



IRVINE RANCH
CONSERVANCY

15 YEARS OF STEWARDSHIP

A Report to the Community



OUR MISSION

Irvine Ranch Conservancy's mission is to restore, protect, and enhance the ecological health of urban wildlands in a way that fosters compatible human behaviors and inspires connection and partnership.

WHO WE ARE

Since 2005, Irvine Ranch Conservancy has helped protect, restore, enhance, and connect people to more than 40,000 acres of biological and geological treasures in Orange County, California. These lands have been declared Natural Landmarks by both the U.S. National Park Service and California State Parks.

IRC's team of scientists, educators, trail specialists and hundreds of volunteers work together to ensure that the Irvine Ranch Natural Landmarks remain healthy and resilient forever, and that current and future generations experience, enjoy and help protect these special places.

WHAT WE DO

IRC brings the comprehensive ecological knowledge, educational expertise, and land management experience necessary to help urban wildlands thrive. From our early years as a venture-philanthropy initiative of the Irvine Company focused on managing and protecting open space on the historic Irvine Ranch, IRC has evolved into an independent, devoted non-profit partner to public landowners and agencies and the community.

We conduct broad programs of habitat restoration, fire prevention, community engagement and education, invasive species control, native plants and seeds, nature recreation, and monitoring and research – all to ensure that the lands and waters in our care remain healthy and resilient forever.

Since 2005, working with many partners, IRC has helped catalyze a growing community dedicated to protecting these natural treasures. IRC is restoring or enhancing nearly 2,000 acres of habitat, has built and maintained 160 miles of trails and visitor facilities, and engaged thousands of volunteers to become experts, leaders, and contributors to our local wildlands. We have introduced hundreds of thousands of people to these spectacular lands, helping them make their own personal connections to nature.





WHERE WE WORK

Lush. Rare. Teeming with life.

The wildlands of the Irvine Ranch Natural Landmarks are often called “a National Park experience in Our Backyard.” Vast rare habitats and miles of world-class trails are within a 30-minute drive for more than 3,000,000 people in Orange County and beyond. These local wildlands grant easy access to fresh air, beautiful views, and outdoor recreation immersed in nature.

Their closeness also makes them vulnerable to the impacts of human development and activity. Threats to the health of the Landmarks include wildfire, invasive species, habitat degradation, loss of critical species, and excessive human access. These challenges are all wrapped in the uncertainty of climate change.





OUR CORE PRINCIPLES

Irvine Ranch Conservancy's core principles guide everything we do:

PARTNERSHIP

The long-term health of the Landmarks depends on successful collaboration by a wide variety of people, communities, and interests. We work closely with and support more than three dozen public and private partners and anyone who shares our Vision of excellent stewardship of wildlands.

INNOVATION

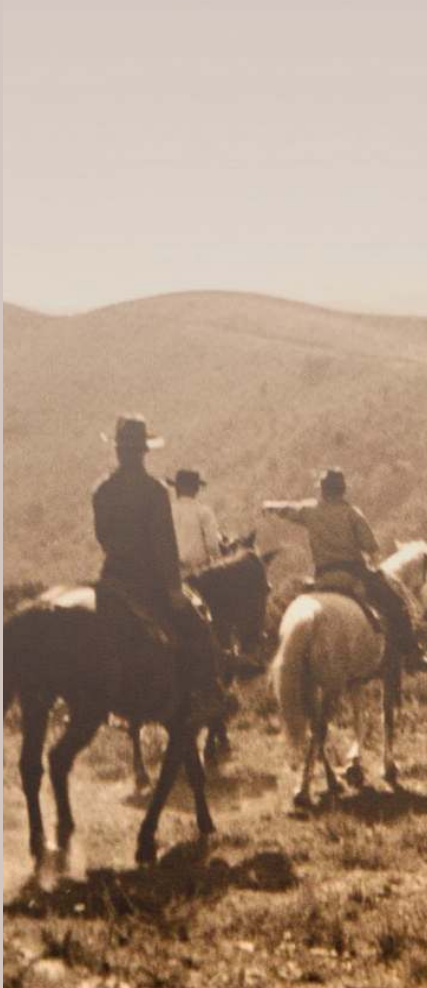
Caring for the Landmarks requires constant creativity, ingenuity, and imagination. We continually seek innovative solutions and new ways of approaching challenges, and we encourage the same entrepreneurial spirit in our partners.

