

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation  
December 1, 2022

**S'MORE: SPACE FOR MEANINGFUL OUTDOOR RECREATION BIG SUR**

Project No. 21-056-01  
Project Manager: Erin Gravley/Tim Duff

**RECOMMENDED ACTION:** Authorization to disburse up to \$300,000 to the Ventana Wildlife Society to prepare plans, environmental review documents, and permit applications for a group campground and support facilities for outdoor programming within Andrew Molera State Park in Monterey County.

**LOCATION:** Andrew Molera State Park, Monterey County

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EXHIBITS

- Exhibit 1: [Project Location Maps](#)
  - Exhibit 2: [Conceptual Design Renderings](#)
  - Exhibit 3: [Existing Conditions](#)
  - Exhibit 4: [Project Letters](#)
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**RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS**

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution and findings.

Resolution:

The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes a grant of an amount not to exceed three hundred thousand dollars (\$300,000) to the Ventana Wildlife Society (“the grantee”) to prepare plans, environmental review documents, and permit applications to construct a group campground and support facilities for outdoor programming within Andrew Molera State Park in Monterey County.

Prior to commencement of the project, the grantee shall submit for the review and written approval of the Executive Officer of the Conservancy (Executive Officer) the following:

1. A detailed work program, schedule, and budget.
2. Names and qualifications of any contractors to be retained in carrying out the project.

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### Findings:

Based on the accompanying staff recommendation and attached exhibits, the State Coastal Conservancy hereby finds that:

1. The proposed authorization is consistent with Chapter 10 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding Lower-Cost Coastal Accommodations.
  2. The proposed project is consistent with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria.
  3. The Ventana Wildlife Society is a nonprofit organization organized under section 501(c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code.
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## STAFF RECOMMENDATION

### PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends the Conservancy authorize a \$300,000 grant to the Ventana Wildlife Society (VWS) to prepare plans, environmental review documents, and permit applications to construct a group campground and support facilities within Andrew Molera State Park in Monterey County (Exhibit 1). This proposed campground and accompanying facilities will be called Space for Meaningful Outdoor Recreation Big Sur, or S'MORE. VWS will use the proposed facilities for their overnight camping trips and daytime outdoor education programs benefitting underserved communities in the region. VWS will collaborate with State Parks to maximize use of the S'MORE group site by other nonprofit organizations serving underserved communities when not in use by VWS.

As identified in the Conservancy's "Explore the Coast Overnight: An Assessment of Lower-Cost Coastal Accommodations" (2019) ("the Assessment"), there are several barriers to access and enjoyment of the coast, including economic cost, lack of transportation, and cultural or social barriers. Another barrier listed in the Assessment is a lack of visitor-serving amenities.

VWS currently uses the project site for its environmental and recreational outdoor programming, including the overnight family camping portion of its current Conservancy Explore the Coast grants. VWS engages over 1,200 youth annually from throughout Monterey County with targeted outreach to increase equitable access for historically underrepresented communities in areas including the Salinas Valley and North Monterey County region. 75% of participants attend free of charge, with 90% of those participants enrolled in the National School Lunch Program, with family incomes at or below 130% of the Federal Poverty Level. VWS also leads a family camping program with pre-trip planning sessions for participating families to learn how to plan a camping trip, set up a tent, and prepare meals. Transportation to the park is provided and excursions are led by bilingual educators.

The project site is not currently developed with formal campground or support facilities. The proposed project will develop plans for a group campground for 25 to 30 tents. State Parks will install and maintain chemical toilets to serve visitors to the campground. Other proposed improvements include a welcome area, accessible and temporary parking, a picnic shelter with a rustic kitchen and picnic tables, outdoor grills and fire rings, and an amphitheater (Exhibit 2).

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Rocked paths will connect campsites to improved areas and an existing trail that runs along the Big Sur River to the beach. In addition, the campground will include a garden of locally obtained native plants and interpretive signs with stories of the history of Native American tribes in the region.

The proposed facilities will greatly increase the comfort and utility of the site, making it an ideal location for educational and recreational programs run by VWS, State Parks, and potentially others. Design of the campground amenities will be informed by feedback received through a robust community engagement process that will involve underserved communities throughout Monterey County and local tribal groups. The community engagement will ensure that the plan will include improvements that will best serve these user groups. Once the S'MORE is constructed VWS will facilitate use of the campground by targeted groups through a scheduling system managed by VWS and State Parks. This system will prioritize access to the campground by systemically excluded communities including tribal organizations using a network of organizations VWS has served over the past decade through its outdoor education programs. VW and State Parks are also discussing the possibility of the new campground being used for State Parks' FamCamp program which is designed to introduce camping to community groups who would otherwise not have the opportunity to have an overnight outdoor recreation experience.

