

BFI Foodscape Mapping Project – Oral Histories
Category: Food Spaces

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Transcript of interview conducted with

JAMES SANNER

Berkeley, California

Organizational affiliation: Rec Sports Dept.

by: NATHALIE MUNOZ

Golden Garden Questions

MUNOZ: This is Nathalie Munoz with James Sanner on April 14th, 2017. And so just just right into it. Can you tell me about where we are and what you do here?

SANNER: Sure, so we're at the Clark Kerr Campus in my office which is in Building 24, which houses all the grounds equipment and the like for the Rec Sports Department and serves as the camp office for the youth summer camp. And, it's kind of the headquarters for working up at the Golden Garden, which is on the eastern expanse of the Clark Kerr Campus, kind of fanning up into the wild land space at the top of the hill.

MUNOZ: How many acres is this?

SANNER: That's actually up for debate. The boundary lines between different departments as well as East Bay Regional Parks has never been firmly clarified, but the Golden Garden specifically is about one acre. So that's one acre with a southwest aspect of quite steep hill in between a running track and Sports Lane.

MUNOZ: What is currently growing there?

SANNER: Currently there is about 130 fruit trees. There's kind of a shrubby bush understory of mixed fruit bushes, with taking a kind of permaculture, agroecological, approach to the structuring of the food forest look at multi-functionality of the things that go in there. So, most of the bushes right now are nitrogen fixing as well. The entire area just to kind of replenish the soil, because it

had been heavily goat grazed with kind of an annual mudslide management regime for many years. Been encouraging the native grasses and forbs to recolonize the hillside but there's also kind of cover cropping of fava beans to, again, bring some more biomass and some nutrients back into the soil. And then there's also a handful of perennial medicinals and pollinator attractors intercropped with what's up there currently.

MUNOZ: What are your hours of operation and is the garden open for visiting for anybody?

SANNER: Yeah, so, hours of operation are mainly all day Monday through Friday. Open for visiting... currently there is a fence around the entire garden, and that is actually just for keeping deer out. They were a major hindrance at the early growth stages of the food forest, just because they can eat a lot and seem to really prefer little baby trees. So, having them out has really helped the growth and so there's currently a large fence around the entire perimeter as well as a dead hedge. We've reclaimed a tremendous amount of woody debris from various gardeners on campus and have retained that around the perimeter, forming a kind of five foot by five foot berm that has been heavily enjoyed by many, many birds and lizards and snakes and little mice that now call it their home, but it's really served a great mechanism for kind of reinvigorating the ecology on the hillside. So, because that is actually locked, we found that to be the best way to keep the gate shut. It's not just open for casual viewing. That said if anyone wants to see the space or visit it, people can contact me anytime. I work with various student groups and various groups from the community to actually do research and just enjoy the space. That's currently the major way in which this space is able to be accessed, but, hopefully in the future as these gardens develop and become more integrated as part of the campus community, there will be a more established way for regular operations hours.

MUNOZ: What is the history of the land? When was it founded? And has the garden always been a part of the UC?

SANNER: History of the area was it was actually kind of a real liability for the University going back maybe eight years. We had regular, pretty significant mud slides that would shut down the road. Looking at the Google Earth images or Google Maps of the area,

actually the last one that's the cataloged date shows mud slide that had just happened. So, it's kind of a funny archived record of where it was. The road used to get shut down, we would have goats come in and that was an expense, there was a regular fire risk, and looking at all those as kind of, "What are those a reflection of". They kind of all had the common denominator as poor management practices. So, I worked to get rid of the goats, did some work with the Fire Mitigation Committee and we removed a bunch of trees and we just changed the whole vegetation pallet on the hillside in combination with putting in major sediment traps to change the mudslide concern. In working to establish the site as a native plant garden, there was a recognition that there's many people here as well and to what degree that's appropriate, that's a whole question unto itself, but it's certainly evident that we're a part of the ecology. In that we're a part of the ecology, I wanted to incorporate a planting regime that reflected that just to increase the degree of sustainability that the garden is really going to be able to reflect. A series of contour swales were installed, and, because of the slope of the hill, they're more akin to terraces just because of the way the geological conditions work and angle repose and what have you. You have to put in terraces instead of just typical permaculture swales. Starting about five years ago, I staked the area out and saw what would be possible on it. And, about three years ago I drafted a formal plan, the kind of strategic plan for sequentially how things could be installed, the cost structure for putting up fences and buying plants, putting in irrigation, and things like that. Three years ago the first trees went in the ground and another small wave, mainly of replacement trees, unfortunately, last year to replace what the deer had been consuming. And then, a large planting went in again this year. To date, it's been a thing for about three years and it continues to grow, but, the back bone of it, the structural foundation in terms of the trees are mostly in. There's still space to accommodate a little over a dozen trees and there will always be room for additional small herbaceous pollinators and beneficial, multifunctional plants to be inserted, but that's the layout of what's existing currently and where it came from.

MUNOZ:

What does leadership look like for this garden?

SANNER:

Again, this was kind of an initiative that I took on myself – mainly just some spare time, some free time. This was something

that I thought would be very beneficial for the area. And, in that it's literally directly over the major fault in the area, there wasn't going to be any real estate interest in developing this site with some physical structure, so I felt pretty comfortable that some efforts and energies could be placed into this site. What was developed on the site had the opportunity to be retained for ideally as long as the trees are able to be productive. The leadership is kind of just me drawing up designs, getting approvals, and continuing to branch out with various campus groups, community groups, faculty, and growing the garden or the program of what this is going to be able to be incorporated into offering food into the campus community, and offering research and educational enrichment for anyone interested.

MUNOZ: Would you say that that would be your personal mission? To eventually get it to that state?

