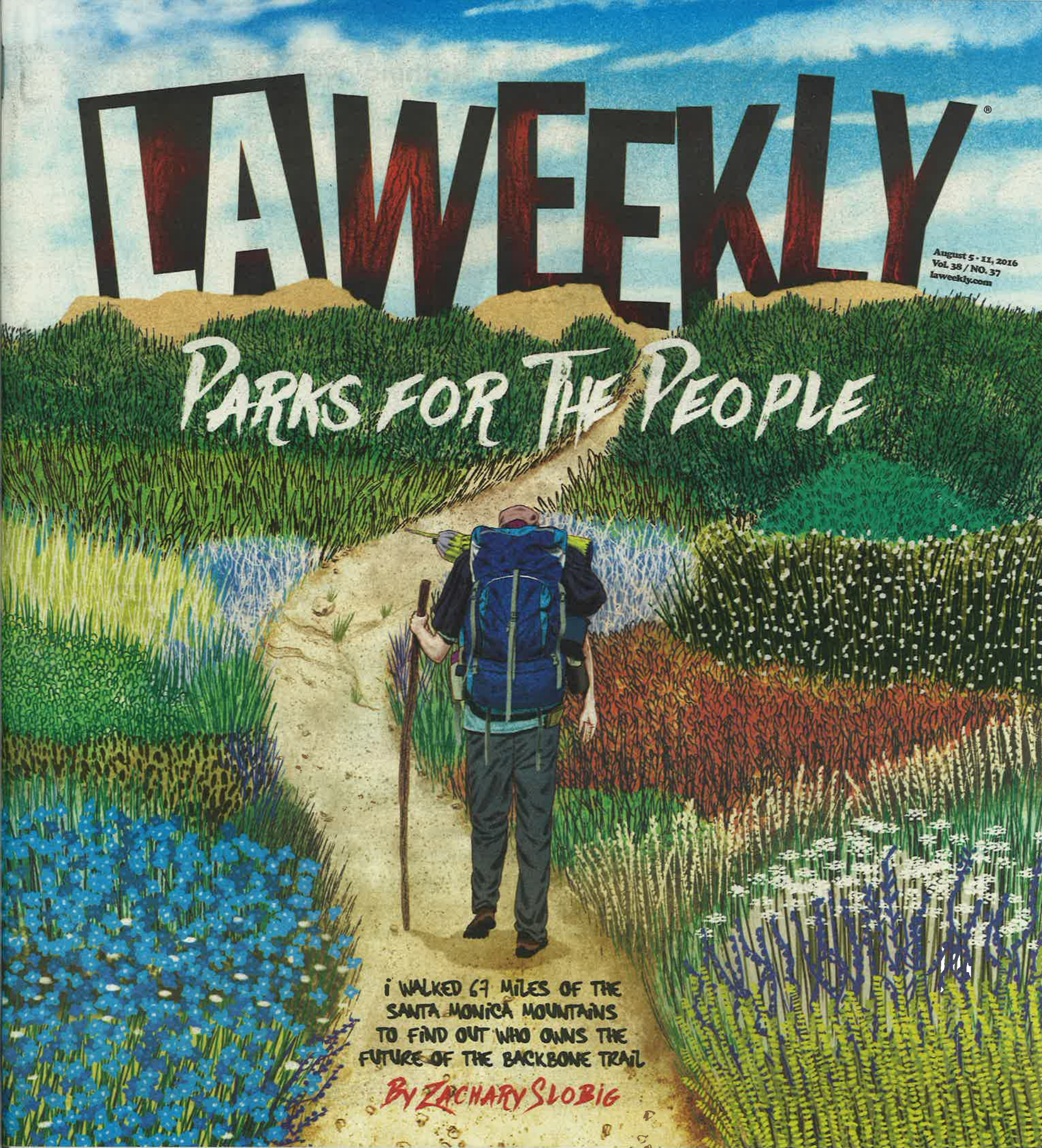


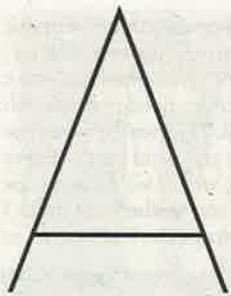
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PARKS FOR THE PEOPLE



i WALKED 67 MILES OF THE
SANTA MONICA MOUNTAINS
TO FIND OUT WHO OWNS THE
FUTURE OF THE BACKBONE TRAIL
By ZACHARY SLOBIG



dventures start with a crazy idea. On July 3, I embarked on a journey across 67 miles of the Santa Monica Mountains, tracing the new Backbone Trail, which starts as an unassuming path above the ever-green polo field of Pacific Palisades' Will Rogers State Park and ends near Point Mugu, across the county line.

