

Trails – Good Preventative Medicine  
by Maureen McGarry

Interrupting the quiet of the forest, sounds of laughter mixed with scraping shovels and squeaking wheel barrels on the May 24th Volunteer Workday as community members restored trails in the Arcata Community Forest. A group of 21 trail stewards gathered on Trail 7, deep in the heart of the City of Arcata's treasured forest, worked hard, and had fun doing it. These loyal trail supporters chose trail work over the Kinetic Sculpture Race send-off in the nearby Arcata Plaza. The spirit of the volunteers was upbeat, and talk of future projects along forest trails continued throughout the morning. There is no question that restoring, building and enjoying trails is growing in popularity and is a high priority for these volunteers.

Amy Uyeki has been volunteering for over a year. "You get to work on a team of like-minded individuals who become friends as you work together, if they're not your friends already. There's a tremendous sense of satisfaction when you've built a trail, removed invasive plant species or, my favorite, transformed an unwanted trail or road to its natural habitat. You feel like a set designer! And returning to areas that we've worked on earlier, I feel a sense of pride and giving back to a place where I've gotten so much enjoyment."

On June 7, celebrating National Trails Day, another Forest Workday will take place in another part of the Arcata Forest- the Beith Creek Loop Trail. Volunteers will meet at the parking area by Trail #9 on Fickle Hill Road at 9 am. The American Hiking Society is promoting National Trails Day and is building a nationwide constituency of hikers and trail stewards, establishing strategic alliances with national, regional and local partners and advocates for hikers in the nation's capital. Their mission states that, "Sustainable hiking trails and trail systems bring people together, connect them with our national and cultural heritage, promote healthy lifestyles and serve an integral role in conservation."

Rees Hughes of the Humboldt Trail Stewards echoes these views with a local twist. "On a practical level, National Trails Day and programs like the Volunteer Trails Stewards are ways for us to give back to the places we love to walk. And it makes a huge difference because there are so few paid staff to do the work in our local communities or at the county level."

The numbers of RSVP volunteers (those who are 55 and over) are increasing with every workday opportunity. Now that the McKay Tract in Eureka is on the horizon, volunteers are needed for trail building and forest restoration there. Retired people looking for some healthy physical activity are encouraged to sign up with the Humboldt Trail Stewards.

"We have been so fortunate to have a number of new trails completed and in the works- The Hikshari' Trail in Eureka, the Arcata Ridge Trail, the proposed John Campbell Memorial Greenway and Strongs Creek Trail in Fortuna, the Bay Trail, and the McKay Community Forest east of Cutten. Community support is critical. We'll begin working in the McKay Community Forest in early fall and will need dependable help," says Hughes. Even if trail building might seem too arduous for those who are 50 plus, just enjoying hiking on local trails is good for our health. Studies at the Department of Physical Education at San Diego State University show that sedentary lifestyles result in muscle loss and lowered aerobic capacity.

"Walking is a tremendously good activity for senior citizens. It's cheap, it's simple, almost anybody can do it. It has very real benefits for maintaining mobility and independence," said Dr. Michael Pratt, the acting chief for the Physical Activity and Health Branch at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta (CDC). Research at Scripps College in Claremont, California has also shown exercise is good for the mind. In a recent study, exercisers performed significantly better in all reaction-time tests and in all reasoning tests.

Uyeki brings it back to the forest. "For volunteers, it's a total win-win situation. First off, you're working in an incredibly beautiful natural environment that fills you with a sense of awe. You get a great aerobic workout hiking through these beautiful forests, then a lot of upper body, physical work moving logs, debris, plants, trash -- who needs to go to the gym?"

People who want to participate but are unsure of their physical abilities can help by providing support to the volunteers who are doing the physical labor. Dennis Houghton of the City of Arcata' Environmental Services Department coordinates, supervises and instructs volunteers on workdays. He appreciates community members that show up and participate.

"We have learned that providing food & beverages at the volunteer workdays really makes people feel appreciated and culminates the whole workday experience. As people finish up with the work for the day, we often do a BBQ or pizza lunch and it allows people to relax, commiserate over the completed project, and share a laugh or two. Long term volunteers really look forward to the BBQ as much as the work and it is the "icing on the cake" for a successful day that keeps people coming back."

RSVP is looking for volunteers who can help with food solicitation and preparation. Some donated items that can help with supporting this effort include contributions of food from local businesses. A donation of a propane barbecue would also be helpful as well as water dispensers, cloth napkins and washable plates and cups, and storage containers for zero waste supplies. Getting the word out by participating in social networking is helpful for reaching potential volunteers.

If you are interested in becoming a part of this growing trend of trail building, trail

support, meeting new people and having fun, contact VCOR/RSVP at 442-3763 or [vcor@a1aa.org](mailto:vcor@a1aa.org), Environmental Services at 825-2163 or [dhoughton@cityofarcata.org](mailto:dhoughton@cityofarcata.org), or Humboldt Trail Stewards at [hughes@humboldt.edu](mailto:hughes@humboldt.edu). To view video of the recent Arcata Forest Workday, go to May Volunteer Workday on YouTube or <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LFbovMz57DA&feature=youtu.be>