



THE SIGNPOST

Third Quarter 2023

President's Message:

It's almost fall and it's now time to think ahead to 2024 and the next California Parks Training Conference, which will be March 4th-7th.

Our 2024 conference committee has been working diligently on the 2024 Parks Training Conference. The conference will be held in Oxnard at the Marriott Courtyard. The nightly room rate will be \$145. We will be posting a special code for this rate in the upcoming newsletter.

We will have three tracks to select from consisting of: Resource Management, Public Safety, and Interpretation. One of our main sponsors for the conference will be the Ventura County Sheriff's Department who will supply speakers on Public Safety and will present a special training on the Monday before the official start of the conference.

If your organization has any individuals who would like to present a topic, please let our committee know.

If you have any questions or comments please contact one of our committee members. More information forth coming.

2024 Conference Committee:

[Candice Hubert](#)

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President,
Matt Cerkel



2023 World Ranger Day

Mike Warner, Northern California Regional Director



Photo Credit: Mike Lynch, CSPRA

The 31st annual World Ranger Day was on July 31st. It was one of the largest celebrations held at the Point Reyes National Seashore's Kenneth C. Patrick Visitor Center near Drakes Beach. Twenty-five agencies and groups and approximately 155 participants from local, county, special district, state, and federal agencies throughout central and northern California came together. A special delegation from Kolkheti National Park in the country of Georgia, Point Reyes's sister park made the event international.

World Ranger Day was established in 1992 to bring public awareness to both the work that rangers and other park professionals do every day, and to honor those lost in the line duty. The international Ranger Foundation, which administers and facilitates The World Ranger Congress and World Ranger Day, also produces a yearly Roll of Honor to commemorate rangers who have died in the line of duty. Between June 2022 to May 2023, the Foundation noted that 148 rangers lost their lives in the line of duty.

This year's celebration also marked the 50th anniversary of the line of duty death of National Park Service Park Ranger Kenneth Patrick and State Park Ranger Richard Schnurr. For those who do not know, Ranger Patrick was murdered on the morning of August 5th, 1973, while conducting a traffic stop on suspected poachers within the Point Reyes National Seashore. In



that same year, Ranger Schnurr lost his life on November 26th, when the water tender he was operating suffered a mechanical malfunction and led to the vehicle veering off a park road at Mitchell Caverns State Natural Reserve. The family of Ranger Patrick were in attendance of this year’s celebration, along with a State Parks delegation on behalf of Ranger Schnurr’s family.



Photo Credit: Anela Kopshever, National Park Service

Speakers included representatives from the National Park Service, International Ranger Foundation, California State Park Ranger Association, and Kolkheti National Park, along with a presentation of life saving and valor awards by the Park Ranger Association of California. A thoughtful addition at the end of ceremonies was an open microphone session for attendees to share how they became park rangers, which was ended with a reading of “Send a Ranger” written by Stephen Mather, the first director of the National Park Service.

A new memorial was dedicated for Ranger Patrick in front of the Kenneth C Patrick Visitor Center, followed by a group photo. The rest of the morning was spent socializing with new and old friends, consuming a delicious cake, and enjoying beautiful and rare sunny summer’s morning at Drakes Beach with osprey circling and diving for meals, much to the entertainment of the assembled crowd.

The World Ranger Day Event at Point Reyes was hosted by the Point Reyes National Seashore



staff and was sponsored by the International Ranger Foundation, and California State Park Ranger Association.

Awards for Meritorious Actions Presented at World Ranger Day Event

Mike Warner, Northern California Regional Director



Earlier this spring, for the first time in three years the California State Park Rangers Association and Park Rangers Association of California's Awards Committee met to review submissions for awards. All three applications were approved unanimously, details following below. It was also decided by the committee to present the medals this year at the World Ranger Day celebration at Point Reyes National Seashore.

Ranger Steven Kong, City of San Francisco

On the morning of November 18th, 2019, Ranger Kong was on duty traveling between park facilities when he observed a driver yelling at other motorists at a stop light. As both the driver and Ranger Kong merged on to Interstate 80, the driver lost control of his vehicle and crashed into the center median.

Ranger Kong stopped his vehicle to render aid to the driver. While doing so the driver stabbed Ranger Kong. With the assistance of bystanders, the suspect was detained until police officers arrived.

The suspect was charged with attempted murder, aggravated assault, carjacking, and possession of a stolen vehicle.



Ranger Kong is hereby awarded the Award of Honor for his actions on November 18th, 2019.

