

Karen Merritt Recollections about SNRI beginnings
Dhh 6/14/13

Karen has excellent records. She produced minutes of meetings and had a trove of photos from the period.

Karen's job was a .5 FTE appointment as UC Merced Director of Academic Planning and she spent generally three days a week in Merced, and two at her other position at UCOP. She was one of seven managers planning the university—what Chancellor Tomlinson-Keasey called The Magnificent Seven, after the film.

The Memo of Understanding with the NPS came in May of 1999, about the same time as Tomlinson-Keasey became Chancellor. It was critical that UC Merced be a research university, in fact Karen was asked directly by Yosemite officials if that was planned. There was planning funding from UCOP for a research focus. It was desired by the Chancellor that research be cross-disciplinary. A call had gone out in 1997 to research divisions at the other UC's, asking for idea from Multicampus Research Units. The idea was to come up with what would make UC Merced distinctive and make its mark in the world of academia.

Scripps Institution at UCSD was a model for what eventually became SNRI. So was the Institute for Transportation Studies at UC Davis. Carol Tomlinson-Keasey and Karen Merritt went to see its director, Dan Sperling, and he commented that he wanted to have a relationship with Yosemite, but wasn't getting a response from them, and it was too far away. Chancellor Tomlinson-Keasey, who had worked at UC Davis, told Karen to take the Yosemite idea and see what she could make of it.

She found an interested potential partner in Jerry Mitchell, who was assistant to the park's superintendent and also held the title of chief of implementation of the new Yosemite Management Plan. In April, 1998, Karen attended a UCD ITS seminar, as did Jerry. He asked if UC Merced wanted a research center in Yosemite.

At the time, Don Erman of the UCD Centers for Water and Wildlands Resources had led a group that did the Sierra Nevada Ecosystem Project to assess the Sierra natural resources. Erman served on the committee that was formed to advise UC Merced on research, and in turn he suggested that Frank Davis at UCSB might be a good person to check out the concept of a Sierra Nevada Research Center. Other key people on the committee were Alex Grazer, UCB, head of the UC NRS, and Frank Powell, UCSD, who was the White Mountain research station manager, which is near Bishop in the southern Sierra.

Sequoia-Kings Canyon National Park was involved early on as well. Stan Albright was superintendent. The multi-campus planning committee reached out to both Yosemite and Sequoia-Kings Canyon. Dave Graber, a UCB graduate and senior scientist of Sequoia-Kings Canyon, was very encouraging. Bill Tweed, chief of interpretation in the park, was in favor of the concept, as was superintendent Mike Tollefson. Stan Albright, Yosemite superintendent, made Jerry Mitchell his point man on the project. Fire expert Jan Van Wagendonk, another UCB grad, and Russ Galipeau, chief of resource management and science in Yosemite, were

interested in making the link between the parks and the Central Valley.

A prospectus was written in 1998, and UC Merced leaders met at Yosemite in November of 1998 with key NPS and MultiCampus Research Units people. NPS was also interested in working more closely with the U.S. Forest Service, and felt a research focus might aid in that desire. Gallspeare asked if UC Merced was interested in internships in the park—absolutely was the reply. NPS was also interested in attracting international scholars to the parks.

Karen Merritt and Jerry Mitchell wrote the first MOU at the suggestion of Alex Glazer, UC NRS director.

With that in hand, in September, 1999, sites for a field station were explored. They looked at a Lodgepole service facility, a fire station near Ash Mountain in Three Rivers, Whitaker's Forest, which was owned by UCSB, Sequoia Grove near Redwood Canyon, owned by U.S. Forest Service, and Wawona. Encouraged by a letter of support from the Yosemite Fund, Jerry Mitchell wrote a proposal to rehab cabins in Wawona, and it became a priority for the Yosemite Fund.

In October 1999, advertising was started for an SNRI director. The ad in the Chronicle of Higher Education said "Candidates must have a record of distinguished research and teaching in one of the fields pertinent to the SNRI that would qualify them for a tenured senior faculty appointment. Also, administrator experience appropriate to planning and creating an Institute is required. Alex Glazer chaired the first search, which did not reach a satisfactory conclusion. Gary Esposito chaired the second, which resulted in hiring Sam Traina from Ohio State (who grew up in Patterson, CA).