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Duff joins Orinda as Outreach and Education Coordinator

By Sora O'Doherty



James Duff, Outreach and Education Coordinator
Photo Sora O'Doherty

What brought James Duff, Orinda's new Outreach and Education Coordinator, from Texas to California? Well, actually, it was his wife. They had been living in Texas, where James was working with the Austin Fire Department, but his wife was seeking a change and was recruited by the African Wildlife Foundation to run western fundraising, working from home in the Bay Area. They arrived in Oakland mid-August and thought they would quickly purchase a home, but soon realized that the Bay Area is very diverse and it would be worthwhile to get to know it better. They are currently living in Moraga.

Duff attended Indiana University of Pennsylvania, where he earned a B.A. in Art History and Latin American Studies. He also worked for the Student Conservation Association (SCA). Later he moved to Austin, where he worked with Texas Conservation before going to work for the Austin Fire Department. Duff thinks that "the city of Orinda was interested in me because at SCA my position had a large educational element. In addition, I was a substitute teacher in the Austin Independent School District public schools at the high school level."

Orinda's new hire comes to them from Austin, Texas, although he hails originally from Pittsburgh, Penn. Duff had been working in land management for about eight years. He's spent a lot of time in Bureau of Land Management locations in New Mexico and the El Dorado National Forest. He says that he moved to Austin

because he was tired of living in tents.

Duff also has a family background in fire. He has family in New Mexico, where his aunt was a state forester for a while and now runs a water garden business. There have been a couple of fires in Lincoln, New Mexico. "My uncle found Smoky the Bear," he claims. Duff explained, "The Fire Service was fighting a fire in Lincoln when they found a bear cub who had climbed a tree to escape the fire. His mother was gone and his back was scorched. The Fire Service flew the bear cub to the veterinary hospital in Albuquerque. The cub recovered and ended up in Washington, D.C.'s National Zoo as Smoky the Bear. Smoky was buried in New Mexico when he died in the 1970s, and there was another one." Duff notes that originally Smoky the Bear was a very, very successful cartoon, but that officially there have been two live smoky bears.

Duff says that he has worked with several fire chiefs and his impression of Moraga-Orinda Fire District Chief Dave Winnacker is that he is "very reasonable." He looks forward to working together with MOFD on the complex issues facing Lamorinda. He takes a balanced view of things, noting, for example, that while dead trees may be a fire hazard, they also provide habitat for animals. As for standing dead pine trees, he agrees that the majority of them need to be mitigated, but adds that he pauses when it is a blanket rule, because there may be many unforeseen consequences. He believes that it is better to work in concert with the landscape, and expects that it will be necessary to manage expectations.

Regarding fire code enforcement in Orinda and Moraga, Duff notes that he is coming from working in "regulatory resistant Texas," where almost everything required voluntary compliance. "We only had carrots," he remembers, no sticks. Regarding some recent MOFD enforcement efforts, he acknowledges that "people don't appreciate it when you move the goalposts." But he points out that with climate change it's like the fire fighting community is "trying to build the plane when flying it."

Duff believes that "you have to change things as things develop, and change is needed in the face of so much emerging science on wildfire risks and landscaping. He thinks that a lot of people have viewed wildfire as the easiest hazard for us to control, unlike hurricanes, tornadoes, and other natural disasters. This lulls people into thinking we can eliminate it from the landscape, he thinks, but adds that he now sees a lot of people recognizing the sea change that is happening. Fire safety is Huff's "hope and my desire," he says, "but I don't know if I would set 100 percent fire-proof as a reasonable goal."

One thing he believes to be true is that "for every single fire tragedy, the thing that is found to be a critical

point of breakdown is communication." For example, he continued, "during the fires at Storm King in Washington or Yarnell Hill in Arizona, information existed and could have been shared to save lives." He added, "If a firefighter is killed while fighting a fire, there almost always is a lengthy investigation to figure out where things went wrong, and this usually points to communication."

Duff emphasized that studies have found that families who have an emergency plan suffer less from post-traumatic shock disorder.

In addition to James Duff, in 2022 Orinda added the following new personnel:

Farah Khorashadi, Senior Engineer was rehired (January 2022)

Celina Palmer, Associate Planner (August 2022)

Donna Baarsch, Planning Technician (August 2022)

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[back](#)

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