

Champions of the West

Meet our backyard heroes—eight people and organizations that have saved forests, restored rivers, built trails, and made the West a better place to live

Photographs by Douglas Adesko

Six months ago, we asked *Sunset* readers to send in nominations for our first Environmental Awards. Nominations poured in by the hundreds—by phone, by letter, by e-mail. Now we are pleased to announce the eight winners of *Sunset's* 2003 Environmental Awards. (Many of the other worthy entries will be highlighted in later issues.)

Each of these eight success stories shows how much good one person or one small group can accomplish. If you're seeking inspiration or practical advice on improving your own corner of the West, read on.

RIVERS, OCEANS, AND BEACHES ▶

Melanie Winter, The River Project

Fixing a forgotten waterway

STUDIO CITY, CA. Melanie Winter stands above the Los Angeles River, looking down at the property known as Taylor Yard. From here, it looks like industrial hardscape. But Taylor Yard is a major victory in the fight to restore this neglected river—a fight that Winter helps lead as the director of the nonprofit River Project.

"A very lush and pleasing spot, in every respect," explorer Father Juan Crespi wrote in 1769, lauding the Los Angeles River. But since 1938, when flood-control projects began to encase the river in concrete, most of it has been as pleasing as a parking lot.

A former Broadway performer, Winter first took note of the river when she returned to Los Angeles to care for her parents. She joined up with Friends of the Los Angeles River, which since the 1980s had pushed for restoration of the waterway. "When I connected to the river effort, I realized it encompassed everything I'd been trying to do. Open space. Community." In 2000, Winter founded the River Project.

The 3-mile Taylor Yard riverbank is the project's most high-profile success. Winter forged a coalition of local groups to get \$45 million in state funds to establish the L.A. River's largest park—an oasis that one day may resemble the lush stream praised by Crespi. —Matthew Jaffe

The River Project, www.theriverproject.org or (818) 980-9660.

