

# ENVIRONMENTAL INSIGHT

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## PLEIN AIR PAINTERS PUT BRUSH TO CANVAS IN UPPER CHIQUITA CANYON

Usually it's the early birds with wings that see the morning sun as it rises in Upper Chiquita Canyon Conservation Area near Rancho Santa Margarita. But before dawn on a Friday in April, a group of landscape painters put up their easels and palettes in this pristine wilderness usually closed to the public. Their goal? To capture with brush and paint the morning's golden glow over the preserve's ridges and rolling hills.

"It was a dream come true to paint here today," said artist Toni Danchik, who lives in Laguna Niguel. "Driving down Oso Parkway, I would see these meadows and hills and wish I could paint there. The area is so beautiful."

She and the other artists in the group practice plein air painting, a French expression for the artistic approach of painting in the open air.

Most days, the conservation area's shimmering grasslands and rocky ridges are enjoyed only by its wildlife inhabitants – including the mountain lions, deer and others that move through it on their way to O'Neill Park or the Chiquita Ridge. Bought as an environmental mitigation site by the Transportation Corridor Agencies (TCA) to balance construction of The Toll Roads, the 1,158-acre site is closed to the public to protect the endangered species here, like the coastal California gnatcatcher.



The special day of access was the brainchild of Laguna Hills Mayor and former San Joaquin Hills Transportation Corridor Agency (SJHTCA) Board Chair Melody Carruth. A lover of the arts, Carruth suggested almost a year prior that TCA partner with the Southern California Plein Air Painters Association (SOCALPAPA) for a one-day painting expedition.

"An artist can look at a rock outcropping and find the majesty in it. I thought inviting them here would be a perfect way to increase awareness of nature's beauty that surrounds us and direct attention to the areas protected by TCA," Carruth said.

For SOCALPAPA's event organizer JoAnn Royal, joining forces with TCA for a painters' day was a master stroke. She remembered meeting TCA staff to look at different sites. Upper Chiquita Canyon was the first stop. "I looked around and saw lots of views and ideas for different paintings. I saw the beautiful vistas to Saddleback Mountain," Royal said. "We didn't need to go anywhere else."

To folks who drive through Orange County, it's not always obvious how much open space is protected. "People think The Toll Roads are just about laying asphalt, but for every mile of road we build, we find land to balance that construction," said Mission Viejo Mayor and Foothill/Eastern Transportation Corridor Agency Board Chair Ed Sachs. "There's a lot that we do to protect open space that people don't know or think about."

The event marked the first time that some of TCA's board and staff saw the site. Fred Minager, mayor of Laguna Niguel and current SJHTCA Board Chair, had his initial view of the landscape that day just as the artists did. "It's a hidden jewel," Minager said. "It's great that TCA had the foresight to purchase and preserve this parcel."

The artists who came agreed, even if most of them weren't aware of just how much land TCA has set aside to protect in perpetuity. "As plein air painters, we have a love for nature and a respect for nature," said Danchik.

TCA purchased the Upper Chiquita Canyon conservation area in 1996. Formerly used for cattle grazing, it had been slated for residential and golf course development when TCA took it over. Since 1990, TCA has set aside more than 2,100 acres of land at 16 different Orange County locations, protecting each in perpetuity for future generations.

[Click here](#) to view a video of the event.

[Click here](#) to view photos of the event.

[Click here](#) to view paintings created during the event.



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