

In Memorium

# HONORING COASTAL ACTIVIST SARA WAN

BY JIMY TALLAL AND EMMANUEL LUISSI



Local activist Sara Wan passed away on September 3 at the age of 83. She spent decades striking fear into the hearts of those who attempted large development projects on the beaches all over California, as well as those who tried to deny beach access to the public.

“This is sad news for Malibu and the environment,” Kristin Thames, Sara’s nurse, wrote to *The Malibu Times*. “It should be front page in Malibu, as she was a very dear woman and did amazing things for Malibu and the world.”

Wan, a Malibu resident since 1986, served longer on the California Coastal Commission than anyone — from 1996 to 2011 — and was chair of the commission twice.

Susan Jordan of the California Coastal Protection Network credited Wan with being the driving force behind coastal activism in California as we know it today.

Back in 2011, the Pacific Legal Foundation, a property rights law firm, wrote that the California Coastal Commission might be among “the very worst” violators of property rights, “and among the agency’s twelve voting members, Commissioner Sara Wan, whose disdain for property owners and their rights is legendary, may be the worst of the lot.”

Originally from New York, conservation was not always Sara’s focus. She had a B.A. in zoology from Vassar College, an M.S. in biology from Yale, and an M.S. in electrical engineering from UC Irvine. She married Dr. Lawrence Wan and had two sons, Mark and Eric.

Wan founded and chaired Maric, Inc., an engineering firm that manufactured electronic time devices for sports. It was only after she sold the company in 1992 that she became a full-time environmentalist.



Sara Wan (left of the sign) at the revealing ceremony at Corral Canyon dedicated in her name in 2009. Photo contributed

It all began with her paying close attention to coastal access, and development issues in Malibu, her son Eric told the LA Times.

Wan was a proponent for the incorporation of Malibu as a city, which enabled various environmental protection measures to be implemented. She was a member of the Malibu Township Council, and her husband Larry was elected as a member of the inaugural Malibu City Council in 1990.

Fellow Malibu resident Madelyn Glickfield served on the Coastal Commission from 1986 to 1996.

“There was very little advocacy along the coast at that time except for the Surfrider Foundation and the National Resources Defense Council (NRDC),” Glickfield shared in a phone interview. “I met Sara at a local get-together just after she moved here. I told her the California Coastal Commission was important, and not many environmentalists were involved in it, so I coached her

and Susan Jordan ... I gave her the first push, but boy, did she fly!”

“Sara was appointed to my seat on the Coastal Commission,” Glickfield continued. “Sara was a ‘take no prisoners’ person — very ardent about winning for the environment and a very controversial figure in Malibu. She made a lot of people crazy. She went the full length to protect the environment ... I think Malibu would be quite different today without her.”

She was considered an expert in habitat and wetland issues, marine mammals issues (particularly the impacts of sound on marine mammals), water quality, and coastal land use and planning.

Wan served on the board of the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy (SMMC), was a member of the Santa Monica Bay Restoration Commission, and co-founded the Western Alliance for Nature, a land conservancy.



Calamigos Ranch owner and The Recreation Alliance board member Glen Gerson greets the guests at Sara Wan's memorial reception. Photo by Emmanuel Luissi.

She established “Vote the Coast” to promote political candidates that defend coastal protection, as well as the Organization of Regional Coastal Activists (ORCA) to help coastal advocates network and represent the environmental community at Coastal Commission hearings.

The Sara Wan trailhead at Corral Canyon (next to Malibu Seafood) was dedicated to her by the SMMC in 2009.

Former colleagues and friends gathered at the Calamigos Beach Club on October 8 to honor her life and legacy by sharing memories of her tenacious spirit and sharing their thoughts on what her life's work has meant for the city of Malibu and the entire California coast.

Those who knew her admired and praised her for her unrelenting attitude for environmental preservation and passion for coastal and ocean protection.

Executive Director of the California Coastal Commission Jack Ainsworth explained that he met Wan early in his career, over two decades ago, when she was an activist for environmental protection. He went on to be part of her staff when she became a Coastal Commissioner and said Wan brought her activist spirit to the commission.

He said he will remember her as a fierce warrior for coastal and ocean protection.

“She set a standard for all commissioners going forward,” Ainsworth shared. “She’s an inspiration. She taught me what it meant to be brave and fierce, and at the same time, she would just be so sweet and wonderful.”

Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy Executive Director Joe Edmiston said Wan’s intensity and dedication to environmental protection battles were unmatched. He said she was an inspiration to others to fight hard for what they believe in.

“If you don’t deviate, if you’re uncompromising, if you know what your goal is and you go straight toward it, things will coalesce around you,” Edmiston said. “She had that direction and that firmness, and it was an enlightening thing for me. You never had to wonder where Sara Wan’s compass was, and that was a great thing.”

In addition, he noted that Wan would say that she was not just a representative of Malibu but a representative of the coast. She would say that not all people lived in the coastal zone, and most of her true constituents lived outside it. She considered herself as a representative for them all.

“She had a significant impact on projects all up and down on the coastline,” Edmiston explained. “In that leadership, she was not just a person from Malibu; she was really for the

entire coast of California and the people of California.”

Fran Pavley, former senator and state assembly representative, served with Wan as a member of the Coastal Commission. She shared she admired Wan’s attention to detail and her bravery to stand up for what she believed in. She said Wan may have angered some powerful people in her career, but she was unwavering.

“She wanted to pass on an appreciation for the coast,” Pavley said. “She wanted to preserve the ocean’s water quality, the views of the ocean, the marine mammals, all of it. There was no vested interest other than just personal commitment.”

Jill Jones, chair of The Recreation Alliance and land use and environmental attorney for Wan’s conservancy, worked with Wan on beach access projects and the acquisition of land in Marin County for habitat preservation. She said it was an honor to work with her.

“We should be grateful for still having beach access and having preservation of our beaches,” Jones shared. “California’s coastline is what it is because of Sara Wan.”

In a tweet on October 7, former California Governor Gray Davis also honored Wan.

“Wan was a giant in the environmental movement. She served during the entirety of my governorship. Her leadership helped ensure that our unrivaled coast would belong to all Californians,” Davis wrote in the tweet.

Ainsworth said that although Wan’s career could be measured by her many accomplishments, a lot of her legacy lies in the projects that helped keep Malibu undisturbed.

“The habitat that hasn’t been destroyed, the beach that hasn’t been obstructed, the beautiful views that we still have, the public access that she’s helped secure, those are the things that she’s left her mark on in this incredible place,” Ainsworth shared. 🌲



One of many photo collages of Sara Wan's life featured at Wan's memorial reception at Calamigos Beach Club on October 8. Photo by Emmanuel Luissi.



From left: Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy Executive Director Joe Edmiston, Former California Senator Fran Pavley and California Coastal Commission Executive Director Jack Ainsworth at Sara Wan's memorial reception at Calamigos Beach Club on October 8. Photo by Emmanuel Luissi.