

Good use for graze anatomy

Goats are clearing invasive weeds in the Palos Verdes Nature Preserve

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The sound of hundreds of goat hooves echoed through a small valley overlooking the ocean Saturday in the Palos Verdes Nature Preserve, surprising passerby who watched as the animals munched their way through yard after yard of invasive weeds.

The 230 goats are the first step in a project to restore natural flora and fauna to a 12-acre portion of the 1,400-acre preserve that was burned in a fire in 2009.

The goats, which range in size from 75 to 150 pounds, are positioned to gobble up all the invasive weeds so native plants and insects can move back in and survive, said Danielle LeFer, conservation director for the Palos Verdes Peninsula Land Conservancy.

"It will increase diversity of all sorts of animals and insects and plants too, because when you have an area that is overgrown with weeds, they become almost a monoculture," she said. "When we clear it of the weeds, we allow the seeds that are in soil to come out."

Grazing, low-cost and environmentally friendly, is becoming a more common practice in restoration and conservation efforts. In 2008 and again last year, goats were put to work clearing weeds near Angels Flight in downtown L.A. — though not nearly so many. In 2009,



HOOVES AND MOUTHS: Low-cost, eco-friendly grazing is being used more often in land restoration.

the conservancy also used goats in the preserve.

For many years, goats were removed from natural areas because they were known for eating everything in sight. Now, conservationists and fire safety officials realize that the creatures are efficient as long as they are monitored.

That is the job of the goats' keeper, Mark Choi, 41, who will basically live with them as they chomp their way across the valley as part of the Portuguese Bend Restoration Project.

The first boar goats arrived in Palos Verdes on Wednesday and were put to work in an area near the Pea-

cock Flats and the Burma Road trails. Charred pine trees with gray cones were visible reminders of the fire.

An additional 120 goats will arrive this week. Choi has nicknamed one friendly goat Pepper for the charcoal freckles dotting her face.

"If you come back here in two days, you'd barely recognize it," Choi said as he instructed his border collie Troy to steer the goats.

The goats, which are a mix of white and brown with black and caramel spots, collectively eat about half an acre of weeds per day.

Twenty-four hours a day, Choi and Troy will watch for coyotes and other preda-

tors. Choi will sleep in his truck, or his son will stand watch for him. If he's hungry or needs to take a shower, he'll zip home. He and the goats are surrounded by an electric fence to keep onlookers and others out of the 12-acre area. At the top of a hill, Choi has positioned two black cloth folding chairs.

"My office has a good view," he said.

He has often chatted with hikers on the popular trail, where white, yellow and purple wildflowers have sprouted. Choi said with a chuckle that the average person doesn't even seem able to identify the common farm animal. The most common question is a simple one: "Are these goats?"

After the goats finish eating, the conservancy hopes to restore coastal sage, cactus scrub and other native vegetation, which help birds such as the gnatcatcher and cactus wren breed successfully.

Bill Coleman, 54, of Redondo Beach took his son Skylar and a friend bicycling Saturday afternoon. When Coleman stopped to use his phone, he asked the youngsters: "Did you see the goats?"

The boys gazed over the hill.

"Can we touch them?" asked Skylar, 8.

"They are cute," said Ben Oien, Skylar's friend.

The goats will stay around for a couple of weeks; the exact time will be determined by how quickly they eat.

"It's on goat time," Choi said. "It depends on their appetite."

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