VWS and State Parks do not expect the campsites to be available to the general public due to management capacity, but the general public will be able to access all of the other improvements during times when VWS and State Parks are not running their respective camp programs, including the picnic shelter and kitchen, amphitheater, and path to and along the river.

**Site Description:** The 1.5-acre project site is located within Andrew Molera State Park, a 4,800-acre relatively undeveloped public park located west of Highway 1, about 20 miles south of Carmel in Monterey County (Exhibits 1 and 3). The park features 26 hike-in campsites with a hiking trail along the Big Sur River that leads to a wide sandy beach. Other trails extend over the park's vast coastal terrace offering spectacular panoramic views of the Pacific Ocean and Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary. Since 1992, VWS has had a concessionaire agreement with State Parks to operate its Discovery Center immediately adjacent to the project site. The Discovery Center houses a public condor exhibit and the organization's wildlife biologist offices. The current concessionaire agreement includes use of the project site for educational programs and overnight camping, and already includes use of the proposed S'MORE features, though it is not yet built. The agreement will run until 2027 and then auto-renew for another five years.

The picturesque project site is situated along the Big Sur River corridor and consists largely of grassland surrounded by oaks and large, mature sycamores. The area was previously used for equestrian trail riding, which left large areas of bare ground that have filled in with non-native grasses. Currently VWS uses the project site to run overnight camping and educational and recreational programs. There are no formal tent sites or other campground amenities other than several fire rings though the area has electricity and potable water.

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**Grant Applicant Qualifications:** The Ventana Wildlife Society is a non-profit organization founded in 1977 to reintroduce Bald Eagles and California Condors to their native habitats in the Central Coast. Since 1992 VWS has had a concessionaire agreement with State Parks to operate their outdoor education programs in Andrew Molera State Park. Today they work in both wildlife recovery and environmental and outdoor education including bi-lingual educational and recreational outdoor programs for youth and families in Central California with scholarships available for low-income participants. They also operate a visitor center in the park with a field office for their wildlife biologists.

VWS has hired the design, landscape architecture, and planning firm of Zander Design to oversee the development of plans, securing of necessary permits, and completion of CEQA. This firm has worked on several other similar projects including the Pfeiffer Big Sur Campground Cabin Project and the Fort Ord Dunes State Park Campground Project. VWS will bring on a similarly qualified team to manage the eventual construction phase of the project. State Parks will also participate in planning in an oversight role and will serve as the lead CEQA agency.

Over the past seven years VWS has been awarded several Explore the Coast Conservancy grants to fund their outdoor education programs, including a \$300,000 renewal grant awarded in September 2022. The grantee has also managed other state and federal grants. They have 10 full-time employees and their financials are audited yearly.

### **CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA:**

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria, last updated on September 23, 2021, in the following respects:

#### **Selection Criteria**

#### **1. Extent to which the project helps the Conservancy accomplish the objectives in the Strategic Plan.**

See the "Consistency with Conservancy's Strategic Plan" section below.

#### **2. Project is a good investment of state resources.**

The project will develop plans for a new group campground within Andrew Molera State Park for use by VWS and other organizations serving systemically excluded communities. VWS will design the campground with input from the communities it is meant to serve, which will ensure that it is designed to best serve their needs.

The project advances statewide goals as it serves to promote and implement the goals from the Conservancy's "Explore the Coast Overnight: An Assessment of Lower-Cost Coastal Accommodations" (2019) as follows:

1. Helps improve existing lower-cost coastal accommodations within 1.5 miles of the California coast.
2. Ensures that lower-cost coastal accommodations will be affordable and available to non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and public entities that support a range of

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programs for young or under-resourced populations, including education, service learning, healthy living, recreational, or similar opportunities.

3. Maintains and increases the stock of lower-cost coastal accommodations on coastal public lands and land owned or managed by NGOs.

**3. Project includes a serious effort to engage tribes. Examples of tribal engagement include good faith, documented efforts to work with tribes traditionally and culturally affiliated to the project area.**

The grantee will engage tribes by 1) planning and implementing outreach to tribes in the region to solicit their input on the types of improvements and programs that would best serve them; 2) facilitating booking of the completed S'MORE site by interested tribal groups; 3) consulting with tribes to incorporate tribal stories into interpretive signage at the site; and 4) agreeing to have a cultural resource monitor on site for any earth-moving for tribes who have requested that consideration.

**4. Project benefits will be sustainable or resilient over the project lifespan.**

The proposed project site is within Andrew Molera State Park and has already been in use for several years by the grantee's Explore the Coast program and other overnight programming. The grantee has an existing concessions agreement with State Parks to operate in the park. State Parks has agreed to provide staff support for ongoing maintenance of the project area, including the chemical toilets.