I hadn't hiked much in years, and there I was, three days into my long walk, and I was a little lost. So I did what any 21st-century explorer would do: I called an expert.

"You *do* remember the Santa Monica Mountains run east-west" The sound of my old community college botany professor's voice was breaking up—I only had one bar on my phone. "Look for the

flat spot. That's why it's called Saddle Peak," Doug Allan told me.

I'd spent two hours trying to find my return to the Backbone Trail by trial and error, bush-whacking and backtracking through thick chaparral, peering into the manicured properties along the ridge that divides Calabasas from Malibu. My friend Doris Yee had joined me for

the day and so far we'd wandered in circles in an area no larger than a couple of square city blocks. She lives in Lincoln Heights and works for a major tech firm. We studied our maps—mine the paper folding kind, hers the handheld pixel kind. "Well, it just shows you how big the world is, I guess," she said.

The Backbone Trail, I would learn, contains multitudes. Los Angeles now has a premier trail network worth bragging about, one that starts well within city limits, climbs through nearly every watershed of the Santa Monica Mountains, and ends at the shimmering Pacific. Over the course of six hot summer days, I hiked the whole freaking thing. I carried and drank about a gallon of water a day. I ate a couple dozen terrible freeze-dried meals. I wrapped each of my toes and my heels with duct tape. I got locked inside a Malibu vineyard. I basked in some transcendent sunsets with swarms of dragonflies and a few deer as my only companions.

The Backbone Trail took some four decades to cobble together through 180 parcels of land acquired by several state and federal agencies and private conservation groups. This year the gears of bureaucracy went into overdrive so that the Backbone could be dedicated during the centennial year of the National Park Service. One of the last swaths of (10 »

PARKS FOR THE PEOPLE

I walked 67 miles of the Santa Monica Mountains to find out who owns the future of the Backbone Trail

BY ZACHARY SLOBIG



ILLUSTRATION BY JASON RAISH

» 9) land needed to link up the trail in the hills far above Zuma Beach was finally donated in June. It was owned by Arnold Schwarzenegger and Betty Weider, the widow of the fitness impresario who got the former-California governor his first acting role as “Hercules in New York” by claiming he was a German Shakespearean actor.

Hiking this trail end to end is a logistical challenge still — the National Park Service hopes to someday have water and trail camps at regular intervals. I camped four nights and flopped with my older brother in Woodland Hills two other nights — he also acted as shuttle driver the subsequent mornings. There are only four campgrounds along the way, two of which are a good mile walk from the actual trail. Camping “out of bounds” is illegal, and I promised to play by the rules, thus the San Fernando base camp.

While I trudged west along this dusty trail, I wondered how well the Backbone would entice Angelenos from all back-grounds. The physical barriers to full public access are now gone, but the powerful invisible barriers remain that have long kept recreational use of the Santa Monica Mountains as white as its nearby communities. A mere 26 percent of Angelenos are white, while the most recent data available shows that 72 percent of the recreational users of these mountains are white, like me.

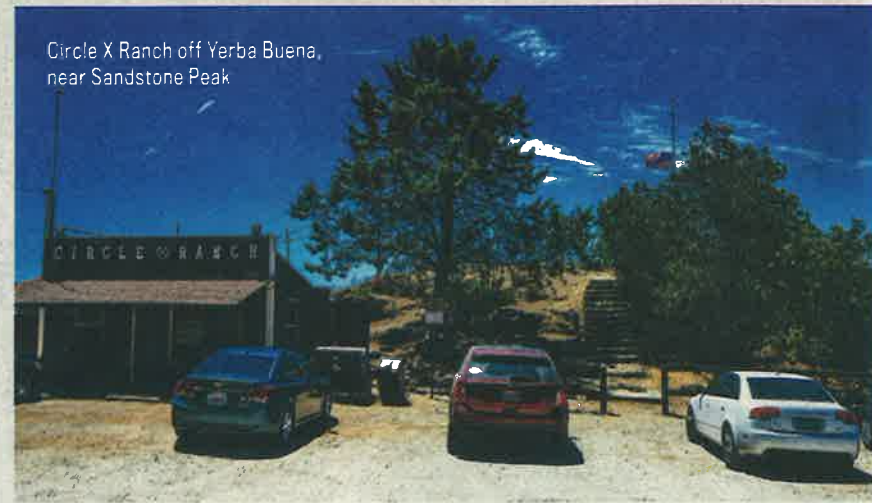
For me, this trail is a personal journey, too. Some 24 years ago, in the summer following the 1992 riots, I swung a pick and stomped shovels with the Los Angeles Conservation Corps to maintain trails in

