

Why Our Parks Matter More Than Ever

By Wendy Figone

In our modern world, we often use the words *health*, *wellness*, and *well-being* interchangeably. But according to **Halbert L. Dunn**, the physician and thinker who introduced the concept of *High-Level Wellness*, these ideas are meaningfully different—and deeply interconnected.

Dunn believed that true wellness arises from the relationship between **body, mind, and environment**. His work reminds us that well-being is not simply the absence of illness, but the presence of connection, purpose, and vitality. In an era when technology increasingly pulls us indoors and onto screens, his vision feels especially relevant—and points us back to an often-overlooked resource: **our parks and natural spaces**.

Understanding the Differences

Health: The Absence of Disease

Health, in its most basic sense, refers to the absence of illness or injury. It's an important foundation—but on its own, it doesn't guarantee a fulfilling or balanced life. Much of modern medicine focuses here: diagnosing, treating, and restoring physical function.

Wellness: An Active, Ongoing Process

Wellness goes further. Dunn described it as a **dynamic process**—one that requires intention and participation across many dimensions:

- **Physical:** movement, rest, and nourishment
- **Mental & Emotional:** clarity, resilience, and stress regulation
- **Social:** meaningful connection and belonging
- **Spiritual:** purpose, reflection, and inner life
- **Environmental:** the influence of our surroundings on how we feel and function

Wellness isn't something we achieve once—it's something we practice over time.



Feeling silly and joyful at Mirada Surf. Photo below by Rob Cala



Well-Being: A Sense of Fulfillment

If health is a state and wellness is a process, then well-being is the lived experience that emerges from balance. It's the feeling of contentment, meaning, and connection that comes from being aligned with our values and with the world around us.

Why Connection Matters

Dunn emphasized that wellness does not exist in isolation. Our well-being depends on **connection—to ourselves, to others, and to our environment**. This is where many of us feel the strain of modern life most acutely.

- **Disconnection from Nature:** Many people spend far less time outdoors than previous generations, despite strong evidence that natural environments support stress reduction and mental clarity.
- **Weakened Community Bonds:** Digital communication is fast, but often shallow. Parks offer something different—shared spaces where people gather, slow down, and experience a sense of belonging.
- **Loss of Inner Stillness:** Constant stimulation leaves little room for reflection.

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San Mateo County Parks

Cowell – Purisima Trail
Coyote Point Recreation Area
Crystal Springs Regional Trail
San Andreas Segment
Sawyer Camp Segment
Edgewood Park & Preserve
Devil's Slide Trail
Fitzgerald Marine Reserve
Pillar Point Bluff
Flood Park
Friendship Park
Junipero Serra Park
Huddart Park
Memorial Park
Pescadero Creek Park
Sam McDonald Park
Heritage Grove
Mirada Surf
Moss Beach Park
Quarry Park
San Bruno Mountain Park
Sanchez Adobe
San Pedro Valley Park
Tunitas Creek Beach
Woodside Store
Wunderlich Park

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Wendy and friends under the tree canopy.

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creativity, or quiet awareness—essential ingredients for a healthy inner life.

Returning to the Basics in Stressful Times

The other day, while I was guiding a **forest therapy walk**, someone paused and shared that they couldn't remember the last time they had truly felt the bark of a tree. That simple comment lingered with me. It captured something many of us are experiencing—not a sudden disconnection from our senses, but a gradual one that happens quietly over time. We move through natural spaces without touching, noticing, or lingering.

Forest bathing—mindfulness in nature—invites us back into sensory relationship: feeling texture, noticing temperature, listening closely, and allowing ourselves to be shaped by place. This kind of presence is where care begins. **Stewardship and conservation are born out of deep connection**, not obligation. When we feel the land, we are far more likely to protect it.

Parks as Pathways to Well-Being

This is where **San Mateo County's parks, trails, and shorelines** play a vital role. They offer accessible spaces for restoration, reflection, and connection—no special equipment or experience required.

A quiet walk, a sit spot by the water, or a moment of stillness beneath trees can gently support:

- Nervous system regulation
- Mental clarity

- Emotional resilience
- A deeper sense of belonging to place

These experiences are not about productivity or performance. They are about presence.

