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A river runs through them

Federal wilderness designation sought for hiking sites

By [Anne Krueger](#), UNION-TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

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John Gastaldo / UNION-TRIBUNE

Chas Kennedy, a Boston transplant now living in San Diego, puts on his socks and shoes after fording the San Diego River in the gorge near Julian during Saturday's hike, part of San Diego River Days.



SAN DIEGO RIVER DAYS

San Diego River Days continues today and next weekend.

For a complete list of the 40 events, go to sandiegoriver.org

Some scheduled activities:

May 9, 8:30 a.m.: Estuary Exploration Bike Ride. An 8-mile bike ride starting at the western end of Voltaire St. in Ocean Beach

May 9, 1 p.m.: Presidio Park Tour, 2727 Presidio Dr., Mission Hills

May 15, 9 a.m.: Lotus Dune restoration. Learn about the Nuttall's lotus. Access road off Friars Road at Sea World Dr., Mission Bay

May 15, 9:30 a.m.-3:30 p.m.: Explore Mission Trails Day. Mission Trails Regional Park

May 16, 9 a.m.-2 p.m.: Riverfest — fun run, music, food, climbing wall, displays. Qualcomm Stadium practice field.

Online: For more pictures from Saturday's San Diego River Days event, go to uniontrib.com/gorge

For a schedule of upcoming events, go to sandiegoriver.org

NORTH COUNTY — Descending a trail near Julian into the San Diego River gorge, a group of hikers marveled at the multicolored show of flowers along their path and the expanse of green everywhere below. They splashed through the San Diego River — no deeper than a creek — and relaxed for lunch under cottonwood trees as quails flew from the brush and a wild turkey trotted by.

The hike, one of the events held Saturday for San Diego River Days, was conducted as part of a campaign to show the public some of the San Diego County sites that supporters want designated as federal wilderness areas. The designation is being sought for almost 64,000 acres of wilderness and 22½ miles of river that they would like to see named wild and scenic.

Jim Daly of San Diego, one of the 16 hikers, said he was sold.

“That was so incredibly beautiful,” said Daly, an architect at the University of California San Diego. “I’m really pleased that people are taking the time to save the wilderness before it becomes developed.”

Hike leader Geoffrey Smith of Mira Mesa said he has been working for more than 25 years to obtain federal protection for wilderness areas, which prevents development and keeps the lands in their natural state. Smith is regional organizer for the California Wild Heritage Campaign, an effort to get federal protection for more than 2.4 million acres of wilderness and 22 rivers.

“We believe very passionately in what we do,” he said.

Smith is leading a series of hikes in North County within the congressional district of Rep. Darrell Issa, R-Vista. Issa has proposed a bill that would set aside 21,000 acres as federally protected wilderness — expanding the Agua Tibia wilderness area by more than 7,000 acres and increasing the Beauty Mountain wilderness zone by nearly 14,000 acres.

Smith said he's pleased with Issa's effort, but a coalition of wilderness organizations is hoping that even more

areas can be set aside. That includes almost 25,000 acres at Eagle Peak, where Saturday's hike was held; nine miles of the upper San Diego River in the Cleveland National Forest; and six miles of Cedar Creek.

"We want to show (that) these lands are worth protecting," Smith said.

Rob Hutsel, executive director of the San Diego River Park Foundation, said that stretch of the river is already protected because it's within U.S. Forest Service lands, but the Wild and Scenic River designation would focus more attention on the significance of the waterway.

"It lends credibility to the efforts to protect and conserve it," he said.

Hutsel said San Diego River Days, which continues today and next weekend, is an opportunity for all of the 70 organizations that support the river to hold events at the same time. Forty-two were scheduled, ranging from hikes to cleanups to fun runs celebrating the 52-mile river, which begins north of Julian and flows to the Pacific Ocean between Ocean Beach and Mission Beach.

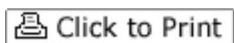
"It's connecting people with the river and what many groups are doing to create a better future for the river," Hutsel said.

The hike, on a warm, sunny day, showed off the remote area at the end of Eagle Peak Road at its best. Heading down, the 16 hikers stopped to admire the yellow monkey flowers and the delicate white morning glories that brighten the trail. They encountered a short-horned lizard, a threatened species, that waited to be photographed before scurrying away.

"I used to chase them all the time when I was a kid," said Bruce Julson of Oceanside as he admired the creature. "Now I don't see them anymore."

Find this article at:

<http://www.signonsandiego.com/news/2010/may/09/a-river-runs-through-them>



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