

VIEWPOINTS

VIEWPOINTS: PETER LANGLEY: Environmental concern should begin at home

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THIS PAST WEEKEND Martinez celebrated John Muir's birthday and the 37th Earth Day. The celebration on Saturday marking the 169th anniversary of Muir's birth included a hike to the top of Mount Wanda and a green film festival.

The hub of activities, as always, was the John Muir National Historic Site, and the focus was getting people in touch with their natural environment. Muir, who spent a lifetime trying to get people to pay attention to nature, would have greatly approved.

Since its inception in 1970, Earth Day has become a worldwide phenomenon. You can go on the Internet and find events in countries such as Albania, Pakistan and the Philippines, in addition to events across the United States.

Earth Day's founder was the late Sen. Gaylord Nelson from my home state of Wisconsin. I remember working in his office as a law student. It was the center of environmental action on Capitol Hill; the activists of the day would show up regularly.

Nelson had a passion about environmental protection, which is rare among politicians. He constantly encouraged his staff to look for ways to push legislation on issues such as controlling pesticides, reining in nuclear power, and stopping massive Army Corps of Engineer projects.

One could sense then that the environmental movement was building, particularly on college campuses. Over time, the effects have been dramatic: for example, now all major building projects are environmentally reviewed, hazardous waste disposal is strictly regulated, endangered species are protected and we recycle.

But the environmental movement's most important impact, I believe, has been people realizing that they have a personal stake in it. More than ever, people seem to be looking at how they can contribute to saving planet Earth.

Following Al Gore's advice and reducing their carbon footprint -- by things such as driving less, lowering electricity consumption and buying a hybrid vehicle -- is the most effective way that people can contribute at a personal level.

Preserving the natural environment on a broad scale, though, takes concerted action. People need to support organizations that are applying resources to achieve specific goals. This is what the Martinez-based Muir Heritage Land Trust is doing.

Supporting the land trust is probably the most important thing people can do locally to promote tangible environmental improvement. A conversation last week with land trust executive director Linus Eukel and land program manager Suzanne Jones brought this point home to me.

The land trust recently completed acquisition of the Fernandez property, a 702-acre parcel near the Franklin Canyon Golf Course. The group is now focused on raising \$4 million for restoration and stewardship of the property. This includes putting in trails and restoring Rodeo Creek.

The creek, they pointed out, is not in its natural state. Years ago, a railroad dug a ditch to divert a watershed away from a tunnel it wanted to build. This increased the quantity and velocity of water flowing in the creek.

Over time the creek banks eroded and the natural canopy of vegetation disappeared. The creek became too warm for steelhead trout to spawn, siltation increased, and head cuts of erosion moved up the stream as trees along the banks continued to fall.

Now upstream property owners are losing land and may lose buildings due to the erosion. The creek is undermining Christie Road, which borders the property, and fuel lines to Central Contra Costa County. Downstream silting presents a flooding problem.

Restoring the creek will bring an ecosystem back into balance and yield economic benefits: upstream property will be stabilized and potential gas and fuel line ruptures and road repair and flood control costs will be avoided.

Further, stabilizing the banks will allow the land trust to build a bridge to a staging area for hikers. It will also allow equestrian users to bring their trailers in and provide quick access for emergency vehicles.

This is a small-scale project, and contributing to it may not seem like a big deal. But much larger watersheds (e.g. rain forests) have been altered by man.

Citizens supporting the restoration process locally will pave the way for tackling environmental degradation on a greater scale. This will bring natural processes back into balance and curb global warming and other environmental ills.

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