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Interview with Walt Anderson 1/19/2006 – Final version (with interviewee corrections)

Robyn: Do you remember the first time you went into the Buttes?

Walt: Sure. August 1976. I had been approached by David Cavagnaro, who wrote the forward to the first book. We put it in here again, so I called it “fast forward”. No, let’s see, “forward” and then we had “fast forward” by Craig Childs. But, anyway, Dave Cavagnaro was hired by a landowner, Peter Steidlmayer. Peter wanted to protect his land from possible acquisition by the state parks, because the state parks were looking at the Buttes very seriously at that time. Peter reasoned that if he opened his property for public access and interpretation, that the state couldn’t justify buying and taking his land away. He had 1100 acres in Brockman Canyon, West Butte area, and he was right, of course. So, basically, he wanted to establish a company, and he wanted to call it West Butte Sanctuary Company, because West Butte is on his property. He hired David as a consultant to help him find somebody to manage that company. That’s what it was. And David knew me from a photo workshop in Yosemite that I took with him at one time, and thought that I might be the person. He says, “You know, I don’t know if you’re ready to come out to California yet, but here’s the deal.” So, he explained that this guy wanted to do something with this land, and he needed somebody like us. So we said, “Well, we’ll take a chance”, my wife and I. We’re now divorced. But we flew out here in August of ’76. Now, August is normally a horrible time to go into the Buttes. We don’t take trips up there then. But, believe it or not, as we walked on that property with him, it rained! In the middle of a drought! In 1976; it was the only rain for years! practically. And it rained, and we just completely fell in love with it. It was just magical. So we just dropped everything. I was nearly done with my PhD, and I decided, “You know, maybe I don’t need that PhD. This is a real opportunity; you don’t get an opportunity like this everyday.” And so we came—moved out here and we worked for Peter. We started in October, and the first hike that we led in the Buttes was in December of that year. And we put up a couple of little cabins; we lived in Brockman Canyon.

Robyn: Did you really? How exciting!

Walt: Yeah, it was. Except that we had to run this gallery in Colusa. We had a gallery; we both have an art background too, and so we had a gallery and frame shop over there. So we’d be running over there everyday and coming back and just sleeping there in the Buttes, it seemed like, some of the time. So we didn’t get as much intimate time there as we wanted. And, then, of course, in the summer it was beastly hot because the cabin didn’t have any insulation. It just had a tin roof.

Robyn: So did you stay in there during the summer?

Walt: Yeah, stayed there year round.

Robyn: And you didn’t have water, did you?

Walt: Well, yeah. We put up a big water tank up on the hillside and ran a PVC pipe all the way down and tried to bury—it was a drought. We tried to bury that pipe in that ground. It was like picking rock the whole time.

Robyn: And did you have propane or solar panels?

Walt: No, we had a woodstove, and just cold water that ran into the sink. And we had a separate composting toilet, a little thing. Yeah, for bathing we had—eventually, we had a hot tub with a water heater and woodstove. So we had to run the woodstove for a couple of hours in order to get it hot enough in order to bathe.

Robyn: And how long did you live there?

Walt: It was a year. We were pretty paranoid about fire because Brockman Canyon is a tight canyon, and several fires had started on Pass Road. When they're burning in the grasslands it's fine, but if they get to the canyons they explode. They literally take off with the updrafts going up those things, and nothing can stop a fire like that. It's just phenomenally hot fire. You know, we cleared everything we could around there. We mounted sprinklers on top of the roofs, so that if we were there we could turn the sprinklers on with the water pressure we had until the pipe burnt out of the water tank. So we were just really lucky that didn't happen. And so the second year we lived in Colusa in his big, gigantic apartment, four-story building that he has on Main Street in Colusa. 713 Main Street.

Robyn: He being Peter Steidlmeyer?

Walt: Yep. He had that building there, and so he allowed us to live in part of that building. We had the frame shop there.

Robyn: And was he living there or was he living in Chicago?

Walt: Chicago.

Robyn: So there was nobody else living on that land? It was just the two of you?

Walt: Yeah. And our golden retriever and our cat until the cat got taken by an eagle.

Robyn: I was going to say. A cat up there would get taken by something.

Walt: Yeah, it didn't take long for that to happen. And then, of course, we began to meet all of the interesting characters, like Manuel the sheepherder. Have you talked to Heather about Manuel?

Robyn: No, I haven't yet.

