

Celebrating the environment



IJ photos/Marian Little Utley

WORKING TOWARD FUTURE: Members of the Marin Conservation Corps environmental education program work on top of a mound that will be a 'high grassland' area. Over 350 donated native plants will live at the garden at offices in San Rafael.

Making every day Earth Day

Conservation Corps keeps Marin beautiful

By Mark Prado
IJ reporter

A band of young people armed with tools, a passion for the outdoors and a desire to learn have quietly served as guardians for Marin's environment for the last 20 years.

As the county acknowledges Earth Day today, and basks in the wake of a string of weekend Earth Day cleanup activities, members of the Marin Conservation Corps are back at work clearing trails, planting trees and providing environmental education in schools.

"I guess you could say every day is Earth Day for us," said Deborah Grant, director of development and community outreach for the corps.

The Marin corps started in 1982, in response to severe flooding that throughout the county during the "Great Storm" winter. A group of citizens — headed up by Richard Hammond who is still on the Board of Directors — started the group. They went to work immediately, helping protect local neighborhoods from flooding, as well as saving natural habitats that were at risk from the



READY: Manuel Yah prepares a plant for planting.

fierce storms.

After 20 years, it is the oldest local, private, non-profit conservation corps in the country, based at sites in San Rafael and Novato. The corps' \$4 million annual budget comes from donations and from the California Department of Conservation.

Each year, the corps provides job training to more than 200 people

See Corps, page A5



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IN THE SOIL: Crew supervisor Andrew Fast takes part in planting one of over 350 donated native plants at the learning garden.

Corps

From page A1

ages 18 to 30, who work on projects that help preserve the environment in Marin.

"We go to schools and give environmental education, we help people recycle, there is trail restoration, removal of non-native vegetation, creek erosion control, fire fuel reduction, there is just so much," Grant said.

The most recent example of the corps' work is the rehabilitation of the Bay Trail near Shoreline Parkway in San Rafael. Once a dump, the corps worked with the Marin Conservation League and others to put in benches, picnic tables and walkways. It also mulched areas and put in native vegetation such as manzanita, oak trees and sage.

"It's now a place that welcomes you," said Gary Miltimore, a natural resources supervisor for the corps, who worked on the project. "To see people out there enjoying it really makes you feel good. That's what we do."

Corps members say they get great satisfaction from their work.

"It's real physical work out there," said Sarah Conte, 19, of Corte Madera, who has been with

the corps for five weeks. "It's very rewarding and there is a lot of teamwork involved. It's been great."

The corps also provides young people with a chance to learn. Through its educational component, corps members earn high school diplomas, GEDs and college credits.

"I have learned so much," said Juan Carlos Sosa, 28, who has learned how to speak English during his 15 months with the corps. He also is working toward his high school diploma.

"I am also teaching people about things like recycling," Sosa said. "You also teach people about the environment and its importance."

Grant acknowledged that, in Marin, there is a special obligation to be conscientious, given the county's emphasis on the environment.

"It is very special working here," she said. "This is one of the most beautiful places on earth. We all feel a real passion and joy for what we do here. It is a privilege."

For more information on the Marin Conservation Corps, visit www.marincc.org

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