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COMMUNITY

Up a creek and lovin' it

Volunteers with cotati creek critters restore habitat, educate public

By RAYNE WOLFE
THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

Dorothy Gale in the "Wizard of Oz" figured it out, and so did Jenny Blaker of Cotati. Everything you really need is probably already in your own back yard.

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Back in the late 1990s, Blaker and her husband came to live in the cozy town of Cotati. Little did they realize that their own back yard would open up a whole new world.

The Laguna de Santa Rosa channel runs behind their property.

"At the time, a bike path ended there and the city wanted part of our land to complete the path," said Blaker, who said yes. That required removing soil and bringing in fill. By the project's end, some of the creek beds were left bare.

With biologist friend Maria Alvarez and Linda Christopher, both members of Cotati's Community and Environment Commission, Blaker approached the city of Cotati and the Sonoma County Water Agency for permission to plant native trees and shrubs. Soon a coordinated effort was under way to restore the habitat to a healthy balance.

"In a way, buying our house changed my life completely," Blaker said.

Cotati Creek Critters grew out of that tiny neighborhood effort and over time has developed into a thriving group dedicated to preserving and restoring the Cotati streams of the laguna. It is sponsored by the nonprofit Laguna de Santa Rosa Foundation.

In 2005, a grant of almost \$170,000 from the California Department of Water Resources Urban Streams Restoration Program allowed the group to expand the program.

Working closely with Blaker is stewardship coordinator Wade Belew, who leads groups of elementary school students who visit Cotati to learn more about ecology and preservation of the laguna channel.

Published: Sunday, Apr 22, 2007

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"People ask us when we're going to be done. I don't think we'll ever be done. At some point, the planting will be done, but maintaining everything will take a lot of energy," Belew said.

Volunteers are always welcome to help with planting, which stabilizes banks and reduces soil erosion. Community planting days are held during the winter and spring.

Teacher Karen Mitchell of Congregation Ner Shalom school, Dor Hadash, has been bringing students to the creek restoration site for several years.

"They love it. I have kids who have seen trees they planted grow up. This fits in with our beliefs about repairing the world," Mitchell said.

Sonoma State University student Whitney Diver recently participated in a Critters project in preparation for a spring break service project in Moab, Utah.

"A group of us needed to get a feel about what restoration is all about and Cotati Creek Critters was a big help," Diver said.

"We learned how to plant trees, how to sustain them using cardboard mulch and hay, protect them from flooding with stakes, that sort of thing. A lot of manual labor, but fun," said Diver.

As spring turns to summer, planting days end, and the Critters "Inside/Outside" nature education series commences. From April through September, the group hosts a variety of nature walks, a bike ride, a tour of the laguna treatment plant and an afternoon focusing on insects.

Volunteers say the work is rewarding and needed.

"I go out there every day and I can't believe the level of maintenance the Critters bring. I do a lot of river restoration and technically, they are really doing the right thing. They are increasing the complexity of the habitat," said Critters volunteer Kallie Kull, who lives in Cotati and works as an environmental planner for Marin County Public Works.

To learn more about the Cotati Creek Critters, visit www.creeks.cotati.info or call Jenny Blaker at 792-4422.

You can reach Staff Writer Rayne Wolfe at 521-5240 or rayne.wolfe@pressdemocrat.com.

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