



REFRAMING THE FUTURE

Robert Redford Conservancy for Southern California Sustainability at Pitzer College

“Tick tock...”

During a year when once-in-a-lifetime ecological catastrophes seemed commonplace, when temperatures hit record highs and levels of sea ice plummeted to all-time lows, environmental experts and activists gathered in Los Angeles for the launch of the Robert Redford Conservancy for Southern California Sustainability at Pitzer College. They came from many different places and professions, but all agreed on one thing: when it comes to responding to the environmental crisis, urgent is an understatement.

“This is it,” said Lance Neckar P’12, the director of the Robert Redford Conservancy and professor of environmental analysis at Pitzer. “This is our chance.”

“Working on the environment is the most important issue we face as a species,” said Nicholas Pritzker P’93, a Chicago-based philanthropist and co-founder of Clean Energy Trust.

“It’s kind of late in the game, but it’s not too late,” said the Conservancy’s namesake—actor, filmmaker and environmentalist Robert Redford. “As long as there’s an inch of possibility we have to give it everything we have.”

By creating the Redford Conservancy, Pitzer is giving it everything it has, aiming to stretch that inch of possibility into an infinitely sustainable future.

“For a college whose motto is ‘Mindful of the Future,’ our goal is

pretty simple,” said Pitzer President Laura Skandera Trombley at the November press conference announcing the Redford Conservancy. “We will do nothing less than reinvent the way we live on a planet that has been taken for granted for far too long.”

A LIVING LEARNING LABORATORY

The Robert Redford Conservancy is both an innovative academic program and an incipient institution. Its future home is a former infirmary located on nearly 12 acres of the Robert J. Bernard Biological Field Station just north of Pitzer’s main campus.

The grounds are dominated by coastal sage scrub, an easily overlooked, ecologically exceptional ecosystem that has been practically wiped out in California.

“In Claremont, you can cross the street from Pitzer and be in one of the rarest habitats on the planet,” said Pitzer Professor of Environmental Analysis Paul Faulstich ’79 & P’15. “This is a remarkable opportunity for learning.”

The parcel is a microcosm of Southern California—a region of intersections and interfaces where suburban homes and highways border undeveloped land. With its semi-arid climate and a population twice the size of Portugal’s, Southern California wrestles with a raft of environmental issues: too little water for too many people, polluted air, rampant development, decimated biodiversity, a culture of cars and consumption. At the Robert Redford Conservancy, Pitzer students and faculty will probe these problems and develop integrative solutions—through research, policy-making, planning and design—that will restore resilience to the region.

One of the Redford Conservancy’s projects is already underway. This past fall, Pitzer students began to study examples of successful sustainable projects and will participate in the eventual green renovation of the historic infirmary, which served as a medical facility for The Claremont Colleges until the mid-70s.

“Our classroom is a living laboratory,” Neckar said. “It is an ideal place to study multiple ways in which we can innovate hybrid built

and conserved landscapes as a foundation of sustainable cultures in similar urban-edge conditions.”

With more than half the globe living in urban areas that spew 75 percent of greenhouse gas emissions and siphon potable water supplies, the built environment lies at the crux of the environmental crisis.

“Learning how to do green buildings and everything that entails—from methods to materials to locations to transportation—really has an enormous potential for improving the world,” said Joel Reynolds, the western director of the Natural Resources Defense Council.

At the Robert Redford Conservancy, students will question everything, including the concept of sustainability itself. Too often, notions of sustainability focus on ensuring that people can keep living as they do now instead of recognizing how fundamentally they need to alter their lifestyles, Faulstich said.

“We have to reexamine the relationship between humans and nature,” he said. “We have to understand what we’ve done wrong and how we can begin to make amends.”

The Redford Conservancy’s goals are expansive, evolving, even radical. Students will work with scholars, practitioners and concerned citizens. They will dive into community-engagement projects and partner with Pitzer’s media studies program to share their work through the visual arts. Ultimately, the Redford Conservancy will develop the next generation of environmental change-makers. If all that sounds ambitious, it should.

Robert Redford CONSERVANCY

for Southern California Sustainability

PITZER COLLEGE

PRESS CONFERENCE

On November 19, 2012, the launch of the Robert Redford Conservancy for Southern California Sustainability at Pitzer College was announced at the Los Angeles Press Club.



