

Happy Trails At Santa Cruz State Parks

By Tessa Stuart Sun, May 22, 2011 Santa Cruz Weekly



CCC member Robbie Shepard (far right) works with state parks employees at Wilder Ranch. (Chip Scheuer)

Greg Snyder is hauling brush to the side of a trail he's just helped clear at Wilder Ranch State Park. The new Twin Oaks single-track cuts across the slope of a hill before disappearing into a sweeping view of the Pacific Ocean. Not bad for a job that promises "hard work, low pay, miserable conditions and more."

That's the motto of the California Conservation Corps, a state program modeled on the New Deal's Civilian Conservation Corps, which cleared trails and campgrounds and built some of the National Park Service's most iconic lodges during the Depression.

Snyder is a member of an elite unit of the CCC called Backcountry Trails. Typically, Backcountry Trails crews are made up of Corps members who have demonstrated extraordinary work ethic and ability. This group is a little different, though—in addition members of the CCC, it includes veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan like Snyder.

Originally from Bowling Green, Ohio, Snyder joined the army when he was 17. "I was stationed at Fort Hood. First of the 58th—I was an air traffic controller," he says, catching his breath on a break from trail work. He served in the military for four years, a term that included service in Iraq, before returning to Bowling Green to earn his bachelor's degree.

For the next five months Snyder will cross the state restoring trails as part of the 15-member crew (nine veterans, six civilians) from New York, California and all points between. The crew is piloting a partnership between the CCC and the Veterans Green Jobs Corps that aims to get more vets into sustainable jobs.

A little farther down, Myra Guzman is digging a drainage ditch to divert water off the trail and prevent erosion. “I think it makes us a more efficient crew, the fact that we’re all familiar with discipline, structure, time management,” she says. Guzman spent two years stationed in Guam during her service with the Navy, where she was a firefighter and welder. The Navy, Guzman says, “was like this—hard work but very rewarding.”

While at Wilder the crew is creating new trails to replace old, eroded ones that date back to when the park was still a farm. “A lot of the time when roads were originally built on farming land or logging land, they were built from point A to point B, regardless of drainage,” says Chris Pereira, Santa Cruz District State Park Maintenance Supervisor and Backcountry Trails alum. The new trail the crew is building is designed to have less impact on the land.

Before joining the CCC, Raquel Carillo graduated from UCSC with degrees in Sociology and Latin American Studies. She plans to use her time working on the trails to figure out her next move. “It’s a good way of networking too,” Carillo says. “I’m talking to Chris [Pereira] about what he’s doing, what other opportunities there are with this park and other State Parks.” The Backcountry Trails program is known as a feeder to competitive forestry jobs at state and national parks. While in the program, crewmembers are paid a monthly stipend of \$1,387 (before taxes and deductions for food) and receive a \$2,675 Education Award from AmeriCorps.

Even though it seems like a win-win for everyone involved—veterans and recent college grads get temporary jobs and lasting skills, and the parks get labor at a reduced cost—the veterans’ crew and four others almost didn’t happen at all this year.

Cuts to the California budget meant there was almost not enough money to fund the necessary supervisor positions. “The CCC typically has been cut every single year,” says Paul Hancock, the crew’s supervisor, whose position was only funded after an appeal to Gov. Jerry Brown. Brown created the program during his first term as governor in 1979. “They take hard cuts, and it really amazes me because it is a program that actually creates its own revenue. It doesn’t dip in to the state budget.”

The Santa Cruz District has sponsored the crew’s first month while the members restored trails at Big Basin and Wilder Ranch. On Friday, they’ll pack up camp at Rancho del Oso and move to their next “hitch”—a two-month stint in Shasta-Trinity National Forest, followed by another two months at Sequoia National Forest.