Santa Rosa & San Jacinto Mountains National Monument

A celebration of beauty and history in The Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains National Monument

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IF YOU WANT TO KNOW THESE MOUNTAINS, THERE'S NO BETTER GUIDE than J. Smeaton Chase, an Englishman who toured the Santa Rosa and San Jacinto mountains in 1915 with his burro, Mesquit. Chase was baked senseless by the stupefying heat. His coffee cup was blown away by "the pestilent wind" ripping through the San Gorgonio Pass. He was evicted from his coyote skin sleeping bag by a flash flood down Chino Canyon.

When he ended his visit, you'd think Chase would care little what became of this uncouth land. But the thoughtful tourist wrote a book, California Desert Trails, urging that these mountains be preserved for all time as a national park.

Travelers before and after have come to a similar conclusion. No matter how many cholla spikes they flick off their socks, they still want to see this beautiful and sometimes prickly place protected.

And it finally happened.

On Oct. 24, 2000, legislation introduced by U.S. Rep. Mary Bono was signed into law, and the stomping grounds of J. Smeaton Chase and Mesquit became The Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains National Monument.

Hold on, you say: Why didn't Mr. Chase get his national park? It's true the national monument designation sometimes confuses people. To clear up matters: A national monument is not a "junior" national park, even though some monuments, such as Joshua Tree, are eventually redesignated as national parks.

At one time in history, monuments and parks were more distinct, but these days there is no substantial difference (to the public, anyway), says Hal Rothman, professor of history at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, and author of a book on national monuments. Both titles are the equivalent of an Academy Award: the highest honor bestowed on natural areas. "The designation means you have something assessed as important to the nation, not just your region," Rothman says.

The label also means we're determined to protect our "nationally significant biological, cultural, geological and recreational resources." But "resources" is too paltry a word to encompass the abundance and vitality found in these mountains.

Out there is a teeming world of hidden waterfalls, rockhounds, mystics, hermits, botanists, rattlesnake researchers, nomadic artists, Indian artifacts, and more than 500 plant species, each with a personality you could spend a lifetime getting to know. Want to meet a Tahquitz ivesia or a San Jacinto prickly phlox? You'll only find it here.

"Resources" would include the wild bighorn lamb, Ambrosia, whose life was saved atop Bradley Mountain by a sheep researcher applying mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. And Manuel Hamilton, chairman of the Ramona Band of Cahuilla Indians, who can tell you about making bone arrows and collecting healing teas as a boy up on Cahuilla Mountain, an area the Ramonas deem a sphere of influence to the national monument. Or the Wellman family, which has ranched Texas Longhorn cattle in the San Jacinto Mountains since the 1800s.

The monument and its resources are too sprawling and big (272,000 acres) ever to be contained in a management plan—but still it's someone's job to try. That someone, the first manager of the monument, is Danella George. Blonde and irrepressible, George grew up a California surfer girl and still looks and acts the part. Her management style is friendly and surfer-casual.

George has happy memories of visiting the desert as a child: chasing lizards with her friend Smitty and diving into the El Mirador Hotel pool, where you could hold your breath and wave at your parents in the subterranean bar.

Returning to the desert as an adult, George was riveted by the escarpment. "The mountains here are so straight up and open," she beams. "Much of the history and ecology for the Santa Rosa and San Jacinto mountains can be attributed to their angle of repose." George admires the slope mostly in passing these days as she sprints from meeting to meeting.

The endless meetings are necessary to coordinate the hundreds of people involved in the monument venture. There's a convergence of electricity and creativity around the new monument right now. As George says: "It's intensely cooperative and evolving."

It's been a cooperative effort right from the earliest days. Over the decades, many influential folks have championed preserving the mountains as a national park or monument. Among the advocates: Desert Magazine founder Randall Henderson, author John C. Van Dyke, first Palm Springs Mayor Philip Boyd, and Desert Center founder Steve Ragsdale.

Other distinguished outdoorsmen added their vote simply by visiting and expounding on what they saw: Edmund Jaeger, famed botanist and an authority on deserts worldwide; Ansel Adams, the country's premier landscape photographer; and John Muir, America's greatest conservationist.

Like Chase, John Muir was socked by the desert heat, which brought to mind for him "Milton's unlucky angels." But like Chase, he found ample consolation. "O the beauty of the sky evening and morning," he wrote to a friend.