Why We Walk

Long walks are great for thinking, for epiphanies and for transformation. Pilgrims along the Camino de Santiago through northwest Spain have been having “aha” moments for centuries. Polymathic newspaper man and Southwest Museum founder Charles Lummis took a job at the *L.A. Times* in 1884 and relocated by walking for 143 days from

I thought about my wife, who would soon undergo a major surgery and wouldn't be able to cuddle our 3-year-old daughter until the end of the summer. With each step, I was quietly taking inventory of my life. “I like walking because it is slow, and I suspect that the mind, like the feet, works at about three miles an hour,” writes Rebecca Solnit in her *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*. “If this is

both black. Every morning that summer I joined the other corps members in that former firehouse for “PT” (calisthenics), and a run through the neighborhood that was still called South Central. Then we'd load up the vans with trail tools and head for the Santa Monica Mountains, where we'd spend the day fixing up worn and washed-out trails. I saw the Pacific Ocean for the first time from



this range. A handful of years later, I spent a spring semester at Santa Monica College wandering sections of what now is the Backbone above Topanga in a field botany class, geeking out on native shrubs and wildflowers, and reigniting my major crush on these overlooked mountains. I'd now come back to familiar ground — I live in San Francisco these days — to take stock of what it means to have a wilderness experience in the largest urban national park, to hike this trail that can magically deliver urbanites into the wild less than 20 miles from downtown L.A., and to explore close-by nature as a powerful prescription, a balm for our harried times of violence, political discord and the endless echo chamber of our digital lives.

Cincinnati to Los Angeles. Spanish explorer Cabeza de Vaca wandered the Southwest for eight years, and transformed from a conquistador to a mystical faith healer.

Along my comparatively meager stroll, I found myself jotting down in my notebook all sorts of little jolts of ideas. As I huffed and puffed up the Bulldog Motorway west of Malibu Creek, thoughts came about what to do with my aging parents, who have bunked with my sister in a two-bedroom apartment not far from Los Angeles High School for a couple years because they can't afford another option. As I followed switchbacks above Mulholland west of the Malibu Country Club, ideas flowed about what my little brother might do when he's sprung from prison late next year. As I topped Sandstone Peak,

so, then modern life is moving faster than the speed of thought, or thoughtfulness.”

I thought back to the summer of 1992, when I joined the Los Angeles Conservation Corps, the urban cousin of the CCC, which operates out of an old firehouse on South Main Street. I lived just a short bike ride away. Many of my fellow corps members were former gangbangers — one of my crewmates was shot and killed that summer right in front of LACC headquarters — and the neighborhood still smoldered from the riots that had shaken the city just a few months prior. I was a 17-year-old white kid from Washington, D.C., where I grew up in a mostly black, working-class neighborhood in a mixed-race family. I have two older brothers, one white, one black, and a younger sister and brother,

one of those LACC vans when it made that curve through the tunnel where the 10 freeway becomes PCH.

Along my hike, I thought a lot about how the Backbone Trail could play a central role in reimagining “the outdoors” as a place of inclusivity — here is this wilderness experience so proximate to the most dynamic, diverse metropolis in the country. This trail could be a powerful antidote to the dizzying pace of life, the daily micro traumas that go unaddressed. “This is your trail, Los Angeles,” I scrawled in my notebook. “Wilderness is a construct.” Grandiose, for sure, but I'd been rereading John Muir's classic *My First Summer in the Sierra* along my journey because I wanted to find some affinity with a famous long walk. I found in that (12 »

» 10) journal he kept in the summer of 1869 the manic, poetic Muir who inspired the conservation movement that eventually gave us the national parks. I found the meticulous botanical descriptions and amusing sketches of animal behavior. I found the phrase “passionate ecstatic pleasure-glow,” which might be the perfect way to describe the charged, mildly psychedelic feeling of a long, solitary walk in a stunning landscape.

