

The Community VOICE

Rohnert Park, Cotati, & Penngrove

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Be more than just a 'green' consumer

By Andrew L. Roth

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Something vital is missing from the recommendations that we, as ordinary citizens, are encouraged to follow to protect the environment.

Because of global warming, we know to replace old light bulbs with compact florescent ones and to say no to "plastic or paper" at the grocery, in favor of reusable cloth bags. We know to buy "green" and shop local. Yet, many of us retain a nagging sense that these actions, alone, remain inadequate. Even driving a hybrid car may leave us wondering, is that all there is?

These practical and important recommendations would yield significant environmental benefits if we all followed them. But none of these recommendations encourage us to act, except as consumers. Narrowing our view of protecting the environment to consumer choices blinds us to other, more empowering roles we could fulfill.

To be most ecologically effective, stewardship of the environment must literally take place, locally. To be most personally rewarding, it should involve direct, hands-on action. In this view, every community presents its members with local and direct opportunities to take action on behalf of the environment. The trick is to identify and pursue these opportunities.

We in Rohnert Park and Cotati are fortunate to be connected by the creeks running through our towns. These waterways link us to the Laguna de Santa Rosa, which drains 250 square miles and is the Russian River's largest tributary. Our fortune is multiplied by the existence of a non-profit, grassroots citizens' group dedicated to preserving and restoring these streams, the Cotati Creek Critters.

Twice a month, from October to May, the Critters host community planting days, open to all. A multi-year \$169,000 grant from California's Department of Water Resources funds the Critters' current project to plant 2,000 native trees and shrubs along creek banks in Cotati by May, 2008. A new grant, from the City of Santa Rosa, will support the planting of complementary native grasses and sedges.

Planting native flora stabilizes banks by reducing soil erosion, improves water quality, and enhances wildlife habitat. The latest science demonstrates that ecological restoration controls floods more effectively than previous engineering methods. The ecological benefits of creek restoration are undeniable, but my enthusiasm for the Cotati Creek Critters goes beyond these points.

The Critters' planting days involve much more than planting native flora. Planting days link participants with nature, with place, and with community. You cannot spend a morning with others, digging, planting, and mulching, without feeling directly connected.

That feeling strengthens community and empowers each of its participating members. It keeps me coming back to the Critters' planting days, even after my busiest workweeks. I've never helped at a planting day where I left thinking, "I wish I'd done something else this morning." It feels good to work with others to make a visible difference in our communities.

Don't just take my word for it. Jenny Blaker, the Critters' outreach coordinator, wrote her master's thesis in Conservation Psychology at Sonoma State University on the group's outreach program. Her study of volunteers confirms my experience. These volunteers report that restoring local creeks fulfilled a deep need for connection with nature, place, and community. Come and see for yourself.

Walk the trails that parallel the Cotati reach of the Laguna de Santa Rosa, between Ladybug Park and East Cotati Avenue. See the progress made by local volunteers, including many community school groups.

The Critters' first community planting day is scheduled for Saturday, October 13. The organization also presents the Inside/Outside Nature Education series.

For more information on the Cotati Creek Critters visit <http://www.creeks.cotati.info>.

Andrew L. Roth lives in Cotati and teaches sociology at SSU.

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