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Environmental group transforms Whitewater land

*K Kaufmann
The Desert Sun*

When the Wildlands Conservancy took over the Whitewater Trout Co. two years ago, the Yucaipa-based nonprofit set a goal to restore the native plants and habitat at the site and make it energy self-sufficient in five years.

Today, the 291-acre former commercial fishery has been transformed into a family friendly park, with nature trails and three trout ponds. Roof-top and ground-level solar panels provide a major part of the site's electricity.

"We're generating energy naturally," said Frazier Haney, preserve manager for the conservancy, who has led the park's restoration efforts. The park, open since April, got an enthusiastic review from April Rhodes of Banning, who visited the site Dec. 29 with her three grandchildren.

"It's so peaceful," said Rhodes, who remembered the site from its hatchery days. "It seems more open; there's not the whole fish industry."

The fish ponds were a major hit with the kids, particularly the rainbow trout — some a foot long — that leapt out of the water when fed the free food available at the visitor center.

"I like how the animals live here without being hurt or hunted," said Jaymee Rhodes, 9, of Beaumont. "And it's beautiful."

In fact, the only predators the trout need to worry about are the occasional migrating great blue heron or black bear traveling through the canyon, Haney said. Kids can fish at the park on Saturdays, he said, but it's catch and release only.

The conservancy teamed up with Friends of the Desert Mountain to buy the site in 2006 as part of its Sand to Snow Project, a 33,000-acre preserve system circling the San Geronimo Wilderness.

The Whitewater Preserve "is part of a wildlife corridor between the San Jacinto Mountains and the San Bernardino, that one spot left in Southern California where we have a wildlife corridor connecting the two mountain (ranges)," said Buford Crites, vice president of the Friends board.

"The area behind the trout farm, you can walk back up that canyon for days and not see another person and see remarkable plants and animals," Crites said.

Out with the old

Restoration of the site after years of commercial use presented some significant challenges, Haney said.

"There was a lot to change," he said. "We tore down 19 neglected houses and structures. We hauled out over 150 Dumpsters."

Putting in the solar panels also raised unique problems — such as carefully pruning an 80-year-old cottonwood tree to ensure it doesn't throw shade on the ground-level panels.

“We didn't want it to be too intrusive,” said Vincent Battaglia of Renova Energy Corp., the Palm Desert company that designed the system. “When you have kids up here, you can say, ‘This is part of nature, too.’”

The new system should generate enough electricity — about 23,000 kilowatt hours per year — for the three buildings now on the site, with the excess going back into the power grid, Haney said.

The energy savings at Whitewater will balance power use at other conservancy properties such as Bear Paw Preserve near Yucaipa, where a heavy forest landscape doesn't allow a solar installation, he said.

“It's like a very small cap-and-trade system,” Haney said. “The net results of green energy production should be green.”

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Additional Facts

Whitewater Preserve

Where: 9160 Whitewater Canyon Road

Hours: 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily

Cost: Free

Food and water: Bring your own, no concessions.

Directions: Take Interstate Highway 10 west to the Whitewater exit. Turn right on the Whitewater Cut-Off Road; left on Whitewater Canyon Road. The preserve is at the end of the 5-mile road.

Information: 325-7222

Upcoming programs

The Whitewater Preserve holds monthly nature and education programs. All events are free. January events include:

- Catch-and-release fishing: Saturdays, reservations required.
- Full moon hike: 7 p.m. Jan. 10
- Campfire program: 6 p.m. Jan. 16, an evening of stories, games and marshmallow roasting.
- Volunteer Day: 9 a.m. Jan. 17. Help park staff restore native habitat.

Information: 325-7222

Sand to Snow

The Sand to Snow Preserve System stretches from Pioneertown in the east to Yucaipa in the west, and from Big Bear in the north to Desert Hot Springs in the south. The Wildlands Conservancy created the 33,000-acre project to protect the San Gorgonio Wilderness and wildlife corridors in and out of the area. In addition to the Whitewater Preserve, the project also includes:

Pioneertown Mountains Preserve and Pipes Canyon Wilderness, a Mojave Desert preserve Mission Creek Preserve, a Sonoran Desert preserve near Pioneertown.

Oak Glen Preserve, an oak woodlands park near Yucaipa.

All preserves offer free children's education programs and other family-oriented activities.

Information: (909) 797-8507
