

ORANGE COUNTY

Nature feels out of reach for some



Local advocates want to get children from underserved communities to experience the more than 40,000 acres of Orange County wildlands protected by the Irvine Ranch Conservancy. Above, visitors experience 360-degree views from a lookout at Saddleback Wilderness in Orange in March 2024. **PAUL BERSEBACH — STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER**

Advocates work to expand green space, make beaches and parks accessible, welcoming to all

By Emilie Takahashi
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On a field trip to the beach, an elementary school student stepped off the bus, eyes wide, and pointed at the sand.

“Can I touch that?” he asked his teacher.

It’s a true story that was passed along to Genesee Ouyang, education director for Orange County Coastkeeper, a moment during one of the nonprofit’s educational field trips that revealed an underlying truth about access to nature in the county.

Ouyang works with Title I schools, introducing students

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Chris Farmakis, left, and Richard Morales embrace as they play pickup soccer with other adults over 70 at Westgrove Park in Garden Grove on Tuesday. “This field is home for us,” says 71-year-old Arsen Seharian, one of the youngest players in the group, which meets twice a week. **JEFF GRITCHEN — STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER**

5 stunning parks, open spaces to explore in Orange County

By Emilie Takahashi
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Orange County residents can find free and docent-led activities each week throughout the region’s parks and open spaces.

Visitors can sign up for activities at letsgooutside.org that range from hikes to photo walks and junior ranger explorations to nights learning about bats. They are organized by the Irvine Ranch Conservancy and its partners, utilizing thousands of acres of natural land owned by the county, Newport Beach and Irvine. Also check the OC Parks website and your local city for even more things to do outdoors. Here are five outdoor places you might

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SOUTHLAND

Water agency leader sought

Critics fault secrecy in GM search as Metropolitan Water District faces big decisions

By Andre Mouchard
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The most important water job in this region, general manager of the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, is in flux.

Three people have held the position over the past five years, including two since the end of January. Now, Met Water is in the process of hiring yet another new leader, with district officials saying their goal is to find a general manager who will stay

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ORANGE COUNTY

Thai antiquities remain stranded, far, far from home

Some folks harbor a dispiriting conviction that governments are unable to handle the simplest task.

We generally do not subscribe to this. Life-saving vaccines, institutes of higher learning, landing on the moon, executing war and peace, etc., belie the notion that they can’t do hard stuff. But — after more than a year following the infuriating saga of the stranded Thai antiquities — we understand the notion that they can’t do easy stuff.

In July 2024, we told you about the travails of Trevor Murphy, a fiduciary in Laguna Beach trying to fulfill the last wish of a client. The late

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Teri Sforza
COLUMNIST

BASEBALL

Padres dominate Dodgers

San Diego reclaimed the NL West lead with a 5-1 victory over the Dodgers on Saturday night. Los Angeles is in second place for only the second day since April 27. **B1**

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from the county's lower-income communities to the beach and watershed. Most of the students live within a half-hour of the coast. But for some of them, the field trip is their very first time at the beach.

"Of course you can touch that, that's why we're here," Ouyang said. "But if you're not introduced to these spaces or you don't know what's out there, you don't know."

Orange County is famous for its beaches and sprawling open spaces. OC Parks boasts more than 60,000 acres of green and coastal space.

This year, county officials expect to spend almost \$200 million to maintain the parks, staff lifeguards and rangers and cover other costs. Additionally, there are acres of city parks, beaches and miles of preserved wildlands throughout the region.

But not everyone who supports these spaces with their tax dollars benefits from them.

In a recent survey, Orange County Coastkeeper narrowed down what barriers limit access to O.C.'s outdoor spaces. It found that high costs for transportation and parking fees, as well as costs associated with using spaces such as camping or hiking equipment, and physical limitations, are top reasons why the crowds that end up exploring canyons or enjoying a beach day don't necessarily reflect the diversity of Orange County's population.

"The fact that people feel unwelcome and unsafe in these spaces is terrible," Ouyang said. "People in minority communities that don't feel safe going outside, they're not going to go to the beach, they're not going to enjoy the spaces."

"We believe that access to outdoor spaces, including the beach, including the coast, including the mountains, and these beautiful spaces, is not a privilege but a right," Ouyang said. "It is a right for everyone."

To start, not all Orange County cities are created equal.

