

# OPEN LANDS, OPEN MINDS

*Aimee Rutledge has been Executive Director of the Sacramento Valley Conservancy since October 1996. Ms. Rutledge also helped found the Friends of the Sacramento River Greenway, and has worked with the American Institute of Architects, California Council and the California Bicycle Coalition as a legislative advocate. She holds a BA in History from Pomona College. In this interview, the International Affairs Journal poses questions about the Sacramento Valley, a place not far from the Davis campus itself.*

**IAJ: What is the importance of the Sacramento Valley Conservancy?**

AR: The Sacramento Valley Conservancy is a nonprofit, private land trust governed by a locally-based volunteer board of directors and functioning with a dedicated staff. We provide the unique community benefit and service of purchasing open space lands for habitat, agriculture, scenic and recreational purposes from willing sellers at fair market value or below, for example if they are interested in a donation of part of the value for tax purposes. We then manage these special lands in cooperation with agencies and local farmers and ranchers for future generations for open space values, never to be developed. As a land trust, we differ from many other environmental groups since we have a policy against taking positions on development projects. Instead, we are pro-active developers of open space, working to implement our own 21st Century Open Space Vision for the Sacramento Region. This vision map is posted on our website at [sacramentovalleyconservancy.org](http://sacramentovalleyconservancy.org), and people can check the project map. It shows where we do our work and our priorities for land preservation.

**IAJ: What would you say are the most important environmental issues facing Sacramento today? And, how important is it that we focus on conserving land, rather than developing it?**

AR: Even though we are facing an economic downturn, the pace of growth in the Sacramento region has been and will continue to be extremely fast-paced. The Sacramento area is a highly desirable place to live, and we want to keep it that way for future generations! The loss of farmland and habitat in our region has significant impacts on our community. From 2002-2004, Yolo and Sacramento Counties lost a combined average of 12 acres of farmland each day, according to the California Department of Conservation. Protection of land prioritized in Sacramento Valley Conservancy's 21st Century Open Space Vision will preserve local farms, provide many threatened wildlife species with a place to thrive, help provide places for our many new and existing residents to exercise and experience our heritage lands, and help protect our local communities from flood waters by providing a balance of viable urban and rural lands. The community needs to recognize that an investment now is necessary to preserve our most special places for the future. The Sacramento region, unlike the Los Angeles and Bay Areas, has not approved a local dedicated funding source for open space acquisition and management. Our area would greatly benefit from voting for local funding to

help compete for the many state and federal grants that are available if you have "match" funding. We must value and invest in our heritage lands or they will soon be gone forever.

**IAJ: Why do you think people aren't as worrisome about the issues as they should be?**

AR: Personally, I believe that people in the Sacramento region are beginning to understand how quickly growth and development is using land and that they are starting to think ahead about investing in protecting special places. But, I also think we do not see and realize the beauty and value of our Central Valley Rivers, creeks, farmlands and wetlands because our area is so flat. In the Bay Area, they see Mount Diablo or know the bay is there, and they think "That's my mountain", or "That's my Bay." Here, do we think "That's my creek", or "That's my heritage farmland and wetlands, local food supply and place for migrating birds and hawks to feed?" Or, do we focus more on the far away Sierra Nevada Mountains and Pacific Ocean? We cannot afford to ignore our very special, iconic valley landscapes which provide water and food for families, fish, migrating waterfowl, and many other special creatures, including majestic Sandhill Cranes and Swainson's hawks, determined salmon, darling burrowing owls and delicate tiger salamanders.

**IAJ: What is your current project and how did you promote awareness to this issue?**

AR: SVC is working with Yolo Land Trust to protect lands in the Sacramento River Delta, with the Motherlode Land Trust to protect oak woodlands, vernal pool wetlands, creeks, rare plants and cattle-grazing lands in the low foothills, and with the Laguna Creek Collaborative and Dry Creek Conservancy to protect stream corridors and connect over 100 mile loops of habitat and stream-side trails to the existing American River Parkway. We work hard every day with local landowners and agencies and the public through direct outreach, partnerships and our website and hike and outing programs.

**IAJ: How would one find out more about the hikes and tours that the conservancy leads?**

AR: Join us on our outings at our special preserves this spring! Go to [www.sacramentovalleyconservancy.org](http://www.sacramentovalleyconservancy.org) or call Tammy Mebane, SVC's Stewardship Director, at 916-216-2178 for more information.

**IAJ: What is the next step that concerned citizens should take to preserve the valley, especially the younger generation?**

AR: Get out and experience our heritage Central Valley landscapes. Bring friends, have fun and experience their beauty! Come on our tours at our Deer Creek Hills Preserve, go to the Cache Creek or Putah Creek access areas, go to the Cosumnes River Preserve or tours at the Yolo Basin Wildlife Area. Then, act to protect these by supporting local land trusts, or working with local agencies working to protect open space and help us fund these efforts.