Ranger John Mohamed, Fulton El Camino Regional Park District

In the afternoon on May 2nd, 2022, Ranger Mohamed was traveling between park facilities when he observed a structure fire on Madison Ave in Sacramento. The fire department had not arrived on scene yet, and Ranger Mohamed observed a male subject inside the building. Ranger Mohamed entered the burning structure and successfully rescued the trapped subject, and then returned into the structure, now at risk of collapsing, to search for additional victims until fire units arrived. Ranger Mohamed suffered mild smoking inhalation and was treated and released at the scene.

Ranger Mohamed is hereby awarded the Medal of Valor for his actions on May 2nd, 2022.

Ranger Jared Elster, Sacramento County Parks and Recreation

On December 11, 2019, Ranger Elster was off duty and picking up a family member at the Auburn Library when he heard someone say, “call 9-1-1.” When he went to investigate, he discovered a knife attack in progress, with two people injured. Ranger Elster attempted to intervene, suffering a knife laceration to the hand in the process. Ranger Elster was successful in disrupting the attack and saving lives at the risk of his own. The suspect was later arrested and charged with attempted murder and assault with a deadly weapon.

Ranger Elster is hereby awarded the Medal of Valor for his actions on December 11th, 2019.

For those that may not be aware, the committee meets once a year (except in the case of a lockdown / pandemic) to review applications submitted by fellow rangers. Nominations must be submitted to the Award Review Committee no later than January 1 of each year.

The nominee must be a park professional, employed by any California, Nevada, Oregon or Washington municipal, county, state, regional or federal park agency, open space district or special park district. The nominee is not required to be a member of the Park Rangers Association of California or the California State Park Rangers Association.

The Awards

Medal of Valor

Valor is defined as, "Performing an act above and beyond the call of duty; and, exhibiting exceptional courage, extraordinary decisiveness and remarkable presence of mind, with unusual swiftness of action, without regard for personal safety, in an attempt to save or protect human life.

Public safety personnel are routinely charged with handling emergency situations and may be called upon at any time to put their own personal safety at risk. Park rangers and other park professionals fight wild land fires, conduct search and rescue operations, apprehend criminals, provide emergency medical services, and perform other duties to ensure the safety and welfare of the public they serve.



Periodically, park professionals will face emergency situations that are so extreme that by engaging in the emergency, they not only jeopardize their personal safety, but risk their own lives. There is nothing more precious than human life, and there is nothing more noble than saving human life.

The Park Rangers Association of California Medal of Valor may be presented to any park professional who risks his or her own life to an extraordinary degree in saving or attempting to save the life of another person or sacrifices him or herself in a heroic manner for the benefit of others.

This award recognizes the recipient's demonstration of unusual courage involving a high degree of personal risk in the face of danger. The heroic act does not have to be related to the recipient's official duties nor occur at their official duty station.

Award of Honor

The Award of Honor may be presented by the Association to individuals whose actions are admirable or heroic, but do not rise to the level required for the Medal of Valor.

Life Saving Award

The Life Saving Award may be presented by the Association to individuals whose actions are an exceptional act under emergency conditions, not involving bravery, wherein a service is rendered that results directly in sustaining a human life.

To nominate one of your colleagues, please go to <https://www.calranger.org/honors.html>





Ranger Mohamed's Account of His Actions on May 2nd, 2022

Mike Warner, Northern California Regional Director



Park Ranger John Mohamed, with the Fulton El Camino Park Police Department, shared his experience with Board President Matt Cerkel and I, following the World Ranger Day Event at Point Reyes National Seashore. With Ranger Mohamed's blessing, we decided to share it with our membership. In his own words, this is Ranger Mohamed's account:

On May 2, 2022, at approximately 1735 hours I was driving north on Auburn Blvd. between parks when I observed heavy smoke to my east. I turned onto eastbound Madison Avenue and observed a commercial building fully engulfed with flames coming out of the roof approximately 12-15 feet in the air.

At 1737 hours I notified Sacramento County Sheriff's Dispatch of the structure fire. I also requested that Sacramento Metro Fire be dispatched as there were no other agencies on scene. I entered the parking lot for the building which once housed a large one-story restaurant and was approximately 4,000 square feet in size. I drove around the exterior as the building had a chain link fence surrounding it. I noticed a break in the fence near the main entrance to the building. I advised dispatch that the building appeared to be abandoned, however I would be checking for occupants.

