

Member Profile: Duane Wells

Duane is from Hollywood, would you believe? Okay, he was born there but grew up in Temple City, California. By high school, his family was living in Balboa, near Newport Beach, California. Duane enjoyed backpacking and that led to the notion that he wanted a career working with nature, in the outdoors. While he was studying at Orange Coast College, a counselor suggested a transfer to Oregon State University. Duane was accepted there and pursued a major in Forestry Engineering.

Before he could quite finish that course of study, Uncle Sam got hold of him for a stint in the U.S. Army. The Korean conflict was going on at the time but Duane had the good luck of being posted to Germany (West Germany in those days, of course). This turned out to be a very positive experience for him. He said that he learned a great deal there. Initially assigned to the light infantry, Duane realized that it would be up to him to make the most of his experience. He convinced his superiors that his nearly finished degree in forest engineering should qualify him for something more interesting. Construction engineering was not quite the thing but topographic engineering (basically surveying) certainly was. He joined a crew that was mapping the Danube River and some of its tributaries. He and his fellow engineers took soundings of river depth and recorded coordinates of the corners of all the bridges. Why? In the event of a war there (right next to East Germany), these bridges might all be blown up so the Army needed to know in advance where it could put its pontoon bridges. While in Europe in the Army, Duane managed to tour Italy as well.

After the army, Duane returned to OSU to finish his degree. Upon his graduation in 1956, where do you suppose he landed? Why, Mendocino County Courthouse, where else? Right out of school, "April Fool's Day, 1956" he went to work for Webb Brown at the Mendocino County Assessor's Office. He started as a timber appraiser. In those days, California taxed standing timber so the assessor's offices in timber counties employed a number of timber appraisers. In time, Duane became Chief Timber Appraiser and eventually Chief Appraiser. After Webb Brown retired, Duane ran for Assessor in 1978 and won. He served as Mendocino County Assessor until the end of 1990, as he'd decided not to run again. He said that he began to think about retirement when he was hiring those who had not yet been born when he started working there!

Here he was, retired from the County and still feeling young enough to do whatever he wanted to do. He was a licensed real estate appraiser, a licensed professional forester, and a licensed commercial pilot. What to do? He flew charter around the western states until the acquisition of a pacemaker precluded continuation of that vocation. Even while working for the Assessor's Office, in his spare time Duane flew for Pool's Air Service (no relation) which became Smith Air Service. He also flew for Ukiah Flying Service. He flew fire patrol with CDF from 1964 through 1971. At first, he would even fly a CDF commander around during fires to direct ground operations.

Duane is a member of the Mendocino Forest Council. The MFC reviews and comments on industrial timber management plans. Lately most of the large timber landowners have been doing individual timber harvest plans that do not go through the MFC. Current efforts of the council are focused on Jackson State Forest, which is currently under a logging ban.

Duane and I have been serving together on the Mendocino County Resource Advisory Committee (RAC) for Mendocino National Forest. Duane also serves on the advisory board for Ukiah Unified School District's Redwood Valley Outdoor Education Project. This nature center provides wonderful opportunities for school children to get out and study nature and learn from knowledgeable teachers. Duane, in his time with the children, emphasizes the perspective that forests grow trees and trees are our source of lumber (it doesn't magically appear at the lumber yard, kids). As a member of the Society of American Foresters, Duane teaches 5th graders from Santa Clara County at Forest Conservation Days at Sanborn County Park (nearly 3,700 acres, in the Santa Cruz Mountains). The Park's original old-growth timber was logged to provide materials to rebuild San Francisco after the 1906 earthquake leveled it. After 100 years of regrowth, the trees are again quite imposing. Duane said that some of the urban school children there have not seen a forest such as that, despite the fact that it's a public park that's in their "back yard." At the beginning of a session, he'll ask them if it's ever alright to cut down a tree. They'll inevitably say, "Oh, no!" At the completion of a session he'll ask the question again and get a reluctant, "Well, maybe, sometimes it's okay."

With all these volunteer activities, what does Duane do for fun? He travels. He strongly recommends a visit to the Galapagos Archipelago!