Walt: You should. There's some interesting stories. And, you know, the person you really need to talk to most of all—I mean, maybe I'll have something—is Ira Heinrich, up in Oregon.

Robyn: I would love to talk to Ira.

Walt: He'll talk to you for hours and days.

Robyn: Mike Hubbartt's still in touch with him. I can get his information from him.

Walt: He's doing a really interesting autobiographical book about his experiences in the Buttes, and his love, you know, he got married at age 15, things like that, something like that. It's fascinating. At one time I was going to do a book—a second book after the *Sutter Buttes: A Naturalist's View*, way before this one—called *Sutter Buttes Profiles*. I was gathering material on different things; I wanted to do one on the Dean Place, the family there, and one on the county trapper, a grizzled old trapper, who really had fascinating stories and knew the Buttes better than anybody because he was out there all the time tracking animals—

Robyn: Who was that?

Walt: Hensley, Rex Hensley from Sutter. And his father had been a trapper before him. I don't know if he's still alive, but Rex Hensley. Definitely a guy to track down if you can because he knew a lot of stuff. I think his name's in the book. But I thought a chapter about him would be interesting. And then there were a number of other people I thought would make some interesting chapters, but, as I started gathering data and interviewing Ira, and we were friends anyway, I soon realized that the amount of information and the quality of information about Ira was so excessive compared to everything else, that it just didn't make any sense to write a book about all these characters and have a chapter about Ira, because Ira would totally dominate the book. So that's the kind of guy... you need to talk to him for sure.

<deleted portion at request of interviewee>

And, then, I basically went out to the landowners. I approached them and within a year I had access on 40 properties. Within a year I'd gotten signed permission from that many landowners for access, and so that's really kind of the beginning of the whole idea of what evolved with Ira into the foundation. But we felt that if the idea was good it shouldn't depend on the patronage of a single landowner, and so we really wanted to involve as many property owners and landowners as possible. Middle Mountain Foundation hasn't really needed to involve all the landowners because some of the properties are marginal, maybe, for scenic beauty, or they're too close to the road or something like that. On the other hand, I think that those landowners are just as important because the integrity of the Buttes really depends on the whole range. And so if you ignore some of the peripheral things, you could be risking... just as we know, there's a few trophy homes going up at Pass Road, and it's possible that might have been averted if that landowner had been courted a little bit more.

Robyn: My impression is that that's now changing, and I don't know if it's because of things like those trophy homes, but when I talk to Mike about landowner things—Mike Hubbartt—I always get that he really is trying to reach out to as many landowners as he can.

Walt: Yeah, it's what you've got to do. So some of that is historical too, because when we left in '85 and moved up to Oregon, cause my wife then wanted to go to graduate school, and... I hated to go. I didn't want to go, but I thought, "Well, okay, she's followed me a few times. It's my turn." So we moved up there. So we hired Don Schmoldt to be the next—it's in the book—to be the next director of Sutter Buttes Naturalists. And we helped him. We worked with him. I came back during the spring for a couple of months and helped lead some trips, and helped with some of that stuff. But it was way too big for him, for one guy by himself. And he wasn't as connected in the community as I was. I had lots of friends, and friends in Colusa particularly; that's where we lived at the time. So, then, he turned it over to Ira. And then I worked with Ira some on getting it going. He's the one who converted it into a foundation. The Schnabels were not the first people in the whole operation; I was using other properties. And then when I finally got access to the Schnabels, and they welcomed me to come—they went to Alaska with me on one of the trips that I led. The older Schnabels and Margit went to Alaska with me and we became really good friends, and then later they went to Africa with me, and Madagascar, and they've been all over the place with me over the years. Brazil, maybe, I can't remember. The parents.

<deleted portion at interviewee's request>

Peter's cousin was Bob Steidlmeyer, who owns Bragg Canyon, and so Bob's son Marty has been starting up a little operation of his own. He leads trips up there, and then he also cooperates with Middle Mountain.

Robyn: Is that Sutter Buttes Tours? I saw a sign...

Walt: A sign along West Butte Road? Yeah, that's him. That's Marty. So he runs his own operation. I talked to him last year and he was telling me how many trips he was taking up there. He likes to take big groups up there. He's not too concerned about level of impact—

They're also negotiating with him about a possible conservation easement. But he's got a pretty profitable little enterprise going there. He loves it. There's plenty of room. The bottom—you know the name Middle Mountain Foundation—I tried to tell the board members—the foundation is the mountain. We're just the people helping to affirm and protect that foundation. We've got to remember that. The foundation is not something that we have to keep going for any other reason except than for the mountain itself.

