

NCC Quarterly

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Coordinating Science and Land Management across the Nature Reserve of Orange County

THE HIKING ISSUE

According to the 2023 Outdoor Participation Trends Report, hiking is America's favorite outdoor activity! In recognizing our country and county's desire to hit the trails, the Natural Communities Coalition has dedicated its October newsletter content to support hiking in the Nature Reserve of Orange County.

Outdoor Participation Trends Report

The 2023 Outdoor Participation Trends Report, conducted by the Outdoor Industry Association (OIA) and the Outdoor Foundation, recently revealed hiking as the most popular outdoor activity in America – and it's only getting more popular. Orange County trail use estimates in 2023 reflect this national trend.

Per the OIA report, the number of hikers in the United States is 59.6 million with 881,000 individuals experiencing their first hike in 2022.

The second most popular outdoor activity noted in the report was trail running, with bicycling, fishing, and camping respectively rounding out the top five. For individuals ages 55 and older, birdwatching and wildlife viewing were identified as the most popular outdoor activities.

One of the opportunities for improvement listed in the report is the need to enhance participation rates among ethnic populations. While it is noted that the outdoor industry and pandemic have driven some growth in ethnic and racial diversity over the past three years, outdoor participation remains less diverse than the U.S. population overall.

The value of the Outdoor Participation Trends Report to the Natural Communities Coalition (and its landowners, and other partners and stakeholders), is the macro level scientific data it provides to inform future land management practices under the NCCP/HCP vision of compatible land use.

A few of the conservation focused thoughts arising from this report include:

1. Are elected officials and executive-level staff at OC Cities and County knowledgeable of the popularity of hiking and the ongoing investment it takes to build and sustain trail systems to serve the masses?
2. What is being done by developers and community development agencies to address the rising demand of trail users and is it adequate enough for the future?
3. What measures are in place are in place to monitor impacts and restore sensitive ecological features which have been degraded due to excessive or incompatible use?



Trail Use Etiquette

Like the roads we drive upon, trails have an established system of rules and expectations. Unlike operating a vehicle, however, you don't need a license or formal training to use a trail. What this often means is trail use and trail users are highly unpredictable. And while trail use necessitates some form of cooperation among users, everyone's safety is enhanced when trail use etiquette, or standard trail use guidelines are understood and followed.

When planning a hike, biking trip or horse ride, there's a lot to keep in mind: Where to go, the technical/physical skill required, what to pack, how to stay hydrated, and protected from sun exposure should be at the top of the list. Also included in this preparation should be an understanding of how to cooperatively practice safety and collectively enjoy an experience in nature with everyone you encounter on the trails.

The following tips offered are largely accepted among trail users. Please note these tips may be superseded by local trail use rules established and enforced at specific wilderness park locations.

Right of Way – Those traveling uphill have the right of way. If you are biking or hiking downhill on a singletrack trail, simply pull off to the side to make room for those hiking up the hill. Hikers and bikers are expected to always yield to horses, mules or any other pack animal.

Passing – If you approach a party who is moving slower than you, it is okay to pass, but passing should be done in a respectful manner which kindly informs the group of your presence, your desire to pass, and need to remain on the trail. Avoid pushing through groups on narrow sections of trail and seek to pass in places where the trail widens. In addition, pay attention to situations where you may be moving slower than others behind you. In these cases, it is recommended to take a moment to rest and allow others to pass.

Noise – The sounds created by nature should be accessible to all. Playing music through a bluetooth speaker, shouting at others, and even conversing on one's phone disrupts the solitude others seek when experiencing nature.

Off Trail Use – Off trail use, such as cutting through switch backs and/or accessing social or illegal trails, degrades the resource and compromises the safety of others. Hikers, bikers and equestrian users are expected to remain on trail at all times.

Interacting with Other Trail Users – It is common for many trail users to seek solitude as an ideal outcome to their trail use experience. People often greet each other on the trail with a "hello" and/or a friendly smile. Don't expect a conversation, particularly if it's with someone who may be avoiding eye contact or exercising.

