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Park and Go

A new research center near Anza-Borrego State Park provides a home base for scientists studying the desert

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In April, as contractors were still retrofitting and renovating a former clubhouse in Borrego Springs, a botanist studying larkspur became the first scientist to use the Steele/Burnand Anza-Borrego Desert Research Center. Less than a year earlier, the University of California, Irvine announced the donation of funds to purchase the former Desert Club as an addition to its system of preserved lands used for research and teaching.

“The university’s Natural Reserve System has 38 reserves around the state in mountains, in the deserts, on rivers, at the beach, in the marsh,” says Faculty Director Tim Bradley. “What [the Steele/Burnand center] offers is a very close relationship with Anza-Borrego State Park. That’s a really wonderful opportunity. ... We also hope to have a relationship with the paleontological museum there.”

Another distinction is that the university does not own land at each of its reserve sites, often working with a park, the U.S. Forest Service, or The Nature Conservancy. “In this case, we own the four acres the building is located on,” Bradley says.

The purchase of the building and land was made possible by a gift from Audrey Steele Burnand, whose father-in-law, Alphonse Burnand Jr., commissioned Streamline Moderne architect William Kesling to design a social hub for a planned community in the late 1940s. (Burnand had gathered investors and incorporated Borrego Valley Land and Development Co.)

After the Desert Club building was completed in 1949, it indeed became a social hub, with dances every Saturday night from 9 p.m. to 1 a.m. and parties around the 85-foot-long elliptical pool. The club subsequently languished and in 1968 was purchased by Bob Schepe (a watercolorist) and Sophie Schepe (an author and naturalist), who turned it into an antique and thrift shop known as The Galeria.

After their deaths, the Schepe estate sold the property in 2005 to artist John Scranton. After three years of working on it, he put it

on the market. Meanwhile, the university had been looking into building a research center in Anza-Borrego State Park. But the 2008-2009 recession curtailed those plans.

Fate (or serendipity) stepped in when Jim Dice, an environmental scientist for California State Parks and a Borrego Springs resident, ran into Jere Hansen, Audrey Steele Burnand's business manager and philanthropic representative, at the post office. Though she had moved, Mrs. Burnand maintains ties to the area.

"The Burnand Foundation is still very, very active in supporting things in Borrego Springs, including Little League," Dice says. All he did, he adds, is inform her of opportunities to help the university establish a research center there.

Retiring from his job with the state and becoming the new center's manager, Dice says the facility is open to all fields of scientific research, including archaeology, biology, botany, geology, and paleontology.

"First are biology and geology, but nowadays that also involves engineering and hydrology," Bradley notes. "We also encourage people from other faculty disciplines to come out there, whether it be photography or art classes or social sciences."

The 4,600-square-foot main portion of the center features a wall of glass overlooking the desert expanse toward the south-southeast. Renovations made by the university include replacing all the glass (as well as supporting structures), retrofitting to seismic standards, replacing the entire electrical system, installing a new roof, gutting the kitchen and installing new counters and appliances, and renovating bathrooms and the locker room in the 800-square-foot lab and locker room part of the building.

A 24-foot-long bar (upholstered in torn red leather) that harkens back to the Desert Club days has been retained, but been reupholstered in green. "Mrs. Burnand told us she couldn't remember the original color, but it was not red; so we went looking for something that would match the interior and trim," Dice says.

The building encompasses two bedrooms, but two dormitories are planned on adjacent land donated by the Anza-Borrego Foundation. "The timing and size of those facilities depend on a grant applied for through the university's Natural Reserve System," Dice says. Bradley notes that UCI has applied for enough Proposition 84 funds to house 25 students. (The Safe Drinking Water Bond Act of 2006 authorized \$500,000 for improvements to parks and nature education facilities.)

The center's inaugurating botanist from Augustana College in Rock Island, Ill., had called Dice to inquire about conducting research in Anza-Borrego State Park and didn't know whether he would camp or find nearby lodging. Dice offered him the opportunity to stay in the soon-to-open center. Although the furnishings amounted to folding chairs and a "Tiki bench," Dice says, "He loved the place, even though it wasn't set up."

Applications

In addition to university students and scientists, individuals may apply to use the center, but only for research/educational purposes. "It could be an individual, someone writing a book about cacti," says UCI Faculty Director Tim Bradley. "You have to be engaged in some kind of official project."

Big Getting Bigger

Anza-Borrego Foundation, which will have an office in the center, is planning classes and a monthly series of educational programs open to the public. The new offerings punctuate a milestone for the foundation, which celebrated its 45th anniversary on Feb. 17 and the acquisition of 50,000 acres since its founding in 1967. Foundation trustee and park historian Diana Lindsay explains that a lot of people homesteaded in the area, so there were 67,000 acres of private land dotted throughout the park at that time.

"It was a real management night-mare," Lindsay says. "So the park commission formed an organization that would help raise funds to buy the private holdings or ask the owners to donate them to make the park whole." Covering 1,000 square miles, Anza-Borrego State Park contains 90 percent of California's wilderness lands. The 50,000 acres acquired by the foundation includes surrounding ranches; there are still about 30,000 acres of private land within the park boundaries.

"The foundation's mission was expanded after the Anza-Borrego Natural History Association broke away from the park and there was no one to help with interpretive programs, run the visitor center, and acquire funds for park expenses," Lindsay says. "We took over that function by creating an institute within the foundation." That institute now has the ability to partner with UCI to offer

educational programs to the public. The park itself marks a milestone this year: On Nov. 17, it turns 80 years old.