

Ojai Creek project gets helping hand from volunteers

By Monica Lara Special to The Star

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Nearing completion to restore the upper portion of a creek in Ojai's Libbey Park and eventually let water flow again, volunteers continue to remove the nonnative plants that squeezed out local species.

"The goal is to create a sustainable watershed," said Brian Holly, restoration ecologist and project leader.

The Ojai Creek restoration project, a four-year effort by a handful of local organizations, has rejuvenated more than four acres of parkland and watershed, according to Holly.

When the volunteer-assisted project is complete, organizers expect the habitat to be more enjoyable for the community and its inhabitants, including the endangered steelhead trout.

(View the [Ojai Creek project](#) slide show)

Starting at the upper end of the creek and making their way down, project organizers are hoping to connect the water flow to San Antonio Creek, which runs into the Ventura River. The connection had been prevented by overgrown, nonnative plants that had depleted the habitat.

The Ojai Valley Green Coalition is leading the volunteer effort. Along with coalition members, 32 volunteers helped with the project on Saturday.

"Not only do we want it to be more aesthetically pleasing; since it is a human-made landscape, we are trying to bring back its natural habitat," Holly said.

Before Saturday, workers and volunteers had removed 26 truckloads, each 2 tons, and a 25-foot wall of invasive, nonnative plants last summer. The nonnative plants, including the Himalayan blackberry, were retaining moisture from the soil and causing rot and interrupting regeneration of the native plants, according to Wally McCall, chief executive officer of Concerned Resource Environmental Workers, or CREW.

"When we got it cleared out, we found three dead oak trees," McCall said of the Ojai nonprofit's restoration work. "The stream had not seen daylight in 40 years."

To keep invasive plants at bay and create an ideal habitat for the native plants was the task at hand. During the volunteer day Saturday, workers used biodegradable, chemical-free methods to stop soil erosion and kill any remaining root systems of nonnative plants. They put down a thick stretch of sheet mulch using cardboard and wooden mulch, which they expect to break down into soil over time and to block the sun from the remaining roots.

They also attached mesh along the hillside with holes for plants. Native plants, such as woody shrubby mule fat and tall leafy ragweed, were planted along the water bed. After about a year of weeding and watering, the plants are expected to flourish with little maintenance.

"The creek flow in the channel was obliterated and covered up. Now you can see it and get into the area," said David White, director of the Ojai Valley Green Coalition. "It is very beneficial for the community."

Project partners are hoping to begin the next phase of heavy-duty restoration at the lower end of the creek in the fall.

Because of the tough terrain and the quantity of large trees to be removed, the project is expected to cost close to \$500,000, according to McCall. CREW and Holly are seeking grant funding for the project.

The restoration has been ongoing since it was launched in 2008. The efforts have been supported by \$120,000 in grants from public and private sources, including the California Department of Fish and Wildlife, Ventura-based clothing company Patagonia and the Ojai Rotary Club.

"The great part of this project is people can go and see our progress and see what can happen when you put your mind to it," McCall said. "We've opened up a whole area of park accessible to the people of Ojai."



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