

NCC Quarterly

Customer Service in Open Space Land Management

Landowners and land managers within the Nature Reserve of Orange County are tasked with a breadth of customer-oriented services, 365 days a year.

As the third article of a three-part series, this story focuses on the role of customer service in the management of protected open spaces. The first article, which appeared in the July edition of NCC Quarterly, reviewed the importance science plays in managing natural landscapes. The second feature examined the essentiality of public safety within wilderness parks and open spaces.

Customer service (as it relates to land management) is about connecting nature to compatible human experiences. Highly specialized personnel from a variety of landowning, management, and regulatory agencies serve a critical role in offering the public opportunities to experience nature in meaningful and satisfying ways. The most popular types of customer services come in the form of interpretive programs, docent-led activities, self-directed experiences and special events. At the heart of nearly all customer services offered in the Nature Reserve are the efforts of an immensely knowledgeable and talented group of volunteers.

Interpretive Programs

The National Park Service (NPS) defines interpretation as “a catalyst in creating an opportunity for the audience to form their own intellectual and emotional connections with the meanings and significance inherent in the resource (National Park Service, 2001) The Association for Heritage Interpretation notes “Interpretation enriches lives through engaging emotions, enhancing experiences and deepening understanding of people, places, events and objects from past and present.”

Whatever definition one may prefer, interpretive programs deliver an educational outcome and provide a greater



IRC Docent Stephen Chung helping hikers find their way on Serrano Ridge.

public understanding why our nature resources are valued and worth conserving.

A sampling of several interpretive programs and facilities in the Nature Reserve of Orange County, which have great customer feedback, include:

- [Upper Newport Bay Preserve](#)
- [Quail Hill Loop Trail Self-Guided Audio Tour](#)
- [Aliso and Wood Canyons Visitor Center](#)

Docent-Led Recreational and Stewardship Activities

Docents serve as open space ambassadors across the Nature Reserve of Orange County. Just about each day of the year, Irvine Ranch Conservancy, Crystal Cove, and Laguna Canyon Foundation docents lead a variety of group hikes, mountain bike rides and stewardship activities. For those who are looking to explore and learn about nature, the websites [Lets Go Outside](#), [Crystal Cove State Park](#) and [Laguna Canyon Foundation](#) provide a list of guided hikes, conservation activity and other events. Please note these events do require registration.

Access to docent led activities is open to all and in many cases free of charge. The inspiration of nature and aesthetic beauty

Continued on page 2

Customer Service in Open Space Land Management

From page 1

of places such as as Crystal Cove, Buck Gulley, Laguna Coast Wilderness or the dramatic landscapes of the Irvine Ranch Open Space provide an ideal backdrop for these programs.

Self-Directed Experiences

The highest volume of use within the open spaces and wilderness parks of Orange County is referred to as self-directed use. In most cases, individuals begin their desired activity (e.g. hiking, biking, or equestrian use) at a designated trailhead and proceed to follow established trails. Self-directed use is typically offered seven days weekly, from 7:00 a.m. to sunset. Sites may be closed however without notice, due to inclement weather, red flag warnings (fire) or other conditions.

Through the course of one's self-directed experience, they may come across a series of "managed access trails." Managed access trails follow routes within the Nature Reserve where habitat value is rich and the presence of target and identified species is likely high. Visitor traffic and public use of these trails are closely managed to protect the most crucial portions of sensitive ecosystems and enable the recovery of protected native species.

Special Events

Wilderness Access Days, which invite the public to experience the entirety of an area's trail systems (managed access and 7-day access trails) are offered monthly and provided by City of Irvine and OC Parks. The events do not require advance registration and are typically conducted from 8:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. The websites [Lets Go Outside](#) and [OC Parks](#) may be helpful in providing additional information.

Conclusion

The Natural Communities Coalition recognizes customer-oriented services as an essential part of responsible land management. With a commitment to creating meaningful and satisfying public experiences in nature, landowners and land managers remain focused on sustaining the quality of human experiences in the Nature Reserve while acting to comply with the long-term science and conservation goals and mandates contained in the NCCP/HCP.

Western Spadefoot Toad

One of the most fascinating species protected through the Natural Community Conservation Plan/Habitat Conservation Plan of Central and Coastal Subregion of Orange County is the western spadefoot toad. This small 2-3 inch amphibian spends much of its life burrowed underground, where it can be near moisture. The "spadefoot" name is derived from the hard, keratinous protrusions in their hind feet, which look like a spade shovel.

The western spadefoot toad habitat in Orange County is largely centered in Crystal Cove State Park and Laguna Coast Wilderness Park. Since the 1950's, the western spadefoot population is believed to have declined by 80%. The likely causes of the toad's weakened status are loss of habitat and an absence of viable breeding areas, such as vernal pools and road ruts. Aside from the conflict from vehicles, most road ruts in periods of drought do not retain an adequate water supply to support the 30-day metamorphic cycle from tadpole to toad.

In an effort to improve habitat and breeding success for the western spadefoot toad, a multi-agency group of land managers, scientists, wildlife experts, and contractors have been assembled and called to action. Their charge is to build seasonal ponds and improve upland habitat away from stabilized trails and fire roads.

The scope of work is to build 12 seasonal ponds which hold water for 30-80 days and are surrounded by native landscape cover. Eight of the ponds are being constructed along Moro Ridge in Crystal Cove State Park and four ponds are being placed at Bommer Ridge and Emerald Canyon in Laguna Coast Wilderness Park. All ponds will be closely monitored through 2025.

Project partners include California State Parks, OC Parks, University of California Los Angeles, United State Geological Survey, Land IQ and Nakae and Associates. Project funding is provided by Natural Communities Coalition and California Department of Fish and Wildlife.



