

Angeles National Forest draws flood of visitors, trickle of resources

By Rebecca Kimitch, Staff Writer

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ANGELES NATIONAL FOREST - This Labor Day weekend, thousands of people will be drawn to the cool rivers, scenic trails and fresh air along the canyon of the San Gabriel River.

And while they will find a beautiful natural respite from the urban valley below, they will also find creeksides littered with trash, rocks covered in graffiti, precarious access to the river's edge and sparse restrooms and information signs.

The number of visitors to the canyon has grown by an estimated 33 percent over the past decade, to about 2 million annually. At the same time, federal funding for recreation in the forest has been cut in half, from nearly \$3 million a year to \$1.2 million.

The consequences are striking.

A week ago, on a not-particularly-hot weekend day, the parking lot by the West and North forks of the San Gabriel River was full by 9:30 a.m. Any visitors who didn't leave their houses early enough had to fight for parking along the road,

and then navigate long distances to their destinations.

Between the cars, the parking lot was trashed with old pizza boxes, plastic bags, paper plates and other picnic remnants.

And the trash trail continued down a half-crumbled set of large stone stairs that led to a small, intimate beach on the creek's edge, where a perfect swimming hole beckoned. There, distracting from the natural beauty, were dirty diapers, empty bags of Flaming Hot Funyons and Cheetos, and giant boulders tagged with graffiti.

"It's disgusting. People have no respect for this place," 16-year-old Tania Vaquerano said, glancing around the scenic camp her family had set up for the day along the West Fork, a few feet from the diaper-strewn beach.

"You have to educate the citizens. But really, it's common sense, people should know better," she continued.

Both are true, agreed Daniel Rossman, regional associate for The Wilderness Society.

"I grew up camping, being taught leave-no-trace principals. That ethic can be taught. But without it, you end

up with the broken windows theory," Rossman said, referencing the idea that if a place falls into disrepair, it will only get worse because of

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Photo Gallery

San Gabriel River Area of the Angeles National Forest



People drop supplies down a 15 foot wall to get to the The Oaks Picnic Area, East Fork San Gabriel River in the Angeles National Forest, Sunday, Aug. 29, 2010. Conservationists say that the area is in need of better access and facilities for visitors.

(SGVN/Staff Photo By Eric Reed)

Trash is huge problem

Rossmann and The Wilderness Society are part of San Gabriel Mountains Forever, a coalition of community and environmental groups working to bring more resources to the national forest.

More trash cans are necessary, but so are more rangers and volunteers to remind people not to leave their garbage behind, or give citations when necessary, said Juana Torres, associate regional representative for the Sierra Club, also part of the coalition.

Beyond trash cans, forest visitors and advocates say the area is in desperate need of more restrooms, better signs indicating trails and paths and improved access for families to get to the river's edge.

Along one portion of the San Gabriel River's East Fork, visitors who want to picnic on a wide beach must navigate an 8-foot drop down a cement wall. They pass their coolers, chairs, and, in some cases, barbecue grills, down the wall to someone below, before making the leap themselves. A few hundred feet away, the area is accessible via a more gradual path, but there are no signs indicating the access.

Marty Dumpis, deputy supervisor for the forest, said the U.S. Forest Service tries to put up more informational signs, but they are vandalized or stolen.

Dumpis said the Forest Service does the best it can with the resources it has to keep the area clean and meet the needs of visitors - volunteers and staff regularly pick up trash in the area - but they face a complicated cycle not necessarily about the need for more money.

"If people didn't leave trash, and we didn't have

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graffiti, then a big part of our budget wouldn't be spent dealing with those issues, and we could do more education and enforcement... If you just toss more money into having more people, you are buying more people to pick up trash. You have to educate," he said.

Heavy usage

The Angeles National Forest makes up 70 percent of the open space in Los Angeles County. Many areas of the county are severely lacking in parks.

So it comes as no surprise to forest advocates that the Angeles National Forest is one of the most visited national forests in the nation. Most of those visitors live within 50 miles, Dumpis said.

And more than half of them head to the San Gabriel Canyon part of the forest, which has only three designated areas for picnicking. And access to two of the three, near Crystal Lake, has been blocked for years because of damage from the 2002 Curve Fire.

So instead, visitors find their own unofficial creekside spots to enjoy for the day.

"It's a use unique to the area that has evolved over time," Dumpis said.

For South Bay resident Yessica Mejia, it was her sweet 16 birthday wish to come to the canyon with her family.

"It's so peaceful, calm. I just love it here," she said from a blanket spread out on the shore of the North Fork.

Policy makers frustrated with the obesity epidemic that plagues many communities would be elated to see the sights along these river forks.

Kids scamper along boulders, plunge into the water, and play volleyball on beaches.

And the area boasts an extensive network of trails for hiking and biking. But more informational kiosks and rangers are needed to tell visitors about these more intensive recreational opportunities, Rossman and Torres say. Currently, such information is only provided on the way into the forest, at the San Gabriel Canyon Gateway Center.

Torres blames part of the lack of resources on the fact that many of the canyon's users are Latino.

"If these people were Anglo, there would be more resources. It is a big social justice issue," she said.

By comparison, the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area spends about 15 times more on recreation than the Angeles National Forest, according to a Michigan State University study.

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Dumpis said the comparison isn't exactly fair because of the types of recreation in question.

"I think we are getting our fair share compared with other forests. But I imagine they would all say they need more resources," he said.

Federal funding is allocated based on park usage and park acreage, he said.

The Angeles National Forest also supplements its budget with the sale of Adventure Passes, amounting to about \$1.2 million a year. And a team of volunteers also dedicate thousands of hours to the forest, Dumpis said.

Relief coming

Part of the pressure on the San Gabriel Canyon will soon be relieved when access to Crystal Lake is reopened, expected next spring, according to Caltrans project manager John Lee.

Caltrans officials had hoped to have the section of Highway 39 open years ago, but during the original emergency repairs, they realized damage was so severe that new, time-consuming engineering work needed to be done.

The San Gabriel Mountains Forever Campaign is also hoping to get part of the forest, and the valley below, declared a National Recreation Area, which supporters say will draw more federal resources to recreation in the area.

In an effort to show how far a few dollars can go,

forest advocates are developing an approximately \$1 million pilot project to improve recreation along Cattle Canyon, near the East Fork.

The open canyon offers much potential to visitors. And the pilot project could bring new picnic tables, a restroom (though highly visited, the area is currently served by a couple of port-a-potties), trash cans, an information kiosk and a regularly present ranger.

"We're just talking about basic needs that aren't there right now," said Jane Beesley of the Rivers and Mountains Conservancy, which provided a grant for the project.

Officials are still evaluating the site and planning potential facilities and next spring they will survey users on their needs. The project won't be compete for two or three years.

The project is being developed through a partnership of the Forest Service, the Rivers and Mountains Conservancy, the Sierra Club and the Upper San Gabriel Valley Municipal Water District.

"We have finally figured out a way to work collaboratively. It is a real partnership that will come with real things," Beesley said. "Hopefully we can replicate it one at a time so we these nice recreation areas for everyone to enjoy."

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