Well-Being and Stewardship Go Hand in Hand

When people feel connected to the land, they are more likely to care for it. In this way, personal well-being and stewardship are deeply intertwined. Parks are not only places for recreation—they are places where relationships with land, community, and self are renewed.

By supporting access to parks and encouraging mindful engagement with these spaces, we support both community health and long-term conservation.

A Closing Reflection

Halbert L. Dunn's vision of High-Level Wellness reminds us that a thriving life is shaped not by speed or constant stimulation, but by connection, intention, and environment. Our parks offer a simple and powerful invitation to slow down, reconnect, and remember what it means to be well.

Wendy Figone is a certified Forest Therapy Guide and Trails Consultant, an expert-level Myofascial Release therapist, and a Stanford Compassion Ambassador. The Parks Foundation has partnered with Wendy to lead coastal and forest therapy outings as part of our Your Parks, Your Health series.

A Road Well Traveled: Remembering Doug McConnell

The Bay Area's most beloved outdoor guide is gone
— but the trails he helped us love, remain.

Doug McConnell, the warm and tireless television journalist who spent nearly five decades helping Bay Area residents fall in love with their own backyard, passed away on January 13, 2026. For generations of Northern Californians, his was the face that appeared on Sunday evenings and said, quietly but persuasively: *go outside, look around, there is something remarkable waiting for you.*

From 1993 to 2009, McConnell was the host and senior editor of the *Bay Area Backroads* television series on KRON, one of the longest-running regional television series in American broadcast history. When that chapter ended, he returned with *OpenRoad with Doug McConnell* which found a home on NBC Bay Area. It has been running for more than a decade and is now known as *OpenRoad with Doug McConnell and Friends*.

Doug was someone who made friends wherever he went and filled the world with enthusiastic positivity. He had an extraordinary ability to make viewers feel that they, too, could simply show up at a trailhead and be welcomed into something meaningful.

San Mateo County's Tireless Champion

Among the many regions McConnell championed over the years, San Mateo County held a special place in his work. The San Mateo County Parks Foundation was proud to be one of several organizations to underwrite *OpenRoad with Doug McConnell*. Together, we brought the county's remarkable

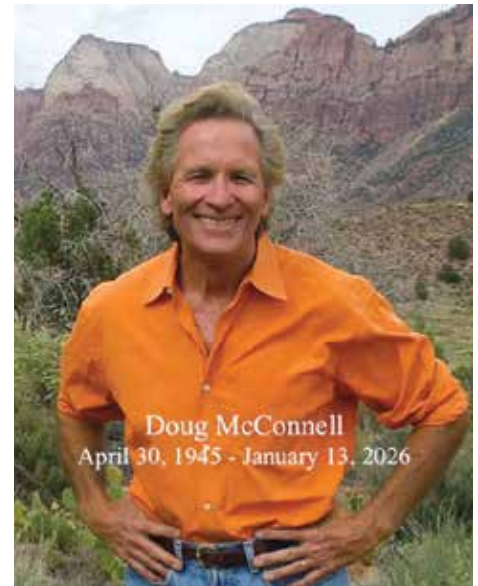
— and often overlooked — network of parks and open spaces into living rooms across the region.

The episodes he devoted to San Mateo County read like a love letter to the Peninsula's landscape, written over many years. Here are some of our favorites in Doug's own words:

San Bruno Mountain - *"San Bruno Mountain is surrounded by a sea of cities on all sides. A gem of nature, it's literally hiding right here in plain sight. It's populated by exceedingly rare and endangered plants and animals, saved by citizens against long odds. A relic of our past — being nurtured for our future."*

Crystal Springs Regional Trail - *"Hidden in these hills are tales of bringing water to the people and building the Bay Area as we know it today. This historic and luscious land — so close and so accessible, so mysterious and so beautiful — can be easily explored on a beloved and growing public trail system. San Mateo County from the bay to the breakers with mountains and forests in between is absolutely gorgeous!"*

Forest Health at Huddart and Wunderlich - *"Fire has always been part of California's landscape, but climate change and more than a century of suppressing all wildland fires immediately and unnaturally has made threats of catastrophic wildfires today greater than ever before and the work of public land managers to make their forests ecologically healthier and more resilient to fire ever more urgent. Effectively managing our cherished parks and wildland ecosystems will require long-term vision, boots on the ground, and unflinching support from all of us."*



"The most valuable real estate in the entire Bay Area is owned by us — we have more protected parks, open space and agricultural lands than any major urban region on the planet."