Leave No Trace – The American Hiking Society recommends the following "Leave No Trace" principles. Walk in single-file and avoid shortcuts. Focus activity on resilient surfaces and walk through mud/puddles to avoid



widening the trail. Dispose of waste properly. Leave everything you find in the wilderness where it belongs. Respect wildlife by keeping your distance and avoid approaching animals, while demonstrating respect for other trail users.

Group Use – Large groups may take up more space, make more noise, and impose greater safety risk on individual trail users. Be thoughtful in selecting wider (non singletrack) trails for group use and keeping lanes open for others to pass.

Pets – Dogs may harm natural ecosystems and as such are not allowed on most the trails within the Nature Reserve of Orange County (NROC). Make sure you read the trailhead signage before entering a trail to make sure you and your pet companions are in compliance. Click on following link for dog compatible trails. <https://www.rover.com/blog/9-best-dog-friendly-hikes-orange-county/>

Bicycle Bells – Bells provide an auditory "ding" which alerts other trail users well in advance of one's approach. Bells are a favorable way of informing others that bicyclists are nearby. Bells are also less startling or confrontational than shouting at someone.

Ear Buds/Headphones – While there are no laws prohibiting the use of ear buds or headphones on NROC trails, hikers and bikers using these devices accept an added safety risk by eliminating their ability to hear the warnings of native wildlife and fellow trail users who may be approaching outside of their visual sightline.

Share Your Knowledge with Novice Trail Users – When encountering individuals who may be new to hiking or unaware of trail use etiquette, please kindly share the tips above.

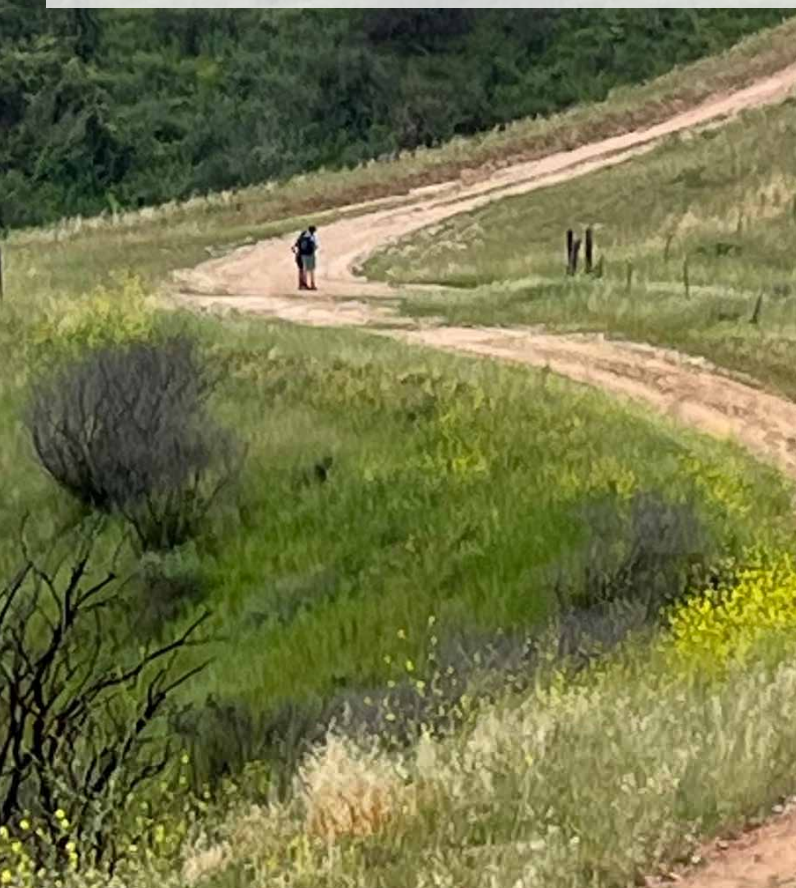
Nature Immersion through Family Hikes

One of the most impactful ways Orange County families may expose their children to nature is through family hiking trips in the Nature Reserve of Orange County.