And You Will Know Us By Our Trails

On July 7, 1976, young, perhaps slightly psychedelic Gov. Jerry Brown signed into law an experimental department that he described as “a combination Jesuit seminary, Israeli kibbutz and Marine Corps boot camp.” He modeled the California Conservation Corps after the Depression-era Works Progress Administration programs. If you’ve hiked a trail on public land in this state, there’s a pretty good chance that the CCC either built it or helps to maintain it. The CCC motto is “hard work, low pay, miserable conditions ... and more!” These 18- to 22-year-olds, many of whom have had trouble with the law, sign up for these minimum-wage jobs and along the way, have an opportunity to complete their high school diploma. If they endure, they just may find their way to a better future. Some don’t — my youngest brother was kicked out of the CCC, never got his act together, and a decade later landed in a federal prison for armed bank robbery.

Bruce Saito, former head of LACC, took over last year as head of the CCC. Both organizations deserve a heaping amount of credit for building and maintaining the Backbone Trail. The week after my hike, I caught up by phone with Saito, working on a Saturday. He told me of Ron Webster, a machinist by trade and volunteer trail builder, who as far back as the 1970s had led groups of other volunteers on trail-building outings to what are now sections of the Backbone. Webster directed many LACC crews, and Saito described a sometimes fraught dynamic. “I wanted so badly to get these urban, inner-city young people out there, and yeah, it was really hard work out there,” Saito told me. “Here was this cantankerous old white guy and he’d have these black and brown kids look at him like, ‘Why the fuck are you telling me what to do?’ His issue was perfection. If it didn’t look right, he’d rip it out. He wasn’t just reinforcing the environmental conservation work, he was showing young people that whatever you do, don’t do it half-assed.”

Webster’s sections of trails are marvels of sighting and alignment through tricky terrain. He had a gift for threading a trail through a landscape for maximum scenic pleasure. Walk the Musch Trail — the first of his trails — which drops you down from Eagle Rock in Topanga Canyon State Park to the Trippet Ranch backcountry camp, and you see that Webster thought hard about every switchback and turn. He wanted visitors to fall in love with this place. “Look, I don’t believe in a lot of things,” Webster told me by phone. “But I believe that in wildness is the preservation of the world, like Thoreau said, and trails should lay lightly on the land. Trails are a compromise with the wildness, so people can be affected by it.” He’s 82 years old and still gets out every Saturday for trail maintenance with a group of Sierra Club volunteers. Webster is responsible for one

third of the total Backbone Trail, and that’s just a fraction of the miles of trails he built throughout the Santa Monica Mountains.

On July 7, the 40th anniversary of the California Conservation Corps, I hiked just over 15 miles from Kanan Road across the county line to the campground at Circle X Ranch. As I walked that day through several new sections of trail lined with scarlet larkspur and Indian pink, hummingbirds swooping all around, I still knew nothing of Webster. As I continued on through the former Schwarzenegger/Weider property, I thought of the young men and women I worked with almost 25 years ago with the LACC. I wondered how many people who use these trails are aware

residents fought for 15 years a proposed development by one of Walt Disney’s heirs, which would have plopped 97 luxury homes and a golf course at the top of the canyon. Somehow it seems, though, that successful preservation of wild lands — at least, in the Santa Monica Mountains — has created a recreational space primarily for white people.

The Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area, one of the first and largest of the urban national parks, actually was intended to give people of color and the urban poor a better opportunity to experience nature. This was all part of the progressive “parks to people” movement of the 1960s. Yet access to parks remains complex. Consider

I THOUGHT ABOUT THE FACT THAT THE LIGHTEST THING IN MY BACKPACK WAS WHITE PRIVILEGE — MOST WHITE FOLKS NAVIGATE THE WORLD OBLIVIOUS TO IT.



The Backbone Trail as seen from Corral Canyon, headed west



A camper trailer at the Circle X Ranch campground

that so many of them were built by mostly young black and brown people from tough neighborhoods, who had never before been in the Santa Monica Mountains.

Parks to the People

At some point along every section of the Backbone, I walked within spitting distance of very expensive homes. The Santa Monica Mountains are some of the whitest and wealthiest ZIP codes in the area, and the NIMBY forces here are legion. Some of that territoriality has been positive — Topanga

the findings of a study conducted by Jason Byrne, then a Ph.D. candidate in geography at USC. Byrne and his co-researcher surveyed people at 33 spots throughout the Santa Monica Mountains and found 72 percent of users were white, 11.8 percent Latino, 5.5 percent Asian and 1.6 percent black. The 2005-09 American Community Survey shows that just 29 percent of Angelenos are white.