Robyn: That is going in my thesis. That is a great sentence.

So, you went to Oregon in '85, and have you lived in California since then?

Walt: No, but I used to come down almost like the swallows, except reverse migration. In spring, I'd come south. And I'd come down for a month, two months sometimes, and lead trips. When I was in Oregon I was really sick and didn't really establish myself there. And then, of course, my wife says, "You know, you never really left the Sutter Buttes." My heart was still here. So I'd go back in spring, lead trips, give talks, etc. And then I'd sell my paintings in California because I was doing painting up there. I never sold any in Oregon, I think. I sold lots and lots—I've sold

200 paintings, mostly in California. And then I'd lead some international trips and things and connect up with people. So, yeah, I sort of stayed connected.

Robyn: So, you've never lived back here. And how long have you lived in Arizona?

Walt: I moved there in '91. We were in Oregon six years and in '91, I took a job. And I thought <heavy throat clearing>. I understand her point of view; we had two little kids, and freelance life is an up and down thing. It looks like the bank's going dry and then I'll sell a painting or something like that. Hey, then we're great for another month, you know. But she wanted security.

Robyn: Arizona's a lot further. So you don't get here as much.

Walt: No, it's harder for me to get here now. Eugene was a day's drive, and now it's a day-and-a-half drive or so. You know, I still can do it. I brought some students out from Prescott College. I'd bring five or six students out, and we did a lot of really in-depth studies, much of which has not been published. But some of it was incorporated into the ecosystems chapter (in *Inland Island*), in the communities chapter. But that was really great. It would be like a three-week field course. I'd take them out and we'd do a lot of vegetation mapping. It really got me thinking about the relationship of soils to vegetation and a lot of things like that, that I might not have noticed otherwise.

Robyn: What is it about the Buttes that you think is so special? I mean, obviously, there's something about the Buttes that for you is special. You've written two books, you go through a lot of trouble to get here. What is it that you think creates that?

Walt: I've described that a little bit in that last chapter. You know, you can talk about the unique geologic features and no other volcanoes have deformed sediments on that scale. And you can talk about the unique combination of plants and animals, and you can talk about some of the history. You can talk about all of those things, but they just don't suffice. There's just a feeling, there's just a presence, I think. It's that connection; it's that sense of place thing. And I think some places just attract us more powerfully than others. And I do believe that just... well, there's a concept of biophilia. Are you familiar with that? They've done lots of studies and testing this biophilia hypothesis, that, even in Seattle, they showed people random pictures of—not random—selected pictures of different environments around the world. And even though they live in that humid, cool, green climate, the highest frequency of preference, and the strongest emotional responses came from savannah habitats like we evolved in in Africa. You see, we have, pretty likely that there's a genetic predisposition in us to like savannah habitats because that's where most of our evolutionary history occurred. And certainly we're going to be attracted to water and other kinds of habitats that will support life, of course. But still there's almost an innate thing. Many people—I'm not saying that it's universal—they respond really positively to savannah habitats. So, you know, take a look at here <pointing to cover of *Inland Island*>, we've got savannah habitats, the open, rolling hills, the patches of oaks, and then the thickets, and then the little streams. I think that it strikes a responsive chord that's in us, that certainly gets reinforced by culture, but I do believe there's probably a genetic basis for us. Every organism has habitat preferences.

Robyn: And you're saying that because of the savannah that's there or because of the variety?

Walt: I think it's—yeah, I do believe the diversity of the place is as much appealing as the savannah, because if you go into the foothills around here, you have savannah, but it doesn't have that same impact. Or in the coast range, something like that. There's a lot of similar landscapes in general, but not with this dramatic juxtaposition of so many things in one place. And a swarm or cluster of peaks like that is really unique. I mean, other places are really dramatic, like Yosemite—look at how powerful that place is. But you take most of the coast range and most of the Sierra Nevada and they're not topographically diverse. You might have gradual things, you might have a canyon, you might have this, but you don't have it all in one spot like that. So I think that's part of that. And then I do think the isolation of it out in the middle of a completely altered landscape comes kind of like a surprise. And once you get in there... I mean, not everybody loves the profile of the Buttes when they pass it, but once they get inside, I mean, they're hooked. But some people even love just the profile. Just truly amazes me because that's without any direct connection, that's just scenery, but still, it works. So, there's something going on here. And, of course, the Indian tribes had all their legends; they were powerfully drawn to it. Most people from the ground don't realize how circular it is, and yet the Indians were totally aware of that. They were totally aware of its circularity, and that kind of was characteristic of a lot of sacred mountains around the world. That many of them have almost this circular arrangement. That's what I understand. Ira could probably tell you a little bit more on that.

