

Menlo Park's Almanac

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Celebrating open space

Two of the Peninsula's
premiere environmental
organizations celebrate
25 years of saving nature and
teaching kids to care about it.

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Photo by Frank Bevans

Celebrating open space

*Stories by
Marion Softky*

In 25 years, the Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District has saved 42,000 acres; Environmental Volunteers' docents have taught nature to thousands of students

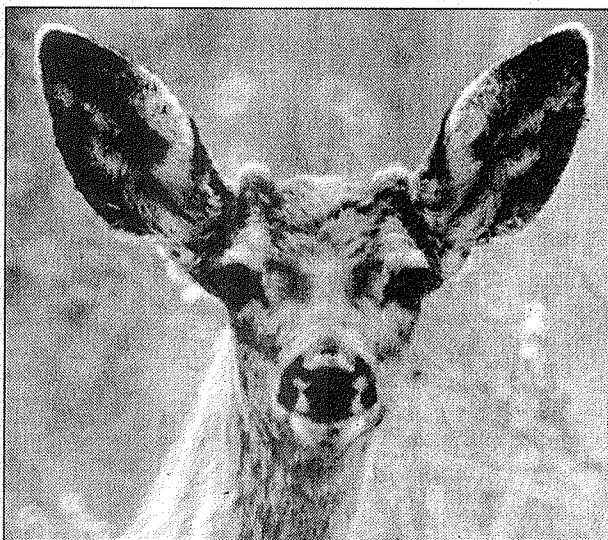


Photo courtesy of Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District

The Peninsula is rich with people and organizations dedicated to preserving what's left of the natural environment and opening it to present and future generations.

People protect the natural heritage in many ways: through individual action, and through participation in organizations that have saved thousands of acres of Bay, creek, coast, mountains, meadows and forests, which might otherwise be asphalt, homes and businesses.

These organizations are public and private, with huge areas of city, county, state and national parks added to the Peninsula in the last generation. They are old and young: as old as Sem-pervirens Fund, which has been preserving redwood forests for

99 years; and as young as Community Impact, which has marshaled energetic volunteers to restore parks and build trails for nine years.

They are political, like the Sierra Club and Committee for Green Foothills, which fight over-development and destructive uses of land. They are educational, like Hidden Villa, which teaches children about farms and nature on the former estate of the late Frank and Josephine Duveneck. They raise money, like the Peninsula Open Space Trust (POST), which has helped buy and preserve open lands on the Peninsula.

In this issue, the Almanac focuses on two of these organizations, both celebrating their 25th anniversary this year.

The Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District, formed by voters of northern Santa Clara County in 1972, has preserved 42,000 acres of foothills, mountains and Baylands as open space available to the public. It has changed much of the Peninsula hills from developer dreams to forever natural.

Environmental Volunteers was founded in the same year by the late Karen Nilsson to teach school children about the natural world so they would care about it and work for it in later years.

The public is invited to a joint celebration of the accomplishments of these two organizations on Sunday, Oct. 12, from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m., at Skyline Ridge Open Space Preserve. Booths, exhibits and activities will be set up around two ponds.

Environmental Volunteers will conduct activities for children, while adults can hike, relax, learn, or check out a mountain bike.

The festival, "Take a Walk on the Wild Side," is an opportunity to have fun and and learn more about the organizations and their work.

Sometimes the wildlife watches the hikers and photographers.

Below: The top of Windy Hill is perfect for hawks, kites, radio controlled gliders, and sometimes even hang gliders.



Photo by Charlotte MacDonald

Above: Hikers enjoy an outing on Windy Hill Open Space Preserve, which has been saved from development by the Regional Open Space District and the Peninsula Open Space Trust. At left: You can see forever from the top of the Windy Hill Open Space Preserve. Without formation of the open space district 25 years ago, this view would probably include houses.

Open space district saved Peninsula hills from bulldozers

Approximately one million people a year enjoy lands owned by the Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District. They hike its 240 miles of trails, picnic in redwood forests, enjoy panoramic vistas and spring wildflowers, ride horses and bicycles on wilderness trails, send their kids to study salamanders and earthquakes in nature education programs, and fly kites, model airplanes and hang gliders from its windy hills.

Many more enjoy the scenic backdrop of Silicon Valley and the many benefits — from cleaner air to less flooding and less traffic — that come from the 42,000 undeveloped public acres acquired by the open space district.

