



South Coast Missing Linkages: Background

150 years ago, southern California was a vast wildland, in which an uninterrupted mosaic of habitats supported a wealth of plant and animal life. The intersection of climate, geology and topography yielded coastal sage scrub, chaparral, sagebrush steppe, alpine forests, salt marshes, oak woodlands, freshwater wetlands, riparian forests and coastal dunes. To this day, the diversity of southern California's plant and animal communities— many found nowhere else on Earth— is rivaled by few other places on the planet. Creatures great and small have evolved, adapted and thrived in this unique environment.

With the onset of urbanization, much of this once far-reaching network has been destroyed or fragmented. Habitat loss and fragmentation threaten vital natural areas around the world, but the threat is particularly severe in southern California, a land of rapid population growth, proliferating freeways and poorly planned development. According to the report *Precious Heritage: The Status of Biodiversity in the United States*, southern California is one of the 25 'hotspots' of biodiversity on Earth. It is also one of the most at risk, with over 400 species of plants and animals considered threatened or sensitive by government agencies and conservation groups.

Despite the tremendous pressures placed upon it, southern California remains one of the most biologically diverse places on Earth. The landscape is vibrant with wildlife: mountain lions still pad between the Chino Hills and the Santa Ana Mountains, bighorn sheep still graze the San Bernardino Mountains, badgers still roam between the San Gabriels and the Sierra Pelona, and steelhead trout still foray into coastal streams.

In November of 2000, over 200 land managers, scientists and conservation ecologists met at a California-wide Missing Linkages Conference. This groundbreaking conference identified 232 linkages needed to prevent isolation of wildlands and thus protect biodiversity in California. The conference catapulted landscape connectivity to the forefront of conservation thinking in the state. Of the linkages the group identified as critical to sustaining the state's wildlife and plant communities, over a third are located in southern California.

Immediately following this conference, South Coast Wildlands, a science-based conservation planning organization, helped focus efforts on the state's most urgently imperiled region -- The South Coast Ecoregion. Working with a broad-based partnership that includes the National Park Service, the California Resources Agency, the U.S. Forest Service, California State Parks, the Mountain Lion Foundation, The Wildlands Conservancy, San Diego State University Field Stations Program, the Conservation Biology Institute, The Nature Conservancy, Resources Legacy Fund Foundation and the Department of Defense, among others, South Coast Wildlands has spearheaded the South Coast Missing Linkages Initiative. The goal of this initiative is to provide the full range of native plants and animals with adequate landscape connections to withstand both natural and unnatural impacts such as fire, flood, growth and climate change. The vision is to create a major wildland network in one of the world's largest metropolitan areas.