

For the lands you love



Taking the long view...

Considered by many to be the father of the modern day “land ethic” in the United States, Aldo Leopold wrote of the importance of “thinking like a mountain”. In response to witnessing “a fierce green fire” in the eyes of a dying wolf, he considered the long-term impacts of losing a species. The idea of “thinking like a mountain” also captured the interconnectedness of nature, environmental sustainability and the importance of maintaining the long view.

As we celebrate our 40th year and mourn the loss of Zad Leavy, one of our founders, we are reminded that our work is generational. We have all inherited a legacy of stunning landscapes to care for and the decisions we make today create the conservation opportunities and challenges of tomorrow. “Thinking like a mountain” reminds us to think big and to think beyond our own lives and lifetimes. It requires courage to take on daunting projects, to stretch ourselves to new heights, to cultivate patience and to redefine what conservation can mean for everyone.

As supporters of Big Sur Land Trust, you are part of an unfolding conservation legacy; a story that takes the long view and deepens with each acre conserved, each tree planted, each trail built, and each person that gets involved. Thank you for making local land conservation a community priority.

And to Zad: Thank you for thinking like a mountain.

Jeannette Tuitele-Lewis
President/CEO



In their own words

A conversation with Zad and Laela Leavy

On March 22, 2018 we had the pleasure of sitting down with Zad and Laela Leavy for a chat about their roles as members of the group of founders who started Big Sur Land Trust 40 years ago. Two weeks later they attended our Founders and Former Trustees potluck lunch at Glen Deven Ranch. Everyone was so excited to see them! Little did we all know that within a month, we would lose Zad – and that makes this conversation even more precious. We are immensely grateful to both Zad and Laela for their time as founders and as continuous supporters. The generous donations to Big Sur Land Trust being made in Zad’s memory are a lasting testament to his incredible legacy. Note: Because this was a dynamic conversation with Zad and Laela, comments that are not marked with their names were given in combination.

What originally brought your family to Big Sur?

We lived in Los Angeles and would come up to go camping. We fell in love with the area and thought, “How often are we going to be able to get up here?” Our original intent was to build a “little cabin in the woods” and come up on weekends. One day we just looked at each other and said, “Why not?” We presented the idea of a permanent move to the kids and told them that it was going to be our “Big Sur adventure”. The kids were 10 and 12 – it was a family decision to move.

Two years later we finally found a piece of land behind Ventana. We moved in 1974 from Manhattan Beach. Zad was winding down a big class-action suit, and his law partners thought that we’d be back in a year.

Laela: First, we rented a trailer near the Big Sur Grange. Four of us and a dog. The kids slept outside, but when the rains came we all ended up in the trailer. The kitchen table came down and made a bed. I can still see my son’s feet hanging off. We realized then that this arrangement was not going to work for long. So, we rented a cabin at the State Park from November to February and added another dog to our family. We had one tiny bathroom – and we still like each other! It was one of my favorite years.

Zad: We started with “a little cabin” and then it got bigger and bigger and bigger. I built almost the entire interior of the house: doors, tables, and lots of other things.

Laela: It really was an adventure! Julianne started at Captain Cooper and our son Michael was in middle school. Every morning we’d walk them down the hill at 6:30 a.m. or whatever time it was to catch the bus. I can’t believe I did that! We kept our boots by the door and survived four fires. We lived there full time until 1989 when we moved to Carmel, where Zad had his law practice. We sold the house in Big Sur in 2000 and it burned completely in 2008. It was a 37-pole structure and every one of them burned. That was hard to see.

Did you have any interest in open space before camping in Big Sur?

Zad: I was in the Boy Scouts and did a lot of camping and hiking. After WW II, I helped Boy Scout execs set up Camp Emerald Bay in Catalina. Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts and the Red Cross used it along with lots of other people. I was the caretaker so I was there all the time. It was really kind of fun.

Did you know anyone when you arrived in Big Sur?

No, only our architect, Jeremy Wilson. Then we met Bruce Newell, Roger’s brother. We gradually met other folks that we connected with mostly over the idea of trying to preserve the area. We got interested in starting a land trust because there were plans to subdivide 40 acres above our property to build ranchettes. In 1976 we started talking seriously to folks. We sat around kitchen tables and talked over cups of coffee.

