

Volunteers and Long-term Community Support for Effective Pest Plant Control

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[The following is an edited transcript of the presentation.]

Hello. I'm going to use the first person plural the royal "we" as it were. I think whoever you talk to that does the hands-on restoration work I'm talking about thinks of themselves as part of a much bigger whole. We are the "broombashers," the Pampas grass pullers, the Restoration Teams, and the invasive plant patrols. We are the grassroots stewards. Upon first glance to the passerby visiting our wild areas and parks, it would appear that we're wielding tools and uprooting shrubs, vines and huge clumps of grasses. If the passerby is a keen judge of human character, it'll appear that we're having a good time. And we do. We enjoy ripping out invasive plants because we know this is what mother earth needs and we are dedicated to helping heal her. We also like working together, being outside, and learning about the plants, animals, and natural processes that make up the natural world. Together, we've shown that species like broom, Pampas grass, and English ivy are effectively controlled using renewable, sustainable, locally derived, human energy.

The work of the Wildlands Restoration Team in the Santa Cruz mountains exemplifies what can be done. Our work has already freed many acres of pest species, and we're gaining momentum. Last year, one program alone, the Presidio Park Stewards, led by Sharon Ferrell, logged 50,000 volunteer hours. For less than a \$100,000 investment in program support, that's a half million dollar return in labor if costs are conservatively estimated at a relatively low \$10.00/hr.

The Wildlands Restoration Team has grown since its start 5 years ago. The great bulk of the work is done by the relatively small numbers of repeat attendees, or the "core team." The one or two timers are important, too, because it's through their large numbers that the message will be carried to others, and this is how awareness increases and gets more people involved. That's the key ingredient for success!

What does it take to build such a program? Three key factors must be in place for your program to be successful. First, the biggest challenge is finding a program leader. This person needs to combine the traits of having a strong constitution and being fiercely dedicated to ecological restoration. They need to interact well with people and they should know how to interpret natural history. Volunteers want to learn about native biodiversity, things like how to tell a rough-skinned newt from a California newt, and that California oaks have some 400

species of gall wasps associated with them. Second, volunteer programs need tools. For broom, weed wrenches. For pampas grass, pulaskis. Many other tools come in handy. A four-wheel drive truck to transport volunteers and tools may be necessary. Third, your volunteers will also need to be recognized and supported within your program. When they need new tools they should be quickly accommodated. It's absolutely vital to show volunteers that they are appreciated. Camping trips and potlucks are two effective ways to do this. Share stories from areas of land management that may interest the volunteers. It's nice also to provide a forum for volunteers to make suggestions for ecosystem stewardship.

Pulling up exotic pest plants is a necessary and integral part of our work as stewards, but this is just one aspect of our involvement. We realize that the biggest threat to what remains of our natural areas is not the weeds themselves, but an increasingly urban population that becomes more and more alienated from natural processes. As we have decided to return to the land a little for all that it has given us, our programs are creating what every land manager dreams of: an educated, dedicated, and responsive political constituency. While we are out there pulling up invasives, we're learning about the biological diversity that must be protected. We're also learning what it takes to steward the land. We pass these stories on to our friends and relatives. These stories and the teams that we're part of are building a new kind of community in the cities from which most of us hail. The lessons we have learned are best presented as quotes from the Restoration Team.

"I can honestly say that no other experience has done more to shape my values and beliefs than working with Ken Moore and the Wildlands Restoration Team. Every work day is a learning experience and over the years that I have worked for the team I have gained a fuller understanding of the intricacy and complexity of nature. There is a connectedness in working to restore a native ecosystem. It is that connectedness that intrigues me and gives me hope. The individual really does make a difference because two people can pull a whole lot more broom than one." (This volunteer was 16 years old when he started coming out 2 years ago)

"Working with direct action groups like the Wildlands Restoration Team benefits both me and the forests to a much greater degree than working with groups that use chemicals or simply sending money to groups that claim to be doing something for the environment. In an age of widespread apathy where feelings of helplessness are common in an increasingly disassociated, digitized society, this direct contact with both the environment and the problem is especially rewarding and rejuvenating. Our presence on the trails also teaches the public that threats to our environment are here, now, and also that we humans can make a difference without depending on machines or chemicals. Hand removal succeeds for me on the most important points: not only is it more effective, it is also more satisfying on a basic, human level."

"Yes it can be boring. Yes it can be hard. It's often dirty, hot and uncomfortable. Some days I find ticks burrowed in my skin and I run a constant battle with poison oak. My back aches and my fingers are tender after a full day's work. Why do I keep coming back? Why don't we just douse the stuff with Roundup? Number one, I keep coming back because I see that it's working. A creek smothered in a blanket of German ivy once liberated, springs back with native life. A hillside of Pampas grass

after a year's work sprouts with redwoods. Amazingly, replanting is not necessary. The ground is just waiting for the opportunity to send forth its treasures. We need do nothing more than give it a clean slate. The 'success stories' speak for themselves each time we return to an area we've worked on. Almost as important as the results of the work are the friends I've made. Working side by side, week after week, slowly but steadily uncovering a disturbed site makes for a great sense of camaraderie. I look forward to seeing those familiar co-pullers each week and meeting new ones. It's wonderful being around people who share a concern for the environment and come out to do something for it."

These quotes are just a few, there are many, many more. But, the ones I have just given pretty much include what many other volunteers want to say. What we're asking for now is that more parks, more agencies take the information here and make it possible for more enthusiastic volunteers to become involved. They are out there, waiting for the opportunity. Please provide them with leadership, tools, and support. The time is now. Every day, month and year you wait you lose a chance to reach someone and the weed patches are spreading.