California is generally known as an environmental leader, but the state has also faced tremendous environmental degradation and destruction. I chronicled my “top 10” worst environmental decisions in the state’s history last year.

But what about the good things state policy makers have done? Here is my list of the most significant environmental wins in California since the state’s founding. To qualify, as with the last Top 10 list, the action had to preserve a uniquely beautiful environmental feature (landscapes and plants). You’ll see that many of these decisions sought to reverse the destruction highlighted in my original negative list.

10. San Francisco’s Embarcadero Freeway Removal



The Embarcadero freeway was a double-decked freeway eyesore circling downtown San Francisco. Following the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake, it became structurally compromised. While some wanted it re-built, city leaders ultimately decided to tear it down, opening up a beautiful, walking/biking/transit-friendly promenade and revitalizing the Ferry Building through improved access. It’s a success story about what can be accomplished when we undo the car-oriented infrastructure mistakes of the past.

9. Avoiding New Power Plants With Energy Efficiency



Since the 1970s, California has instituted a series of energy efficiency mandates on new buildings and appliances that have collectively helped the state avoid building dozens of new power plants, while at the same time saving consumers a lot of money. Imagine our coastline and disadvantaged communities with all those polluting power plants that ultimately were not needed. It also means that today we need to develop less land for new solar and wind installations, thanks to the foresight of the state’s energy efficiency visionaries.

8. Protecting the California Coastline

Concerned about development and privatization along the state’s sensitive coastal lands, California voters in 1972 approved Proposition 20, which led to the legislature adopting the Coastal Act. The Act and its commission ensures that the public always has a right to access the state beaches, as well as placing environmental protections on any new proposed development. As a result, the state has ensured environmental protection across 1.5 million acres of land and 1,100 miles of California coastline from Oregon to Mexico, including nine off-shore islands.

7. Establishing Point Reyes National Seashore



Point Reyes is a natural wonderland just 40 miles north of San Francisco, with beautiful, historic coastal areas and graceful cypress forests and valleys in the interior. It was under threat of housing development when local leaders convinced the National Park Service in 1962 to establish the Point Reyes National Seashore as a 53,000 acre recreational area, which in 1976 grew an additional 25,370 acres with the Phillip Burton Wilderness Area there. As a result, the area is protected from further development and maintained as accessible open space for residents of the San Francisco Bay Area and beyond.

6. Protecting the California Desert



The Mojave Desert is a stunning landscape in the high-altitude plain outside of urban Los Angeles, stretching to the Colorado River. Mountain peaks punctuate forests of Joshua trees, sand dunes, and wide vistas brimming with flowers in the spring. When under threat of development, including mining and off-roading, state and local leaders convinced Congress in 1994 to protect this land with Sen. Feinstein’s California Desert Protection Act, which created two national parks (Joshua Tree and Death Valley) and the Mojave Preserve, protecting more than 9.6 million acres.

5. Preserving the Santa Monica Mountains

The Santa Monica mountains form a backbone through much of the heart of urban Los Angeles, from the Hollywood hills through Malibu and out to the Pacific Ocean, briefly resurfacing as some of the largest Channel Islands. They offer beautiful hiking, historic and sacred Native sites, commanding views, and spring wildflowers and waterfalls. Threatened by development given their prime location and views for the wealthy who can afford to live there, state leaders formed the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy to protect them as a natural respite for Angelenos for generations to come.

4. Saving the San Francisco Bay

The San Francisco Bay is the largest estuary on the West Coast of the United States. Historically it was teeming with birdlife, fish, and shellfish, along with densely populated Native villages. Industrialists filled in much of the bay and its coastal wetlands, including for real estate and other development. In the 1960s, local activists formed Save the Bay, leading to successful efforts to preserve the remaining wetlands from further development.

3. Rescuing the Last Old Growth Redwoods



California’s coastal redwood trees are the tallest on Earth, reaching as high as 330 feet and living for over a thousand years. These treasures are only found from the Oregon border south to Big Sur, though loggers felled over 95% of them within a century to meet the region’s insatiable demand for lumber. Along with the Save the Redwoods League and some local landowners, state and local leaders managed to preserve groves throughout the state, culminating more recently in a deal to preserve the Headwaters Forest in 1999.

2. Ending Sierra Nevada Hydraulic Gold Mining



Gold mining brought much economic activity and immigration to California, but it led to war and genocide of the Native people, as well as significant, long-lasting pollution in our agricultural lands and waterways. Mercury from the mines still plague our waterways. But in 1884, federal judge Lorenzo Sawyer put a stop to hydraulic mining in the name of protecting agricultural land from the sediment runoff, in the case *Woodruff v. North Bloomfield Gravel Mining Company*. As a result, the Sierra Nevada mountains no longer face destructive hydraulic mining and our waterways are cleaner.

1. Establishing Yosemite National Park

Yosemite National Park is arguably the crown jewel of America’s park system. It features stunning glacial-carved Valleys, including Hetch Hetchy and the namesake Yosemite Valley, with incredible geologic features such as Half Dome, El Capitan and Yosemite Falls, the tallest waterfall in North America, along with priceless Sequoia tree groves. President Lincoln signed legislation in 1864 to protect much of the Valley and the main Sequoia grove, setting the precedent for the founding of

the first national park at Yellowstone in 1872. Then Scottish immigrant and Martinez resident John Muir convinced Teddy Roosevelt during a 1903 camping trip to expand national park protection for Yosemite, allowing visitors from all over the world to enjoy more of the wonders of this world-class treasure.

While it’s easy to lament all that was lost in California’s environmental history, these 10 wins remind us that wherever there has been destruction and injustice, reformers and visionaries have also been present to fight back. (And of course there were more victories that didn’t make this list, such as saving Mono Lake and fighting off the draining and highway-strewning planned for Lake Tahoe.) These successes did not happen on their own, and in fact in many instances happened in the face of significant opposition from entrenched interests. We owe a debt to those activists and leaders who helped preserve much of California’s environmental heritage for future generations.