**5. Project delivers multiple benefits and significant positive impact.**

The project will create a significant positive impact and multiple benefits as it will develop plans for 1) improvements to lower-cost campsites in a popular area for coastal access and limited lower-cost accommodations; (2) educational structures that can be used by organizations to provide Californians with programs for education, access, and recreation on the Central Coast.

**6. Project planned with meaningful community engagement and broad community support.**

VWS has a long history of community engagement when developing and implementing its outdoor education programs and will utilize their network of community-based organizations to design the proposed campground facilities. Over the past year VWS has conducted numerous in-person focus group sessions with over 300 residents of underserved, low-income communities in the Salinas Valley and North Monterey County to better understand how its programs can best serve these communities. This type of direct community engagement has provided VWS with important insights that will be incorporated into project planning and design. The project will include a community engagement plan including outreach to tribes in the region to solicit their input on the types of improvements and programs that would best serve these community and tribal groups.

### PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy

\$300,000

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Ventana Wildlife Society	<u>\$19,990</u>
<b>Project Total</b>	<b>\$319,990</b>

The anticipated source of Conservancy funding for this project is Chapter 9 of Proposition 68 (Section 80120-80121), which allocates funds to the Conservancy to enhance and protect coastal and ocean resources, and, in particular, to grant funds to public agencies and nonprofit organizations for lower-cost coastal accommodations (Public Resources Code Section 80120 (b)). Consistent with the purposes of this funding source, the proposed project will develop plans to improve campsites at Andrew Molera State Park, a lower-cost coastal accommodation.

The Ventura Wildlife Society is contributing \$19,990 to the budget. Unless specifically identified as "Required Match," the other sources of funding and in-kind contributions described above are estimates. The Conservancy does not typically require matching funds or in-kind services, nor does it require documentation of expenditures from other funders or of in-kind services. Typical grant conditions require grantees to provide any funds needed to complete a project.

### **CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:**

The proposed project is consistent with Chapter 10 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, Sections 31411-31414. Pursuant to PRC Section 31412(a), the Conservancy may award grants and undertake projects as part of its Lower Cost Coastal Accommodations Program (Explore the Coast Overnight) to facilitate improvement of existing, lower-cost accommodations within 1.5 miles of the coast. The proposed project will prepare plans for a group campground and support facilities at Andrew Molera State Park, which is within 1.5 miles of the coast. Proposed improvements for planning include formalized tent sites with pads and paths, bathroom and cooking facilities, and a picnic shelter with tables.

Consistent with Section 31412(b), Andrew Molera State Park is affordable and available to low- and middle-income families with park camping rates of \$30 per night. Furthermore, the project site is currently used and will continue to be used by the Ventana Wildlife Society for its outdoor programming, which is provided free of charge to 75% of participants, many of whom are from families at or below the Federal Poverty Level.

Consistent with Section 31413, the Conservancy's implementation of the Explore the Coast Overnight Program is guided by a lower-cost accommodations assessment: "Explore the Coast Overnight – An Assessment of Lower-Cost Coastal Accommodations" (Assessment) which the Conservancy completed on March 14, 2019. The proposed project will help improve existing lower-cost coastal accommodations, as called for in the Assessment. Additionally, the Assessment recommends that lower-cost coastal accommodations be affordable and available to NGOs and public entities that support a range of programs for young or under-resourced populations, including education, service learning, healthy living, recreational, or similar opportunities. The project will create plans for improved camping facilities and structures for interactive educational programming. The site and its amenities will be used by the VWS, State Parks, tribes, and other organizations serving systemically excluded communities.

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### **CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S [2018-2022 STRATEGIC PLAN](#) GOAL(S) & OBJECTIVE(S):**

Consistent with **Goal 2, Objective C** of the Conservancy's 2018-2022 Strategic Plan, the proposed project will design amenities such as picnic areas, rustic kitchen facilities, and an improved campground intended to increase and enhance coastal recreation opportunities at Andrew Molera State Park.

Consistent with **Goal 16, Objective C** of the Conservancy's 2018-2022 Strategic Plan, the proposed project will increase coastal access for all Californians by supporting an organization that provides coastal experiences to underserved populations. The Ventana Wildlife Society provides transportation, training, outdoor activities, and bi-lingual education for youth and families with 75% of participants being from low-income and/or migrant communities in Monterey County.

### **CEQA COMPLIANCE:**

The proposed project is statutorily exempt from review under the California Environmental Quality Act pursuant to 14 California Code of Regulations, Section 15262, because it involves planning studies and feasibility analyses for possible future actions that have not yet been approved or funded, and it will include consideration of environmental factors. The project is also categorically exempt under Section 15306, because it also involves basic data collection and resource evaluation activities that will not result in disturbance to an environmental resource.

Upon approval of the project, Conservancy staff will file a Notice of Exemption.