

State honors plant-pulling volunteers

By MAY WONG
Sentinel staff writer

A 15-foot-tall enemy towers above Ken Moore. But with the heavy jaws of a weed wrench, Moore clenches the plant and wrestles it from the earth.

For almost four years, Moore has repeatedly waged this battle against the exotic French broom in state parks in Santa Cruz and San Mateo counties. Under a Sempervirens Fund program he started in 1990, each week Moore and dozens of volunteers remove truckloads of non-native plants that have invaded the park system and crowded out native plants and animals.

Volunteers in the Wildlands Restoration Program this year put in more than 3,000 hours of labor-intensive work to restore parklands in the Santa Cruz Mountains back to its natural state.

This week the state Department of Parks and Recreation recognized the volunteer effort and named the program as one of thirty recipients of the 1993 Take Pride in California award. Les Clark, a state parks ranger, nominated it.

Under the program, groups of volunteers ranging from college students to business organizations make weekly treks into the state parklands to weed out the unwanted.

"It's helping nature heal," said Moore, an Aptos resident who is the program coordinator. "Nature is the predominant force here. If we could provide that little push and remove the damage that we ourselves have caused, then nature is going to do the rest."

Every Saturday morning, except when it is raining, Moore and anywhere from six to 35 volunteers can be found at Butano, Portola, Big Basin, Fall Creek, Rancho del Oso, Castle Rock, Henry Cowell, or the Forest of Nisene Marks state parks.

Their foes include French broom, pampas grass, acacia, English ivy and German ivy. The aggressive and hearty plants were imported for decorative reasons over the past century, and ended up infiltrating the coastal lands of California, Moore said.

Such plants reduce biodiversity in the ecosystem, Moore said.

Weeding out the French broom, a bushy, yellow-blossomed plant with feathery plumes, from Rancho del Oso was the program's first goal, he said.



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Volunteer Bob Wright, right, and restoration coordinator Ken Moore attack a stand of Nisene Marks pampas grass.

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Parks officials were skeptical in the beginning, Moore said. But last year, the original growth of the broom in the park was all pulled out. Now only the young seedlings are being removed.

"Everyone told me it couldn't be done," Moore said. "Now they don't take me lightly anymore."

But because of the plants' prolific behaviors — French broom seeds can live for 80 years — eradication efforts in the state park sys-

tem will be a long, painstaking process, Moore said.

"It's definitely a long-term commitment," Moore said. "But if we stop we would go back to ground zero."

The Sempervirens Fund is a non-profit land conservancy group based in Los Altos. Since it was formed in 1900, it has saved and preserved thousands of acres of Santa Cruz mountain redwood lands.