COMMITMENT TO EXCELLENCE

Irvine Ranch Conservancy is dedicated to the highest quality work and best practices in everything we and our partners do. We engage in and promote activities and actions that sustain the Landmarks over time so that future generations can experience their richness as we do today.

HISTORY

From the early history of the Irvine Ranch to the protected, globally important wildlands today, the timeline of this land is a chronicle of conservation and stewardship.



- 1864** — James Irvine and partners purchase 93,000 acres of land and form The Irvine Ranch — the land is cared for as a ranch for more than 100 years.
- 1959** — The Irvine Company begins development of a Master Plan for the ranch. This Plan will result in more than 50% of the ranch preserved as open space.
- 1988** — City of Irvine residents overwhelmingly vote to establish an open space preserve of over half the city.
- 1992** — The Irvine Company partners with The Nature Conservancy — a respected international non-profit — to preserve and plan for conservation of the ranch open space.
- 1996** — The Nature Reserve of Orange County is created for nearly 40,000 acres of wildlands and habitats on the historic ranch.
- 2005** — Irvine Ranch Conservancy is founded to succeed The Nature Conservancy and ensure that the open space is cared for and enjoyed to the highest possible standards; IRC partners with the City of Irvine to manage its 6,600-acre open space preserve.
- 2006** — The wildlands of the historic Irvine Ranch are designated a National Natural Landmark by the U.S. National Park Service.
- 2007** — IRC establishes the volunteer Fire Watch program to deter and detect wildfires; IRC's remote wildlife camera monitoring program begins.
- 2008** — IRC partners with the City of Newport Beach to manage open space and habitat; Irvine Ranch is recognized as the first California Natural Landmark.
- 2009** — The Native Seed Farm is established on 14 acres of former strawberry fields to provide native seeds for habitat restoration and volunteer opportunities for the community.
- 2010** — 20,000 acres of protected wildlands are transferred from Irvine Company to the County of Orange; OC Parks partners with IRC for their long-term management.
- 2011** — IRC partners with Orange County Transportation Authority to restore and enhance 1,200 acres of rare habitats in Limestone Canyon, Silverado Creek and Loma Ridge.
- 2012** — IRC partners with OC Waste & Recycling to restore habitats in Agua Chinon Canyon.
- 2014** — IRC partners with Orange County Fire Authority to establish the COAST Fire Prevention Working Group.
- 2015** — The City of Irvine renews its partnership with IRC for an additional 10 years.
- 2018** — IRC's remote Camera Trap program records its 800,000th wildlife photograph.
- 2019** — IRC's volunteer community surpasses 500 individuals who contribute more than 45,000 hours of service annually.
- 2020** — Irvine Ranch Conservancy celebrates 15 years of land stewardship and service to the community.

IN 15 YEARS, IRC HAS...

Offered nearly **22,000** public access programs bringing more than **200,000 people** onto the land.



Constructed **29 miles** of new trails and **8 staging areas** connecting to **52 miles** of existing trails.



Enabled over **1,000,000** visitors to enjoy IRC managed self-guided areas. More than **5,000,000** people visit the Irvine Ranch Natural Landmarks each year.



Removed more than **1,500,000** **invasive plants**.



Operated 50 remote wildlife monitoring cameras, compiling a database of **more than 800,000 photos**.



