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## Crestridge Ecological Reserve Survives Vandalism With Help of Volunteers

By Ann Hennessey

All it takes is a few minutes. walk into the Crestridge Ecological Reserve and suddenly the multimillion-dollar estates of southwestern San Diego County disappear behind rocky bluffs. At times like these, it's easy to forget where you are.

Rust-colored trails cutting through the reserve reveal the soil's iron-rich composition. Granite juts up from the earth. The walk itself is an easy one for a novice but this is no artificial nature hike pandering to tourists. Poison oak grows lushly in some areas and can wrap vine-like around coast live oaks. Southern Pacific rattlesnakes make their home here as well and sometimes sun their earth-toned bodies on the trail itself, blending with the scenery. In other areas, the dry shrub offers no shade to the pounding sun and fat black flies will buzz a hiker.

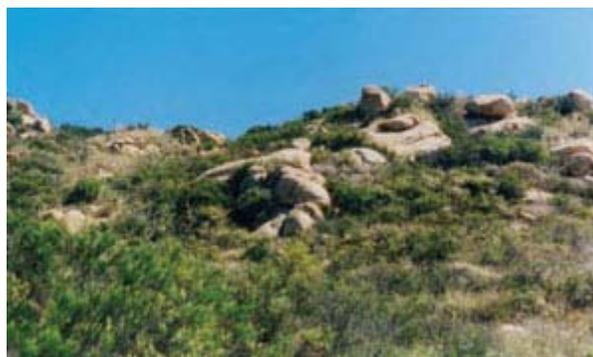
Crestridge Ecological Reserve is Southern California's model reserve, one of the most significant pieces of land set aside for nature in this part of the country, said Terri Stewart, Department of Fish and Game (DFG) senior biologist. The reserve has everything ecologically significant to Southern California, from sensitive butterflies, to bobcats, to an ancient Indian village where people once ground acorns into the smooth boulders. DFG owns and manages the 2,640-acre property just three miles east of El Cajon, but numerous groups partner with the state to provide a wide range of services, including outdoor education, horseback riding, and wildlife identification. Residential development hems the reserve on all sides providing numerous volunteers and lending some problems of its own. In early July the spring wildflowers are starting to leave the reserve, but enough remain along the trails to hint of delicate life making do with what nature offers. The chalk-leafed dudleya, its blooms the color of red licorice, grows from rocks on the side of one path. The lemon-yellow mariposa lily shares ground with the wild lilac, its blue-purple flowers hanging on for one last gasp of spring. Monkeyflower blossoms are throughout the reserve, the bugle-shaped flowers ranging from a soft peach to blood red.

With cicada giving an electrical buzz to the air and white sage wafting its incense across a soft breeze, it's difficult to consider that someone actually drove a Bobcat tractor along this trail earlier this year and plowed down an estimated acre of vegetation - including at least one oak tree - to build eightfoot high motorcycle jumps.

The damage is obvious even to a casual observer and yet, Stewart said, the most dire consequences from this illegal clearing are yet to come. The people who cleared the vegetation disturbed the shallow root systems of coast live oaks estimated to be 100 to 200 years old. Broken roots are exposed to the elements. These trees, where seven varieties of hawks roost and nest, may die within the next 30 years, Stewart predicted.

"People don't realize the impact of what they do," she said. But this damage is more than just carelessness. This is deliberate vandalism. "They know it's not their property. I don't know why anyone would take a dozer and just go do work on someone else's property. I think it's pretty blatant when someone comes onto an ecological reserve with a tractor."

The struggle between DFG and some motorcyclists who have laid claim to the reserve is an ongoing one. Motorcyclists were there when the state bought the reserve in 1999 from The Nature Conservancy, who acquired the land from a land developer. The motorcyclists haven't gone away even after the San Diego media publicized the damage. In fact, on this particular July day



**Typical scenery found at Crestridge Ecological Reserve**

Photo © Ann Hennessey



**Top, efforts to repair the damage caused by vandals will take time and a great deal of effort. Crews must try to return the habitat to its natural state.**

DFG File photo

**Bottom, a sign declaring the property as protected habitat and closed to vehicles has been knocked down and ignored by vandals.**

Photo © Ann Hennessey

season could send valuable topsoil downhill in muddy waves. By mid-June DFG had taken down the massive motorcycle jumps with its own tractors, but the major job of trying to recontour the disturbed earth to match the drainage of nearby ground still lies ahead.

"We've got to try to recreate the natural topography and that's difficult," Stewart noted. It's not the kind of work conducive to heavy equipment. "We're going to need a lot of people with shovels," she said. The struggle between those who want to save land for nature and those who want access to government property for recreational use continues throughout the country.

"That's why we develop land use management plans, to ensure those habitats and species are protected," said Doran Sanchez, a spokesperson with the federal Bureau of Land Management. State and federal governments set aside land for recreational use, including off-road vehicles, he said. It's just a matter of going on the Internet to find those locations and research what uses are allowed, he said.

"It's a major concern, not only that our public lands are here for people to enjoy, but that they are used properly," Sanchez explained.

Leaving the Crestridge Ecological Reserve, biologist Stewart stopped to gaze over the hills at the community of Lakeside below her. The smell of pearly everlasting, a plant whose smell reminds her of pancake syrup, wafted through the air. Just barely, if Stewart stood on tiptoes at the edge of the trail, she could spot Highway 8; specifically the sole place the California gnatcatcher (a threatened songbird) will cross that freeway.

