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Orinda Nature Area closed due to storm damage

By Sora O'Doherty



Giant trees fell during recent strong storms, forcing closure of the Orinda Nature Area. Photo provided

Early in March, the Orinda Nature Area was so badly damaged by winter storms that, in consultation with the Orinda Union School District, the Friends of the Nature Area agreed to close it, canceling all scheduled spring classes as well as the upcoming summer camp season. Bill Hudson, a naturalist on the Friends of the Nature Area Board, said that everyone was very sad, because they had in fact been looking forward to even greater use of the nature area, but the safety of students and personnel was paramount, and it was difficult to even survey all the damage yet.

Naturalist Toris Jaeger is currently not working, as the classes she teaches have been canceled. The nature area is locked up, and Jaeger cannot access the greenhouse even to water seeds that were newly planted before the storms hit. The storms in early March brought down large old oak trees and bay laurels as well as undercutting the banks of the San Pablo creek as it crosses the nature area and another, smaller creek. This

resulted in the trails along the creeks becoming very narrow with possibly dangerous banks. Every Sunday, prior to the closure, the nature area welcomed volunteers to help maintain the area and its plants. Jaeger says that until the closure there had been regular attendance of up to 26 volunteers, and she has had requests from students to reopen the nature area for volunteers, although it is not within her power to do so.

"The nature area is a place that heals people," Jaeger says. "Volunteers love working together and talking to each other about school and life."

Recently, since the OUSD took a more active role in the nature area, there had been more successful programs, including the very popular summer camp program. Many children were interested in the camp for the upcoming summer, and teens wanted to work at the camp.

When the trees first came down, Reg Barrett, a member of the Friends board, tried to deal with the fallen trees with a chain saw, but the trees are too big to be handled that way. Hudson says that the friends have gotten together with the district, which owns the property, and were very excited to start working on more activities in the nature area. However, as a result of the strong winter storms, it was decided that there were too many unknowns on the property for people to be allowed in. "We don't want anybody to get hurt," Hudson said, "although we are very disappointed" not to be able to proceed with plans for the spring and summer, including a festival planned for April, which may be rescheduled in the fall.

Hudson believes that it will be necessary to wait until the ground dries out somewhat before it will even be possible to fully survey the damage. The district may also be able to secure some funds for dealing with the nature area from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA).

For Jaeger, it is the first time in 45 years that she isn't teaching, and she also isn't getting paid, which she admits is a great financial hit. Jaeger will celebrate her 80th birthday in August.

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