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SOAR celebrates 10th year as nature's advocate

Nonprofit group now focusing on collaborating with former adversaries

By **Stephanie Hoops**,
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October 10, 2005

Ten years ago, Ventura County preservationists decided that before risking the loss of their rural surroundings to the offices, retail stores, subdivisions and pavement that urban sprawl typically brings, they'd better do something.

Under the auspices of a nonprofit activist group called Save Open Space and Agricultural Resources, or "SOAR," they drew lines in the sand to keep Mother Nature's work out of development's reach.

On Sunday, they celebrated their accomplishments, with more than 400 people coming together for a picnic at Underwood Farms in the Tierra Rejada Valley. SOAR's 10th anniversary included hot-air balloon rides, hikes, a bluegrass band, bird watching, a foot race and a bike ride among its many activities.

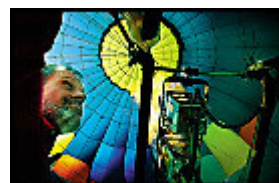
Since its conception in 1995, SOAR has had its adversaries, those who thought the group was unfairly taking away farmers' property rights and driving up housing costs by keeping developers at bay.



Juan Carlo / Star staff

Jamie Geller, 10, of Simi Valley joins in a 5K run through the pumpkin fields at the 10th-anniversary celebration of Save Open Space and Agricultural Resources at Underwood Farms in the Tierra Rejada Valley. The event Sunday drew more than 400

people.



Juan Carlo / Star staff

Kris Young of Ojai soars over the SOAR fete in a hot-air balloon. Sandi Matsumoto, another Ojai resident riding the balloon, looked down at the open land below. "It's just beautiful to see it," she said.

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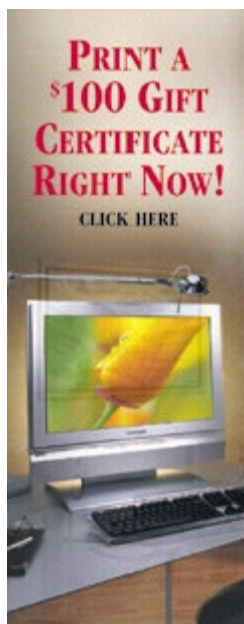
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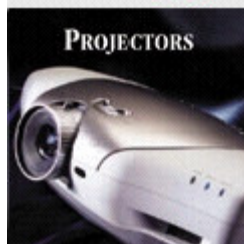
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But that perception has softened. In a twist that exemplifies time healing what reason cannot, many of those adversaries have since come to terms with SOAR being a fixture in the county.

Rex Laird, chief executive officer of the Ventura County Farm Bureau, said the bureau has shifted its focus from combating SOAR to working with it.

"I feel it's more productive to deal with reality and move on," Laird said. "We have long since tried to figure out how to best represent our industry in the context we find ourselves in and how we're going to find decent, safe and sanitary housing for our farm workers."

Karen Schmidt, SOAR's executive director, said her organization has come to the table with opposing groups and they are now addressing the issues collaboratively. "I would say we have come a long way to finding common ground," she said.

And much has been accomplished, say those who attended Sunday's celebration.

Ojai resident and TV star Larry Hagman has been an active supporter of SOAR because, he said, he doesn't want to see the area become a strip of concrete. "You go south to San Diego," he said, "it's all one city."

Between munching on peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and having his photograph taken at the celebration, Hagman explained that, in this day and age, it is important to preserve our natural resources.

"I think we've got to reserve some land for growing vegetables," he said, "because in 20 years we won't have any gasoline."

Floating over the Tierra Rejada Valley in a hot-air balloon, SOAR volunteer and Ojai resident Sandi Matsumoto took in the view as she thought about what SOAR is about.

"I just love farmland," she said. "It's just beautiful to see it."

Standing beside Matsumoto in the balloon's basket, Ojai resident Jo Young agreed.

"One can imagine what Ventura County would look like if we hadn't had SOAR 10 years ago," she said. "We wouldn't have our greenbelt. This is really fabulous. It's so rural. When you get up high, it looks like the paintings from the 1800s."

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