In recent years, a band of tireless boosters again revived the crusade for federal protection. Names that come up again and again are Bill Havert, executive director of the Coachella Valley Mountains Conservancy; Buford Crites, Palm Desert Councilman; Joan Taylor of the Sierra Club; Corky Larson, former Coachella Valley Association of Governments executive director; Katie Barrows, associate director of the Coachella Valley Mountains Conservancy; Ed Hasty, former Bureau of Land Management state director; and Ed Kibbey, executive director of the Building Industry Association's Desert Chapter.

The advocates received the help of Congresswoman Mary Bono, as well as U.S. Sen. Dianne Feinstein, who introduced a companion bill in the Senate. "You have to give final credit to Mary Bono," says Havert. "She did what was necessary to finally make this happen."

Of course, since this is Palm Springs, we couldn't do a national monument the way everyone else does it. We had to innovate. This would be the first national monument created through a cooperative effort of Congress rather than a presidential dictate. What this means is the monument has broad support. Unlike some hastily decreed monuments, it's not going away.

In another departure from convention, the entire Palm Springs Valley building industry backed the monument. "Normally when you talk about declaring something a national monument, the building industry would have apoplexy," says Crites. "But here we had Ed Kibbey of the building industry, and Joan Taylor of the Sierra Club sitting down together and saying, 'How are we going to fix this so we have something we can all love and live with?'"

More innovation: The management plan is an experiment in radical cooperation, with the Bureau of Land Management and the Forest Service sharing the reins equally with the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians. State agencies, local governments, several Indian tribes and a host of partners all weigh in on decisions.

Guiding the monument for the San Bernardino National Forest is San Jacinto District Ranger Laurie Rosenthal. She acknowledges the old monolithic way of doing business might be easier, but she believes the fruits of cooperation and community involvement make it worth the added effort.

"We may be the managers of this monument, but this is not our land," Rosenthal says. "It's everybody's land. We really want this to be a community-supported monument." That means the public will be involved in everything from monitoring archeological and biological sites to maintaining trails and educating schoolchildren about the monument's nine threatened and endangered species, including the southern yellow bat and the least Bell's vireo.

A final first is the inclusion of an Indian tribe as an equal partner in the monument. In the 1920s, the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians nixed several attempts to include the Indian Canyons in a proposed national park — without the tribe's input.

Today the tribe has equal say. "For the tribe, monument status means we are now able to work with other agencies in protecting cultural sites off the reservation," says Barbara Gonzales Lyons, vice chairman of the Agua Caliente Tribal Council. "We want to do the gamut of protection — the native plants, trails and water resources as well.

"This is where my people began," she adds. "This is where we've always been."

You may have heard about this new national monument and still be a bit vague on where it is exactly. So here's how you find it:

If you're driving into Palm Springs from Los Angeles, the Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains National Monument begins where Highway 111 breaks away from Interstate 10. If you follow 111 through the Palm Springs Valley and look to your right, you're roughly following the base of the monument all the way to the northern reaches of the Salton Sea.

The southern edge of the monument abuts the Anza Borrego Desert State Park near Travertine Rock. Up in the mountains, the western boundary is just beyond the ridgeline.

Once you've found the boundaries, you'll want to get oriented to landmarks. The first object that's likely to arrest your attention is 10,834-foot Mount San Jacinto. Whether adorned with snow or the red beacon of the Palm Springs Aerial Tramway Station, the mountain is an imposing centerpiece to the national monument.

J. Smeaton Chase prized his view of the mountain,s face from his camp in Chino Canyon, noting that the peak rears up from the surrounding desert: "Explicit, bald, almost artificial."

Explicit, indeed. The northeastern face of San Jacinto is one of the steepest escarpments in the United States.

The rapid rise influences nearly everything about the monument, from weather to animal and plant diversity to Indian patterns of habitation. The abrupt rise also makes the mountain appear shockingly close to the valley floor. From your hotel room or patio, you can almost reach out and pet San Jack's flank.

It's this extreme vertical relief that allows for immediate and unparalleled access from desert resort to wilderness. "There's a dramatic interface here between solitude and city," says Buford Crites. "You only need to take a couple of twists and turns up a canyon or a ridgeline and the urban world of Southern California is gone."

"I can get from town onto a trail in five minutes," adds Jeff Morgan, vice chair of conservation for the Sierra Club's Tahquitz Group. "It takes me usually less than 10 minutes from my house to get to the tram and less than 20 minutes to get off the tram. I know the schedules, so I park my car and off we go."