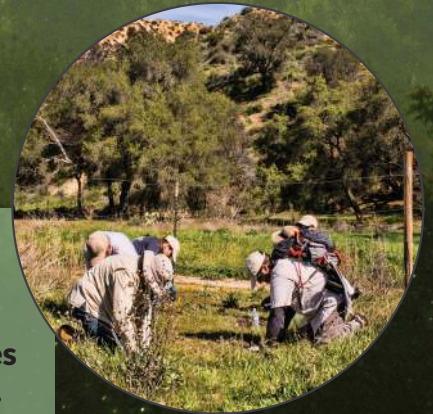
Maintained, repaired and inspected **160 miles** of trails annually.



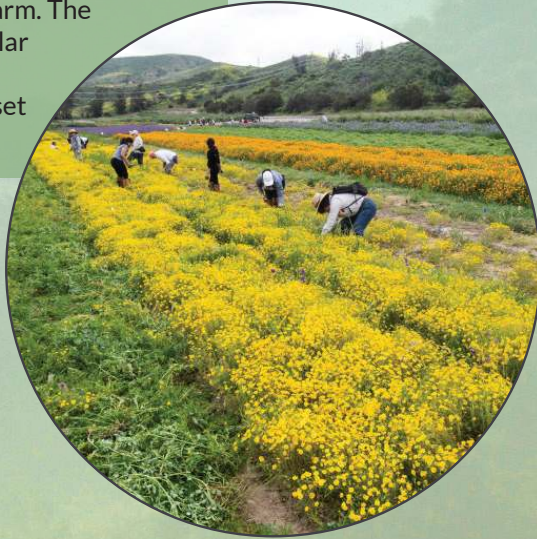
Enhanced and restored over **2,000 acres** of habitat.



Planted more than **75,000** **native trees and plants**.



Harvested **5 tons of native seed** from **50 species** at the Native Seed Farm. The Farm is a popular and treasured community asset in Irvine.



Operated a website to help people connect to the land – LetsGoOutside.org – with **40,000 regular users**.



Over **500** active Conservancy volunteers gave more than **500,000 hours**. One Conservancy volunteer reached **6,500 lifetime hours**.



Sent a weekly eNewsletter on the Landmarks to more than **14,000 subscribers**.



Grew the OC Parks Volunteer Program to more than **1,200** volunteers who gave **300,000 hours**. The Program won a National Award of Excellence in 2016.



Hosted **11,077 Facebook likes** and **2,200 Instagram followers**.



Established the Volunteer OC Fire Watch Program to prevent wildfire. **360 volunteers** have given over **50,000 hours**.



Core Programs

HABITAT RESTORATION AND ENHANCEMENT

The cornerstone of IRC's conservation program is habitat restoration and enhancement, and the most remarkable element is its scale. Over the last 15 years, IRC, together with our partners, has been enhancing and restoring 2,000 acres of land previously degraded by

intensive ranching and other land uses. The program promotes ecological health, resilience and connectivity of habitats across the landscape, so they support functional ecosystems of native plants and wildlife and provide public enjoyment now and for future generations.

Restoration Unearths West Loma's Native Habitats

Threatened California gnatcatchers. Comical burrowing owls. Delicate small-flowering Phacelia Ciliata. Endangered native grasslands. These animals and plants and many others are making a resurgence on West Loma Ridge following a decade of restoration efforts by IRC. The re-appearance of these rare inhabitants is a sign of a massive renewal underway as life returns to a vast landscape.

Since 2009, a team of staff experts, partners and volunteers at Irvine Ranch Conservancy has been involved in a monumental effort to bring 400 acres of watershed on West Loma Ridge back to its former ecological health. Through a process of surveying and mapping, active restoration efforts, and dedicated site monitoring, the team has worked for more than a decade to restore ecological balance and biodiversity, plot by plot.

Once a plan was developed, IRC began a mammoth effort to prepare the site. Non-natives were systematically cleared by any effective means, including mowing, goat grazing and hand pulling. All existing invasive species must be removed before planting can even begin – a process that sometimes takes 3 years.