Watching the fog roll over the bare hills, it's easy to take these natural expanses for

granted. But 25 years ago, things were different. With the exception of a handful of county parks, every acre of the Skyline area and its foothills was privately owned and mostly off-limits to the public. Further, many owners of rural land had visions of scenic subdivisions that would bring husky profits.

The future implied by that private ownership changed forever in November 1972. People in northern Santa Clara County voted by more than 2 to 1 to establish the Midpeninsula Regional Park District (later renamed the Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District), a special government agency that could levy taxes to buy and manage land solely for the preservation of open space.

Without this district, "we could have had ridgetop Pacifica all the way down Skyline Boulevard," says Jay Thorwaldson, who first floated the concept of a special government agency to acquire open space in an editorial in the Palo Alto Times on Feb. 16, 1970.

The vision

The Palo Alto Times posed the stark choice: "Will the hills above the Peninsula be open or occupied?"

While the editorial grew out of frustration with Palo Alto's struggles to limit development in its hills — which extend to Skyline — similar struggles were taking place to the north and south. In San Mateo County, conservationists were fighting rear-guard actions against subdivisions, logging, and motorcycle use in the mountains.

Mr. Thorwaldson, who is now restoring an old house on district land, says he felt many conservationist arguments were really a subterfuge to keep land from being developed at all. He concluded the editorial by challenging conservationists to prove they were serious about saving land by creating a district

that could raise taxes to buy and preserve it.

Following the editorial, conservation forces mobilized to plan and launch a special district based on the model of the East Bay Regional Park District. Maps and legal documents were drawn, a survey taken, and supporters mobilized to write letters and attend hearings.

While the campaign took off in Santa Clara County, the effort in south San Mateo County hit opposition from the Board of Supervisors and members of the county establishment, who tended to view the county's mountains and forests as real estate rather than resources.

In 1971, the supervisors voted 3-2 to pull out of the proposed district; only in 1976 did the Bayside area of the county, from San Carlos south, vote to join the district — over strenuous opposition by the supervisors.

A major acquisition in San Mateo County in 1980 was the upper part of landmark Windy Hill, overlooking Portola Valley and the Midpeninsula. This was the first effort undertaken jointly with the Peninsula Open Space Trust, a private, nonprofit land trust that received the property as a gift and later sold it to the open space district for half its value.

Other purchases followed, as the district tried to buy as much threatened land as possible during its early years. Just in San Mateo County, thousands of acres on or near Skyline Boulevard were bought from private owners and became the popular open space preserves called Long Ridge, Skyline Ridge, Los Trancos, Russian Ridge, La Honda Creek, Purisima Canyon and El Corte de

