BY MARILYN BERLIN SNELL

A Few Good Species

The Marine Corps' Michael Lehnert protects natural security

At the Sierra Club's national convention last year in San Francisco, the bold co-founder of the environmental organization Earth First, Dave Foreman, shared the podium with Michael Lehnert, a U.S. Marine Corps general in full-dress uniform, to discuss what it would take to restore the country's wild places. After Foreman railed against "the greatest extinction of species in 65 million years," challenging listeners to create a world in which people and wilderness could coexist and thrive, Lehnert let the wolf howls of applause die down before he responded. "If you came here looking for a fight, I'm sorry to disappoint," he said. "My job is to apply some of [Foreman's] ideas to what I do." Since 2000—between deployments to Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, and Iraq—Lehnert has been championing the cause of environmental stewardship within the Marine Corps. At the conclusion of his talk, he invited anyone interested to come and see what's being done to protect and restore Southern California's Camp Pendleton, where he's currently stationed. Last spring, I took him up on it.

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TIM TADDER

The largest Marine Corps base in the world, Camp Pendleton covers 195 square miles and contains three distinct climatic zones: coastal plain, coastal valley, and mountain. Scrunched between the ever-expanding metro areas of San Diego and Los Angeles, the base remains 85 percent undeveloped—just the kind of pristine, high-value real estate speculators drool over. The rugged terrain serves as both a buffer against rampant sprawl along California's coast and a magnet for wildlife. Eighteen threatened or endangered species reside here, including the California least tern, least Bell's vireo, Pacific pocket mouse, and arroyo toad.

Lehnert, 55, moved to Camp Pendleton in March 2005 and a few months later was named regional commander of all seven Marine Corps installations west of the Mississippi. The son of an enlisted man, he was born on North Carolina's Camp Lejeune Marine Corps base and has been a Marine since 1973. Today he's a two-star major general in a nation at war, charged with getting men and women ready for battle. He's also an environmentalist in a rigid, hierarchical world with other priorities—where a built-in tension often exists between preparing Marines for deployment and protecting the land and water on which they train. Yet as Lehnert's rank and responsibilities have increased over the years, so have his latitude and creativity in decision-making. “It's possible,” he says, “to find ways to get Marines ready for combat and at the same time be good stewards. It's not a zero-sum game to me.”

ENDANGERED SPECIES
KEEP OUT BY ORDER OF COMMANDING OFFICER

. . . and he means it: During nesting season, Marine maneuvers through surf and sand are restricted in favor of the California least tern and Western snowy plover.

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Even in his darkish-green and black pixelated camouflage fatigues, Lehnert doesn't fade into Camp Pendleton's scenery. With squared shoulders, a voice comfortable giving orders, and a gap-toothed smile that looks at times mischievous, he simply isn't a blending-in kind of guy. He's a man of action, but one patient enough for data gathering if it helps him make his case for environmental protection.

Camp Pendleton has an annual natural-resource budget of $35 million and an environmental staff of 84, charged with adhering to federal and state regulations. With Lehnert's support, the base also pursues studies and stewardship beyond what's required by law. “A country worth defending is a country worth preserving,” he says simply while describing some of the base's erosion abatement, solar-powered water purification, and vernal-pool-restoration projects. Though I get the feeling the general uses that line often, it's a good one, and I tell him so. “Yeah?” he responds. “And when you write it, your readers will yell, ‘Come on! The military protecting the environment? Give me a break!’”

There's good reason to be skeptical. Billions of dollars in environmental cleanup are needed at Department of Defense sites, according to the Government Accountability Office (GAO). Yet, since 2003, the DOD has annually submitted to Congress requests for broadening military exemptions from key environmental laws, on the grounds that they hamper readiness on the nearly 30 million acres of land it controls. Congress already allowed case-by-case military exemptions from Superfund legislation as well as the Clean Air Act and the critical-habitat designation of the Endangered Species Act. But Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld asked for exemptions from those acts as well as the Marine Mammal Protection and Migratory Bird Treaty Acts. (The requests were made in the face of a 2002 GAO report that concluded that not only was the military at a high state of readiness, but also the Defense Department had failed to demonstrate that compliance with these laws significantly impedes training.)

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The Republican-controlled Congress granted the DOD's wishes. In the case of the Endangered Species Act, it decreed that if military bases had natural-resource-management plans in place, they could forgo designating any critical habitat for endangered or threatened species.

Lehnert supports the exemptions. He concedes that policies such as critical-habitat designations are “absolutely essential for institutions that don't get it” and should be kept on the books but insists that Camp Pendleton is a success story on both the national *and* natural security fronts.