— Doug McConnell

His Legacy

Doug spoke at the San Mateo County Parks Foundation's 20th anniversary event in 2018, generously sharing his time and energy with us. He was always calling people's attention to the immense treasures in our collective backyard. We have to know what we have before we can protect it. That was his life's work: helping people know what they had. And he found it energizing to be in the field, spending time with people who were working to make the world a better place.

Of course, that was also, most definitely, Doug, too. He was always reminding us that the Bay Area's open space and parklands are worth fighting for, worth funding, and worth visiting on a Sunday afternoon — or really any day of the week. His commitment to education and outreach inspired generations to venture outside, explore new trails, and cultivate a sense of wonder about the natural world.

The road he opened is still there. He'd want you to take it.

The San Mateo County Parks Foundation was a longtime underwriter of OpenRoad with Doug McConnell. You can explore episodes featuring San Mateo County Parks at <https://supportparks.org/videos-highlighting-the-parks/#open-road>.



Blossoming Together: A Park Series for New Parents

by Cristina Vila Ruiz

Connection and a sense of belonging are things we all need, yet they are sometimes overlooked or hard to find; especially during big life changes like becoming a parent. Parks offer unique spaces where people can gather, connect, and build community in welcoming and neutral environments. Our Parent-Baby Meetup series embraces this idea. By meeting monthly, we recognize that real connection and relationship-building take time. Meaningful community grows through repeated moments of sharing, support, and conversation.



Baby hand print art.

Since last September, the San Mateo County Parks Foundation, in partnership with the San Mateo County Libraries, has been hosting a monthly Parents Meetup as part of our *Your Parks, Your Health* event series. This gathering was inspired by my 14-month-old son, Franco, and the importance of having a village. Becoming a parent can be one of the most joyful and at the same time overwhelming experiences in life. During those early months and years, many parents find themselves searching for connection, reassurance, and the feeling that they are not navigating this journey alone. In addition to building connections among families, these gatherings also highlight the benefits to babies of being outdoors

and interacting with others. Spending time outside and observing other children can be incredibly inspiring for their development. For example, Franco was motivated to start walking after watching another baby walk with support, and when he got home, he tried to do the same.

Unless the weather is cold and rainy, at which point we move to the Foster City Library, these meetups take place at Coyote Point and are connecting families to parks. Spending time outside has incredible benefits for both parents and babies. Fresh air, movement, and simply being in nature can support mental well-being, reduce stress, and create meaningful moments. Each month we offer a different activity related to parenthood. Some are playful, like story time, while others focus on important skills such as infant CPR, and some are simply relaxing, like baby yoga and infant massage.

We have welcomed babies as young as five weeks old all the way to 19-month-old toddlers. Many families return month after month, building friendships and support networks. One mother recently shared with us: "Thank you for hosting this, it's working! I even set up a playdate with my toddler, and that's exactly what this is about."

Another parent told us: "It was a wonderful experience. My baby and I enjoyed it a lot. Being a mom isn't an easy job, but events like these make it so enjoyable when we get to see other moms and share our experiences. I really appreciate the efforts from the whole team."

And it's not only moms and dads who attend, many families come with grandmothers, aunts, friends, and caregivers. We love seeing extended families actively involved and present in these moments as well.

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Franco taking a break during baby massage at the Foster City Library.



Blossom Birth and Family led a 'mommy and me' yoga class.



First Parents & Baby meetup at Coyote Point included a stroller walk.

Thank you to our generous supporters!