Irvine is regularly ranked among those with the best park systems in the country, and 96% of its residents can take a 10-minute walk to reach one of those nationally acclaimed parks.

But just two cities away, in Garden Grove, only 1% of the land is used for parks and recreation and just 41% of residents live within a 10-minute walk of a park, according to the nonprofit Trust for Public Land. City officials say they are working to provide more.

Neighboring Santa Ana moved up 14 spots this year from its 93rd place in the nonprofit's annual ranking.

"We have to tackle the real elephant in the room, which is acreage, the number of acres that Irvine has in comparison to places like Santa Ana and Anaheim have," District 2 OC Parks Commissioner Ray Diaz said. In his two years on the commission, Diaz said he has been working to increase access to green space in Santa Ana and parts of Garden Grove. To Diaz, that means investing more in green spaces, carving out pocket parks and potentially converting golf courses to spaces more people can enjoy.

In the past year, Santa Ana has added five new parks, including the La Artista Artesia Pilar Park, which was carved out of less than a quarter-acre of extra space and has walking paths and trees for shade and murals of the neighborhood's defining Chicano history.

"We try to meet the community needs, and that currently is creating more green spaces for people to go to," Diaz said.

"So many young people always have said that they need somewhere to go," he added. "By opening and creating more parks, you are reducing the probability of students falling through the cracks, and leading down the path of street violence."

But inequity isn't only measured in acres.

In his 20 years researching park design in Orange County, Stephen Gibson, a landscape architect and urban planning professor at UC Irvine, has come to the conclusion that many public parks aren't designed for



In his 20 years researching park design in Orange County, Stephen Gibson, shown at William R. Mason Regional Park in Irvine on Tuesday, has come to the conclusion that many public parks aren't designed for everyone. Gibson, a landscape architect and urban planning professor at UC Irvine, says the solution is to put power in the hands of the community. **LEONARD ORTIZ — STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER**



Older adults play pickup soccer at Westgrove Park in Garden Grove on Thursday. **JEFF GRITCHEN — STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER**

everyone.

"Providing a park is one thing, but whether it is accessible to everybody is a very different equation," he said.

When Gibson's father died, his mother started staying indoors.

"I would say, 'Let's go for a picnic,' and she would say, 'No, it's too much difficulty.' Parking was too much of an issue; she had to walk too far, it hurt her hips," Gibson said.

"It seemed like excuses to me at the time," he said. "She just wanted to stay in the house, I thought. But I started to notice that the complaints she was having, as to why she wouldn't go to a park, were more about the access that she didn't feel she had."

That's "subtle exclusion" in the way parks are designed, he said.

It could be in the number of benches for older adults who are trying to take a walk but need a break, the amount of paving for wheelchair accessibility or the shade provided for family picnics. Gibson finds that, in America, there is a tendency to provide large open spaces; expanses of green fields for throwing a football or a Frisbee.

That excludes a lot of cultural groups that don't use open grassed areas, but rather hold gatherings under shade and trees, he said. Think of a morning tai chi group or a family that can't afford to drive to an amusement park and relies on a park for hosting a party.

The design becomes crucial and can be one reason some communities feel certain parks aren't for them, Gibson said.

Another reason might be much more subtle.

"There were certain cues about those parks, very subtle cues, signage, the kind of streets around the parks, that gave them the impression that, 'We don't go to those parks,'" Gibson said.



Elementary school students play with an Earth ball at Kids Ocean Day at Huntington State Beach in Huntington Beach on May 21, 2024. The program makes the ocean accessible to all students in a supported way, one Garden Grove teacher says. **JEFF GRITCHEN — STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER**

That barrier, which can also make people feel like some beaches aren't for them, is more about "psychological access."

"When you sense that you don't belong," he said, "it doesn't matter what kind of amenities you have there, you just won't stay there or you won't go there again because it's not comfortable."

Gibson said, in his 30 years as a landscape architect, he has seen that real estate developers and city planning departments can have a "certain expectation of what they want," and may skip over crucial steps in considering community use.

The solution: Put power in the hands of the community.

"Community members are a huge fountain of knowledge," Gibson said. "It doesn't matter if they have a degree, what they have is experience of what we are trying to design for. We're fools to believe that we don't need to heed that advice and that knowledge."