As we stand on a hilltop with a few members of his environmental team, Lehnert makes his case: We are looking down at the Santa Margarita—one of California's last free-flowing rivers, which passes to the Pacific Ocean through the southern portion of Camp Pendleton. An airstrip bisects the valley below. Intermittent gunfire can be heard from the adjacent Wilcox Range, while dark military helicopters lumber above us like giant Cretaceous raptors. Mostly, however, the vista resembles a scene from California's pre-sprawl past: unscarred hills and valleys plush with sweet-smelling coastal sage scrub (habitat for the threatened coastal California gnatcatcher), spindly creosote, and live oak. Although nearly 40,000 service members train at the base each year, the lion's share of the activity happens at night, so much of daytime Camp Pendleton looks and feels like wilderness.

Lehnert grabs at the fennel next to him, breaks off a wispy-leafed piece, and sticks it in his mouth. “I hate this plant,” he announces before offering me some to taste. “It's exotic, one of the worst offenders, and it's all over this base.” Next he points toward the valley. “See all that dead gray stuff down there by the river? That's what's left of arundo in that area.” The arundo, or giant reed, is an invasive perennial that

The Stephens' kangaroo rat, one of two endangered mammals on the base, thrives in undisturbed coastal sage scrub.

chokes the life out of native flora and fauna, including the arroyo toad.

To protect this endangered toad, Marines are clearing arundo along the banks of the Santa Margarita, from the base's property line all nine miles to the sea. At the same time, training vehicles on maneuvers sometimes crash into the river. "We are restoring habitat so that we have sustainable or growing populations of threatened and endangered species," Lehnert says. "We are also using the property for national defense purposes." He emphasizes, repeatedly, that if the Marines can't train, they'll leave Camp Pendleton, "and then environmentalists are going to be dealing with developers instead."

Lehnert argues that the creation of critical-habitat zones is a disincentive to stewardship. "Under critical-habitat designation, it's actually in my interest to keep arroyo toads, for instance, out of anyplace they aren't already in," he says. Essentially, why restore the entirety of the Santa Margarita River basin, he asks, if it only means the toads will migrate and make the whole thing off-limits to training? "The real issue is whether we are being successful in growing larger populations and protecting habitat."

Lehnert has no numbers for the arroyo toad yet but can document some other successes: In 1983, there were 62 male least Bell's vireos found on the base; by 2000, the endangered bird's numbers had jumped to 807. There were 233 pairs of the endangered California least tern observed in 1983, but by 2005, 1,348 were counted.

"The move to exempt places like Camp Pendleton from critical-habitat designations was politics, pure and simple, on the part of the Bush administration and its allies in Congress," Bart Semcer, the Sierra Club's wildlife-policy expert, tells me later. Since 2001, he has worked to build stronger conservation ties between the Club and government affiliates, including the Marine Corps, touring installations and meeting officers like Lehnert. Though Semcer believes the exemptions "succeeded in taking American conservation policy one more step backward," he has observed Lehnert's approach to natural-resource protection up close and believes in his commitment. "The general has a can-do attitude about stewardship," says Semcer. "We just need more people with his drive, motivation, and willingness to pursue innovative approaches to conservation."

While environmental laws are being weakened from the very top of the military hierarchy, a stewardship ethic born of these laws (as well as a growing understanding of environmental threats generally) has taken root in the day-to-day operations at Camp Pendleton. Lupe Armas, the base's environmental security manager, is a civilian who oversees its natural-resource staff. In his 14 years at the base, he has seen many commanders come and go. (Generals usually have two-year rotations.) "We have a lot of pristine habitat that's being well managed here; it's not just being left alone." He adds that Lehnert has been an enthusiastic supporter of these efforts.

Lehnert, who is standing next to Armas on the Camp Pendleton hillside, jumps in. "And if I wasn't on board with Lupe, he'd just wait me out. I'm serious. Lupe would have a rough two years, and then I'd leave, and he'd get back to work. There's simply too much momentum in the Marine Corps."

As I drive with Lehnert, Armas, and others to visit various sites across the base, passing hand-painted signs paying tribute to Marines who have died in Iraq and Afghanistan, I begin to appreciate the stark reality of what "military preparedness" actually means. According to Lehnert, 460 Marines from bases in Southern California—the vast majority from Camp Pendleton—have been killed in combat. The week before my visit, six Marines drowned when their vehicle overturned into an Iraqi river. "I don't know whether that driver was well trained and just had an accident or whether he lacked training," says Lehnert. "But I have a responsibility to ensure that those we send over to Iraq have the best training possible."

I can't help but think that if the Fox News Channel's professional bully, Bill O'Reilly, were with us, he would have a rage-induced aneurism over the training decisions that have been made at one of our stops. We are at the Crucible, a physical location but also a test every Marine must go through at the end of training. Essentially, the Crucible is 60 hours of reduced sleep, lots of marching, and a series of tasks that test Marines' ability to work as a team, solve problems, and survive combat.