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 Paula Dahlke
 Elaine Walton Horsley in
 memory of Don Horsley

Matching Gift Programs

Apple Matching Gifts Program
 CISCO Foundation
 Equinix, Inc.
 Genentech, Inc.
 Gilead Sciences, Inc.
 Google Matching Gifts Program
 Intuitive Surgical
 LinkedIn
 Nvidia
 Pacific Gas and Electric
 Company
 Unity Technologies
 Visa Employee Giving Program

*Every effort was made to ensure
 that this list is complete and
 accurate. The Foundation regrets
 any errors or omissions. Please
 contact us so we may make the
 proper correction.*

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Sami Chang Is Back – And She's Got Her Sketchbook!

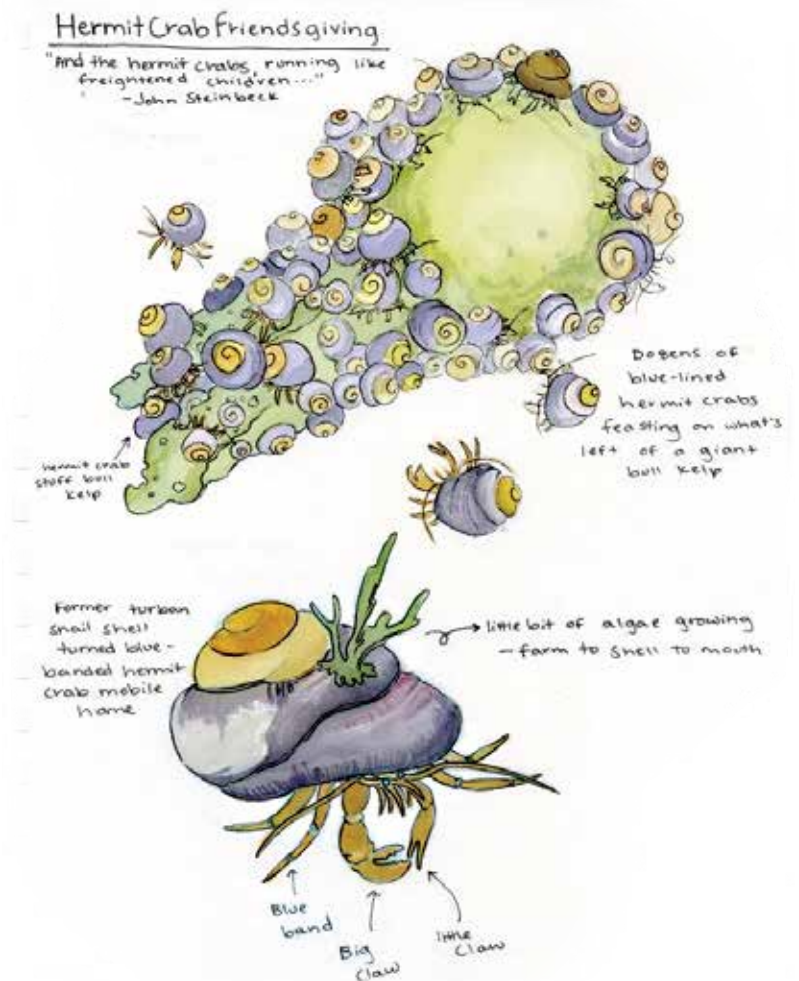
Sami Chang, the artist who created our Fitzgerald Marine Reserve poster, will be back to lead nature journaling classes with the Parks Foundation this spring and next fall. Her events with us will rotate around different county parks, affording an intimate learning environment for any budding illustrator.

Sami is a science illustrator who is particularly interested in marine ecosystems and the complex interactions displayed between different marine organisms and their environment. Her interests also expand above sea level and into the world of terrestrial organisms and processes. Through her artwork, she wishes to inspire others to enjoy the natural world around us in hopes to protect it for future generations.

Traditionally, Sami loves working with watercolor and ink. But she is not shy to use colored pencils, graphite, and gouache. She can also be found using Adobe Photoshop and Illustrator for many projects.

In addition to the San Mateo County Parks Foundation, her clients have included Bishop Museum in Honolulu, Discovery Whale Watch in Monterey and Tahoe Donner in Truckee, plus others. She's had exhibits in numerous places including The Art of Nature at the Santa Cruz Museum of Natural History.