Looking south of the white granite spurs of San Jacinto, you'll see a broad divide where Palm Canyon "one of the Indian Canyons" cleaves the Santa Rosa and San Jacinto ranges. The gap is often filled with curls of cloud pushing in from the wetter western side of the mountains.

South of the Indian Canyons, the mountains seem to wrap around to your left. These are the little-known Santa Rosas. Only a few field biologists and manic hikers can claim true intimacy with these mountains.

It takes awhile to appreciate the beauty of this boulder range, but lest you think the Santa Rosas are drab, wait until sunrise or sunset when layer upon layer of ridges and ranges are revealed. "It's like you,ve donned 3D glasses. Changing light on these mountains makes for nonstop topographical surprise," says Chase.

You'll easily spot the prominent 8,716-foot peak of Toro and nearby Santa Rosa mountains, but don't assume the sentinels you see are all there is.

People can live in Palm Springs Valley for years and believe there are only three or four peaks in the local mountains and only one monster: San Jacinto. Surprise. There are at least four additional peaks topping 10,000 feet in the San Jacintos. The Santa Rosas, too, are well-stocked with peaks worth exploring.

Morgan should know. "I've been on every peak on the ridge dozens of times," he says. "Folly Peak, Jean Peak, Marion Mountain, Tahquitz and Red Tahquitz peaks, Apache and Spitler peaks, Eisenhower Mountain, Rabbit Peak . . ."

While Morgan takes to the ridgelines in summer, he heads for the cool canyons in winter. This truly is a monument of charismatic canyons, each with its own character. From north to south, there's Snow Creek Canyon (best mountain view in Southern California), Tachevah with its massive wedge of blue-gray granite, and Chino Canyon, former home of Cahuilla Indian shaman Pedro Chino.

And Tahquitz. This is the legendary home of a malevolent spirit who makes rude noises and launches occasional guerrilla attacks on hikers. While camping in this canyon, Chase was awakened one night by old Tahquitz rumbling in his ear.

Then there are the Indian Canyons. If San Jacinto is the lofty figurehead of the monument, the Indian Canyons are its warmer heart. For travelers, the canyons, creeks, pools and shady groves of Washingtonia filifera palms provide a welcome antidote to sun, wind, and cholla punctures.

Chase once fell into a state of near-intoxication watching "moon arrows" flashing from polished palm fronds in a palm oasis. The Indian Canyons, he said, "never fail to draw a tribute of surprised approval from even the callous globe-trotter."

The lesser-known canyons of the Santa Rosas include Toro, Martinez and Deep Canyon, home of the Philip L. Boyd Deep Canyon Desert Research Center, part of the University of California Natural Reserve System. While you can't visit Deep Canyon (it's maintained in a pristine state to aid biological research), you can glimpse its tantalizing depths from the Cahuilla Tewanet Overlook on Highway 74.

Now that you've got your bearings, you can get out there and discover something. It hasn't all been done for you.

This monument presents a dream opportunity for anyone with an appetite for adventure. You have an impressive chunk of protected land, but minus the snack shops, kiosks, and crowds that clutter many of our nation's parks. The Santa Rosa and San Jacinto Mountains National Monument is a great, raw work-in-progress.

And for now it's largely a DIY (do-it-yourself) monument. Be your own naturalist. Be your own botanist. Be your own explorer.

Still in its infancy, the monument is somewhat inaccessible, except to hearty hikers. In fact, there is only one major paved road through the mountains (Highway 74, the Palms-to-Pines Highway). For now, the thoroughfares really consist of trails. There's a snippet of the Pacific Crest Trail, along with a hodge-podge of old Indian paths and horse trails laboriously hacked out of granite mountainsides by the circa-1930s riding club The Desert Riders.

Because so much of the monument is hard to access, you can still feel like a pioneer naturalist. "For example," says BLM geologist Steve Kupferman, "you can venture out and investigate the Martinez Mountain Rock Avalanche. Not many visitors have glimpsed this mammoth and remote slide, the second largest of its kind in the United States. The slide was created between 10,000 and 20,000 years ago, when avalanches roared out of the mountains and blocks the size of small cars were tossed a mile into the desert."

Another area ripe for discovery: plants and animals. The area is recognized globally as a hotspot of biodiversity. While out bagging peaks, Jeff Morgan has come upon cougars a half dozen times, as well as bighorn sheep, 10 different kinds of snakes and perhaps 100 varieties of birds.

Buford Crites has discovered ferns and orchids tucked away in canyons. "There's a rare bluecurl flower in the high country, the only place it exists in the world. But we're not going to tell you where to look." Remember, this is a DIY deal.

