza Borrego, Point Lobos, Fremont Peak, Seacliff State Beach, Sonoma Coast, Castle Crags, and Calaveras Big Trees.

Those places have been enjoyed by tens of millions of people and generations of families since. They have made our state a better place to live.

But until the Newsom administration agreed to set aside funding to establish Dos Rios State Park near Modesto earlier this year, it had been 13 years -- since 2009 -- with the creation of Fort Ord Dunes -- since the state had established a new park unit. That's the longest such drought in the history of the department, back to the 1920s. There are still thousands of acres that the state parks system owns, but which remain closed to the public years after their acquisition.

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Yes, but parks cost money, several governors have said. They require ongoing commitments.

Yes, they do. But looking back, nobody ever says 'We saved too much of Big Basin.' 'Mount Tamalpais would have been better covered with gated subdivisions.' 'Big Sur could really use a six-lane freeway.'

As the writer Wallace Stegner wrote decades ago: "What is a resource worth? Anything it costs. If we never hike it or step into its shade, if we only drive by occasionally and see the textures of green mountainside change under wind and sun, or the fog move soft feathers down the gulches, or the last sunset on the continent redden the sky beyond the ridge, we have our money's worth. We have been too efficient at destruction; we have left our souls too little space to breathe in. Every green natural place we save saves a fragment of our sanity and gives us a little more hope that we have a future."

Thank you very much.