Robyn: That leads me to another question. Is there anyplace else that, for you in particular, evokes the same response?

Walt: Absolutely. The Serengeti-Mara ecosystem. And maybe even stronger, perhaps not at all surprising. That is where we evolved—right there! So, it's really a powerful place. Interestingly, people from here who go there into the Masai Mara, they say, "This looks like the Buttes." You know, that's an interesting thing. There are places in there that look so much like the Buttes, although it's acacias instead of oak trees and things like that, but the hills and the greenery and the general topography does remind you of that. So, that's a very, very powerful place. You know, the first time I stepped foot in Africa, I felt, "Oh, I've come home." I just felt that. And I have a similar feeling in the Sutter Buttes. I have to credit Randy Schnabel. One time, I came back from being in Oregon—I guess I was gone for a year—and I came back down. And the gates were open, so I drove on out to the Dean Place. I mean, they knew I was coming; it wasn't a big surprise. But I drove into the Dean Place up there, and Randy came out of the barn and he said, "Welcome home, Walt." So, that's the kind of thing that makes you feel good.

Robyn: Yeah, that's nice. Let me get political here, and I know this is going to make you nervous about you're saying. What do you think about the state park?

Walt: Oh yeah, I can tell you about the state park. I've been very... well, initially we were brought in to sort of counteract the state park. That's what Peter Steidlmeyer wanted. I mean, to us that was not a big issue. We just wanted to come out and start interpreting, enjoying, and so forth. But, Peter... and I already explained the story about he was hoping to protect his land by

opening it for public access because they didn't have anything. So in the first year we were there, state parks people came out several times, so some of the planning and acquisition people actually chartered trips with me, and they went around out there. And some national park people came out as well. One of them was the guy who ran the John Muir... oh, the farm down there in the straits right by the Bay Area... that little John Muir house... he was kind of a famous, or infamous, guy with the National Park Service because he had all his employees read Aldo Leopold, who's really kind of a father figure for the conservation movement and so forth. Anyway, I remember them coming up. I think he was with the state park people and they were looking around, and they said, "Thank heavens we don't have this place because, look, we'd put a \$30,000 outhouse over there, and we'd put a guard on the eagle's nest each year, but we'd lose it." And they recognized the value of what we were doing, bringing people in the Buttes on a very carefully controlled thing, which is kind of contrary to what they were doing at that time, where they'd basically open it up as a recreation area. Now, state parks has evolved.

Robyn: That was 30 years ago.

Walt: That was 30 years ago. And, also there was a lot of opposition to the state parks at that time. And part of it was that the group that actually had something to do with the founding of Middle Mountain Foundation because they had a non-profit status, and I think there was some kind of carry over from that, I can't remember exactly how it occurred, but there was an organization in Yuba City called Save Our Buttes, no Save the Sutter Buttes. It was a very, very small organization, and they were very vocal and they wrote lots of articles. And they called it Save the Sutter Buttes, and that antagonized the landowners who thought that they were saving the Sutter Buttes. And they weren't talking to the landowners, they were saying, "Okay, we want the state park in here. We want to get in here." And all that stuff. And basically they offended the landowners. The landowners started calling them, "Save Our Buttes" so they could call them you-know-what. And so the polarization was really extreme, and it was in that kind of environment that we came. So we arrived at that time, when the landowners suddenly got polarized against the public, whereas, ten years before, they couldn't have cared less about people going in. They didn't care. But then there was a series of abuses, and I've described some of that—leaving gates open and all that stuff. And that's when they started getting protective. They hired an old guy in a Bronco to patrol the place. And he was out there and he kept people from climbing over fences and flying their kites or picnics or whatever they'd be doing.

Okay, now I know I've drifted. What was the question again?

Robyn: Just your reaction to the state park.

