

Remembering
Dr. Elisabeth Brown

A Visionary in Orange County Land Conservation



Elisabeth ‘Liz’ Brown, Ph.D., biologist and inspirational Orange County advocate for open space and wildlife habitat protection, died peacefully on July 6 at the age of 81. A beloved figure in the Southern California environmental community, she served as President of Laguna Greenbelt, Inc. from 1985 to 2019. During that time, she played invaluable roles in collaborative efforts and legal battles protecting wilderness around Laguna Beach, establishing organizations to manage those lands, and creating programs for public access.

Dr. Brown was part of an Orange County environmental movement that created the South Coast Wilderness, 22,000 acres of contiguous open space within the cities of Aliso Viejo, Irvine, Laguna Beach, Laguna Woods, Newport Beach, and unincorporated Orange County. Her passion for protecting Southern California ecology and her ability to help craft complex conservation agreements led to remarkable achievements. When she was reminded of her accomplishments, she was quick to point out, “I didn’t do it alone.”

"Elisabeth embodied the environmental movement that we all wanted to be a part of where science was earned and understood, the political will align, the team making it happen knew what to do, and the funding was found. Her wit, savvy, intuitive approach, and positive attitude were skills we all wanted to have so we could be as effective as she was. She was a beloved mentor."

— *Melanie Schlotterbeck, Southland head for Power in Nature*

Dr. Brown was a key player in the historic fight to protect Laguna Canyon, representing the Laguna Greenbelt, Inc. in months of negotiations with The Irvine Company. Public opposition, including the “Walk to Save Laguna Canyon” in 1989, led the Company to abandon plans for their Laguna Laurel development and sell the land to the City of Laguna Beach. A historic agreement was made to

preserve the land which became the heart of the Laguna Coast Wilderness Park. Dr. Brown remained involved throughout the years-long process of land purchase, fundraising, management planning, and park creation.

During this exciting time, Dr. Brown worked with many others to craft agreements and establish organizations for the long-term protection and management of the coastal open space.

“The idea of bringing all the Laguna Greenbelt lands under common management has been my most important goal short of the preservation of the land itself,” Brown wrote. A cooperative oversight body, Coastal Greenbelt Authority, was created to ensure that the acquired land would remain ‘wild.’ The Authority continues this oversight today, with members representing the park’s landowners, local environmental organizations, Laguna Canyon homeowners, and cities adjacent to the parkland.

“Following Liz’s lead I was inspired; she was my mentor, my friend and my source of knowledge about our unique coastal canyons. Her commitment, wisdom and that special smile will always be remembered.”

— Mary Fegraus, founding executive director of the Laguna Canyon Foundation, and Chair of the Coastal Greenbelt Authority

Dr. Brown also worked to incorporate the coastal open space into an innovative regional conservation effort that was one of California’s first examples of a Natural Community Conservation Plan (NCCP) and Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP). Dr. Brown served on the board of the organization that formed around this Orange County agreement, now called the Natural Communities Coalition.

In the last two decades, Dr. Brown turned her focus to making the Irvine-Laguna Wildlife Corridor a reality. She became increasingly concerned about the need to connect the coastal open space to a larger wilderness area. Without a wildlife corridor, some species in the protected coastal ‘island’ are showing signs of inbreeding. The Irvine-Laguna Wildlife Corridor will provide a pathway for animals to move between the 22,000 acres of south Orange County open space and the Cleveland National Forest. A key portion of the Corridor is under construction in Irvine with an expected opening in 2025. With a sense of urgency that Dr. Brown helped to inspire, Laguna Greenbelt, Inc. is working to complete the corridor by addressing remaining challenges, including safe passage through the I-5/I-405 freeway complex.

“Liz was an excellent leader, a mixture of steadfast determination in achieving her goals mixed with a pragmatic understanding of what can be achieved.”

— Norm Grossman, President of the Laguna Greenbelt, Inc.

Elisabeth was born in 1943 in New York City, to French immigrant mother Marthe-Hermance Malartre who was educated in journalism at the Sorbonne and loved the outdoors, and father Karl Paley Cohen who came from a family of Brooklyn Jews, earned a Ph.D. in chemistry, made important contributions to the Manhattan Project, and became a nuclear energy pioneer. Elisabeth earned a Master's degree in Zoology from UC Berkeley, where she was advised that women did not need higher degrees and went on to earn a Ph.D. in Biology from UC Irvine in 1976.

Elisabeth settled in a home in Laguna Canyon in the 1970s with her husband Dr. Allen Brown where they raised their daughter, Mina. Elisabeth became fascinated by the local wildlife and landscapes and soon joined the movement to assemble a 'greenbelt' of protected open space around Laguna Beach. She explained later that she got involved because she wanted to teach people about the ecology of Laguna Canyon—but realized that if she didn't help to protect it, there would be nothing left to teach them about. Becoming Board President of the Laguna Greenbelt, Inc. in 1985, she treated her position as a full-time job and seemed to have limitless energy for it.

Passionate about helping the public to appreciate and understand local ecology, Elisabeth created trail and field guides, wrote a regular column for Laguna Beach newspapers, and ran a naturalist training class that gave more than 600 people the knowledge to lead tours and educate others about local natural history. Dr. Brown's *Back Pocket Field Guide* provides an overview of common landscapes, wildlife, and plants in Orange County wilderness areas. In the 1980s, her husband and daughter spent one Saturday each month with Elisabeth in the Jim Dilley Preserve, greeting visitors and handing out trail guides.

Elisabeth never lost her drive to work on nature conservation and education, but her dual diagnoses of Parkinson's Disease and Lewy Body Dementia made it impossible for her to continue. She enjoyed hearing about the ongoing efforts of her former colleagues as well as the keen interest that today's youth show in protecting the environment.

"I met Elisabeth in 1991, when I got involved in protecting the California gnatcatcher and its coastal sage scrub habitat. I found that Elisabeth had already been doing this for years, with major successes in the Laguna Greenbelt. We subsequently had many partnerships, always benefiting from her scientific knowledge, her commitment to conservation, and her wisdom in negotiation. Elisabeth had a great wit and upbeat attitude, even in the worst of times. She lifted others' spirits, and her friendly personality was always a bridge to those on the other side. She never shied from a battle, and never ceased to develop new visionary projects, capturing the imagination and efforts of others. Thank you, Elisabeth, for your friendship and for choosing to save the natural world."

— Dan Silver, Executive Director of Endangered Habitats League

A memorial for Dr. Brown is currently being planned. Her family encourages donations in her memory to Laguna Greenbelt, Inc. [To leave your thoughts about her life and contributions click here.](#)