SANNER: Yeah I would say to have it be developed with enough momentum that it is its own kind of recognized entity, that it supplies the campus with multiple services and benefits so that there's an interest in maintaining its proper functioning. If it was well managed it would be easy to realize 10,000 pounds of fresh, local, organic produce annually with the upper reaches of being possibly 20,000 pounds. This is something that there's a great need for and I think in conjunction with the quantifiable production value, that there's a great agroecological, urban ecology, and just general ecology value that a very close to campus living laboratory offers. I think that once professors and students realize that this is here and that they have access to seeing how things develop in the field, it will be able to take off on its own. The other aspect that I'm very hopeful with it is that I see it as a nice proof of concept: what can be done on similar land in the East Bay and there's actually a site that I've been in conversation with people about, just immediately north of here, and that's what used to be my fern-walled housing complex which is now just kind of an open expanse because of, again, the seismic risks. That facility was bulldozed and now there's a five-plus acre site that this kind of proof of concept can be replicated towards. Showing what has been done here and doing it somewhere else in multiples, just allows a great opportunity for research from every step along the way, for planning design, and a much larger windfall of what sort of produce is going to be able to be supplied to those who would enjoy it.

MUNOZ: You said that you are kind of like the head person for this, but who else is involved?

SANNER: I've had support from my department in the sense that they haven't told me not to do it. There's been various Project Berkeley events so I've had a lot of volunteer staff, volunteers who came out and helped out with their time. During some of those events, some career staff through Recreation Sports Department have come and lent their time to help things move forward. It's been a pretty small team of folks, there's people who work with me on a part time basis who do a host of functions and tasks. It's part of their employment requirement, but they're always far more excited to work up in the Golden Garden than anywhere else – that's kind of the sugar on top of the sundae to entice them: "Well, we have to do this, which I realize nobody enjoys, and then we'll get to work up there," and that seems to be a real motivating driver to keep people coming back and wanting to be a close part of what's happening.

MUNOZ: So, the volunteers, do you have any student that come in? Do you know if they're undergrad or graduate or is it just kind of whoever knows about the place?

SANNER: It's been almost exclusively undergrad. The Project Berkeley consists of Berkeley students – undergrads. The Clark Kerr Campus has theme housing, like an environmental theme housing and so some of those folks, and again those are all freshmen, came out and checked some stuff out and have helped me out various times and have been really great and enthusiastic about that.

MUNOZ: In terms of the work that you do there, what data would you say is important to you and how are you collecting it?

SANNER: The data that I've been collecting so far: I've been making sense of plant lists, of all the plant categories what's going to be going on from a successional standpoint. I've recently installed a weather station so as to get a real quantifiable understanding of the unique microclimate, which is because the weather pattern – rain, wind, UV index, maybe not so much that, but the dew point – all sorts of variables are unique here relative to even other places on campus. Seeing what sort of plants are going to be productive,

what are going to be able to be bearing fruit based on chill hours or heat. It's going to be, realistically, quite specific to here, but, that being said, that's helpful to know. Some helpful quantifiable things are what's doing well here: looking at the existing soil, it was somewhat degraded from past land use, so I've been doing a lot of concerted efforts to increase the soil health, the biological health, I've been doing various organic soil amendments. I've done various soil samples, but I haven't done as routine of biological assays as I would have liked to, and that's something that I have sent out to a lab, but have also done myself. It's just a matter of time and what's able to get done.

MUNOZ:

What happens to the things that you are growing? Are you taking them to the kitchen at Clark Kerr, to the dining hall? Or what happens to them?

SANNER:

Currently, I would say we are more in the growing phase and haven't yet matured into the realization of production and harvesting phase. As I mentioned, the deer pushed back a few years what was happening. This year the most established trees had a nice bloom of flowers so most of them will probably have a decent fruit set. That being said, just because of the high demands that places on the roots, I'll probably pick the majority of the fruit before they even develop so as to give the trees a little bit more time to mature. But, the short answer to that question is it hasn't been an opportunity yet to have an abundance of produce that has a need for a home. I mentioned that cover crop of fava beans. There currently is a bumper crop of fava beans on the way, so in theory those could be brought to those who enjoy fresh fava bean falafels and other tasty cuisine that those get made into. I admittedly had some last night, they were pretty good. That's one other aspect of looking at the future development and relevance that the site or any site like this is going to be able to have for the campus. Things like annual pruning for the proper development and fruit set, and the training of trees is really going to be a reflection of how productive they are. But, the other side of the production is having people with enough interest to show up with some regularity who will be able to pick the thousands and thousands of pounds of fruit and then bring them to people who would be interested in consuming tasty fruit. That's something that, as an individual I might be able to do, but wouldn't count on that being an as successful approach to take as if there was an interested body of individuals who would be able to help out and

find enjoyment in doing so.

MUNOZ: What data would you say still needs to be collected or what would you like to collect if you could?

SANNER: I think that if I were doing it all over again, I would've put in some better monitoring systems at the bottom of the slope to measure what sort of runoff or water retention was occurring on the hillside because there's been a series of earthworks, realistically, put into place and I think that the change in hydrology and soil stabilization has been significant. I'd like to be where I'm able to observe that and verify that that's going on. I think that it would have been a benefit from a research standpoint to have objectively measured this, so those results could be shown to people who might want to replicate a similar approach. You can't really go back to the starting point and do things over, so if that site just on the other side of the street were to move forward, I think that it would be something good for them. Possibly more soil testing could be helpful here and relevance of that would be in terms of looking at the successional progression of what is successful here. It could be really effective for understanding what sort of herbaceous layer of the plants or small forbs, woody brush, would do well, but more importantly why it's doing well – making a connection between the soil development and the plant development.

MUNOZ: That's all I have for you today. Thanks again so, so much for meeting with me.