

4/14/82 Flood 82
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Before



and after





Photo by Ron Powell

Extent of Nisene Marks devastation told

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The Forest of Nisene Marks State Park has been closed since the devastating floods of January, and will remain closed for some time.

But last night the public got a good look at what's happened to the park, as rangers, geologists and photographers who have been inside discussed what they've seen before a packed audience at the Aptos Library.

What changes has nature worked in the park this winter?

—The old cabins on Bridge Creek (built around 1916 by loggers) were wiped out. Photographs were shown of the old structures, and the cleaned-out stream channel that is all that remains. "The Bridge Creek Historic Site is non-existent," said park ranger Jerry Waggoner.

—Old railroad trestles that had stood for almost a century were carried away. Historian Sandy Lydon showed photographs of a free-standing bridge support near Aptos Creek. "That was built in the late 1800's," he said. "It had survived big events (floods) in 1955, and before that. It's gone."

—The park's trail system, laboriously built by Youth Conservation Corps workers and volunteers in recent years, was dealt a major setback. Landslides buried fire roads and hiking trails, while flood waters carried some bridges miles downstream. "The Bridge Creek Trail is for all intents and purposes gone," said Lydon. "And Aptos Creek won't be available either. At every bend in the creek there's another slide or log jam. It's dangerous up there." According to Waggoner, "We just got put back ten years."

—Streams ran incredibly high, tearing out trees and scouring creekbeds even at high elevations. "No more nice moss covered rocks, pretty ferns, overhanging branches — none of that peeky-boo stuff," said Lydon, who had pictures taken just

last Sunday to prove assertion. Photographer Ron Powell said that even at the 1,600-foot elevation on Hinckley Creek, the water had run eight feet deep. The park's official rain gauge overflowed at 11 inches the day of the January storm. The forest canopy has been opened up in many places by the slides and flooding, letting in more sunlight and opening up longer views.

UC-Santa Cruz geologist Gary Griggs discussed why the storm had set off so many mudslides, slumps and avalanches, both inside and outside of the park. "There was much greater than average rainfall even before the storm hit," he pointed out. "And the January storm was an intense, extreme event by any measure. The soil can only hold so much. The water gets into the soil down to the bedrock. It weakens the grain-to-grain contacts, it lubricates the (bedrock) slide surfaces. It gets to the point where it's weakened, and when you add more and more water, it can no longer resist movement. The slope material couldn't resist the overburdening weight of the soil, trees and all that water."

The floods cleaned streambeds down to the bedrock in many places. But in other spots they dropped several feet of fresh silt. "It's a very natural phenomenon," Griggs said. "Floods are going to flow when it rains that hard. Where the stream hits an obstruction, like a bridge or a log-jam, it's bound to move and cut. It's the natural process of stream evolution."

Griggs questioned whether it's wise to rebuild everything carried off by the storm. He showed slides of a house just below the park, which had been torn apart by the storm. "That house was destroyed by floods in '55," Griggs said, "Then rebuilt on fill. It was destroyed again in '82. But it will probably be rebuilt. Houses are still being built in this county on slopes that have no business being built on."

The State Parks Department faces the same question with the Forest of Nisene

Marks. "In a sense, we've got a brand new park," said Waggoner.

The picnic areas in the lower parts of the park should be open sometime this summer, according to Herman Schlerf, manager of the seven state parks in the Santa Cruz Mountains. "The main problem is access by vehicle to the picnic areas," he said.

But as for the remainder of the park, Schlerf can't set a date. "Nisene Marks was by far the most heavily damaged of the seven Santa Cruz Mountain parks," he said, "And it will be the last to reopen. We're working with the State Department of Forestry to see which patrol roads they need for fire control. It's still too wet to use the road much, and until we get the patrol road back we can't reopen the trail camp" (a six unit, hike-in camp reached by the less heavily damaged West Ridge Trail and Loma Prieta Grade.)

It's unclear when — or even if — the most heavily damaged roads and trails will be fully reopened. "You remember driving up to Schoolhouse?" said Lydon, "That was a historic experience, folks."

"The change is so widespread," he added, "that critical decisions have to be made very soon. How far back do we go to where we were before January 2?"

Towards this end, the park's Advisory Committee is seeking the public's help. The annual Trail Days is scheduled for Saturday, April 17. "It's a chance to see the changes first hand," said Waggoner. "We're soliciting as much help as we can get. Trail Days has historically built up new trails — this year we're going to try to reopen the West Ridge Trail and Loma Prieta Grade." Volunteers are asked to meet at the park's entrance (on Aptos Creek Road, just above Soquel Drive) at 8:30 a.m.

The Nisene Marks Advisory Committee is also asking for public comment as to which projects deserve the highest priority. Committee members will be working at Trail Days, or comments can be to committee chair Glenn Specht.