

# **C2CC Presentation**

## **Evacuating State Parks Museum Collections During the CZU Fire**

By Jenny Daly (Museum Curator I)

### **SLIDE 1**

#### **Introduction**

Hello everyone and welcome. I would like to say thank you to Robin and C2C Care for inviting me to present my museum collections evacuation story here today. I am honored to be here. And thank you to everyone watching, this is such an important topic.

Just a brief bit about me, my name is Jenny Daly, and I am the Museum Curator I for the California State Parks in the Santa Cruz District. I grew up in Santa Cruz and I am so fortunate to live and work in my hometown. I started working for State Parks in October 2019.

I received my Master's in Museum Studies from John F. Kennedy University in 2010 and I have worked in collections management at various institutions since then, including at the California Academy of Sciences, the Cantor Arts Center at Stanford University, and the Getty Center in Los Angeles.

But working for the State Parks as a curator is my dream job because it means I can combine my love of Parks with my expertise in museum collections management.

I imagine most of you are pretty savvy about museums, but perhaps you may not immediately associate the State Parks with museum collections. In the Santa Cruz District, we have about 15 parks that have either historic artifact collections, historic house museums, historic structures, and/or a visitor center with collections on display. We probably have about 15,000 catalogued individual museum collection items in the District, but that number is much larger if you include the archaeology collections and, of course, the uncatalogued materials.

### **SLIDE 2**

#### **CZU Fire Impact**

So, the focus of this webinar today is how extreme weather impacts cultural institutions. But I wanted to start with this image because this is a photo of my backyard on the day before I had to evacuate from my home during the CZU fire in August 2020. I live up in the Santa Cruz Mountains with my elderly parents and the fire got within a mile of our house on three sides. I want to emphasize that in addition to extreme weather affecting your professional life, an extreme weather event and/or emergency will probably also be affecting your personal life. We got the order to evacuate at 2am and had to load up our cars with pets, computers, photos, food, clothes, etc and get out in a hurry. I spent an entire day trying to find a secure place to stay with my pets, which was a day that I couldn't help my coworkers

with the collections evacuations at work. Ultimately, I ended up being evacuated from my home for nearly 5 weeks.

### SLIDE 3

#### **The CZU Fire**

So, just to give some background on the CZU Fire. In the early morning hours of Sunday August 16<sup>th</sup>, 2020, an uncharacteristic dry lightning storm sparked numerous fires across portions of Northern Santa Cruz County and Southern San Mateo County. By late Tuesday August 18<sup>th</sup> changes in weather conditions resulted in multiple smaller fires growing and merging into an out-of-control conflagration. Collectively known as the CZU Lightning Complex Fire, it ultimately burned over 86,000 acres, destroyed 1,500 structures, and burned for 37 days.

### SLIDE 4

#### **Park Units affected by the fire**

Here is a map that shows the extent of the CZU fire. The pink area is the extent of the fire, and the areas in green are our State Parks within the Santa Cruz District, which is a combination of Santa Cruz and San Mateo counties. This rugged coastal mountain area is south of San Francisco and north of the city of Santa Cruz, bordered by the Pacific Ocean to the west, and the Skyline ridge to the east.

In the morning of Tuesday August 18<sup>th</sup> when the fire was burning for a couple of days, but before it got out of control, I drove out to Waddell Creek, which is where Big Basin State Park meets the Pacific Ocean, and I saw about twenty CALFire trucks, so honestly, I wasn't too concerned. It wasn't until later that night that we began to understand the true scale of this emergency.

### SLIDE 5

Here are the six Parks in the Santa Cruz District that were affected by the fire. The level of impact varies from park to park. For example, 97% of Big Basin Redwoods SP was burned and all the historic buildings and museum collections were destroyed, while neighboring Portola Redwoods SP was barely touched. But, during the fire response, museum collections were evacuated from all these State Park Units to avoid any further damage and destruction to important cultural resources. In the next few slides, I am going to talk about our response to the fire and the evacuation efforts at each park.

### SLIDE 6

I want to give a content warning here, some of the images in the following slides show some extensive fire damage and destruction to museum collections.

#### **Big Basin**

Established in 1902, Big Basin Redwoods State Park is the oldest State Park in California. Big Basin is known for its old growth redwood trees, camping, hiking, and its waterfalls. The buildings in the historic core of the park were built by the California Conservation Corps in the 1930s as part of a WPA-era initiative.

Here is an image of our Archive Room before the fire.

The museum collections were either on display or in storage in three separate buildings in the park.

#### SLIDE 7

Here is an image of the Museum after the fire.

At 9pm on the night of Tuesday August 18th, I had received a text from my boss, who is the Supervisor of Cultural Resources in our District, he was asking questions about evacuating collections at Big Basin that he could relay to the rangers who were in the park. You see, the museum building at Big Basin had just been renovated and at least half of the collections were still stored in boxes from being temporarily relocated during the renovations. I advised my boss that the rangers should at least grab what was still packed in boxes. At this point I did not know that Big Basin was going to be destroyed. We didn't get confirmation until a day or two later that not only had none of the collections been evacuated, but that the buildings and collections were a total loss.

