

# Our coast needs new advocates to step up

## Your Turn

Janet Bridgers

Guest columnist

My friend, Jean Rountree of Oxnard, died recently. She was a wonderful person in so many ways.

I mourn not only her passing, but grieve at the thought that she may be one of the last of a dying breed of civilly minded women who have the intelligence, the grace and the means to tirelessly help protect the California coast.

I'm thinking not just of Jean but of others I've had the honor to know. Among them are Ellen Stern Harris, considered the "Mother of the Coastal Act"; Dorothy Green, hugely responsible for the success of Heal the Bay in the Los Angeles area; the fearsome threesome headed by Sylvia McLaughlin that helped establish the Bay Conservation and Development Commission in the San Francisco Bay Area; and Roma Armbrust of Ventura, who along with Jean Harris deserves much of the credit for protecting the magnificent and important coastal wetland at Ormond Beach.

I long ago deduced that some of the most powerful activists are women of a certain age, who, because their children are raised, not only have the time to be involved but also could remain relatively uncompromised in their activism because they were financially secure. Charity work was what it was called in earlier times; something women did to stay busy while their husbands worked as captains of industry. I've seen them portrayed in films. They always seemed to wear big hats.

In the late 20th century, they seemed to be more like older women wearing tennis shoes as they came, not only well-dressed (other than the tennis shoes) but also well-prepared, to city council and planning commission meetings. I've known them to get up before dawn to drive considerable

distances for Coastal Commission meetings.

The women I've known, and many others, forego the serenity of a quiet retirement. Their energy belies their age.

They work strenuously. In this age of trivial pursuits, when titillation is often preferred over real information, it is awesome to know people who are willing to fight for causes that benefit not only themselves but also those who will come later.

Now, in the 21st century, with the cost of coastal California real estate being what it is, there aren't too many people who live near the coast who can afford the time to protect it. The billionaire class seems to want to protect it only for its own use, not for the enjoyment and rejuvenation of the average Californian.

Is there a solution for finding more tireless activists to fight for the coast? It may lie in recruiting those who are newly retired — people whose minds are still young even though their challenging careers are now concluded.

Perhaps another way to recruit people of all ages is to talk about the great benefits of coastal activism. More than any other area of environmental work, I've found that the coast itself gives a great reward — to be able to drive Highway 1 and remember the words of the late Peter Douglas, longtime executive director of the Coastal Commission, that the success of the Coastal Act is in what you don't see, the marina that did not replace a coastal wetland, the housing development that didn't happen to create a private enclave on a coastal bluff.

To be able to use a narrow walkway between hugely expensive beach houses to go to the beach in Malibu and smell the sweet, cool ocean air and know that battles lasting decades made it possible to ensure this public access — there is a sense of triumph that makes that beach visit all the more wonderful.

The coast still needs protecting, even if the women of the past are fewer and far between. With all the challenges involving politics and the environment now, there have to be women of this moment who see the California coast as their personal *raison d'être*. Interested parties need not apply — just dive in!

*Janet Bridgers is president and co-founder of Earth Alert, which has been active in Ormond Beach issues for many years.*