

# The Tehachapi Range actually ties the state together

Joe Mathews, Ventura County Star, 2-13-16

Don't mess with the Tehachapis.

California has taller mountain ranges, more famous mountain ranges, more beautiful mountain ranges. But no mountains here are tougher — or more important — than the Tehachapis.

A mishmash of mid-sized peaks extending 40 miles across southern Kern County and north Los Angeles County, the Tehachapis effectively form a wall that defines our state. This is their paradox: The Tehachapis at once separate and connect California's regions—north and south, valley and desert, Sierra Nevada and coastal range.

As a barrier, the Tehachapis—the name is often attributed to the Kawaiisu word "tihachipia," or "hard climb"—boast an undefeated record. They have been penetrated—by I-5, aqueducts, and power transmission lines—but they have never been conquered.

Recently, the Tehachapis emerged at the center of the big California debate over high-speed rail. Plans to build the project first from the Central Valley to Southern California have survived lawsuits, bipartisan political opposition, and waning public support. But last month, spooked by the financial and engineering challenges of tunneling through rock and earthquake faults in the Tehachapis (and nearby San Gabriels), the high-speed rail authority said it might make a U-turn, and connect the Central Valley to the Bay Area first.

Of course, the high-speed rail builders would hardly be the first people to lose their nerve at the prospect of crossing the mountain range. Is there any more fear-inducing drive in our state than traversing the Tehachapis on that scarily steep and windy stretch of I-5 known as the Grapevine? Trains still go over the mountains as slowly — less than 25 miles per hour—as they did in the 1870s. And planes almost always hit a little turbulence going over the mountains, because shifting wind patterns (at least that's what a Southwest Airlines pilot once told me).

The Tehachapis represent Californians as we really are — tough, stubborn, and shorter and wider than we look in our publicity stills. (Not everyone can be as beautiful as Yosemite or Angelina Jolie). And, as staffers at the Tejon Ranch Conservancy recently explained, the Tehachapis are the most Californians of mountains: the only place in the state where four varied regions converge — the Mojave Desert, the Sierra Nevada, the coastal range, and the San Joaquin Valley. As a result, the Tehachapis offer an incredible diversity of plants: desert scrub and Joshua trees next to Sierra Nevada forest, or coastal chaparral near untouched Valley grasslands.

Why do we know so little about the Tehachapis? In the 19th century, when most of the state's population was in the north and crossing the Tehachapis was a life-threatening expedition, the papers often referred to Southern California as "South of the Tehachapis" in the tone one might speak of an uncivilized hinterland. But in the 20th century, California tilted south, and the Tehachapis became less prominent, serving mainly to prevent Southern California from sprawling too far north. It also didn't help the mountains' profile that they were mostly privately owned, and therefore not so easily explored by California's nature seekers.

But the last decade has brought the promise of a new era to the Tehachapis.

The Tejon Ranch, a 422-square mile property in the Tehachapis, has pursued retail and housing development on some of its property, while also striking a historic 2008 agreement with environmental organizations to

protect 90 percent of its land. Now the Tejon Ranch Conservancy is conserving, exploring, and providing public access in many ways — wildflower viewing stations, community hikes and drives, naturalist classes, and citizen science projects.

In the years ahead, Californians will want more connections — both with the range, and through it — and we'll need to be careful to minimize their impacts. The Tehachapis, once again, will have to hang tough.