#### SLIDE 8

##### **Rancho del Oso unit of Big Basin**

Rancho Del Oso is the name for the coast side and wetlands area of Big Basin State Park, where Waddell Creek meets the ocean.

Here is an image of our collections storage at RDO.

Rancho Del Oso has a historic house with a Nature and History Center, and there is also a small Welcome Center on the north side of the marsh. Miraculously, both buildings survived the fire despite it coming within 10' of the buildings. I think our State Parks Ranger and the CalFire crews are to thank for saving those buildings.

#### SLIDE 9

This is an image of museum collections in transport.

The park's Interpreter and area Ranger packed most of the contents of the museum collections storage room into a large van. Maintenance staff then packed taxidermy and museum objects on display in the Visitor Center and the Welcome Center and put them into their vehicles, and everything was moved over to the Año Nuevo State Park maintenance area.

A couple of days later I was concerned that Año Nuevo was still in danger from the fires, so I meet with the interpreter, and we caravanned up to Año Nuevo to pick up the van full of RDO collections and drive it back to Santa Cruz for safe keeping. The van with RDO collections remained at a Santa Cruz lifeguard station parking lot for six weeks.

## SLIDE 10

### **Wilder Ranch**

The Cultural Preserve at Wilder Ranch State Park is a collection of numerous historic houses, barns, and outbuildings. The oldest structure is the Bolcoff Adobe which was built in the 1830s, but most of the structures were built by the Meder and Wilder families between the 1860s and the 1940s, including three houses, a horse barn, a cow barn, workshops, and other buildings.

This is an image of one of the collections storage areas after the evacuation.

The museum collections are in various locations throughout the historic preserve, both on display and in collections storage. The collection consists of about 6000 individual objects.

I spent all day here, along with the Interpretive staff, Docents, and a couple Cultural Resource staff from Sacramento, and we packed the entire contents of the museum collections storage room in the Victorian that you see here, as well as most of the museum objects on display in the houses and workshops. Many of the items were packed into staff vehicles and moved to the Santa Cruz Mission State Historic Park just two miles away. We also packed all the hardcopy accession files, reference books, and my office in the Meder house and moved it to the Mission.

## SLIDE 11

By mid-day two moving trucks and crews sent from Sacramento arrived and the movers packed as much large furniture from the houses as they could fit, as well as tools and mechanical equipment from the workshops, more museum collections and research material from an old staff office in the visitor center, and miscellaneous museum collections from around the park to fill up the truck. Then the two fully loaded moving trucks returned to Sacramento that afternoon. At this point, after realizing the losses at Big Basin, we were very motivated to save as much material from Wilder as possible. With the fires moving into the upper reaches of the park, we weren't sure if the Wilder Cultural Preserve would survive.

## SLIDE 12

### **Henry Cowell**

Henry Cowell Redwoods State Park is a beautiful redwood park and is also the location of our District Headquarters.

The park's visitor center has collection objects on display, while the district archaeology collections are stored in a warehouse in the maintenance yard.

This is an image of the archaeology collections being returned to the lab nearly a year after the fires.

The park Interpreter and other staff packed the museum collections on display in the visitor center and evacuated them to the Natural Bridges State Park visitor center for safe keeping.

Then our District Cultural team met two moving trucks and crew members that were sent by the Cultural Resources Division in Sacramento. They packed most of the archaeology collections in the Archaeology Lab as well as all the Park Unit files in the Resources trailer conference room and research files in the office. All this material was taken up to Sacramento to the main State Parks museum collections storage facility.

### SLIDE 13

Here is an image of us reinstalling the taxidermy mountain lion specimen.

After the fire danger had passed, the Interpreters and I returned all the evacuated collections back to Henry Cowell's visitor center and staged them for cleaning and re-installation that was done over the following months.

### SLIDE 14

#### **Año Nuevo**

Año Nuevo State Park is another coast side park, just northwest of Rancho del Oso. These days is mostly known for its elephant seal colony, but the park land was once part of the Steele Family dairy farm.

This is an image of the small Steele family cemetery at Cascade Ranch, which suffered a lot of damage including that broken headstone.

The museum collections are on display or in storage in the barns in the historic complex.

Staff packed the taxidermy, skulls, and ethnographic collections on display in the barn and evacuated them to the Mission for safe storage.

The historic structures in the cultural complex at Año also survived with no damage, despite the fire crossing Highway 1 at a couple points near the park. However, just up the road on the east side of Highway 1, at the Cascade Ranch complex, the historic barn and other outbuildings were destroyed. Fortunately, one historic house survived, but with some damage.

