

Rescuing Forests

By Keith Monroe

Wilderness trails and campsites and available today because Los Angeles-area Scouters refused to take no for an answer when officials said Scouts couldn't be trusted to handle forest conservation projects.

This is a tale of what three Scouters did to a big forest. We'll get to them soon.

An old joke predicts that southern Californians must eventually lose the use of their legs, because they seldom walk. Los Angeles, the world's biggest city in area, is a mass of townships webbed by busy roads on which everyone rides to school and to work. In a region so devoted to motorized transportation, it shouldn't be a surprise that some Scout troops don't include hiking among their favorite activities.

Not that they don't have plenty of wonderful opportunities. The sudden beauties of neighboring forested mountains are just a short drive away.

Still, some troops hike, and some don't. The latter will drive to a campsite and settle down, while the former hits the hiking trail.

Vanishing hiking trails

It wasn't too long ago that those Scouts who wanted to hike had fewer and fewer choices of where to do so in the 643,656-acre Angeles National Forest. Trail after trail was ruined by slides, rains, tree falls, or brush fires. And campsites popular for starting hikes were increasingly filled with family campers, church groups, and bikers from the nearby City of Angels.

The shortage of trails and campsites in the Angeles National Forest is also partly due to recent developments with the U.S. Forest Service.

The USFS was created a century ago to care for 151 national forests, including 17 in California. Its fulltime "trail crews" repaired trails and cut new ones. Skilled rangers cleared new campsites as needed.

The system worked until the mid-1950s. Then the Federal Government began saving money by cutting USFS appropriations--and kept slicing year after year. Rangers were laid off or put on short workweeks. Campgrounds fell into disrepair and were closed. Trails eroded and vanished.

Across the country, some forests have closed one-third of their area. And even more shutdowns loom as superintendents have budgets reduced as much as 30 percent from 1995.

A success story

Things are brighter for the Angeles National Forest, however. Volunteer work crews have been helping out there for years, thanks to a 35- year crusade that began with three Scouters in the Los Angeles area.

By happenstance all three were Scoutmasters are engineers for big corporations. They have long since retired as engineers and as Scoutmasters, but they now work almost full time as hingepins between the USFS and area Scout councils.

The first of the trio to start crusading was James Spencer, chatty young Scoutmaster of Los Angeles Troop 10, a troop in which he'd grown up. Seeking to plan rugged weekends for his troop, he found the possibilities dwindling. This propelled him into a heated discussion with an Angeles Forest official.

"I said: 'My troop would like to tackle a trail repair job. Can we arrange one?'" Spencer recalls. "The ranger told me firmly that the Forest Service never let volunteers try forestry. 'You'd leave a place worse than it was,' he said.

"I went over him to the USFS office in the Federal building. After a few visits I found the right people. I told them, 'You haven't had a trail crew in this district for 20 years. You talk about new sites, but they keep falling out of the budget. Scouting needs trails and camps, and we've got willing hands. Can't we work something out?'"

Skeptical rangers let Spencer's Scouts try a few projects that turned out well. The Scouts proudly spread the word about their achievements, and other troops asked to help.

'My sons never worked that hard'

A leader of one of these troops was James L. Hawkins, an eager outdoorsman with seven sons. Spencer helped arrange some trail jobs, and Hawkins was impressed by how enthusiastically his Scouts tackled the job.

"My sons never worked that hard at home," he admitted. "I decided that conservation work ought to be promoted."

Hawkins became a district camping chairman in the Los Angeles Area Council and then chairman of the council's high adventure team. In these roles he spread the conservation message and found plenty of can-do listeners.

One leader who joined the crusade was William Leslie, a veteran Scoutmaster in El Monte. And for 35 years now, the trio of Spencer, Hawkins, and Leslie have continued to keep the effort alive and growing in the Angeles National Forest.

Once a month the three Scouters have breakfast with Don Gilliland, a supervisor at the forest's Oak Grove Ranger Station. Gilliland tells where work is needed, and the Scouters farm out the projects to volunteer Scout groups.

Leslie and Spencer have spent days at a time at the station. Spencer will help Eagle Scout candidates with their service projects, while Leslie steers Scoutmasters and their troops to work sites.

Under Jim Hawkins's chairmanship, a program called T.R.A.I.L. Boss was developed to train Scouters and the crews for 200 Eagle projects. And the need for the Scouts' efforts may never end. Along with weather, swarms of excursionists incessantly wear down trails and camping areas

A continuous need

In one recent year, keeping up the forest required the equivalent of 32 workers putting in a full day every week. That's 13,187 man-hours. (The quarter-century total for volunteers, logged by the USFS, is beyond 250,000 hours.)

That's quite a legacy for an idea that came into being when an official said volunteers could never handle the work.

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