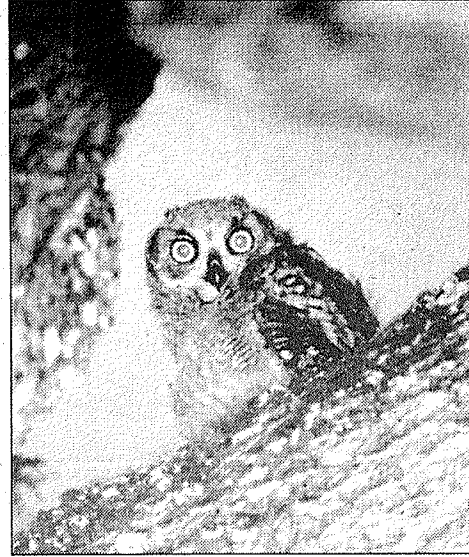


Photo courtesy of Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District

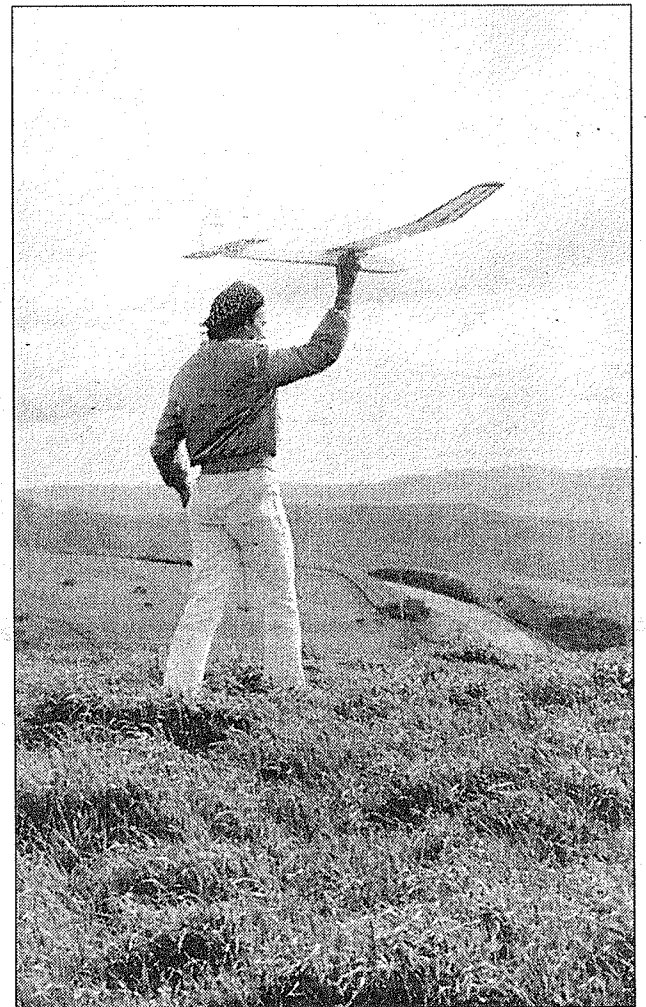


Photo by Charlotte MacDonald

MEETINGS: A draft of a regional open space study will be presented to the public and the board of the Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District at meetings on two Tuesdays: Oct. 7 and 21 at 7:30 p.m. at the Hillview Community Center, 97 Hillview Ave. in Los Altos.

Madera.

In such a massive shift in land ownership, there have inevitably been hard feelings and rough patches. About 12 years ago there was a flap about the district's use of eminent domain — a legal process for taking private land by a public agency. This quieted after the district agreed to restrict the use of this powerful and threatening tool to very limited situations. Also, from time to time, grand juries in both counties have targeted the district — with little result.

Now, most people, even ardent critics, appear to accept — and maybe even welcome — the district's existence.

Betsy Crowder of Portola Valley, who succeeded Harry Turner of Ladera as the

(Continued on next page)



Environmental Volunteers brings hands-on nature to school kids

The second-graders from Willow Oaks School in Menlo Park gleefully identified tracks left in the dirt at Jasper Ridge by raccoons, skunks, deer and coyote — plus sneakers and cars.

"They loved tracks," says Mary Zvirblis of Woodside, one of almost a dozen members of Environmental Volunteers who led a class of 60 wiggly 7-year-olds through Stanford's biological preserve.

"Some said it was the first time they had ever been in the woods. Where they live they never see coyote scat," Ms. Zvirblis adds. "They loved banana slugs; they loved the slime part."

For 25 years this kind of excitement has stirred many thousands of Peninsula children and brought them in touch — literally — with the natural world around them. It continues to energize the dedicated and highly trained members of Environmental Volunteers who go into classrooms and later take the children on field trips to study Baylands, forests or earthquakes zones first hand. "I have as much fun as the kids do," says Ms. Zvirblis. "I see things again through their eyes. I'm amazed how smart they are."

Ms. Zvirblis is co-chair of "Take a Walk on the Wild Side," the festival next Sunday at Skyline Ridge Open Space Preserve that celebrates the 25th anniversary of both the Environmental Volunteers and the Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District.

The Environmental Volunteers (EVs) has come a long way since the idea took root 25 years ago dur-



Photos by Carol Ivie

Environmental Volunteer Mary Zvirblis of Woodside shows Alex Dehnert, left, and Zack Rait of Palo Alto how to drill holes in a clam shell using a pump drill. Native Americans would mount the clam shells on a necklace or use them for money. Children attending the Sunday outdoor festival can try this and other activities of Native Americans.

ing the heady early days of the environmental movement. Spurred by the offer of seed money from the Peninsula Conservation Foundation, the late Karen Nilsson of Ladera came up with the vision of a community project that would involve both volunteers and children.

"I thought the best project would be one that would get people involved — an organization centered around volunteers who would be able to learn and grow themselves, while helping children become aware of, understand and appreciate the natural environment," she recalled later.

Spurred by Mrs. Nilsson's energy, charisma and organizational talents, the first class of 32 EVs convened in September 1972 to learn about San Francisco Bay — a hot issue at a time when the Bay was threatened by filling and pollution — and to devise a program to teach to children.