### SLIDE 15

#### **Butano**

Here is an image of the Butano State Park Visitor Center and the ceiling tiles that were damaged during the evacuation. The tile was damaged while removing an owl that was hanging from the ceiling by wires.

Cultural and maintenance staff packed the taxidermy and ethnographic objects on display. Most of the items were eventually taken to the Mission for safe storage with most of the other museum collections from our parks.

### SLIDE 16

## **Portola**

Here is an image of us reinstalling the taxidermy mountain lion specimen at Portola Redwoods State Park.

The fire burned to the edge of the park, but fortunately not much further. However, collections were evacuated out of an abundance of caution.

Natural Resources staff packed taxidermy and objects on display in the visitor center and evacuated them to the Half Moon Bay maintenance yard.

Later, in November, the evacuated collections were returned, including the mountain lion.

Months later I worked with maintenance staff to re-install the mountain lion and devise new quick-release security mount so that specimen can be easily removed from the wall in the next evacuation.

## **SLIDE 17**

### **Recovery & Salvage**

This is an image of me sifting through the debris at the Big Basin Headquarters building.

In late September 2020, a large team of District Cultural Resources staff, CRD staff from Sacramento, staff from Friends of Santa Cruz State Parks, and a few others headed up to Big Basin to survey and record the destruction of historic structures. I was able to spend some time sifting through the ashes of the Nature Lodge museum storage room, the Headquarters building, and the old lodge to look for any museum collections that may have survived.

## **SLIDE 18**

I was able to recover about 50+ individual items, including logging equipment, axe heads, and saw blades. As you can imagine, it was mostly sturdy metal objects that survived the fire. The salvaged collections were moved to District HQ in Felton for temporary storage.

## **SLIDE 19**

### **Clean Up**

After the fire danger had passed, we realized we had an opportunity to do a deep clean in our exhibition spaces, since they were largely empty of artifacts.

In the months after the fire, with the help of interpretive staff, docents, and other volunteers, we spend at least 12 full working days doing a deep clean of exhibition and storage spaces in seven parks.

## **SLIDE 20**

### **Returning Collections**

About a week after the fire, the first thing we returned were the historic vehicles to the garage at Wilder Ranch. That is the picture on the left here.

As the fire threat diminished, I worked at the Santa Cruz Mission to start organizing the collections that had been evacuated there. The collections were all stored temporarily in the multiple rooms of the adobe, with most of them stored in a room that is normally devoted to playing an interpretive video, so it is basically an empty room that we were able to fill up.

Over the following months, I worked with interpretive staff to begin returning evacuated collections to various parks. We used our State Park trucks to move everything that was stored at the Mission, including the many boxes, furniture, and large paintings from Wilder Ranch. Items were staged in visitor centers and historic houses so they could be inventoried, cleaned, and then returned to either storage or display.

In January 2021, a moving company returned the Wilder collection items from Sacramento. It was one moving truck full of collections. This is the image on the right. The returned collections include furniture for the houses, packed exhibition display objects, museum collections from storage, and machines and tools from the workshops. I worked with two movers to place the furniture in both houses and return the machines to the workshop. Boxed collections are staged in Victorian dining room and shops. I eventually unpacked and inventoried all the items over the next few months.

Some of the items, like the drill press and lathe in the workshop at Wilder, required the help of knowledgeable docents and strong maintenance staff to be reassembled and reinstalled.

By June 2021, a moving company returned two full truckloads of archaeology collections that were temporarily stored in Sacramento to the Archaeology Lab in Felton at Henry Cowell.

## SLIDE 21

### **In Conclusion**

What are the Lessons learned?

In the “Pros” column, I learned that many Parks staff were willing to pitch in to help evacuate collections in an emergency.

I learned the Santa Cruz Mission is a great temporary storage location, at least at the time of the CZU evacuations because the Mission was closed to the public since it was peak COVID times.

We had the opportunity to do a thorough deep cleaning of exhibition spaces and objects on display.

Some of the “Cons” were that we evacuated more than we needed to, specifically with the taxidermy, we really should have focused on endangered species only.

We focused on evacuating items on display and missed some of the core collections in storage, this is primarily due to not having prepared lists of priority objects for evacuation at the time of the emergency.

Some of the taxidermy was damaged during evacuation, which required contracting with a taxidermy conservator to repair the damage.

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The most important lesson learned is the value of having up to date evacuation plans, having priority items identified in advance, having a cache of emergency supplies for packing, having objects in storage already packed in boxes and ready to go, and having a location identified in advance for temporary safe object storage.

My thanks go out to all the State Park staff who pitched in to help during the fires and in the months of recovery. Here is a picture of us at the Santa Cruz Mission flexing our muscles after returning of a load of boxes to Wilder Ranch.

That's it for me, thank you again! Now Kathleen will talk about how her museum connected with the Santa Cruz community during and after the CZU Fire.