**April 10 at Edgewood – Full
 May 30 at San Bruno Mountain**





Sam McDonald's cabin in La Honda.

Sam McDonald County Park: A Historic Recognition in the Making

Nearly seven decades after Sam McDonald passed away, the San Mateo County Board of Supervisors want to spotlight McDonald and his efforts to preserve his slice of the redwoods near La Honda on the national stage. In January, the Board approved a proposal to nominate portions of Sam McDonald Park to the National Register of Historic Places.

The following excerpts come from the National Register of Historic Places Registration Form completed by Marjorie Dobkin, Ph.D., Historical Geographer; Laura Jones, Ph.D., Director, Stanford University Heritage Services; Basin Research Associates, Inc.; and Sam Herzberg, (now retired) Senior Planner, AICP, County of San Mateo Parks Department.

"McDonald's extended family from Santa Monica visited him in La Honda every summer. His great-niece, Leana Brunson McClain, has fond memories of falling asleep in the cabin's screened-in porch to the sounds of Alpine Creek running during the night. She remembers her great-uncle as a very gentle and quiet man who loved caring for his

family and cooking steak and other meals for them in his small cabin kitchen. He was a great storyteller who shared Native American folklore and played his concertina as she sat on the floor by the fireplace. He took her on long walks in the redwoods, inspiring her with his knowledge and love of the forest. She recalls that 'As I think back on those special walks, I realize now that Uncle Man was teaching me about the beauty of the redwood forest.' With his height of 6 feet 4 inches, he seemed as tall as the forest trees when she was a child."

"McDonald had a great reverence for the redwoods and called them 'the lords of the forest.' McDonald's fervent description of his 1917 camping trip in the Big Basin Redwoods State Park in Santa Cruz County suggests that Big Basin may have inspired his move to La Honda in 1919. He recalled that 'We were possessed with inspiration and awe to behold the most colossal among all those lords of the forest through which we had passed — Truly these lords are among the most wondrous things the Creator hath wrought.'"

Sam McDonald's BBQ

Here are two recipes from Sam McDonald's legendary feasts for his Stanford friends. If anyone knows his barbecue sauce recipe, please contact the Observer editor (address on page 2).

ROAST LEG OF LAMB: Well ahead of time, start a big fire in a deep pit or within a circle of stones. Make lateral slits in meat under layers of fat. Stuff with finely chopped onion. Coat entire surface with mixture of flour, salt, and pepper to form crust. Place on grill high over hot coals; cover with metal tub large enough to allow air to circulate. Turn meat only once. Cook for about 2½-3 hours.

BEANS: Use half pinto and half pink beans. Wash, cover with water, and soak overnight. Drain and rinse thoroughly. Cover with V-8 juice, add onion and ham hocks or other meaty bones; season with salt, pepper, and raw sugar. Simmer at least 4 hours, preferably all day. Reheat in slow oven.

"McDonald used his La Honda property as an unofficial recreational site for Stanford University, where he worked in the Athletics Department. He hosted frequent barbecues, picnics, and club meetings for his wide circle of Stanford friends and associates including students, faculty, administrators, staff, and alumni."

The Parks Foundation raised the funding needed for this effort and expresses gratitude to Stanford University, Peninsula Open Space Trust and the generous individual donors who contributed financial support to make this nomination process possible.



Learning baby CPR at the Captain's House at Coyote Point.

(Continued from page 4)

Parents have also started helping shape the topics of our gatherings. Many have reached out with ideas for conversations they would like to have. For example, one parent suggested our March meetup session, "Let's Talk Baby Food," inspired by the common challenge of figuring out what to feed our babies. We love hosting these monthly meetups because they create the time and space for people to truly get to know one another. Relationships grow naturally, and we hope to continue

offering these parent meetups to create more opportunities for families to connect with each other and with nature.

Cristina has enjoyed and learned from her work planning the Parent Meetups. She is passionate about creating spaces where families can connect and build community. She also finds joy in watching Franco and other babies engage with one another. At 14 months, Franco is curious, observant, and loves to explore by touching the grass and everything around him. .