Trustee Robert Redford



President Laura Skandera Trombley



Nicholas Pritzker P'93



Trustee Susan Pritzker P'93



Joel Reynolds, Rachel Warburton '13, Professor Paul Faulstich '79 & P'15, Professor Lance Neckar P'12

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—Robert Redford, actor & environmentalist

“That’s the magic of the liberal arts—think big, think beyond any boundaries,” Neckar said. “That’s always been pretty successful for us at this College.”

UNDERWRITTEN BY UPLIFT

During the press conference, Trombley called the creation of the Robert Redford Conservancy an epic moment born of decades of visionary thinking and determination.

“Today is a celebration of synchronicity—a collaboration of entrepreneurial thinking, idealism and like-minded individuals,” she said.

In 1970, Pitzer became one of the first colleges in the country with an environmental studies program. The emerging field was so new that “environmentalist” appears in quotes in a 1970 memo from Pitzer Professor of Art and Environmental Design Carl Hertel.

They might not have known exactly what to call themselves, but Pitzer’s early environmentalists set the College on its path. John Rodman, a Harvard-trained political scientist, started the arboretum that now bears his name. Hertel and Professor of Human Ecology Paul Shepard—a philosopher disguised as a scientist—took students into the deserts of Mexico and the Southwest to explore nature and art under an open sky. They were all interdisciplinary by instinct.

More than three decades later, Trombley, Faulstich and then-Dean of Faculty Alan Jones began talking about using the shuttered infirmary for a new environmental program. For years, potential developers surveyed the land and called it empty. Others noticed sharp-shinned hawks in the oaks and California gray foxes in the sagebrush.

“I thought, ‘It looks full to me,’” Trombley said.

Trombley spoke with longtime Pitzer board member Susan Pritzker P’93 about expanding the College’s environmental program while protecting an endangered ecosystem. Susan and her husband Nicholas Pritzker have devoted much of their lives to advocating for clean energy, clean water and universal human rights. The Pritzkers provided the \$10 million anchor gift to establish the Robert Redford Conservancy for Southern California Sustainability.

Robert Redford’s connection to Pitzer stretches back to 2006 when he shot the movie *Lions for Lambs* on campus. After discussing the College’s sustainability efforts with Trombley, he threw in his support for Pitzer’s goals, becoming a special environmental adviser. He spoke at the dedication of Pitzer’s first LEED-certified residence halls

and featured the College in the Sundance Channel series *Big Ideas for a Small Planet*.

Redford said he’s uncomfortable with most tributes, but was honored to have an institution dedicated to sustainability in Southern California named after him.

“I grew up here and had a connection here,” he said. “So this is very special to me.”

Before Redford was Sundance or Gatsby, he was a kid with a paper route in the Santa Monica area who cycled to the sea and surfed the Pacific. Over the years, he watched the region’s clean air, open spaces and tide pools disappear. He began fighting to restore and protect nature, sounding the alarm on climate change more than 20 years ago, opposing the Keystone Pipeline and campaigning against the Pebble Mine in Alaska’s Bristol Bay.

Redford said the Conservancy was an opportunity not only to honor what was and what still could be, but “also to honor the young people coming into the world.”

Rachel Warburton ’13 is one of those young people. A native of San Antonio, TX, Warburton said the environmental challenges facing her generation may seem innumerable but they’re not insurmountable.

“It really just takes recognition of what we need to be doing as individuals and as a society and a school,” said Warburton, an environmental analysis major who is studying how ecology relates to human healing.

Reynolds said Pitzer is the right school, in the right place, at an utterly critical time, to turn that recognition into action.

“Pitzer is a beacon,” he said. “Not just as a place to study the environment, but as an academic institution that actually walks the talk.”

Pitzer has been walking that talk for nearly 50 years. Although its first president could not have imagined exactly how the College he once called a wonder child would grow up, the Robert Redford Conservancy seems inevitable, the outcome of both Pitzer’s history and geographic genes. The alluvial fan beneath Pitzer’s foundations formed over tens to hundreds of thousands of years, time eroding mountains even while they rose, pushed up by rival tectonic plates. Half a century ago, construction of the College began on layers of sediment that were underwritten by uplift. Pitzer is a beacon in a basin, always on the lookout for ways to create a better tomorrow.

—Susan Warmbrunn

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—Laura Skandera Trombley, president