As I approached the main entrance to the building, I saw a shadow that I thought was a person



moving inside the building. I opened the front doors and observed a male subject standing in the building approximately 20 feet inside. I was having a difficult time seeing due to the heavy smoke and I was starting to cough as I did not have a mask. The subject appeared to be a WMA approximately 6' 0" tall with something in both of his hands. Both hands were at his side, and I was unable to see what he was carrying.

I announced, "Police! This building is on fire. Come with me." The male simply ignored my commands and retreated further into the building. I followed the subject into the interior of the building thinking that he was confused and needed assistance. I, once again, announced "Police! The building is on fire you need to exit the building." The subject again ignored my commands and retreated further into the building.

I continued following the subject further into the building. At this point I gave the subject commands to drop what was in his hands and to raise his hands over his head. The subject complied with my request. For officer safety and not knowing his involvement in the fire I placed the subject in handcuffs and escorted him out of the building.

While I was escorting the subject out of the building he stated, "My friend is still in there, I have to get my friend." I told the subject that I would get his friend and that he needed to exit the building with me. As I exited the building a Sacramento County Sheriff's Sergeant Connor M Milligan met me at the front door. I requested that the Sergeant Milligan take the subject and place him in his vehicle. I told the Sergeant that I did not know what the subject's involvement in the fire might be and I requested that the subject be detained.



As the subject had stated that there was an additional person in the building, I again entered the building and started a search for any additional person(s). Due to the heavy smoke, I was having a difficult time breathing and my vision was minimal. The sparks from the fire had damaged my glasses which did not help my vision. I entered the building via the front door which is located on the east side of the building.

I then started the search by checking the area to the north. Once I cleared the north end of the



building, I continued to the west then south. On the west side of the building were several small rooms which appeared to have been converted to living areas by several of the homeless persons from the area. Each was full of property and trash. I had to move boxes, trash, blankets, etc. to check for additional people.

As I came to interior doors, I opened each and blocked them open so I would have an escape route should I need it. At this point parts of the ceiling were starting to fall on me and the area surrounding me. I pressed on and continued south down the west side of the building. I was able to open two exterior doors that I felt I could use for an escape should I need it.

When I reached the south end of the building, I still had not located anyone that may be trapped in the building. I started to check the area towards the east and, suddenly, the roof caved in behind me. The smoke was getting heavy and my breathing was becoming a problem. I started towards the north and more of the ceiling and roof fell blocking my exit.

I tried to make an exit through the windows to the east side of the building, but they were boarded up and I was unable to exit via that avenue. I forced myself to remain calm and think about how to get out. I was able to work my way around the fire to the original door that I came in and I exited the building. I did not find anyone else in the building and according to Sacramento Metro Fire there was no one else left in the building.

As I exited the building, I was having a difficult time breathing and seeing. However, I could see that the fire was getting close to my patrol vehicle. I was able to move my vehicle out of the way of the fire and across the street. I opened the door to my vehicle and fell out on the ground having a difficult time breathing.

Sacramento Metro Fire Medics found me and took me to their medical response rig. I was treated for smoke inhalation and went to Kaiser Hospital for treatment. My throat and upper lungs were damaged during the fire.





Nature Together Pilot Project at Galena Creek Regional Park

Andy Brown, Nevada Region Director

Diversity. Equality. Inclusion. These are words becoming more common in our vernacular. On any given day, I see trends in visitation at Galena Creek Regional Park. As a popular hiking destination, adjoining thousands of acres of National Forest and Wilderness, the park is far from the urban core of Reno, about mid-way up the mountain on the way to North Lake Tahoe.

To make the park more appealing to all, and to showcase the broad range of ways that one can recreate at Galena Creek, a new project is taking shape. Nature Together is an idea of inclusivity through sharing experiences being implemented by the Great Basin Institute, in partnership with Washoe County Regional Parks and Open Space and the USDA Forest Service.

The goal of the Nature Together Project is to improve the representation of all people who come to Galena Creek Regional Park by collecting photos visitors take of themselves throughout the park, perhaps participating in a favorite activity such as fishing or hiking with a pet, visiting a favorite location or sharing an aspect of the park that they enjoy most, which can be sent via email to the Visitor Center by scanning a QR. Those who share their stories will be added into an ever-changing slideshow on the Visitor Center's website and social media. Photos will also be added to a mural and displayed inside Galena Creek Visitor Center, which will also display a variety of artwork produced by well-known local artists from minority communities.

