

New trail blazes path toward SC ecotourism

By JENNIFER PITTMAN
Sentinel staff writer

SANTA CRUZ — A public inauguration Saturday of a 27-mile walking and bike path winding through Santa

Cruz is more than a day in the park. The volunteers

pulling the effort together say it's the groundbreaking of a movement to redefine the local tourist industry.

Local eco-dreamers have plotted out an all-day environmental extravaganza in the San Lorenzo Park — replete with an eco-thon relay along the new trail, kid races, guided walking and river tours, beach clean-ups, an Ecology Hall of Fame, farm, garden and arboretum tours and the official inauguration of the Santa Cruz Circle Trail.

After the hoopla, however, the event organizers hope to have made a lasting impression on visitors, namely that Santa Cruz, a.k.a., "Ecotopia, USA," is not just about the Boardwalk and the beach. They are spearheading the effort to make Santa Cruz an "ecodestination" where environmentally conscientious visitors explore more of the local natural splendors rather than just lounge on the beaches. Instead of a typical resort town where tourists passively experience their vacation, Circle Trail Day founders envision a kind of "environmental Club Med."

Santa Cruz would offer tourists environmental study programs. Big-spending naturalists would exchange their gaz-guzzling, fuel-emitting vehicles for quiet, clean-running electric cars at the gated entryways to the county and ride an electric highway, past charging stations located conveniently at spots like Moss Landing.

On foot or by bicycle, they would tread the new Circle Trail that winds along the coast, into wooded foothills, passing the UC Santa Cruz Arboretum, deep gulches and the businesses that jut up to the river levees. They will visit the new Ecology Hall of Fame, the Santa Cruz City Museum of Natural History and an environmental simulation project in cyberspace.

And they will spend money. A lot of it.

That's the plan, anyway, of local community activists Paul Lee, Don Weiss and Sylvia Knapton, who have labored for years with the help of many others to see Circle Trail Day happen.

Ecotourists "will spend twice

Please see TRAIL — BACK PAGE

Trail

Continued from Page A1

what the ordinary tourist will spend," Lee said. "It's upscale. It's people who want to go to good restaurants. I hate to characterize it as the high bourgeoisie, but I'm sure the ecotourist development is a slight cut above the conventional tourist that comes to Santa Cruz."

The project is the brainchild of 73-year-old Sylvia Knapton, an avid hiker with the Walnut Avenue Women's Center, who was looking down at a Santa Cruz map one day after the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake, and a circle of trails "just jumped out" at her.

She wrote letters to local newspapers about the trail being a unifying community project, but was mostly ignored. Several years later, she approached Paul Lee with the idea and he has championed it ever since. Lee has worked on several other local projects, including the Homeless Garden Project and the development of a Santa Cruz greenbelt.

"I drove him around, showing him the different elements of it," Knapton recalled. "... He said, 'just go a little farther.' " Since then, they have mapped out trails, working with other volunteers and Susan Harris, an associate planner with the Santa Cruz city Parks and Recreation Department, who was with the National Parks Service at the time. The National Parks Service provided funding for signs and brochures for the trail. City Councilwoman Katherine Beiers (who will be number 1 in the 10 kilometer race) and Vice Mayor Celia Scott have shepherded the trail through numerous City Council agendas.

Knapton said she saw highlights of the trail as "crown jewels," each spot drawing special interest and the trail linking them together.

Lee, who says he's invested about \$30,000 into the project, envisions more than community unity. He is expecting that as businesses get on board, about 2 million ecotourists will eventually visit the



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

Community activists Paul Lee, Sylvia Knapton and Don Weiss worked for years to make the Circle Trail a reality.

trail and the Ecology Hall of Fame annually. Tens of thousands of people have visited the Ecotopia Internet Web site (www.ecotopia.org) designed by Weiss, he said.

While the ultimate vision espoused by Lee and others may sound far-fetched, it is meant to give the local tourism industry new vision, he said. "Up until now it's been the environment versus the economy. Now we're getting beyond that and asking, 'What's environmental and good for the economy?' ... It's absolutely clear that ecotourism is the big sizzle in the tourism industry. If Santa Cruz can't turn that to its advantage as the ecotourist spot in the world, I don't know who can."

The ecotourism movement has been steadily excelling for the last 10 years according to people in the tourism industry. Fred Sater, a spokesman for the California Division of Tourism, said ecotourism is one of the fastest growing segments of tourism.

Ecotourism, however, is generally considered to include mountain-

eering, jungle travel, exotic treks. Santa Cruz as an international ecotourist spot "is a bit of a stretch," said Christine Nordquist, manager of the Capitola office of Travel Agents International. About 10 percent of her leisure travel clients are ecotourists, with Costa Rica the top choice, Nordquist said.

The area has always promoted its natural resources. Maggie Ivy, executive director of the Santa Cruz County Conference & Visitors Council, said local surveys show that most tourists are spending at least a portion of their trips being ecotourists. Local travel guides give the environment top billing and discuss how to tread lightly.

"The adoption of our new tag line for the county — Santa Cruz County Gateway to the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary — is definitely sending that message and that was the intent," Ivy said. "It's real clear that it's been rising closer to the top in the minds of a lot of people in the community and I think you can see the business community benefiting from it."