The project could never have been attempted without the partnership of IRC's close partner – the County of Orange through its OC Parks Department. Their support enabled IRC to test different restoration methods, which has led to innovations in habitat restoration and new techniques that are now being applied across the landscape on other projects.





Core Programs

FIRE PREVENTION

The single greatest threat to long-term health of urban wildlands on the Irvine Ranch Natural Landmarks and Southern California is catastrophic wildfire. While fire historically occurred every 70-100 years in our local habitats, humans and climate change have altered the fire cycle and the lands are now burning every 7-10 years. This shift permanently alters our rare and diverse ecosystems that evolved under a different fire regime.

Nearly all wildfires in our region are human caused. Solving this complex problem requires the principles of Partnership, Innovation and a Commitment to Excellence that IRC strives to uphold.

To prevent wildfire and protect both the Landmarks and surrounding communities, IRC works actively with volunteers, public

agency partners, fire departments and the community to reduce fire ignitions during Red Flag conditions.

Since 2007, IRC's volunteer Fire Watch Program, supported by the County of Orange and the Cities of Irvine and Newport Beach and the Orange County Fire Authority, has coordinated with Fire Departments, monitored weather conditions, educated the public and deterred fire ignitions in vulnerable areas during Red Flag Warnings.

IRC's fire prevention efforts are integrated with other areas of our work, from removal of invasive plants that can easily ignite and spread fires, to engaging community partners and volunteers, to restoring healthy habitats that stay green longer and don't ignite as easily.

“Just being out there, being visible, can deter arsonists and other people from causing fires. Even though Fire Watch shifts are normally 2 hours, I often stay out for 8 hours. When people see me with my Fire Watch hat and vest, it lets them know that it's a Red Flag day and it's important to be careful. Early detection and deterrence is what we're there for. That's how we measure success.”

— Rocky Bruno, Fire Watch volunteer

Core Programs

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND EDUCATION

Community engagement and education is the heart of everything that we do at IRC. It connects all areas of our work. Through partnerships with landowners, community leaders, and residents, we foster a shared appreciation for our wildlands and a shared vision for the importance of caring for them.

IRC has been providing diverse, nature-oriented recreational activities and informal learning opportunities to the community for 15 years. The program, conducted mostly by IRC's trained and certified volunteers managed by IRC's experts in education and interpretation, helps people experience the breadth and beauty of the Landmarks, including environmentally sensitive and backcountry

areas that are not open to visitors every day.

IRC's Community Engagement and Education program has grown to nearly 3,000 activities a year of hiking, bicycling, equestrian rides, birdwatching, fitness programs, interpretive learning classes, stewardship days, and even nature film events that captivate people's imagination. IRC provides opportunities for anyone of any ability to engage with the land in ways that promote sustainability and stewardship.

IRC's goal is to foster personal connections to the land and a lifelong commitment to participate in conserving and protecting the wildlands in our backyard.

“I really like leading hikes where I get to share my love of the land and nature with other people and get them inspired. There are never grumpy people who come out on a hike! I also love land stewardship. It really makes you feel good to help take care of the land. I remove invasive weeds, plant native species, and do some trail work. There's something especially fulfilling about helping keep the land in good condition. Plus, it's a great community of happy people.”

— *Judy Bright, IRC volunteer*





Core Programs

INVASIVE SPECIES CONTROL

Invasive plants, animals, and insects are critical threats to the rare and sensitive habitats on the Landmarks. They degrade the ecosystems they invade, compete with native plants and wildlife for vital nutrients, space, and light, and threaten the biodiversity of the landscape. IRC works tirelessly to control invasive species and monitor for new ones to prevent them from becoming harmful predators, competitors, and parasites of native plants and wildlife and damaging protected natural habitats.

IRC's team works with an army of volunteers and regional land management partners to remove harmful plants, wildlife,

and other organisms through a variety of methods. The best approach frequently depends on the invasive species and the threat it poses to native species and habitats. IRC practices innovation by adapting our methods to fit the situation on the land.