Gnatcatchers feed on insects that live in coastal sage. By some quirk of nature, though, gnatcatchers will only fly to coastal sage that lies within their line of sight. Stewart quoted a study that showed if the habitat on either side of this point of Highway 8

when Stewart and scientific aide Noel Richards were surveying the damage, they found more vandalism. A DFG sign warning against motorized vehicles in the area was snapped off at the base of its metal post and thrown into a mound of poison oak.

DFG set up surveillance cameras for two weeks after finding the motorcycle jumps. The cameras showed 20 people in the area during that time: two hikers and 18 motorcyclists. Stewart calls the battle depressing. "If you put up a barricade they just start a new trail," she said.

Indeed, the non-public entrance used to carry heavy equipment into the reserve is blocked by logs and posted with signs warning that this is an ecological reserve. A sign gives the rules but it's difficult to read since it had to be posted out of the reach of vandals who kept defacing it. And yet, crushed vegetation to the side of the logs revealed fresh motorcycle tracks.

Local volunteers followed the tractor marks off the reserve to help build a criminal case against the vandals, but DFG wants restitution and a change of attitude most of all. Neighbors, upset over the damage, started patrolling the trails to assist the game warden who lives in another section of the reserve.

"We've had an incredible, positive response," said Leslie Reynolds, coordinator of the Earth Discovery Institute, an educational land management program with the Endangered Habitats League. About 30 people volunteered to help distribute information to the reserve's neighbors and restore the damaged area. In addition, a Boy Scout master called asking if his troop could assist in the restoration and a local community college expressed interest in having its horticulture students participate in the project. Stewart said DFG hopes peer pressure will turn this motorcycle problem around.

Volunteers helped develop the restoration master plan as well. The vandalism left the ground compacted and bare. DFG staff worked with volunteers through the summer and fall to restore vegetation before the rainy



**Native plants at Crestridge Ecological Reserve.**

Photo © Ann Hennessey

dies out, the likelihood of the gnatcatcher going extinct rises dramatically. That is a key element in the state's quest to protect this reserve.

And, what if the little gnatcatcher dies out? Stewart uses the analogy of a wheel with spokes to explain how each creature and plant affects the world we live in. Maybe one spoke missing makes no difference but, eventually; take away too many spokes and the wheel collapses. No one knows what spoke will make that difference.

## Where Do You Report an Environmental Crime?

Hotlines exist for just about every topic, including the environment here in California. Witnesses to environmental crimes like poaching, polluting or destruction of habitat and vandalism on wildlife areas and ecological reserves have a toll free number to call, too. In California, call 1-888-DFGCALTIP (888-334-2258), named for the Californians Turn In Poachers and Polluters program. The 24-hour hotline will connect with local law enforcement officers who can best handle the situation. Those who come across people misusing an ecological reserve should immediately report what they saw but should not confront wrongdoers themselves, experts advise.

"That should trigger some rather immediate response," said Leslie Reynolds, coordinator of The Earth Discovery Institute. "No confrontations are advised."

Try to remember what you saw, where you were, and get a description of the people and vehicles involved, recommended Doran Sanchez, a spokesperson with the federal Bureau of Land Management. License plate numbers can help.

Then, let the agency involved investigate the matter, Sanchez said. Those who appear to break the law may actually have a permit for what they're doing, he said. For example, the warden on the Crestridge Ecological Reserve has a permit for a motorcycle so he can try to keep up with those who are breaking the law.

Likewise, hikers should not ignore what appears to be misuse of public land, Sanchez said. If something looks wrong, report it. "That's just responsible use," he said. "It's like what you'd do if you saw someone breaking into your neighbor's house."

Turn the person in. It takes just one call, toll free, and you can remain anonymous.

## Lots of opportunity to get involved at Crestridge Ecological Reserve

One of the Department of Fish and Game's (DFG) key partners at Crestridge Ecological Reserve is the Earth Discovery Institute, formed to educate the public about nature through the reserve. The Endangered Habitats League, a non-profit organization, oversees the Institute at Crestridge. The Earth Discovery Institute organizes educational, volunteer and fundraising activities for the reserve, according to its website at [www.earthdiscovery.org](http://www.earthdiscovery.org). And, coordinator Leslie Reynolds is always looking for people to assist with those activities.

"We would really love people to volunteer in any capacity," Reynolds said. "There are a myriad of volunteer opportunities." Institute volunteers were instrumental in developing the plan to rehabilitate the vandalized portion of Crestridge, and educating the reserve's neighbors about proper use of the land. Volunteers also got their hands dirty actually restoring the area.

This past summer the Earth Discovery Institute guided the progress of an informational kiosk built at one of the reserve's public entrances. San Diego County-architect and artist James Hubbell designed the rounded kiosk using hay bales and earth. Upon the kiosk's completion, native plants will grow from the roof. The concept, according to DFG biologist Terri Stewart, is to introduce the public, especially urban school children, to nature so they might grow up to better appreciate and, in turn, protect the outdoors.

Two more buildings are planned but do not yet have final DFG approval: a field station that would include a computer lab,



**Environmental crimes include poaching, polluting and damage to habitat. These mounds are the work of vandals who used a bulldozer on an ecological reserve, destroying habitat.**

Photo © Ann Hennessey

library, offices and a home for a land manager; and an open-air studio where people could create art.

In the meantime, the Institute is busy working with local schools, Granite Hills High and Crest Elementary, bringing students to the reserve to learn first-hand about science and nature.

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**Neighbors who enjoy Crestridge Ecological Reserve have also made a commitment to supporting the area as well.**

Photo © Ann Hennessey

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