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KEEPING WATCH OVER THE SIERRA

INTERVIEW BY SUSAN D. ROCK • PHOTO BY KEITH BRAUNEIS

TOM MOOERS

In December of 2000, a group of Sierra residents and local homeowners learned about impending plans to develop Tahoe's Martis Valley with thousands of new homes. And then they decided to do something about it. They created Sierra Watch to effectively advocate for responsible planning and protection of the heart of the Tahoe-Truckee region. Working with local volunteers, engaging planning expertise and partnering with conservation allies, Sierra Watch launched its ambitious Martis Valley Campaign.

The results were unprecedented and far-reaching: permanent protection for thousands of acres of priority conservation land, caps on future development and \$100 million in funding to both help protect more of the Martis Valley landscape and create much-needed workforce housing.

Tom Mooers has served as executive

WHAT'S IT LIKE GOING UP AGAINST REAL ESTATE BEHEMOTHS IN YOUR STRUGGLE TO PRESERVE OPEN SPACE IN THE TAHOE-TRUCKEE AREA? I know it sounds cliché, but our best success comes when we create win-win opportunities. In our effort to protect Tahoe's Martis Valley, we found a way for conservation to actually serve the developers' self-interests. Those kind of creative solutions don't happen by accident. They take a lot of time, persistence and cooperation on many fronts. But the results are truly remarkable. To date, thousands of acres of land have been permanently protected and millions of dollars raised for conservation and workforce housing.

IS THERE AN IDEAL FORMULA FOR BALANCING DEVELOPMENT WITH WILDERNESS PRESERVATION? One of the great examples that Martis Valley sets for the rest of the Sierra is that responsible development and landscape preservation can go hand in hand. The key is to take a step back and ask the important questions

HOW DOES SIERRA WATCH GET THINGS DONE? The key is that we take a pragmatic approach to protecting the quality of life in the region while also staying true to our conservation values. We're strategic and flexible, with a wide variety of tools to protect special places. In Martis Valley, for example, we've applied planning, legal, science, coalition-building and grassroots-organizing expertise to a multiyear effort.

What makes it all possible are the concerned citizens who make up Sierra Watch. Whether people contribute time or money or both, it's those commitments that add up to our ongoing success.

ARE SIERRA WATCH'S SUCCESSSES BEING FELT AND REPLICATED ELSEWHERE IN THE SIERRA? Our success in Martis Valley resonates throughout the Sierra Nevada on a couple levels. We actively export our experience, supporting local efforts to protect Dyer Mountain in Lassen County and Mount Whitney in Owens Valley, for example. And, in a more

RESPONSIBLE DEVELOPMENT AND LANDSCAPING PRESERVATION CAN GO HAND IN HAND.

director of Sierra Watch since 2001. A graduate of UCLA and an alumnus of the Green Corps program, Mooers previously worked at the League to Save Lake Tahoe and the Greenbelt Alliance in California, where he built a strong record of safeguarding the Sierra's natural resources. Mooers lives with his son, Wes, and their dog, Trudy, in Nevada City's first co-housing, high-density development. They all hit the slopes and trails as often as possible.

WHAT IS YOUR EARLIEST CHILDHOOD CONNECTION WITH TAHOE? It's the water. Whether splashing in it as a little kid or floating on it in a canoe, it's always all that clear, blue water. Now I get to watch my son play on the beach and experience it all over again. As a toddler, he gets all sandy, rinses his hands off in the water and says, "Thank you, Tahoe."

— what are the important qualities of local communities, what land do we need to protect to ensure water quality, how much traffic can the region really tolerate — and then make sure that our land-use planning fits our baseline values.

WHO ARE SIERRA WATCH'S BIGGEST ALLIES, AND HOW DO THEY HELP FURTHER YOUR CAUSE? Success in Martis Valley has always relied on a number of committed individuals and allied organizations. Truckee's Mountain Area Preservation Foundation, for example, is fundamental to establishing land conservation and smart growth in the region. The League to Save Lake Tahoe has been critical in ensuring that regional planning considers any impact on The Lake. And, increasingly, the Truckee Donner Land Trust plays an important role in securing permanent protection of Martis Valley land.

general sense, Martis Valley reminds people up and down the range that we can indeed work together to protect the places we love.

WHAT IS THE NEXT BIG CHARGE FOR THE ORGANIZATION? Sierra Watch remains committed to following through with our goals for Martis Valley. We are also making a major commitment to what is shaping up to be the next big land-use issue facing the Sierra Nevada: the future of Donner Summit. As landowners draw up their impending development plans, we are setting positive and constructive goals similar to what we've accomplished in Martis Valley.

WHAT ASPECT OF YOUR JOB INSPIRES YOU MOST? I'm just grateful to be here, and that this is my job at all. It's the volunteers — hikers, homeowners, businesspeople, parents — who deserve the inspiration the Sierra consistently provides. 