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## Commentary: The Gaviota Coast Is Clear, If Only In My Mind

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By Jill Cloutier

When left to the imagination, Naples encounters a very interesting nondevelopment.

In a parallel universe ...

Naples owner and Orange County developer Matt Osgood had an epiphany as he drove his Range Rover through his [proposed development site on the Gaviota coast](#) late Tuesday afternoon.

Here is Matt's account of the event:

"It was unusual. I had a strong impulse to pull my Range Rover over. The feeling was so overwhelming; I finally stopped my car and got out. I decided to sit down and observe the land around me. To my surprise, as I sat quietly in the shade of my SUV, Naples began to reveal itself to me.

Butterflies landed on colorful wildflowers. A golden eagle soared in long circles above me. The chaparral was thick and noisy with birds and insects. I heard a larger animal, (Bear? Bobcat? Mountain lion?), softly moving in the brush. Dos Pueblos Creek sparkled in the sun and I recalled that it was home to one of the largest populations of steelhead trout. A fox, unaware that I was there, ran swiftly across the wildflower meadow.



As I looked around, with no agenda other than to observe, I recalled that this is the only place in the nation that has an ecological transition zone between Northern and Southern Mediterranean plant communities. Looking at the abundant plant life that surrounded me, I could see why the [United Nations](#) lists the Gaviota coastline as one of the top 15 hot spots for biodiversity in the world. More than 1,400 plant and animal species are found here. Twenty-four of them are threatened or endangered.

'What a responsibility I have to this place,' I murmured, as two blue whales leaped in the Santa Barbara Channel below me. I had read years ago that the healthiest coastal ecosystem in Southern California is located here.

I imagined where the 3,700- to 13,000-square-foot homes would be situated ... right where the oak and sycamore trees were. I thought of the ultra-rich owners of these luxury homes driving their SUVs up their newly asphalted driveways, turning the fox into road kill. I imagined the wildflowers transformed into front lawns, complete with household pesticide and herbicide use: toxic chemicals that would run down the landscape and into Dos Pueblos Creek. Once there, they would harm the red-legged frogs that I could hear croaking in the distance.

The houses were going to be big and beautiful, but then I had an image of all of the resources necessary to build these giant luxury mansions. I thought of the places around the world that would be affected by the extraction of the resources needed to build the homes. I realized how my development would harm not only Naples, but other parts of the world.

'I'll make a lot of money,' I reassured myself. 'But, how much money do I really need? How much money is enough? Would I rather go down in history as the man who destroyed this pristine area or as the man who stops the madness? The one who sees reason and says enough is enough!'

These new thoughts were unsettling. I felt shaken to my core and for some reason, found myself crawling to the nearest oak tree. I rested my back against its trunk and looked up at the sky. The late afternoon sunlight filtered through the green canopy and fell to the ground around me. And in that moment, I knew. I saw everything so clearly. I would not be the one to develop this place. I would not open the door for future development to happen here.

Contrary to appearances, Naples wasn't mine to do with it what I wanted. The absurdity of my plan to build 72 large-scale luxury homes began to disintegrate before my eyes. '3,700 to 13,000 square feet ...' I mused. 'What was I thinking? Why not use my talents to repair what is already broken? Instead of breaking what is irreplaceable?'

And in a flash, I saw what I must do. I would develop urban areas, inner cities where the buildings are substandard. Places where the only businesses are fast-food restaurants and liquor stores. I could use my time and money to improve people's lives. There were schools to be built, senior centers, parks, living roofs and gardens. I'd invite nature back to the city, instead of bringing the city to nature. I could take the beauty that I saw in this place, the therapeutic benefits that I feel here, into the urban landscape. I'd renovate, invigorate, and redesign those forgotten places; the inner cities that I was usually too scared to enter.

For the first time in more than 10 years, I felt free. The fight was over. I now had a mission. I would be Matt Osgood, Re-developer. I would go down in history, not as the man who destroyed the last remnant of the Southern California coastline, but as the man who *saved* it. Who changed his course in midlife and in the process improved the lives of millions in cities across America.

Then I did the most surprising thing of all; something that I never thought that I could or would do, not in a million years. I took my cell phone out of my pocket, dialed 4-1-1, and asked for the number of the [Land Trust for Santa Barbara County](#). There was an important matter that I wanted to discuss with them."

Note: Matt Osgood ceded all 1,085 acres of land that he owned at Naples to the Land Trust for Santa Barbara County, with the stipulation that it remain a wildlife sanctuary and never be developed. He is now

focusing his efforts on rebuilding inner cities across America.

*Jill Cloutier is a freelance writer, environmental educator and host of Sustainable World, a radio show airing at 9 a.m. Fridays on KCSB 91.9 FM. She can be reached at [sustainableworldradio@earthlink.net](mailto:sustainableworldradio@earthlink.net).*

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