“Guests to the park will be able to relate to pictures taken by other visitors, which in turn builds important representation, self-confidence, and creates a stronger community,” says Ashley Phillips, DEI Coordinator/AmeriCorps Vista working with the Great Basin Institute at the Galena Creek Visitor Center.

The Nature Together project is currently being implemented and will begin to generate positive participation in the coming weeks and months, which will be shared in a future Signpost.

Is your park or agency working on a similar project, or do you have an experience to share? Let me know by sharing your thoughts on PRACnet.





Under the Flat Hat **Matt Cerkel, President**



In late July, the Press Democrat ran the article “Sonoma County considering removing park rangers’ peace officer status” (<https://www.pressdemocrat.com/article/news/sonoma-county-considering-removing-park-rangers-peace-officer-status/>). This is very concerning, having gone through something similar with my own agency 20 years ago. Sonoma County Regional Parks officials may also drop the EMT requirement. They would also have the Sonoma County Sheriff’s Office take over law enforcement in the parks. The same officials claim this is only a concept, but the proposal seems well advanced for just a “concept.” From my own experience, this proposal, if enacted, will damage the parks and the ranger program and be a costly mistake that will drive even more rangers from the agency.

To understand my belief on this Sonoma County proposal, we must go back to 2002 when I was working as an armed peace officer park ranger for my current employer. In 2002 I asked for an illegal disciplinary action that violated the Public Safety Officer Bill of Rights to be removed from my personnel file. That same year the union that represented the rangers also requested safety retirement during labor negotiations, which was denied. In early 2003 the rangers and union were blindsided by the agency when they disarmed us and suspended our peace officer status by falsely claiming the agency wasn’t a “local agency” under Penal Code Section 830.31(b), but they granted us public officer authority under Penal Code Section 836.5, which also relies on the term “local agency.”

The agency was advised that they were legally able to employ us peace officers. And yet, the agency kept moving the goalposts. When all the opinion came back in favor of the rangers, the agency then sued the union over the issue. During the pre-trial depositions and during the trial,



agency officials misstated facts and even committed perjury. I was a witness during the trial. Under cross examination, the agency's attorney tried to have me declared a hostile witness because my testimony showed the flaws in their "logic" and went against the false narrative they had created. Unfortunately, the agency and their legal hired guns were able to effectively confuse the matter enough to have the judge rule in their favor. Afterwards the agency and the union sought special legislation to authorize the agency to employ peace officer park rangers, which was passed by the state legislature and signed into law by the governor.

This was not the end. It was clear: they did not want us to be peace officers and behind the scenes had secured the support of a slim majority of the elected board that oversees the agency. In December of 2004 they presented a highly inaccurate report that was disingenuous and dishonest that "permanently" stripped the rangers of their peace officer powers and established a costly contracted deputy sheriff program. This program was partly funded by ranger vacancies created by rangers resigning due to the agency's actions. This proposal was approved by the elected board by a 3 to 2 vote. However, like the rangers predicted, things didn't work out as planned for the agency and within a year and half it was decided to restore peace officer status (unarmed) to the rangers. This decision took another three years to complete since an all-new policy manual was needed and all the rangers had to go through the peace officer background investigation and hiring process again. Nearly 20 years later those responsible for this travesty have all retired or left office, but the expensive deputy contract remains (now down to one deputy due to costs), and some lingering damage remains.

Luckily, we now have a great leadership team that have worked hard to improve the ranger program and repair the damage. Three enduring lessons I took from this experience is:

1. Don't give up speaking up for what is right and truthful.
2. When an agency has a specific agenda, it is very hard to stop it, especially if it is largely done behind closed doors.
3. The damage once done can take decades to repair.

Now let's look at the Sonoma County situation. The Press Democrat article states:
"The reasons behind the county's proposal are shrouded in secrecy. Officials insist that a formal proposal does not yet exist and is only a 'concept'."

Multiple county officials declined to comment or say why the county is considering the change. The Sheriff's Office declined an interview this week.

"Presently, there is not a formal proposal being prepared for consideration by the Board of Supervisors," Regional Parks Director Bert Whitaker said in an email, declining an interview. "Any discussions would be considered a personnel issue and not something I am able to comment on at this time."

According to a notice recently sent to three unions representing park rangers, the department is evaluating funding options that include "eliminating or redistributing" vacant positions."



