

Calendar

Canyon Nuts

Saving the Canyons and Other Natural Places

Carrie Schneider says she's the one who "keeps things rolling" for the Friends of Switzer Canyon. So many volunteer conservation efforts are washouts. Schneider was asked to what she attributes her three-year-old group's success in the area that "spreads fingers" (her term) through several city blocks of North Park, from 32nd to 28th Streets, between Redwood and Laurel.

It began with a community event that didn't demand much commitment, she says. "We 'fyered' the neighborhood and invited people to a nature walk. We had a naturalist there who talked about the local plants and animals in the habitat."

What followed was a monthly effort to rid the canyon of invasive, non-native plants, but the group initially had something else on its mind besides weeds.

"The Metropolitan Wastewater Department wanted to build access roads to each of its manholes. They were going to start in Switzer Canyon." Luckily, says Schneider, "a couple of people in the community actually pay attention to things like Notices of Preparation. They said, 'Wait a minute. This is going to be a real disaster.' So that was the group's organizing principle — initial education to help people understand what was special about the canyon and then an explanation of why this sewer project was a bad idea."

The access roads, as originally envisioned, were never built. "Because of our protests, the City Wide Canyon



Houses on border of Las Pitasquitas preserve

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Sewer Maintenance Task Force was formed. It came up with some new equipment, new ideas, new approaches for how the department could access its lines and clean them and so on, without having to cause such huge destruction."

So the department was cooperative? "Well, it became cooperative. The uncooperative people got tired of dealing with us and moved on." Seriously? "I think some of them asked for reassignments." Also, "We had strong city council support. The councilors got the message across to the department: 'You're gonna work with these community people whether you want to or not.' It was a painful process at times, but worked out in the end."

Was there a core group of volunteers, Schneider herself and others? "Oh, yes, of course. There's always a core group — people who are nuts enough to spend a major amount of time on efforts like this." For Switzer Canyon, there's a core of ten or less, says Schneider. "And then there's an outer ring of people who are a little less involved."

So how does she keep her volunteers active? "What I found was that different people like to do different things, and you're more successful if you match them up. For example, some are really good at calling city councilors and telling them what we want." Other people are mortified by that

prospect, but love the monthly battle with the invasive ice plants.

What Schneider thinks works best overall is "a little bit of work for continuous, long periods of time." She witnessed the rise and fall of one friends' group, whom she declines to name, that quickly sparked, then died. "They got together, published a newsletter. They even mailed it" — rather than "flying" it around their neighborhood by hand. "I was pretty impressed. They spent a lot of money — and energy." But then the group petered out. "There was nothing to sustain it."

Like many friends' groups, Schneider's had help from the Sierra Club. Eric Bowlby, the club's canyon preservation organizer, provides newbies with guidance and a template — "flying," initial nature walk, and so on.

Another part of the winning formula, says Bowlby, is a Listserv. Bowlby helps groups create these computerized e-mailing systems that allow members to communicate by posting simultaneous messages to everyone.

More important than electronics, however, is the group's elite. According to Bowlby, what creates enduring success for these friends' groups is "finding the right leadership."

Are these leaders often retired? Traditionally, retirees have time. Schneider works as a microbiologist, but Jim Peugh was retired when he led a another type of conservation group, in the 30-acre wetland in the Loma Portal area. Now over ten years old, that group is the well-established Friends of Famosa Slough.

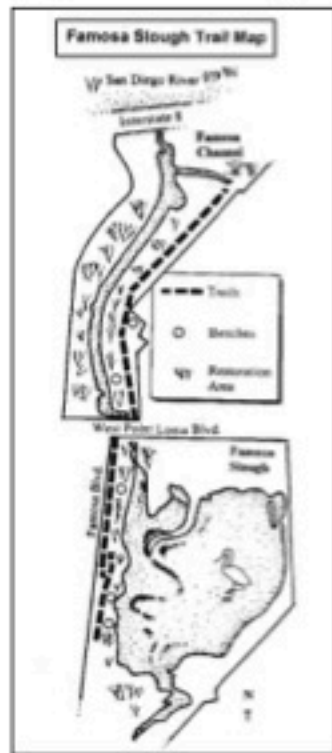
Bowlby has observed that the best

leaders often aren't necessarily retired. "But they are people who have these areas right in their own back yards." Schneider lives within walking distance of the canyon; Peugh can see the slough from his house.

On Friday, Schneider, Bowlby, and Peugh will speak and show slides to tell the stories of their friends' groups and to encourage others to organize their own. Along with them will be Mike Kelly, past



Switzer Canyon; A. Diego coastal sage scrub; B. Southern maritime chaparral; C. Disturbed land



Calendar

LOCAL EVENTS

president of the Friends of Peñasquitos Canyon.

The Peñasquitos group, says Schneider, "has evolved into a much more formal organization than most, because they had some seriously large things they wanted to accomplish. In our case, we're pretty small, so we don't try to do too much. We keep it fun, mix relaxation with working. And over time, we've found,

you can make a difference."

— *Jeanne Schinto*

Slide Lecture:
**"Saving the Canyons
 and Other Natural Places"**
**San Diego Chapter,
 Sierra Club**
Friday, August 16,
7:30 p.m.
Otto Auditorium
San Diego Zoo
Free
Info: 619-585-3773

Events that are underlined occur after August 22.

HOW TO SEND US YOUR LISTING: Contributions must be received by 5 p.m. Friday the week