

Venerable campfire area at Big Basin restored

By PAUL ROGERS
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SANTA CRUZ — More than 1 million visitors who travel to Big Basin Redwoods State Park in the Santa Cruz Mountains every year mostly go to see one thing: ancient trees.

But for nearly 80 years, generations of campers, Scout troops and other park lovers also have listened to rangers deliver nature talks at Big Basin's historic campfire center, a rustic outdoor theater where the seats are carved from fallen old-growth redwood trees.

The campfire center, built in 1935 by Franklin Roosevelt's Civilian Conservation Corps, had suffered hard times in recent years. But now a \$275,000 project funded by the nonprofit Sempervirens Fund, has returned it to its former glory.

"It's one of the oldest and most significant outdoor interpretive venues in the state," said Reed Holderman, executive director of Sempervirens Fund, based in Los Altos. "And it was falling apart. They couldn't use it. The benches were deteriorating. They had



DAN COYRO/SENTINEL

Derrick Morris and wife Stephanie stroll through Big Basin State Park's Campfire Center, where storytelling around a bonfire happens each night with amphitheater seating carved from redwood logs. The center has been restored in a \$275,000 project funded by the Sempervirens Fund.

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BIG BASIN

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rot and termites."

The Sempervirens Fund paid to replace 139 redwood benches. Each is carved from redwoods that had naturally fallen in the park. The project began in 2007, but only finished recently because work could only be done in dry weather. Crews also spent time searching far and wide for the right trees that had fallen in accessible locations, then milled them on site.

"Our environmental scientists carefully helped us select the trees that were available for the benches," said Sheila Branon, acting Santa Cruz Mountains superintendent for state parks. "They had to be accessible, near roads. We chose the ones that had the least impact on the forest."

RICH HISTORY

The old benches, cracked and rotting, were moved to a section of the 22,000-acre park where they will be allowed to continue to decay naturally. The new ones are coated with a protective sealant, and were built several inches off the dirt so they can last longer than their predecessors.

Built near the park's headquarters, the 300-seat campfire area at Big Basin hosts regular talks from park rangers about the history of the Santa Cruz Mountains, its wildlife and its natural features, all illu-

In the 1930s and 1940s, California's first female state park ranger, Harriett 'Petey' Weaver, led sing-a-longs at the campfire area, and nighttime nature hikes she called 'coffee walks.'

minated by a huge crackling fire.

In the 1930s and 1940s, California's first female state park ranger, Harriett "Petey" Weaver, led sing-a-longs at the campfire area, and nighttime nature hikes she called "coffee walks." In 2002, actor/director Clint Eastwood was sworn in on the facility's stage as a member of the California State Park and Recreation Commission.

"We can think of no better place to learn about the park than sitting by a campfire at night under 300-foot redwood trees," said Holderman. "The place is important and it leaves a deep impression on people."

California's recent budget crisis has hit state parks hard. Earlier this year, Gov. Jerry Brown announced plans to close 70 state parks by next July — one-quarter of the state's venerable park system. If the closures occur, Brown would become the first governor in state history to close parks to balance a budget. Although Big Basin is not on the list, other nearby parks are, including Portola Redwoods State Park, the Santa Cruz Mission State Historic Park, Twin Lakes State Beach and Castle Rock State Park.

FIRST STATE PARK

When the Big Basin campfire area had deteriorated so badly that it wasn't

usable, state parks officials asked Sempervirens Fund for help. Named for the Latin name for redwoods, sequoia sempervirens, the organization was founded in 1900 by San Jose photographer Andrew P. Hill, who was horrified to see loggers cutting down 2,000-year-old redwoods in the Santa Cruz Mountains for railroad ties and fence posts. The group convinced state legislators to purchase land in the Big Basin area, and it became California's first state park in 1902.

Since then, the group has preserved roughly 25,000 acres of redwood land in the Santa Cruz Mountains, buying most of the property for Big Basin, Butano and Castle Rock state parks. A ribbon-cutting and ceremony for the renovated campfire area is planned for next year, after work to improve access for the disabled is finished on trails and rest rooms near park headquarters.

"This is a really important place. It provides a sanctuary for the public to sit in — a grand amphitheater to look up at the trees and breathe the fresh air and listen to the sounds of the creek," said Branon. "We don't visit nature enough. Everyone works in this fast-paced world. We all need to take a break every once in a while and visit nature."