Sonoma County hired a consultant to evaluate the ranger program. They asked me if the consultant could contact me for an interview. I said yes and even followed up with the agency after not hearing from the consultant, reminding them of my availability. However, I was never contacted by the consultant. I grew suspicious of the agency's intent, especially after hearing rumors that they wanted to strip their rangers of their peace officer status and were in active talks with another county that has a non-peace officer ranger program. That county had a top parks official once state, in a public meeting I attended, that they had 100% compliance with their regulations. That same agency reportedly has a ranger turnover rate of around 100% over the past decade.

I have talked to rangers in Sonoma County, and they are not sure why this is happening. They were told previously that part of the issue is related to the closure of the NPS certified Ranger Academy at the Santa Rosa Public Safety Training Center (SRPSTC) and that there are no other training options available. This is not true: the county could send rangers to the Basic Police Academy at the SRPSTC, an out-of-state Ranger Academy or the new South Bay Ranger Academy.

I also heard from the Sonoma County rangers that there was a disturbance call where there was an attempt to shoot one of their rangers, a CHP officer, and a deputy sheriff near Maxwell Park in Sonoma. According to the Sonoma County Sheriff's press release, the suspect "grabbed a handgun from the car and began waving it around and pointing it at the peace officers and ranger...(and)" he pulled the trigger multiple times, but the gun did not fire. He continued to point the gun at peace officers, pulling the trigger and pulling back the slide to make the gun fire." Some rangers believe that this incident is playing a major role in the county's proposal.

<https://www.cbsnews.com/sanfrancisco/news/man-arrested-after-allegedly-trying-to-shoot-sonoma-county-deputy-park-ranger/>

<https://www.sonomanews.com/article/news/man-threatens-deputies-with-knife-gun-at-maxwell-farms/>

Looking back, it wasn't that long ago in 2015 Sonoma County Regional Parks changed the uniform and badges of the rangers so they wouldn't be mistaken as deputy sheriffs, especially after some high-profile use of force incidents, including some involving the Sonoma County Sheriff's Office. Reviewing the article, I did notice something interesting their then director stated:

*"Rangers are a combination of many things, you're explorers, you're guardians, outdoorsmen and women, educators, **police officers**, tree lovers, nature guides, greeters, animal protectors, custodians of our natural wonders, and field and environmental scientists all rolled into one."* However, their parks manager, who is now the director, acknowledged that it was a move "to distance itself from law enforcement following high-profile incidents involving the use of force that have increased tensions in some communities between police agencies and the people they serve."



He went on to state:

*“Our goal is not to go out there and write the citations.” **We’re not the police.** We’re there to encourage and facilitate people.”*

I think these contradictory statements may potentially show an anti-prace officer/law enforcement bias from a decision-maker. For park rangers, law enforcement is or should be a vital tool to help protect the parks and the visitors. So now the managers of Sonoma County Parks want Sheriff’s Deputies to handle all law enforcement in the park. This does not make sense. To learn more <https://www.pressdemocrat.com/article/news/new-look-for-sonoma-county-regional-parks-rangers/>

How would contracting with the Sonoma County Sheriff’s Office SCSO work for the parks when the SCSO is facing a “critical” issue and *“The amount of mandatory overtime the deputies are being required to fill is unsustainable”*? <https://www.pressdemocrat.com/article/news/belt-tightening-staffing-woes-at-stake-as-sonoma-county-supervisors-consider/>

How would adding additional patrol responsibilities and duties to an agency that is already spread thin play out? Just because money from the parks could be available to pay for deputy sheriffs to patrol the parks doesn't mean there would be deputies available to routinely patrol the parks.

Additionally, contracting with the Sheriff’s Office would be paying a lot more for a lower level of service. In Sonoma County, a bottom step Deputy Sheriff Trainee earns more than a top step non-supervisory Park Ranger II and the pay discrepancy grows to nearly \$37,000 a year when you compare the pay of Ranger II to a Deputy Sheriff II. So ultimately the patrol presence and level of service to the parks and the visitors would likely be significantly decreased under the County’s “concept.” There would likely be little to no routine enforcement of park regulations in place to protect park resources or visitors.

I would encourage the administrators of Sonoma County Regional Parks to take a step back from this ill-conceived “concept” that would ultimately diminish their rangers, decrease protection of their parks and safety of park visitors, and cost the taxpayers more for a lower level of service. They should also be more open and honest about their motives with their employees and the public. There is still time to do the right thing and I hope they take advantage of that for the sake of the parks, the park employees, and the park visitors.



Park Rangers Association of California-The Signpost



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Thanks for reading! Please [let us know](#) if you have ideas for what you would like to see in future issues of *The Signpost*.