With the help of "Salty the Salt Marsh Harvest Mouse," simple dioramas, pickleweed puppets, stuffed birds, and a Colorful Bay Coloring Book, the volunteers developed their first hands-on course in Bay ecology. With more sophisticated props, they're still teaching it. "I felt like I had just learned to see," recalls LaLu Kiesling of Menlo Park. "After only a few months I saw so much more at the Baylands."

This passion and Mrs. Nilsson's driving energy got the EVs off to a strong start. It helped build a corps of enthusiastic volunteers who are still personally close and still work for environmental causes. Their names are a who's who of local en-

vironmentalists: Mary Paine, Linda Elkind, Jean Rusmore, Mabel Crittenden and many more.

"It was never political," adds Ad Jessup of Portola Valley, a member of the third class. "You helped kids learn about the environment and care about what they have."

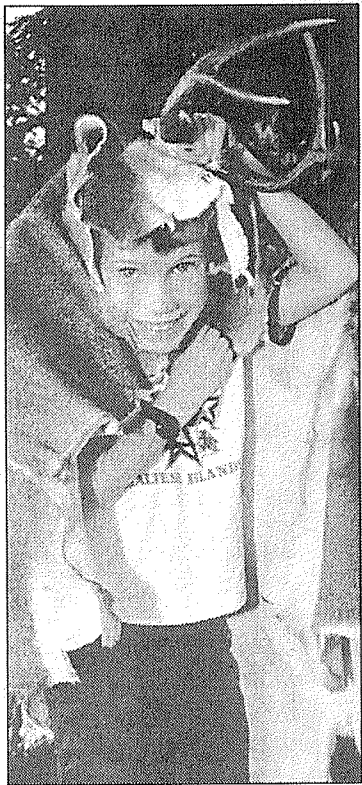
Now the EVs has a budget of \$280,000 and a paid staff of five who coordinate volunteers. Last year 185 volunteers taught 13,025 children and adults, and served 379 teachers in 87 elementary, middle and high schools in San Mateo and Santa Clara counties.

The single topic of Bay Ecology has expanded to seven, including Forest and Foothill Ecology, Early California Indian Life: an Environmental Focus, Earthquake Geology and Preparedness, Water Science and Conservation, Nature in Your Neighborhood, and Birds and Nests.

Volunteers also teach teachers to do hands-on science and train docents for other environmental groups. Recently they helped start a docent program for Huddart Park and helped develop the guide for the Chickadee Nature Trail, says Executive Director Suzanne Mulcahy.

"We know what we do well. We teach people to teach and we teach," says Ms. Mulcahy. "We'll continue to look for new ways to do these things."

Ms. Mulcahy sums up Karen Nilsson's vision: "If we don't educate the younger generation, we'll kiss it (the environment) good-bye down the road. That vision is the reason we have the open space district, and people struggle to save old-growth forest."



Alex Dehnert tries on a deer skin and antlers so he can stalk a deer like an Indian. This will be another hands-on activity sponsored by Environmental Volunteers at the Sunday festival on Skyline.

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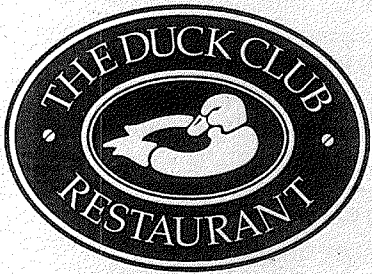
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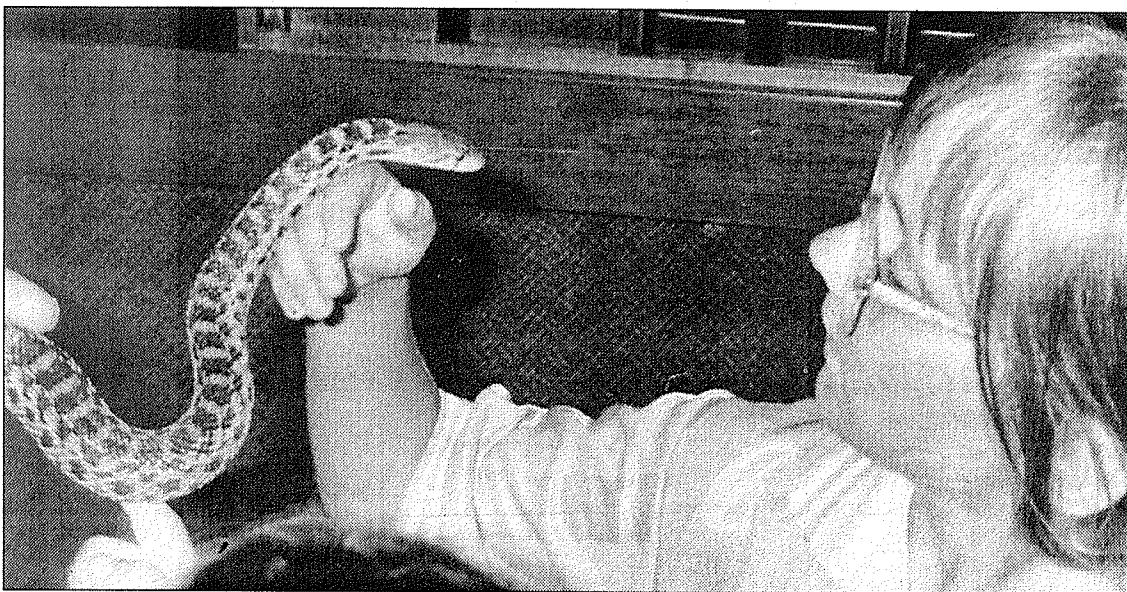