Lieutenant Colonel Bruce Soderberg, who has a master's in science and environmental management from the University of Houston, steps into one

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of the 21 wooden stalls at the Crucible to explain how combat simulation works: “Maybe there’s a team in here, with someone on a stretcher. The red bars in the middle are contaminated, and you have to figure out how to get your team members to the other side of the stall without touching the bars. Everyone by this point is sleep deprived, worn-out, and frustrated.” Each stall tests different skills.

Lehnert adds, “We’re trying to approximate combat conditions as closely as possible. We want to make sure that the first time they experience these challenges is not when somebody is trying to kill them.”

Along with the physical challenges of combat, the Crucible presents another kind as well: It sits on one of the last remaining habitats of the Pacific pocket mouse. Lehnert and Armas’s staff must ensure that Crucible training does not push the species closer to extinction.

Fences were built around the perimeter of the course to keep sleepy, sometimes idle recruits from wandering farther into the mouse’s domain. When the base wanted to spread out by adding stalls, Camp Pendleton’s environmental department had concerns. “It would have meant further incursions into pocket mouse habitat, so the commanders compromised with a less-than-optimal design that didn’t take up so much room,” says Armas.

“If you look at how the Marines did, particularly during Operation Iraqi Freedom in the early part when I was there, we got to Baghdad in a hurry,” Lehnert says. “I guess we did pretty well. So is this type of training effective? Yes, I think it is.”

Habitat is our most important environmental issue,” Lehnert tells me as we bounce over sandy roads, headed to Camp Pendleton’s coast. “If we can find a way to allow our Marines to train without having a significant impact on the habitat, if we can restore habitat, then everybody wins.” For example, he says, “if I can provide the science that says least terns nest from this time to this time in this place, and at other times they aren’t on the property, then we can formulate training schedules that don’t affect them.” Camp Pendleton is the Marine Corps’ premier training base for assault vehicles that can move from water to land. Given that fact, a data-rich and delicate dance is required to protect the least tern—which nests in shoreline dunes on the base—without altogether ceding the terrain to the birds. Lehnert calls it a “win-win proposition”: The Marines get to train, and the “birds and beasties,” as he calls Camp Pendleton’s feathered and furred residents, get their habitat.

Birds like the least Bell’s vireo and southwestern willow flycatcher enjoy Marine Corps aid as well. Several years ago, biologists deduced that the plummeting numbers of birds in riparian areas were due to the brown-headed cowbird, which had evolved on the central plains following bison herds and eating insects stirred up by them. The female cowbird, with little time for motherhood, laid its eggs in another species’ nest and then moved on. The baby cowbird typically hatched earlier than the other birds and so was bigger and better able to grab food from the unwitting host female. As a result, the cowbird has thrived and continues this type of destructive adaptation today. Three years ago, Armas and his team installed cowbird traps: Lured by food, the birds drop in through a slit on the top of the ingeniously designed cages. Once inside, they can’t exit because their wings are spread in flight and they no longer fit through the opening. Since those first traps were built, numbers for some of the threatened and endangered birds have jumped. Innocent birds caught in the traps are released. The cowbirds, in Armas’s diplomatic phraseology, “are terminated.”

Since Camp Pendleton is on war footing, the tension between military preparedness and natural-resource protection is all the more acute. I keep thinking about that tension as well as those disconcertingly efficient cowbird cages at the end of the day, as I sit with Lehnert in his office. In 2002, Lehnert, an engineer by training, went to Guantánamo Bay to build the detention facilities for terror suspects. The general was there three months, constructing the spare, open-air cells many have described as human cages. Long after this tour, he was named in several lawsuits, along with General Tommy Franks, Rumsfeld, and many others, charged with violations of due process and human rights. I tell Lehnert I read the complaints. “And you’re wondering how this guy can care about the birds and beasties and not about human rights,” he says. It isn’t a question, but I answer, “Yes.”

There’s a pause. It’s been a day full of goodwill, but the topic I’ve just brought up feels radioactive. Detainee treatment has nothing to do with environmental issues, but everything to do with ethics, character, and how tough decisions get made when there are competing agendas.

“As you know,” Lehnert begins, “the administration’s position has been that we would be ‘guided’ by but not have to follow the Geneva conventions. When I received that direction, I was at Guantánamo, and the first thing I did was read those conventions.” Before he continues, the general reminds me that he did not supervise the interrogation of prisoners. Choosing his words carefully—“In my position, I cannot criticize policies”—he adds, “Yes, this is a markedly different war. Yes, there are terrorists and all the problems that come with that. But I believe in treating people decently. I think if we had started with the Geneva conventions, it would have been a better place to begin. We could have made them work.”

They’re just words, but they come from a man with a record of making things work. Lehnert has effectively navigated the terrain between patriotic duty and environmental protection—between “love of country” and “America the beautiful.” Like the protections he and his staff at Camp Pendleton have afforded endangered species, military leadership on human rights could help restore another American treasure as well. ■

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