Byrne pointed to a few concrete, infrastructural reasons for why these trails are so overwhelmingly white, and much had to do with signage. It’s all in English, for one,

and without a good map, best of luck finding trailheads in areas directly bordering neighborhoods. “This could suggest to people of colour that such neighbourhood trails are ‘off limits,’” the British researcher wrote. “It is also possible that people of colour perceive the character of the neighbourhoods surrounding the park as a barrier to access.”

That perceived barrier — which Byrne conceded required further research — might well be the greatest impediment to the Backbone Trail hosting a stream of users that begins to look like the city of Los Angeles. My friend Liz Dwyer, a black woman and mother of two boys, told me there’s a strong sense of not being welcome in Malibu and the Santa Monica Mountains. “It’s sad, but it’s not surprising,” she said. “It’s part of the legacy of the racial dynamics of this city and the omnipresent dividing line of the Westside.” She’s lived in Los Angeles for decades, was once a teacher in Compton and, until meeting me on the trail in Topanga Canyon State Park, had never been in the Santa Monica Mountains.

On the Fourth of July, Doug Allan, my old botany professor from SMC, met me and Liz and her two sons — Olinga, a high schooler, and Toussaint, a middle schooler — and we walked west along the Backbone to the foot of Saddle Peak. Allan has lived in Topanga Canyon for more than 30 years and knows these ridges and valleys better than just about anyone. He has a goofy sense of humor, and some of his little jokes I recalled from way back: one native plant, big pod ceanothus, he calls “the official plant of Malibu” because the seed pod looks like a Mercedes symbol. He pointed out the sound of mourning doves and wrens and the tapping of woodpeckers. We stopped at a blossoming yucca and he told us how the Chumash had a zillion uses for it — from fuel to fiber to food.

We paused on a bridge that spanned a dry tributary to Topanga Creek to just be silent and listen. The call of a wren, the crackle of a lizard scampering over dry leaves, the faint background hum of honeybees somewhere high above us. “This sounds like someone exhaling,” Toussaint said. We climbed the last stretch of switchbacks up a section called the Hondo Canyon Trail and suddenly we were in a river of coastal fog flowing over the ridge, twirling into perfect little waves above us, a blast of cool, damp air straight from the ocean. Olinga turned to face it, letting it pour all over him. He closed his eyes and he smiled.

When I caught up with Liz on the phone the week after the hike, she told me that she’s seen Toussaint taking little pinches of leaves off of plants now in their neighborhood, crushing them between his fingers and smelling them — just as Allan had showed him. “They just seemed so relaxed up there,” Liz said. “There’s no Twitter feed, and no news of the latest black kid who’s been shot. It’s so therapeutic to just walk in nature.”

The morning after our hike, Toussaint and Olinga woke up to the news of Alton Sterling being shot in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and with the following evening came the news of Philando Castile’s killing at the hands of police near St. Paul, Minnesota. The next night, Micah Xavier Johnson ambushed police in Dallas, killing five cops. I knew nothing of any of this, each day’s horrors rippling through the nation in real time, while I kept on walking west, blissfully unaware in my (15)

» 12) solitude. I stepped away from the world during what one headline dubbed “the week from hell,” a detachment that I somehow achieved a short distance from the center of one of the largest cities in the country.