Photo by Marion Softky

Snickers, the gopher snake, greets a young nature lover in a Saturday afternoon open house at the David Daniels Nature Center at Alpine Pond in the Skyline Ridge Open Space Preserve.

Family fun at outdoor festival on Skyline

Anybody who loves the outdoors is invited to "Take a Walk on the Wild Side" Sunday, Oct. 12, from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. at Skyline Ridge Open Space Preserve, located at the intersection of Skyline Boulevard with Alpine and Page Mill roads.

Activities include hikes and walks, nature interpretation activities and displays, live animal programs, a nature interpretive center, puppet shows, mountain bike clinics and rides, food, music and lots of giveaways for everyone. And you can also win a mountain bike and other wholesome goodies.

The outdoor festival celebrates the 25th anniversary of two environmental organizations.

The Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District, which has preserved 42,000 acres of open lands in the mountains, foothills and Bayfront, will show off one of its central preserves, with activities centered about two scenic ponds.

The Environmental Volunteers, which introduces thousands of school children to the natural world each year, will offer five "villages" where children (and others) can sample their hands-on teaching.

Kids can grind acorns or don a deer skin to stalk deer in the Native American Village. They can try to eat like a bird or build a nest in the Birds and Nests Village, or shake down model buildings and move an earthquake fault in the Earthquake Country Village.

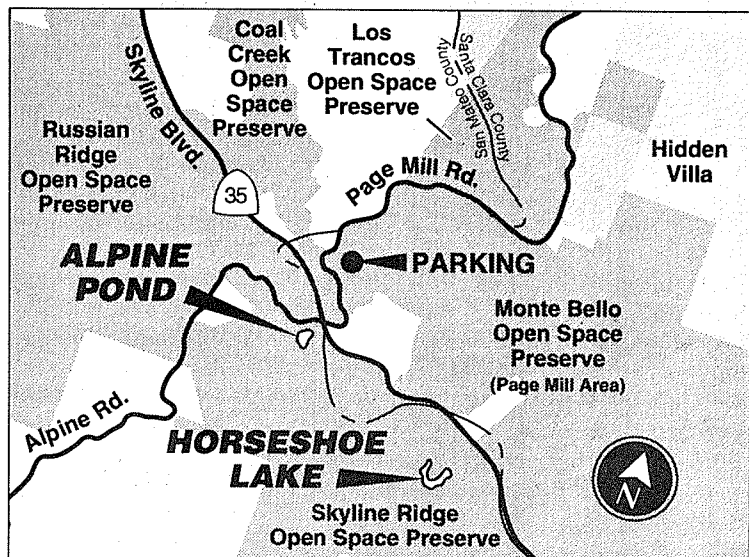
There also will be villages focusing on the Woodland Experience and Sensory Awareness.

Frequent shuttles will whisk people between the two activity areas at Alpine Pond and Horseshoe Lake, and carry them to free parking in a field 1 mile east on Page Mill Road.



Photo by Laura Hester

Cheryl Solomon, docent coordinator for the Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District, tells students from Farallone View Elementary School an Indian folk tale about how a pine cone was formed by little mice burrowing inside.