The Science X Network website (Phys.org) hosts a variety of research studies based on nature immersion. Many of these studies document the benefits of wilderness parks and natural spaces on human health and well-being. Within the past year, published reports have concluded that living near green space adds 2.5 years to one's life, improves lung health, and reduces the risk of children developing ADHD. Furthermore, a study published in Environment International (July 2022) found that children who live in areas surrounded by natural spaces are more physically active, spend less time in sedentary activities, get more hours of sleep and are more likely to walk or cycle to school.

Planning a family hike may be one of the best ways to connect young people to nature. Please note that these hikes will take some advance time and careful thought to plan. The following tips may assist any family who is looking and have a safe and memorable experience outdoors.

- 1. Start small and near home** – When setting out for your first family hike, start with a short half-mile to a mile trek on relatively flat terrain. Search for a trailhead near your home which may eventually serve as a go-to location for future outings.
- 2. Wear the right clothes** – Wear comfortable closed toed athletic shoes or boots and temperature appropriate outerwear, preferably a moisture wicking shirt with a sun barrier.
- 3. Pack the essential equipment** – All hikers should carry a backpack containing a filled water bottle, trail map, sunscreen, lip balm, whistle and snacks. Adults should also carry their smart phone and some basic first aid supplies. Be sure to note the phone number of the park you plan to hike in.
- 4. Emergency Plan** – Before setting out on a hike, discuss trail etiquette and the steps children should take if lost or in danger on the trail, such as blowing a whistle.
- 5. Discuss, identify and interpret what you may see on trail** – Prior to the hiking trip, discuss things you may see on the trails such as types of plants, wildlife, geological or historical features. Plan on locating and sharing details about these items during the hike.
- 6. Talk about the hiking trip and engage children in future planning** – Allow children to be the architect of future hikes and entertain the subject of family hikes at the dinner table and at family outings.
- 7. There are many outstanding nature interpretive programs appropriate for families across the County.** Below are links to just a few:
 - Irvine Ranch Conservancy – www.letsgooutside.org
 - Laguna Canyon Foundation – www.lagunacanyon.org
 - The Nature Reserve at Rancho Mission Viejo – www.ranchomissionviejo.com/land/nature-reserve
 - Crystal Cove Conservancy – www.crystalcove.org



NCC Bids Farewell to Cathy Tucker



For the past 13 years, Cathy Tucker has served Natural Communities Coalition in her quietly effective manner as an independent contractor assisting in the coordination of land management, monitoring, and reviewing research permits, grants and contracts. While Cathy handled a variety of tasks with NCC, she is most frequently praised for her work with the successful coordination of grant-funded projects across the Nature Reserve of Orange County (NROC) and production tasks associated with NROC's Annual Report.

What you may not know about Cathy is her unique connection to the Nature Reserve as an educator, advocate, and hiker over the past 41 years.

In 1982, Cathy started working for the City of Irvine at the Turtle Rock Nature Center. In this position, she was responsible for writing nature-based curricula and teaching lesson plans for the immensely popular Kids and Nature Program. One of the unique features of Kids and Nature was the foundation it built among students, parents and faculty to support and sustain nature education for elementary school pupils.

Cathy was promoted by the City of Irvine in 2000 and transitioned to a supervisor in its Open Space Division. During this time, Cathy served on the NCC Board of Directors, was the Chair of its Outreach Committee, and oversaw dedication ceremonies which converted 2,000 acres of land in Bommer Canyon to NCCP/HCP designated open space.

If you have ever hiked trails in Crystal Cove State Park, Bommer Canyon, or Laguna Coast Wilderness portions of the Reserve, you have likely crossed paths with Cathy. Her favorite hike is on the Lizard Trail in Laguna Coast Wilderness Park, which features awe-inspiring oak woodlands.

When asked what she will remember about NCC, Cathy said, "the group of people I have had the opportunity to work with, and how committed and passionate they are about nature is inspiring. NCC has truly been a remarkable place to be."

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