When residents are simply the recipients, the product misses the mark. By catering to the people who will use those spaces, Gibson wants to bring a "little more humanity" into the urban design.

In Santa Ana, Diaz has

seen the importance of engaging the community and having more voices than ever involved as new parks pop up around the city.

Mariposa Park, built in Santa Ana's Lacy neighborhood, was developed from beginning to end with local community members involved, Diaz said. Residents were instrumental in everything from the naming of the park to the addition of ramps for local skaters.

"It's a beautiful thing for the kids to run over there after school and be excited to see their friends, and just play and be kids," said Sophea Renteria, who grew up five minutes away.

Diaz called it night and day for the community "that has lived there for generations that just needed somewhere to go."

For some communities, parks are a second home.

Twice a week, around 40 players, all over the age of 70, set up lawn chairs and play pickup soccer games at Garden Grove's Westgrove Park.

Arsen Seharian, 71, is one of the youngest players. He started playing pickup soccer in the area more than 20 years ago.

"This field is home for us,"

Seharian said. "And the city knows that, that's why they come and keep it up, so we won't twist our knees and ankles."

He said he feels safe at the park and can rest during breaks in the game in the shade under the trees bordering the field. It's a comfort most parks don't have, he said. They moved to Westgrove from a park across the street that didn't have many trees around the soccer field.

"Everybody's happy here," Seharian added. "This is really special to us."

Playing every week was the community Seharian said he needed, and the park is where they all come together.

John Montanez, Garden Grove community services director, said the city is pursuing additional grants to bring more green space to the communities that need it most.

"We are taking meaningful steps to expand access and enhance quality by investing in neighborhoods that have historically lacked sufficient park resources," Montanez said in an email.

Advocates also want to get children from underserved communities to go out and experience the more than 40,000 acres of Orange County wildlands that are protected and restored by the Irvine Ranch Conservancy.

This expanse of land has miles of easy-to-hike trails and beautiful canyons and rock formations open to the public.

To get residents out to these looked-after lands, the conservancy hosts more than 2,000 free activities every year — but it still struggles with awareness.

Growing up in Santa Ana, Aurora Cortes loved the outdoors. Every year she would go camping with her family, but looking back, she said she noticed that maybe her family was the exception.

Today, she coordinates

hiking, canoeing and other outdoor programs for the nonprofit Latino Outdoors.

Even now, she's gone to scout a trail for a hiking program and come upon "private property" signs and gates to million-dollar homes. She's started doubting herself, even if she knew the trail was for the public, she said.

"I get more excited to explore areas like that because it really does help me push myself and also make people aware that these trails are here for everyone, for us," Cortes said. "We're here to diversify the trails, showing them that these trails are there for them."

Sometimes people need that little push, she said. She hopes that if she takes care of organizing the permits and directions, she'll reduce friction to getting outside. And by connecting with her Latino community, she wants to create a place where everyone can feel safe and welcome.

"There's that sense of familiarity and I think that's really important in these outdoor spaces," she said. "It adds that sense of belonging, because I feel like that can be missing sometimes."

For five years, third grade teacher Andrea McKeever has taken her Garden Grove students to the beach on Kids Ocean Day. Each year, she said, she has a handful of children in her class at Eisenhower Elementary School who have never been to the beach before.

For some families, the beach feels like unfamiliar territory, McKeever said. The Kids Ocean Day program removes all those obstacles and makes the ocean accessible in a supported way, she said.

"These experiences level the playing field. Every child deserves to understand the environment they live in, but not every child has equal access to it," McKeever said. "Programs like this ensure that ZIP code doesn't determine a student's environmental education."

At the end of the year, McKeever also has her students pick out a state park they'd like to visit with the free access pass that is available to public school fourth graders and their families. Parents often send her photos of trips they've taken with the pass.

Orange County Coastkeeper runs programs at 31 sites almost four times a week from October to May, and covers all costs, from transportation to substitute teachers. All of its programs have waitlists.

Ouyang said students are often shocked to learn that the Santa Ana Mountains, Upper Newport Bay and O.C. beaches and tide pools are so close to home.

"There are these beautiful pictures of different habitat types, and they look like they are from all over the world. But I tell them, 'All of these habitats are a short drive away from you,' and they're shocked," Ouyang said. "All of these places are in your backyard and you are more than welcome to come to these places and they have just never been."