

Restoration for People and Planet

by Alycia Matz
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It was eight a.m. on a Monday in mid-June. The day's heat was already making itself known, with haze on the horizon and the sun's rays baking the earth. Even so, volunteers dutifully slathered on their sunscreen, donned their hats, and pulled on their work gloves. They teemed with energy, eager to journey out to the field site. I was among them.

By our enthusiasm, one may never guess that the task for the day was pulling yellow star-thistle. Originally from Eurasia, yellow star-thistle is among California's most invasive plants, made all the more pernicious by a ring of spines encircling the flower heads. These spines are no joke—at ½-1" long, they leave a mean scratch. Yet, we were hardly phased. We chatted animatedly as we worked, fostering a connection with one another, all while simultaneously nurturing our connection to the land.

Increasingly, more people are coming to understand that humans and nature are not separate, but inter-connected. This idea was espoused in Aldo Leopold's renowned work, *A Sand County Almanac*, in which Leopold describes his concept of the land ethic: "All ethics so far evolved rest upon a single premise: that the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts. The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals or, collectively, the land."

Of course, this notion of inter-connectedness is something that indigenous peoples have known for centuries. Robin Wall Kimmerer, a celebrated ecologist and member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, states that, according to an indigenous stewardship principle, "What we do to the land we do to ourselves." In this sense, ecological restoration is reciprocal and mutually beneficial—in restoring land, we restore ourselves.



*Carolyn Losée tackles the invasive plant Salsola soda along Corte Madera Creek.
Photo by Sandy Guldman*

To be clear, ecological restoration is not to be viewed merely as a moral obligation, a means of atoning for our contributions toward an ever-warming climate. It is so much more than that. Numerous studies have demonstrated that nature experience improves our physical, mental, and emotional health. Volunteering is also known to have positive effects, such as increasing our overall life satisfaction, well-being, and sense of self-worth. After volunteering with a few nature-based organizations, I can vouch that these findings are affirmed by my own experiences. But don't just take it from me. Here's what others in Marin shared with me about their experiences volunteering in service to our community, our environment, and our planet.

Carolyn Losée grew up as an environmentalist. Throughout her life, Carolyn has cultivated a deep connection with nature, earning a BA in Environmental Studies and later pursuing an MA in Cultural Anthropology/Archaeology. However, it was around 2017 that her commitment to land stewardship kicked into high gear. At a Climate Action Salon hosted by acquaintances, Dr. Judith P. Klinman gave a presentation on Al Gore's Climate Reality Project, a global effort to address the climate crisis from the ground up by "recruiting, training, and mobilizing people...to push for aggressive climate action." Since then, Carolyn has worked independently and with organizations such as the California Native Plant Society (CNPS), Friends of Corte Madera Creek, and Environmental Forum of Marin (EFM) to enact positive change.

"I'm all about making a change where I live—right here, right now," Carolyn relayed. Troubled by the invasive plants surrounding her condo, Carolyn took the matter into her own hands, removing Scotch broom around her HOA. Believe it or not, she received pushback, getting reprimanded for restoration efforts.

While frustrated by the experience, Carolyn didn't let this hurdle stop her. "Stewardship is a human right, and a big part of the human experience is stewarding the land, and it's also neighborliness. I'm

extending [neighborliness] not only to humans but to all the species that live here.” Indeed, Carolyn found community in both the human and non-human worlds when participating in EFM’s Advocacy Training Program. Her Master Class Project was to restore biodiversity at Richardson Bay Audubon Center & Sanctuary by planting native species. This undertaking required Carolyn to collaborate and coordinate with many people and groups, including CNPS, One Tam, and the Boy Scouts.

Upon reflecting on how this experience affected her, Carolyn shared, “There’s something powerful about the collective spirit of humans acting beneficially for our home—for our environment.”

In asking Carolyn for her advice for someone looking for a volunteer opportunity, she exclaimed, “Just go out and do it—and if a group isn’t already stewarding the property you’re interested in, make inquiries and get permission first. People in the neighborhood will ask you what you’re up to, whether you’re putting in native plants or weeding—and through this, you’re being a role model, you’re educating them. And the beauty of it is, you don’t have to drive anywhere. There’s a real satisfaction in stewarding your own home.” Wise and powerful words.

Mark Palmer has been volunteering at parks and with other local, environmentally-minded groups ever since he was young. “My family has a long tradition of caring for one’s community and enjoying gardening and the outdoors. Volunteering in nature combines all these joys with healthy activities, and meeting people with similar values,” he recounted. Call it a win-win-win.

After retiring and moving back to Marin in 2015, Mark started dedicating even more of his time to volunteer work. His contributions run the gamut from planting to weeding, and from trash removal to trail restoration. His efforts span much of Marin, having volunteered with the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy, Marin County Parks, Marin Water, and Friends of Corte Madera Creek.

“The hardest part is keeping up with the younger volunteers!” he chuckled. All joking aside, Mark acknowledged the point of volunteering is not about who does what, or how much any one person accomplishes—it’s about the joy of working together in stewardship of our shared environment.

There’s also something to be said about how participating in ecological restoration has the potential to change one’s relationship with both nature and with the community. “Volunteering has strengthened my love of nature, and it has also expanded my relationship with the community. I’ve learned about the evolution of community endeavors and organizations, and have partaken in discussions on aspirations and collaborations.”

In asking Mark if he had advice for people looking for a volunteer opportunity, his response was simple, but spot-on: “Have fun! Make it a weekly or monthly adventure.”

From Carolyn’s and Mark’s words, I feel it’s no stretch to conclude that volunteering is the opportunity for endless self-discovery while simultaneously being part of something bigger than yourself. In a world where climate anxiety gnaws at our hearts and technology pulls at our attention, I challenge you to step outside. Pull a weed. Plant a native tree. Say hi to your neighbors. You may find yourself pleasantly fulfilled in ways you never imagined.



Mark Palmer heads off to install young trees at the Ecology Study Area. Photo by Sandy Guldman

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