

MARIN CONSERVATION CORPS REVIVES THE CATARACT TRAIL

By Marilee Eckert

“The best time to enjoy the Cataract Trail is in the rainy season,” says Mike Swazy, resource specialist for the Marin Municipal Water District, who oversees the Mt. Tamalpais watershed. “It’s the most spectacular hike, with vistas of Cataract Falls, an awesome series of cascades down a narrow canyon lined with boulders and fern gardens.”



Falls on the Cataract Trail

Drawn by Artist Audrey Hulburd

The trail begins at the dam at Alpine Lake and steeply makes its way up the mountain to Rock Spring - a rugged climb at best, with parts of the trail carved out of the rock of the canyon walls. Years of neglect combined with heavy usage by hikers have left segments of the trail badly eroded, if not dangerous. Social trails made by hikers to circumnavigate damaged areas or to gain access to off-trail areas have served to further deteriorate the trail infrastructure as well as destroy native plants.

MMWD was determined to save this scenic and historic trail. That brought them to Marin Conservation Corps' door. Crew Supervisor Martin Acosta, an expert trail builder and 14-year veteran of MCC, headed up the project.

Last summer he and his eight-member crew put the finishing touches on the four-month-long restoration project, which was a triumph of design. The work is stunning; in places there are spiral staircases placed unobtrusively in the wilderness. Acosta said: “It was a tough area - and remote.

Everything was hand-carried in. We brought in railroad ties, weighing 80 to 100 pounds each, over our shoulder for steps. We also had to repair the erosion and bring the area back to a natural look. We used steel re-bar to reinforce the soil; we covered bare areas with branches and leaves to recondition the soil so plants will grow back. We put in French drains made of crushed rock across the new trail to help prevent erosion. We built a 40-foot-long retaining wall, 5-feet high in some places.”

Due to the success of this project, MMWD recently received another grant from the state's Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century, to restore an additional section of the trail. The two-season project was contracted to MCC. The work is expected to be finished by the end of the year.

[Marilee Eckert is Executive Director of MCC, and has been with the San Rafael-based organization since 1992. In a future issue of Trail Guardian she may report further on MCC activities.]