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Environmentalism | Environmentalist Geoffrey Smith moving on to greener pastures



Environmental activist Geoffrey Smith has moved to Santa Rosa. Courtesy: Camille Smith

By Terry Rodgers
Contributor

Geoffrey Smith, one of San Diego County's most active and effective advocates for preserving wild lands and open space over the past 30 years, is moving on to greener opportunities.

Smith, 55, has pushed the "refresh" button on his life, moving on Jan. 2 with his wife of a dozen years, Camille, to Santa Rosa. Camille has a job as a nanny, but he will be looking for work.

Ten years ago, Smith set aside his well-paying career as a computer software engineer to devote his professional life to preserving the county's remaining wildlands and native habitat.

“There is nothing like pure wilderness to heal our wounds, preserve our sanity and relieve the stress of our complicated world,” he said in an interview on the eve of his departure. “As a society, we need to have places like that.”

Until a few months ago, he was communications director for the Encinitas-based San Elijo Lagoon Conservancy. Before that, he was the executive director of The Escondido Creek Conservancy from 2005-07. He has also held staff positions with the Desert Protective Council, U.S.D.A. Forest Service, California Wild Heritage Campaign and the San Diego Chapter of the Sierra Club.

He's also served on volunteer groups, including 20 years as chairman of the Los Penasquitos Canyon Preserve Citizens Advisory Committee.

He met his wife while working on one of his many campaigns to preserve pristine natural landscape.

“I married my best volunteer,” he said. Camille, a career teacher, retired from the classroom and became education coordinator for the San Diego Audubon Society. The couple often worked as a team on environmental campaigns. Both also share a passion for cycling and ride a tandem bicycle.

The son of a Presbyterian minister, Smith has been less confrontational than some of his environmentalist peers. He said he learned from his father that “it's all about fellowship and community and people working together toward a common goal.”

“I really relish the connections, the networking” he said. “I believe in the power of grassroots volunteerism as a means to promoting stewardship of our natural resources.”

Tall, bearded and with silver-streaked hair longer than is currently fashionable, Smith would not look out of place in a sepia-toned photograph standing next to John Muir, the legendary founder of the Sierra Club.

Using the same strategy as Muir did with presidents and tourists alike, Smith has recruited hundreds of people to support his causes by taking them hiking, relying on a few words and the beauty of the landscape to inspire them.

During these treks into the backcountry, Smith would wait until the group reached a scenic vista, then pull out a nylon zipper pouch filled with pens and stationery. He would ask them to write a letter to their congressional representative, state senator, etc. right there while sitting on a boulder next to the trail.

“It was a very empowering thing because, for many of them, it was the first time they had ever done something like that,” he recalled.

While his resume of accomplishments is as diverse as the natural habitats he sought to save, two achievements stand out.

The first was his decade-long crusade on behalf of the California Desert Protection Act, which was approved by the U.S. Congress in October 1994.

The bill, which was championed by U.S. Sen. Dianne Feinstein, created 69 wilderness areas in California, along with two new national parks at Joshua Tree and Death Valley, and the Mojave National Preserve.

He will also be remembered locally as one of a core group of local environmentalists who in 2000 launched an effort to establish a “coast to crest” park along the 52-mile length of the San Diego River, including the proposed wilderness headwaters.

Looking over his shoulder as he departs, Smith said the biggest challenges facing the county’s numerous nonprofit environmental groups are the need for funding and leadership from the board members that oversee them.

“The major need is for philanthropic organizations and funders to embrace these organizations and bootstrap them,” he said. “There are a lot of really good mission-focused organizations that need the support.”

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Monday, January 31 

Showing events after 1/31.

[Look for earlier events](#)

Tuesday, February 1

7:00am [LeTip Golden Triangle](#)

8:00am [Friends Meeting](#)

10:30am [Free Caregiver support group](#)

12:00pm [Rotary Club of La Jolla](#)

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6:00pm [MEETING: Bird Book Community](#)



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- [Carmel Valley planning board voices opposition to group's proposal to move Carmel Valley to another district](#) January 31, 2011
The city of San Diego is in the process of re-drawing its eight districts and eventually will add a ninth. One local group is pitching a plan that would move Carmel Valley from District 1 to District 5 [...]
- [Del Mar Highlands Town Center upgrade project reaches halfway point](#) January 31, 2011
Del Mar Highlands Town Center Manager Elizabeth Schreiber said they have reached the halfway point in their renovations on the shopping center, with the project expected to be complete by mid-July. The center's "re-imaging" is bringing improved parking, more restaurants and a completely revamped UltraStar Cinemas [...]
- [Solana Beach: Del Sol Lions Club to dedicate audible signal crosswalk](#) January 31, 2011
The community is invited to join the Solana Beach Mayor Lesa Heebner, and the Solana Beach City Council as they join with members of the Del Sol Lions Club and the community in a brief dedication ceremony on Wednesday, Feb. 9, at 4 p.m., to commemorate the new audible crosswalk signal donated by the Del Sol Lions Club at the intersection of Lomas Santa Fe Dr [...]
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