Walt: So, at that time, whenever we were asked about it, our advocacy was that we think that the approach to working with landowners, and especially when we contacted and started working with 40 landowners instead of just one, it seemed reasonable to advocate that principle, and it became kind of a guiding principle for Middle Mountain Foundation. When Don Schmoltdt took over, you know, I worked with him, and then Ira basically picked up the same thing. And then the board as it's evolved over time, even after Ira left, that became sort of the, one of the leading principles is that this needs to be done with the cooperation of the landowners. I have certainly pointed out, and I might even have pointed out in the first book, I think I did, that the good will

of the landowners is not necessarily heritable. No matter how good they may be, you can't be sure that that's going to continue on in time. And so I've always advocated being creative in looking for approaches to save the land. We could go into a long litany of history here, but as you know, the Middle Mountain Foundation was trying to buy Peace Valley because it was up for sale. And they weren't successful in raising very much money.

But, the money didn't get raised, and so what's going to happen then? Well, it's going to be bought. My opinion is that, at this point, that state parks had evolved a lot, and why not talk to state parks about it? Well, actually, the state parks issue came up, kind of blindsided Middle Mountain Foundation. They didn't know it was really happening until it was announced that they were negotiating to buy this thing. And then, some of the immediate reaction was, "We have to oppose this!" Because it was a carryover of the history of the organization. And they started an internal debate by emails and I was copied on it, and I said, "Why oppose this? It's going to happen and they're going to try to protect a big chunk of the Buttes here, which you can't do. You haven't been able to raise the money. And it's only going to increase the love and respect for the Sutter Buttes if they do it well. I basically counseled them on the stuff that they're doing now. And, so, fortunately, they responded. They said, "Okay, stop our internal bickering here. Let's go for it." And so, they've been... they've approached the state parks people—Tim and some of those other folks that do stuff in there. And they're allies now, which I think is really great. I think there could even be more. I think that there could be some connection between the foundation and... this is an idea that Ira had really, that there's 200 acres that the foundation has some control over. It seems like they might want to use that as leverage to help them gain more land or more money, or, there's a lot of things that they could do possibly to leverage more protection for the Buttes. Ira would have more interesting takes on that. I think there's some really interesting ideas. And I think everybody needs to be really open to alternative ideas. I think the possibilities are endless. But these possibilities have to be explored very quickly because the threats are really serious with the economy the way it is, and with people's ability to buy land.

You know what's interesting—at this Rotary group today... I gave this talk to two or three hundred people at this Rotary group, and they really responded well. They really responded great. There's a guy who came up to me afterwards, and he says, "I don't want anybody else to hear this, but, you know, of course"—I had mentioned that development threat was the biggest threat; I pointed out the trophy homes and so forth—he says, "Half the people in here would be happy to subdivide and build trophy homes on the Buttes."

This is the problem! We all would! And that's why we have to really have this aggressive campaign for people to realize how special it is, and how there are just some places that we are not meant to live, like the Indians felt. The Indians were not territorially about it. They said, "This is a sacred land. All our grievances with one another, we put aside when we come in here. And it's not to be owned."

...

There was a woman who came on a photo workshop with me, it's in the book, and she... with me and Ron Sanford. We went out early from Sutter. We met people at the crack of dawn and went out there and did early morning photography, and she was there. And then other people came out at 7:30 when it was a little bit more reasonable. But, anyway, she went out there with

us, but she didn't have a camera. She was an Indian woman, and she didn't come to the evening presentation that we'd done the night before, but she showed up for that. And she had just come in there to pray, and she went off by herself. Well, some of the photographers saw her there, and so they started photographing her. They said, "Wow, an Indian woman praying in the Buttes. This is spectacular!" Well, she heard this and it disturbed her; she was trying to pray for her ill son. And, so, when everybody came in, we wanted everybody to assemble, and we were down over the Indian grinding stones in Moore Canyon. There's a wonderful set of grinding stones in Moore Canyon; it's a great teaching spot, which they don't use anymore. But to me it was one of the best places.

But, anyway, so she said—I said that she had something to say to the group, and she said that she was praying for her son and she was a little worried about his chances if... she didn't like the feeling of the photographs. Well, the photographers were moved. Several of them immediately rewound their film, popped it out of the camera, and handed her the canister, just like that. It was really great. And then she really got into it. She started talking about the range, and she actually prayed with us, and she talked again about how this was a sacred place and did not belong to anybody, nor do we harbor any long term ill will or grudge against the other people for living here. You can't own this anyway. So, it was a beautiful experience. She prayed and chanted. And we just had a life experience there.

<Interview had to end abruptly due to schedule constraints.>