The environmental festival on Sunday, Oct. 12, from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. will take place at Alpine Pond and Horseshoe Lake in the Skyline Ridge Open Space Preserve off Skyline Boulevard south of Alpine Road. Parking is available one mile east on Page Mill Road.

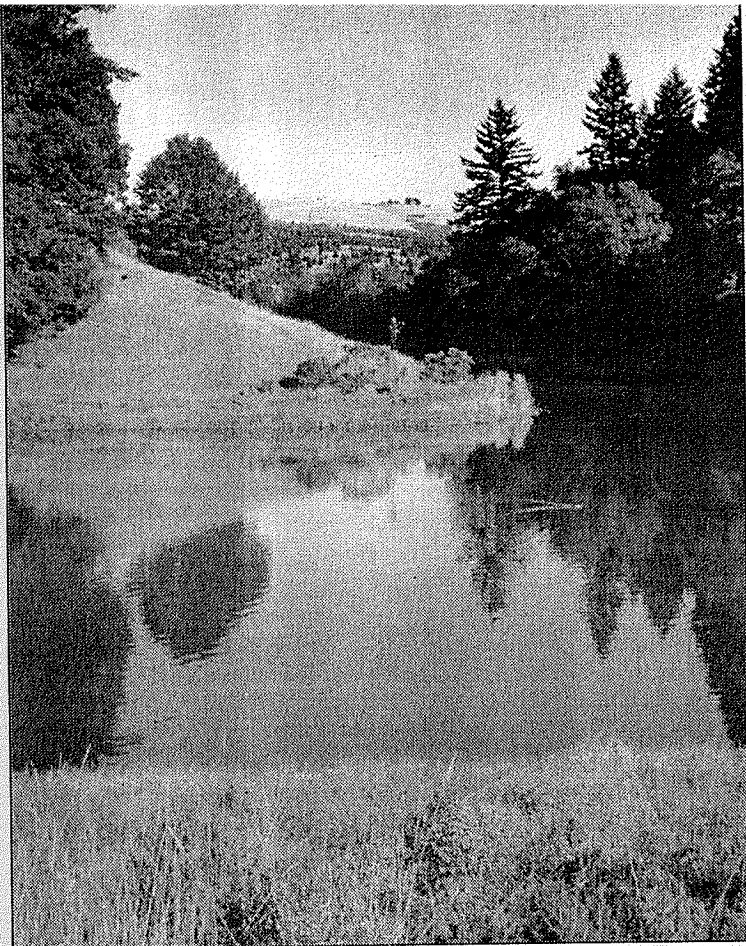


Photo courtesy of Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District

Horseshoe Lake at Skyline Ridge Open Space Preserve will be the site for numerous booths, displays and activities at the "Take a Walk on the Wild Side" festival this Sunday.

Reaching local environmental organizations

All local environmental organizations welcome inquiries, donations and volunteers. Here are some ways to reach them:

- **The Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District**, 330 Distel Circle, Los Altos, CA 94022-1404. Phone: 691-1200. FAX: 691-0485. E-mail: mrospd@openspace.org. Web site: www.openspace.org
- **Environmental Volunteers**, 3921 E. Bayshore Road, Palo Alto, CA 94303. Phone: 961-0545. FAX: 961-0548. E-mail: envirovols@aol.com
- **Bay Area Action**: work projects. 715 Colorado Ave., Palo Alto, CA 94303. Phone: 321-1994.
- **Committee for Green Foothills**: land use and political action. 3921 E. Bayshore Road, Palo Alto, CA 94303. Phone: 968-7243.
- **Community Impact**: one-day work projects. 3921 E. Bayshore Road, Palo Alto, CA 94303. Phone: 965-0242.
- **Trust for Hidden Villa**: environmental education and working farm. 26870 Moody Road, Los Altos, CA 94022. Phone: 949-8650.
- **Peninsula Conservation Center**: resource center with conservation library. 3921 E. Bayshore Road, Palo Alto, CA 94303. Phone: 962-9876.
- **Peninsula Open Space Trust (POST)**: land preservation. 3000 Sand Hill Road, Menlo Park, CA 94025. Phone: 854-7696.
- **Sempervirens Fund**: saving land and trees for parks. Drawer BE, Los Altos, CA 94023. Phone: 968-4509.
- **Sierra Club**, Loma Prieta Chapter: outdoor activities, political action. 3921 E. Bayshore Road, Palo Alto, CA 94303. Phone: 390-8411.