Trail Blazers

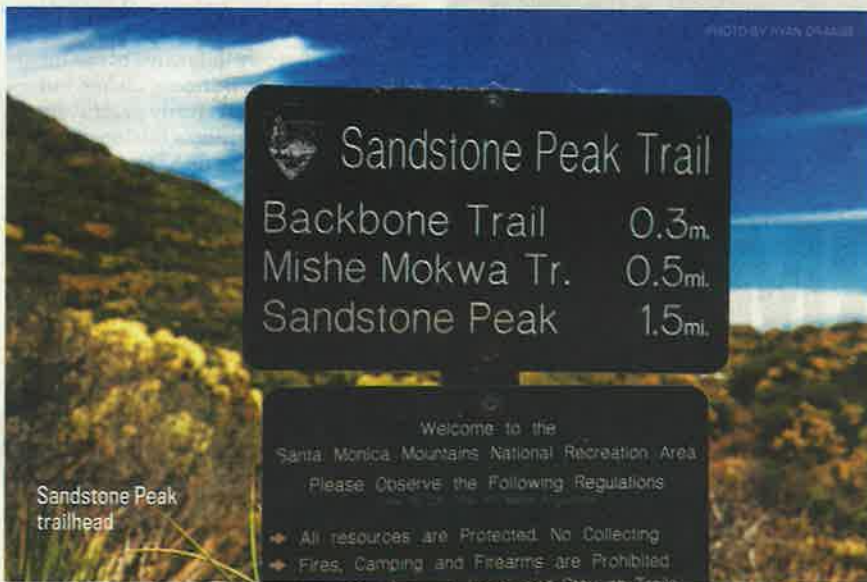
The most important tools for my hike weren't my pack, sleeping bag or tent (all of which I borrowed) but four detailed, topographic maps made by a guy named Tom Harrison, who lives in San Rafael, north of San Francisco. He's been making the best maps of California public land for 30 years. Each of these maps covering a different section of the Backbone Trail cost me \$10, for a total of \$40. For some, that's no big deal. For others, it might be yet another invisible barrier to entry. I emailed Harrison to ask if he had thought of working with urban-access organizations such as Outdoor Afro or Latino Outdoors to get his maps into the hands of people who may not be able to afford them. “No,” he wrote back. “In the 30 years I have been in business, this is the first time the question has ever been asked.”

Melanie Beck, outdoor recreation planner

Los Angeles State Historic Park, Sap said, are “portals to the Santa Monica Mountains,” stepping stones to adventures in wilder places. “We're doing this in the most park-poor community in a city that is one of the most park-poor in the country,” Sap said. “We're all in when it comes to community engagement. We're trying to break down this view that ‘those parks are for white people, not for us.’”

The Last Few Miles

My last night on the trail, I camped under a clear sky with a group of Cal State L.A. archaeologists performing fieldwork in Point Mugu State Park. They told me about a nearby site where Chumash feasted regularly for at least 1,500 years. Piles and piles of shellfish were ferried up into this sycamore-lined valley, a walk of at least eight miles from the coast. As I made my way down those eight miles the next morning, I thought about the potential of the Backbone to become a path toward an outdoor community with an equal place for people of color. I thought about the fact that John Muir may be the celebrated godfather of California conservation, but his writings often revealed his racism, and



for NPS, is one of the people most responsible for pulling together those 180 parcels of land that now connect the 67 miles of Backbone Trail. While she celebrates the triumph of a public right of way, she is concerned about equity in access. She told me of the ParkLINK shuttle bus that began in 2004, ferrying people from the Orange Line to a dozen spots in the Santa Monica Mountains, including two Backbone trailheads. The ParkLINK was a pilot project and ended in 2007.

Glimmers of hope are visible in the heart of the city, though. Kate Kuykendall, NPS public affairs officer, points to the L.A. Ranger Troca, once a taco truck, now “a mobile national park visitor center” for urban engagement. Craig Sap, superintendent of the Angeles District of California State Parks, points to the three years of L.A. River Campouts, a collaboration between State Parks, the National Park Service and arts organization Clockshop, to give Angelenos — who may otherwise be excluded from the outdoor community — an opportunity to sleep under the stars, sit by a campfire and even reel in a fish or two. Experiences like this and the nature trails of the soon-to-reopen, 32-acre

perhaps that has much to do with the whiteness of “wilderness.” I thought about the fact that the lightest thing in my backpack was white privilege — most white folks navigate the world oblivious to it. I thought about how this trail can provide a crucial reset button, so close to a really, really big city. It was the Saturday after “the week from hell,” as I would learn of from my friends who picked me up at the bottom of the trail while I was stripping duct tape off my toes. In the span of a week, the world had gone crazy while I had gotten a bit more sane.

Those last few miles of the Backbone are a spectacular descent, hugging the east side of La Jolla Canyon, through the rich smell of sagebrush, with a horizon more ocean than sky. I threw my pack down and sat on the side of the trail for a few minutes, breathing in the cool, salty air. A steady trickle of day hikers passed by, including an older Korean woman shaded with a big floppy hat, softly singing. “It's a hymn called ‘Under His Wings,’” she told me. As she continued down the trail, I could just barely hear the last verse: *Under His wings, O what precious enjoyment! There will I hide till life's trials are o'er.*

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