

RANCHO PALOS VERDES

Trail watchers see challenges

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Volunteer trail watchers for the Palos Verdes Peninsula Land Conservancy say the swelling number of visitors to the Palos Verdes Nature Preserve over the last few years presents an ongoing challenge to maintain the habitat for the future.

Eva Cicoria and Barbara Ailor, who are among 32 active trail watchers for the 1,400 acres of the preserve, say the number of visitors has increased since the preserve was established ten years

ago. But with social media serving to advertise the beauty of the area to wider audiences over the last few years, trails have widened, eliminating nearby vegetation. And volunteers and staff continue to struggle keeping unauthorized trails closed.

"I think it will be an uphill battle, but we have to do it," Cicoria said. "Or we run the risk of losing all we put into this."

Ailor's husband Bill founded the land conservancy more than 25 years ago, working to acquire chunks of open space from developers and as the land became

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PHOTO BY ED PILOLLA

Barb Ailor examines lemonadeberry plant in the Forrestral Reserve, which also includes cacti, coastal sage scrub and other vegetation.

Trails

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available. Voters ended up approving state and county bonds to purchase the land specifically for the preservation of the critically natural habitat and open space as a preserve, Ailor said.

"In the beginning, people thought he was a nut," Ailor said.

Now, however, Bill Ailor is celebrated as a visionary.

During a recent hike at Forrestral Reserve, Barbara Ailor looked around and said, "After 50 years, what are we going to see here?"

The trail watchers program, which was established two years ago as crowds began growing, is one of several efforts by the land conservancy to keep up maintenance of the city-owned preserve.

In the latest move to address the detrimental impacts associated with more visitors, the Rancho Palos Verdes city council Tuesday evening expanded its trash and recycling programs within the preserve and decided to hire an experienced contractor to remove graffiti. The council soon will consider expanding its part-time staffing at city parks and the preserve in order to increase visibility.

"We built it, and now they're coming and coming," Mayor Pro Tem Susan Brooks said.

As neighbors grapple with larger numbers of cars parking near trail access points, trail watchers continue to pick up dog poop, litter and re-close unauthorized trails.

Most of the 40 miles of

trails throughout the preserve allow for multiple uses, including pedestrians, bicycles and equestrians. However, some trails are for pedestrian use only as indicated by signs, including the Exultant Trail in the Forrestral Reserve. That doesn't stop some bicyclists from riding on the trail, whether the reason is they are unaware the trail is meant only for those walking or because they deliberately break the rules.

The drought conditions also have made much of the plant life appear dead and inconsequential to be trampled. But the vegetation, which supports rare and threatened species, such as the the El Segundo blue butterfly, the Coastal California gnatcatcher and the coastal cactus wren, goes into a dormant state and survives on the moisture of morning fog, Ailor said.

The PVPLC is restoring habitat, including deer weed and astragalus, in the hopes that the PV blue butterfly will someday make a comeback in the preserve.

For trail watchers, the work is rewarding but can also be frustrating. Educating the public remains a priority.

"Protection and restoration, that's our job," Cicoria said. "That job is made considerably harder, more time consuming and more expensive when the people that are out there on the trails are thoughtless or uninformed, damaging original or restored habitat or some other part of it that is put in place to protect it, including posts and rope or signage. That's really our challenge. We've had some success and we've certainly had our setbacks. We move

forward."

Several feet of vegetation has been lost in many areas due to "trail creep," or a widening of the trails because people aren't aware just how fragile the trail-side vegetation can be. Groups walk in bunches and not in a single-file line while bikes and hikers veer off the trail bed.

Patches of what's known as Fossil Hill in the Forrestral Reserve were once full of plant life but now are growing bald patches of dry dirt.

Standing atop Fossil Hill, Ailor said, "We don't want the preserve to look like this."

A short time later, Ailor approached a woman walking with her little dog off leash and informed her that dogs must be leashed. The woman apologized and leashed her dog.

"We want to encourage people to be responsible instead of blaming them," Cicoria said.

Another hiker, Manuela Cerruti of Redondo Beach, said she has walked the trails three to four times a week for the past eight years.

"I have noticed an increase in the number of people visiting the habitat and also noticed the Land Conservancy people are really keeping on top of it," Cerruti said.

Some of the unauthorized trails stem from before the preserve was established, while others are more recent creations. Sometimes it's just one person going off the trail to find a favorite spot to drink a beer or a biker jumping a rock or incline. After one person tramps vegetation and others follow, more



PHOTO BY ED PILOLLA

A sign and branches block an unauthorized trail in the Foresstal Reserve of the Palos Verdes Preserve.

well-defined unauthorized trails are created.

Ailor and Cicoria said that the percentage of rule-breakers among the usual population of visitors hasn't necessarily increased, but the higher number of visitors has meant more rule-breakers. Some people behave and some believe they can go anywhere. Trail watchers have staked down branches to keep some illegal trails blocked.

The PVPLC sponsors group hikes throughout the preserve, complete with a guide to educate visitors about the rules. But groups that don't sign up for a tour tend to be unaware of the rules, so Cicoria, Ailor and other members of the volunteer trail watch team make a point to speak with as many preserve visitors as possible about the importance of staying on the authorized trails.

In fact, the PVPLC is considering stationing a greeter at some of the trail heads to inform groups about preserve regulations, said Conservation Director Danielle LeFer.

Last year, the land conservancy dedicated a full-time field operations technician to close unauthorized trails in the preserve.

In addition to the volunteer trail watchers, LeFer said that the Santa Monica Rangers employed by RPV also provide a presence in the preserve to modify the behavior of visitors.

"Our hope that is that we can really develop a sense of how special the preserve really is and that people who go there and visit the preserve can appreciate that and follow the rules," LeFer said.

Put another way, "It's not a park," Ailor said. "It's a preserve."