"These mountains aren't well-known to the botanical world," says Kathryn Kramer, a botanist for the San Bernardino National Forest. "We just haven't had that many people out poking around. There are still a few unknown species lurking out there, especially in the remote canyons."

"This is a very important place biologically," adds Al Muth, director of the Deep Canyon Desert Research Center. The monument is part of the Peninsular Ranges Province, a series of mountain ranges beginning at the southern tip of the Baja peninsula and winding up here at Mount San Jacinto. The linked ranges provide a highway for species, and the rapid elevation shifts also make for an array of life zones, from Sonoran Desert to Arctic Alpine.

All this diversity means the Santa Rosa and San Jacinto mountains are a good habitat for scientists as well as salamanders. On your rambles, you might run into a researcher herding speckled and red rattlesnakes, or studying hybridization in Gambel's quail.

Or you might spot a collared bighorn sheep. Big, handsome and endangered, the Peninsular Ranges bighorn sheep is the celebrity species of the monument. More than that, they are a benchmark of the health of the mountains." They're a good indicator of wilderness and a good indicator of environmental problems," says Jim DeForge, executive director of the Bighorn Institute.

You've likely heard more about the bighorn than other monument species because they're at the center of disputes over trail use. Specifically, should hikers be allowed on trails in bighorn habitat during lambing season? A final trails plan is still being worked out, but whatever the outcome, there are likely to be more skirmishes ahead.

It's inevitable, because the monument is so close to huge urban populations. The managers undoubtedly will spend endless hours figuring out how to keep human users happy while protecting plants, animals and other resources.

As you become familiar with the sheep and ferns, a crowning piece of the monument remains: an unusually rich human history. It's been said the central question in getting to know a place is, "What happened here?" When you ask that question about the Santa Rosa and San Jacinto mountains, the answer is, "Quite a lot."

Cahuilla Indians lived in the canyons for thousands of years, traveling deeply worn paths to the higher country to gather pinyon nuts, acorns, agave, yucca fibers, and game. If we moderns sometimes look at the mountains as one-dimensional backdrops to our patio parties, the Cahuilla didn't need 3D glasses to see a richer land.

Peaks and boulders were not inert lumps to them, but beings transformed into natural forms. Rocks and even hot springs had power and individuality, according to anthropologist Lowell Bean. So as you're sightseeing in the monument, keep in mind that any arresting outcrop or turret might have an identity and a name.

The sense that people lived here before and invested the land with meaning is palpable to BLM archeologist Wanda Raschkow. "You can be standing on this knob in the middle of nowhere that took you all day to get to," she says. "And you've climbed a cliff and slid down the other side and run into 20 cholla cactus, and you can't imagine another human being has ever been here. And you look down and find a grinding stick."

"This is really challenging terrain," she adds, "and yet everywhere you go you find indications this land has been in use for thousands of years." To get a glimpse of what Raschkow is talking about, hike four miles up the Palm Canyon Trail from the Trading Post. Where you cross the creek, there are deep bedrock mortars right there on the trail.

But the human history of the monument isn't limited to the Cahuilla. "There are lots of stories," says mountain wanderer Crites. There are the remains of whole stamp mills where gold was processed out of these hills and evidence of cattle ranching and brush corrals.

"There are the stories of folks building the tram and the folks up in Idyllwild who didn't want it to happen. There's Peg Leg Smith and the lost gold mine down at the southern end of the Santa Rosas. Or rustlers running cattle into Horsethief Creek. Or Patton and his soldiers camping on what is now El Paseo. There's the incredible story of building Highway 74, a remarkable masterpiece of engineering.

"The first expedition in California, the Anza expedition, came right over the mountain here in 1774," adds Crites. "This is the same time Americans were ringing bells in Boston and here they were coming over the Salton Sink and through the Middle Willows." The Anza route is visible from the monument, at the crest of Coyote Canyon.

An article like this can only hold a fraction of the stories and riches of the monument. And even if we had a hundred pages, there is plenty about these mountains we don't know and perhaps will never know.

"The creation of the National Monument is a commitment from today's community to future generations that a place for solitude will remain within the Southern California landscape," Danella George says. For Crites, a goal of the new monument is keeping it that way. This should always be a place where discovery is possible. "There always should be hidden places that aren't on maps," Crites says.

At the end of his journey, J. Smeaton Chase came to a similar conclusion. The riddles and mysteries give the desert mountains their enduring appeal. He wrote: "The secret is ... secrecy."