“I first met IRC through mountain biking and quickly developed a desire to help improve the habitat, not only for my enjoyment but for future generations of volunteers and visitors. There is such a dramatic difference between a healthy habitat and one filled with invasive plants. When I see an area that used to be all weeds and now is restored, it has a tremendous impact on me.”

– Jeff Black, IRC volunteer

Core Programs

NATIVE PLANTS AND SEEDS

Native plants are the foundation of ecosystems, and IRC's habitat restoration and enhancement cannot happen without a steady supply of seeds and young plants that make up a diverse natural community.

Because of the scale of IRC's restoration work and to ensure a reliable inventory of native plant materials, in 2009 IRC began to operate its own Native Seed Farm. Starting with just 12 species, the crop has grown to more than 50 species of plants, ranging from cornerstone species such as coastal sage to rare and difficult to find plants like cobweb thistle. Another example of IRC's spirit of Innovation, the Farm produces more than ½ ton of seed each year and has saved thousands of dollars in expenses that can be directed instead into more restored acres of habitat.

The Native Seed Farm, located in north Irvine, is on 14 acres of a former strawberry field.

Like most of IRC's programs, it is powered by a handful of expert staff and an army of regular volunteers, as well as dozens of community volunteers and groups who arrive several days a week to help plant, weed, harvest, process, and care for the crop.

Volunteers also help collect small samples of genetically diverse seed from wild plant populations, and the Native Seed Farm uses farming and nursery techniques to grow out enough plant material. The farmed plants and seeds are perfectly adapted to local conditions and more likely to thrive once they are reintroduced in the wild.

The Native Seed Farm is an educational gateway for the community, introducing people to native plants and the surrounding wildlands.

The Art of Making Seeds

Imagine the land is a canvas stretched out for miles over rolling hills and canyons. The plants and animals on this canvas need to work in harmony for the entire landscape "painting" to function and be healthy. From this perspective, we can notice if a local ecosystem is under duress. Perhaps the ecological composition won't be balanced without enough Arroyo lupines, Woolypod milkweed, or Cobweb thistle. But what if we don't have the right materials to compose healthy landscapes?

"We want to fill the restoration sites with the kinds of plants that were native to that area before the cattle ranching era. So, we look for a healthy area that is similar and see what is growing there. We call it making a 'plant palette' - like a color palette in art and design, these are the array of species that we will be painting the hillside with! But it's not about looks, it's about function."
— Rachel Lambert, IRC Native Seed Farm Coordinator





“A lot of times the images have nothing. But when we see a mountain lion, that makes our day.”

— Linda Horn, Camera Program Volunteer

Core Programs

MONITORING AND RESEARCH

To care for the land effectively, IRC must rigorously assess the current state of natural communities, establish goals for their continued health, and track our progress.

Through monitoring and research, IRC gathers knowledge about how the ecosystems are functioning and changing over time.

We do this by continuously gathering knowledge and collecting data about the lands

in our care. We engage scientific researchers, partner organizations, our team, and Citizen Scientists from the community to monitor how these wildlands are changing over time. They collect the data that allow us to adapt our management and implement programs and strategies that enable these lands to thrive.

Tracking the Health of Urban Wildlands Through Wildlife Monitoring

IRC continually innovates in the use of technology to monitor land and wildlife. With a sophisticated network of over 50 heat- and motion-triggered cameras installed throughout the Landmarks, our team of staff and volunteers continuously monitors the health and activity of a wide variety of species.

The camera monitoring program has been operating since 2007, and IRC's early adoption of the technology has resulted in a massive database - more than 800,000 images. During that time, IRC has processed millions of photos. Advances in digital technology have dramatically improved the program and reduced equipment cost.

The images help IRC, our partners and academic scientists understand local wildlife and how their behaviors change in response to seasons, rainfall, wildfire, and the amount of human activity on the land.