Where did your group meet?

At everyone’s homes: the Newells’, the Hopkins’, the Forsters’, Sherna Stewart’s, and our house. Anywhere there was a kitchen table.

Then Pat and Lloyd Addleman came to a meeting and said, “Finally, we found people who agree with us!”

We made some good friends. The people who started Big Sur Land Trust were really great.

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Laela and Zad Leavy at Glen Deven Ranch
Photograph: Margret Cordts



View from Echo Ridge, Mitteldorf Preserve
Photograph: Gary Wilson

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Did anyone have any experience?

Laela: This was new to us all. And Zad learned fast. We became immersed in it.

And putting it mildly, not everyone liked what we were doing. The Big Sur Gazette reported that we were forming the land trust so that we could develop oil wells off the Big Sur coast. Some people thought we were going to sell out to the Federal government and that it was a takeover plot. We had threats that our house was going to be burned down. There were hang-up calls at 4 a.m.

It wasn't always easy. But there was never a question that we would keep moving forward. We just recently heard that one of the folks that was really against Big Sur Land Trust back in those days now thinks it might not have been such a bad idea.

Zad: Being on the coastal commission meant that I had the bigger picture. I could see how our activities fit into the larger scheme of the state efforts. California was in the middle of the Coastal Protection Act and the coastal commission was formed. It was right in line with what was happening all over.

The Trust for Public Land gave us our first big boost. We visited them when we were beginning. Marty Rosen is a still a friend and we were lucky to have his support.

In February 1978, Big Sur Land Trust incorporated as a nonprofit and we were operating with an all-volunteer board.

Laela: I don't think Big Sur Land Trust would be where it is today without Zad and his ability to see something and go forward with it. Zad has a healthy dose of "chutzpah"!

What felt like your first big win?

The biggie was Gamboa Ranch. We heard that 19 attorneys had the land and were ready to sell to a developer. Lloyd Addleman approached David Packard, whom he had known through the tech industry, and David said he would fund the purchase. We were all on the edge of our seats. That was very exciting. Gamboa Ranch is still protected, standing as an open span of pastures and coastal hills that offers iconic views.

There weren't many land trusts in the country. The movement really started growing around that same time. It was fun, despite some of the turmoil.

Another big one was Glen Deven Ranch. Roger Newell was very involved in speaking with Virginia and Seeley Mudd. Virginia was especially interested in conserving it.

Laela: We have a bench there! The kids and I had the bench made for Zad's 70th birthday. Originally, we set it up at Mitteldorf Preserve, right next to the stream. A few years later we had it moved to Glen Deven Ranch, because that's Zad's favorite place.

What about Glen Deven makes it your favorite place?

Zad: My relationship with the Mudds. And my daughter Julianne loves it and has used it for the kids in her Harmony at Home program. I have a lot of connections to the place.

Laela: Mitteldorf Preserve is my favorite because I love the redwoods. They feed my soul. Sometimes I just need to get to Big Sur. I need to walk through the state park, and visit the place we used to live while we were building our house.



Big Sur Land Trust founding families

What's most important in the origin story of Big Sur Land Trust?

Laela: It's the people sitting around the kitchen tables. The transactions are important, of course, but the fact that enough people – a small group of us – got together and started something. We persevered on something that turned out to be very important. That to me is what stands out in my heart.

Zad: For me it's coastal protection. It is so important for people to have this coast. We need to take care of it.

You and the other founders could have chosen an easier path, but you chose one that had a lasting legacy: 40,000 conserved acres throughout Monterey County. We are so grateful!

Laela: We are grateful too. It was a whole different experience. Who expected it? We planned a move to Big Sur and then one thing led to another...

When you founded BSLT you were thinking about conserving the land primarily. How do you feel now that our mission has expanded to continually caring for these conserved lands and advocating for people to have more access to open spaces?

Laela: I love it. I think it's terrific.

Zad: It's very fulfilling. To see all the work the land trust has been able to do over the years and to see all this come about.