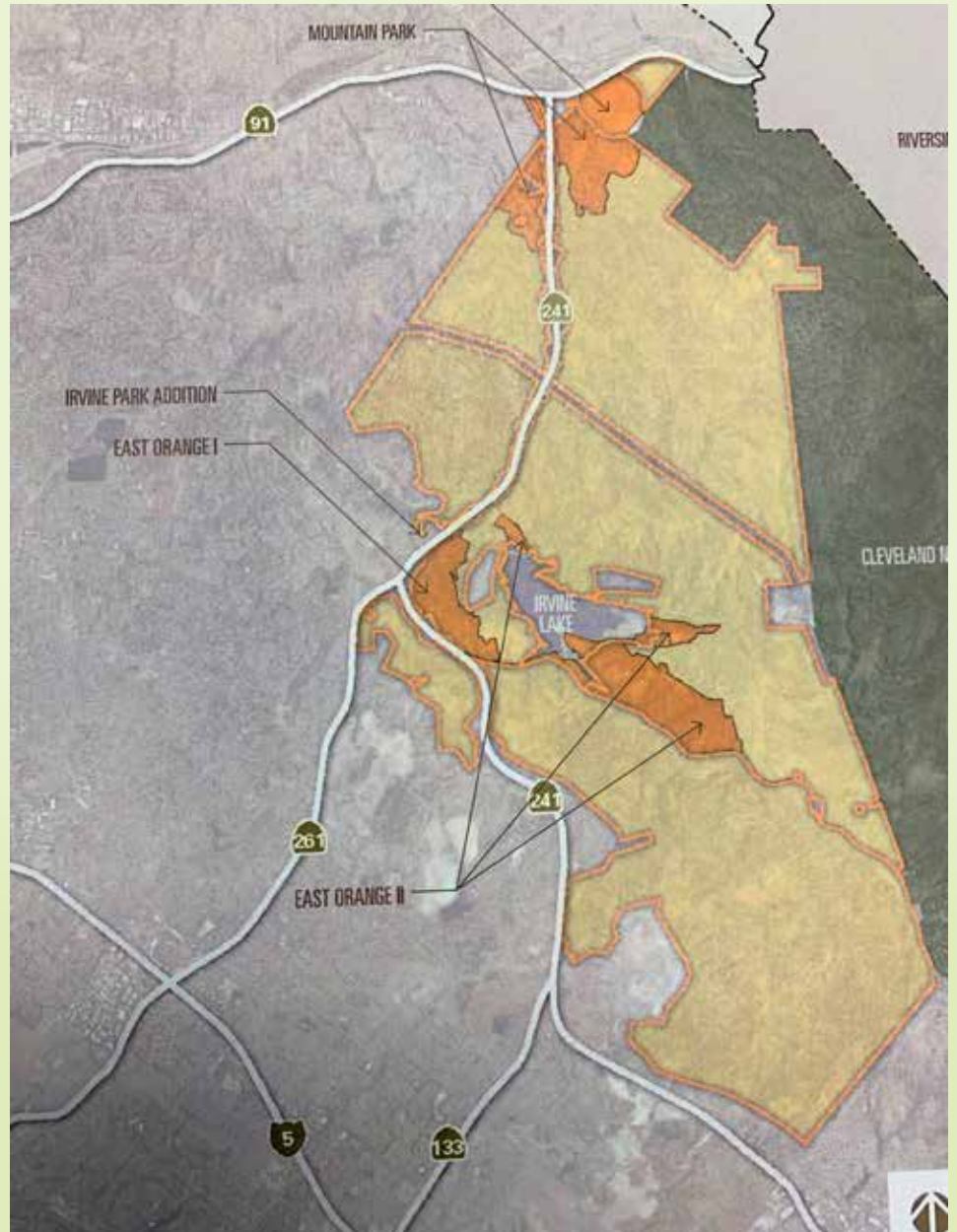
Conservation Easement Properties Provide Added Public Access to Open Spaces

In 2014, the Irvine Company gifted approximately 2,300 acres of open space to the County of Orange. The land parcels, titled East Orange I, East Orange II, Mountain Park and Irvine Park are formally deeded as conservation easements.

Under the conservation easement designation, certain uses of these properties are restricted in order to preserve the land's natural or cultural features in perpetuity. OC Parks (the landowner) and the Orange County Parks Foundation (conservation easement holder) are currently working in partnership to carefully monitor trails, habitat and wildlife in preparing a formal Recreation and Resource Management Plan. This plan, specific to the easement properties, will include a detailed description of localized biotic resources, as well as an overview of future operational procedures including, public access infrastructure (e.g. trails), planned restoration and enhancement projects and customer oriented programs and services.

Over the past year, work has been underway to facilitate public access to the easement locations. Trailhead site improvements, funded by the Orange County Parks Foundation, are complete at North Gypsum Canyon Staging Area and Airfield Staging Area. Site improvements at Saddleback Staging Area are currently under construction. Each of the improved sites includes new parking areas, picnic tables, restroom facilities, an information kiosk and trail access.

Future public use on these lands is envisioned in the near term through a managed access approach. Programs and self-directed public use will be consistent with conditions established in the conservation easements for the area, and may include interpretive, educational and recreational activities such as hiking, mountain biking and equestrian use. Prohibited uses include operation of non-ADA motorized vehicles and the presence of domestic animals (other than authorized equestrian activities).



For more information regarding the East Orange I, East Orange II, Mountain Park and Irvine Park conservation easement parcels, please contact Darin Loughrey, Outreach and Engagement Coordinator at Natural Communities at dloughrey@occonservation.org or by phone at (949) 973-6653.