

From Military Service to Nature Conservationist

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State Conservation Corps initiates first veterans' backcountry trail crew

Assimilating back into society after serving in the military is anything but an easy process. But thanks to a new partnership between a California agency and the Veterans Green Corp (VGC), there's a new, nature-filled way for veterans to spend this transition period—and give our state parks some much-needed TLC while they're at it.

This year, the California Conservation Corps' (CCC) Backcountry Trails Program, which is aimed at preserving California's wilderness areas by making them safer and more accessible to the public, partnered with VGC to establish the first ever veterans' Backcountry Trail Crew. The crew is comprised of 15 men and women, including nine military veterans who served in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The crew will be doing maintenance work at regional state parks, such as Santa Cruz's Wilder Ranch State Park, where they rolled up their sleeves on Friday, May 20. Marine Corps veteran Aaron Enrique Hernandez spent the day working side by side with fellow crew members Robby Sheppard II and Jose Louis Castaneda to clean up and fill in an eroded and worn down section of Twin Oaks Trail. He said that he learned of the new program while in junior college in Santa Rosa and was instantly intrigued.

"I thought it was a great opportunity," Hernandez said. "I always loved the outdoors and camping—'car camping' anyway—but I hadn't been out in the backcountry. I also liked that it's a way to be involved with conservation work."

The program is aimed at helping veterans find jobs with the parks. Backcountry Trails Program Coordinator Phillip LaFollette says that while veterans already have preference in applying for the jobs, they don't normally have the competitive skills to keep up with other applicants.

“This is about helping veterans find jobs, which can be very challenging,” says LaFollette. “After this program they will also have the experience to be hired by state park services and federal organizations.”

For five months, participants camp out away from friends and family without cell phones or computers, left to relying on good old-fashioned snail mail to contact them. During this time, the crews are assigned to clear drainage structures, reroute trails and build and repair bridges, steps, retaining walls and causeways out of rock, wood, brush and soil—demanding work that doesn’t pause for rain, shine or snow.

The group's efforts aim to decrease human environmental impact by rerouting the trails to improve drainage, replacing eroded trails and bridges, and removing natural debris to make the trails safer and more accessible.



"It's hard work but it's well worth it," Hernandez says.

"[The job] is everything I expected and I'm having a blast."

According to the corp's website, ccc.ca.gov, the program's strict structure offers a unique transition between military and civilian life in a setting where veterans can share struggles and support one another.

Sheppard explained that from the time everyone gets up in the morning, (at around 5 or 5:30 a.m.) the crew follows a strict schedule of when to cook, eat, work and attend lectures, where they learn everything from first aid to sawyer certification.

California Secretary of Natural Resources (and former Santa Cruz politician) John Laird, CCC Director David Muraki and State Parks Director Ruth Coleman visited the crew at Wilder Ranch on Friday, May 20 to talk with them and see their work first hand.

Muraki says that while “hard work, low pay and miserable conditions” is the Conservation Corp motto, and crews work hard through adverse conditions, another threat endangered the program this year. With a \$11 million cut to the Park Department’s operating budget and a statewide hiring freeze, potential crew members, who had already purchased \$1,000 worth of equipment each for the season, were told it might be off altogether.

The California State Parks announced on Friday, May 13 that 70 state parks are officially scheduled for closure next fiscal year, including Castle Rock, Twin Lakes, Portola Redwoods and Santa Cruz Mission State Historic parks in the Santa Cruz area. Also in response to the state's financial crisis, Gov. Jerry Brown ordered a statewide hiring freeze in February for all vacant, full-time, part-time and—like the trail crews—seasonal positions.

"The hiring freeze was the only thing over the last 33 years that threatened to stop us," Muraki said to the group Friday, praising Laird for his effort to push the hiring through.

The veteran group also includes two UC Santa Cruz alumni. One is Sophie Carrillo-Mandel, 25, who says that she initially feared the program would be far too intense.

“I just kept coming back to it and thinking about it and eventually had an epiphany and went for it,” says Carrillo-Mandel, who decided to take a chance on the program while she was still young.

The Backcountry Trails Program started in 1979. In its first 28 years, 139 crews maintained and constructed 7,735 miles of trail. The veterans’ crew, which began work at the end of April, is one of seven crews this season. The group is currently camping at Rancho del Oso in Big Basin Redwoods State Park and working at sites like Wilder Ranch and Bean Hollow. However, as the season moves on they will head out to more remote backcountry areas in the Shasta-Trinity and Inyo national forests and Sequoia and Kings Canyon national parks.

“This is a great group, everyone gets along and just works together really well,” says crewmember Robby Sheppard II. “We don’t have any weak links.”