Camera "traps" capture coyotes, bobcats, gray foxes, mule deer, and mountain lions as well as striped skunks, raccoons, opossums, bats, and even rare raptors like the golden eagle. IRC often shares the images with the community to help them see and understand the amount of life on the land.

Volunteers are essential to IRC's Camera Monitoring Program. Every week, teams of dedicated volunteers collect memory cards from each camera, replace batteries, and clear any obstructions. They also help process images.

OUR PARTNERS

“The Open Space Preserve is one of our City’s most treasured assets. We have worked with IRC for 15 years to take care of and provide access to the Preserve, and both the land and residents of Irvine are fortunate to have such a skilled and devoted partner. IRC’s unmatched expertise in resource stewardship, trails, and public access has played a big part in making our community a wonderful place to live.”



– Laurie Hoffman
Former Director of Community Services,
City of Irvine

“OC Parks’ management of the Irvine Ranch Open Space over the last decade has been helped greatly by IRC. IRC’s advanced science-based expertise and solution-oriented approach is particularly valuable. Our integrated public-private partnership where IRC and OC Parks staff work directly together and complement each other benefits from the strengths of both organizations. IRC is an incredible resource to the open space stewardship and land management community.”

– Stacy Blackwood
Director,
OC Parks



“The partnership between the City of Newport Beach and IRC has set an impressive foundation for how we manage and care for our open spaces. We found a partner in IRC that made us better, think differently, and who conscientiously leads the way with measurable results.”



– Laura Detweiler
Recreation and Senior Services
Director,
City of Newport Beach

“IRC has been a vital partner throughout the implementation of OCTA’s Measure M Environmental Mitigation Program. Funded by the M2 Program, IRC has led restoration on more than 1,000 acres of conserved watersheds protected by the County of Orange. Together, we are improving and protecting the valuable natural resources that make Orange County such a special place to live.”



– Lesley Hill
Environmental Mitigation Program Project Manager,
Orange County Transportation Authority



“OC Waste and Recycling’s relationship with IRC has made the entire mitigation process much easier. IRC’s strong agency relationships and expertise in restoration ecology are second to none, which has let us create even more outcomes with greater benefits to the ecology of Orange County.”

– John Arnau
Environmental Services Manager,
Orange County Waste and Recycling

GET INVOLVED

Volunteers are the heart of IRC. They power our projects and multiply our capacity to protect, restore, and enhance Southern California's urban wildlands. They are our most visible connection to the community.

IRC recruits, trains, and supports community members who want to be more deeply involved in our work and the land. We provide exceptional training and opportunities to contribute, to develop knowledge and skills in a variety of volunteer positions, and to direct passion and interest into IRC's Mission.

"IRC is one of the great benefits of living in Orange County. The variety of programs, ease of use, and the genuine enthusiasm of the volunteers and staff are unique in my experience."

— **Ray Wirta,**
donor and avid mountain bike participant

"I have been involved with IRC since June 2006. After experiencing just about every mountain bike ride in Bommer Canyon, someone suggested I become a volunteer. I've been volunteering ever since including biking, running, and the Native Seed Farm. Working on the Farm made me realize that IRC's work touches everyone, not just those who enjoy the trails. It is because of this that I made IRC a major beneficiary of my estate, specifically the Native Seed Farm."

— **Janice Bora,**
donor and IRC volunteer

"IRC has been a wonderful addition to Orange County. I have been proud to be both a volunteer and a donor since the beginning. Many years ago, I read some good advice — donate your time and resources to an activity that you have some skill and interest in and you will be more useful to that organization. Irvine Ranch Conservancy fits me perfectly."

— **John Ganahl,**
donor and IRC volunteer

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VOLUNTEER

To learn more about becoming an Irvine Ranch Conservancy volunteer, go to letsgooutside.org/volunteer.

DONATE

To help Irvine Ranch Conservancy achieve our mission, please consider donating. Visit irconservancy.org/donate, or text 'IRC' to 56512.



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