

TRIAGE on Tillamook Head

Maintaining Ecola State Park a group exercise

By Edward Stratton
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Park ranger Bo Ensign's day started off with a broken fee machine, followed by a drive up a deeply rutted forest service road into the heart of Ecola State Park. He was greeted near a hiker's camp by a snarling, wayward pit bull loose from its owner.

After checking the camp, Ensign was off down the Oregon Coast Trail, carrying a chainsaw, ax and wedges. Several hundred feet in, he ran into the first of many uprooted trees laying partially smashed across the trail. He looked over the mess, and started working his way from the smallest branches to the main tree trunk. A half an hour later, he was through his first tree trunk of the day.

"It's kind of fun to have days like this," he said on a Saturday in May. "It kind of makes some of the other days worth it."

As the only full-time ranger in a lush temperate rainforest stretching along 1,000 acres and 9 miles of rugged, slide-prone ridges and dense foliage, Ensign and the state park's seasonal employees and others keep the trails functional.

South Fork

Officer Sean Love showed up with a 10-man crew from South Fork Work Camp, a 200-bed, minimum-security facility in Tillamook County that provides inmates to clear trails and fight fires on state forestlands.

The inmates, chosen for their good behavior, wore T-shirts, jeans and hard hats. They fanned out into three teams, the first sawing their way through downed trees, followed by the second with hedge trimmers and a third to rake up afterward. Following them was Love.

"We're just a wealth of resources that's waiting to be called upon," said Love, following the cleanup crew as they work their way along the trails.

Over two days, the workers cut their way through several miles of rugged trails over Tillamook Head littered with blown-over trees and dense spring foliage. The crews have also helped construct a foot bridge between Ecola Point and Indian Beach, along with other trail improvements. Love and Ensign said some workers talk about bringing their families back some day to see the work they've done.

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"I think they can relax a bit and feel like a human being again," Love said. "We're also teaching them new work skills."

Ensign estimates the partnership with South Fork has been going for more than 20 years. Tasked with taking care of daily operations and helping the more than 550,000 annual visitors to the park, Ensign said the South Fork workers complete in two days what it could take he and another ranger a month or more to do.

Park triage

Last winter's rain and windstorms left Ecola State Park battered and partially closed to the public.

The park had to remove a popular viewing deck overlooking Cannon Beach and Haystack Rock, because of a deteriorating hillside, and use temporary lines to reestablish water to the park.

Only last month were drivers even able to reach Indian Beach, after slides sunk multiple portions of Ecola Park Road. Near Seaside, another large landslide brought down several more trees and cut more than 50 feet out of the Tillamook Head trail, leaving hikers to make their own route around the destruction.

Ensign said keeping the park operating is a little like triage, making the short-term fixes to keep it open and also understanding that parts of the park will always be sliding. Once staff had access to Indian Beach, he said, they could start to take stock of the wreckage on Tillamook Head.

The park used gravel fill to keep Ecola Park Road passable. Just before the entrance to Indian Beach, the state installed a large culvert topped with gravel and rock, to open the road and ensure fish passage on Canyon Creek below. Ensign said the state will decide in the next year or two whether to keep a culvert or put in a bridge.

Park staff are getting everything up and running before the weather gets sunny and the crowds start showing up. Ecola State Park alone averages more than 550,000 annual visitors.

Ecola falls under the Nehalem Management Unit, which also includes Oswald West, Nehalem Bay, Hug Point, Arcadia, Tolovana and Saddle Mountain state parks. Combined, they average more than 3 million day use and overnight visits.

"There's as much visitation to the North Coast ... (as) there is for other entire state park systems," Ensign said.

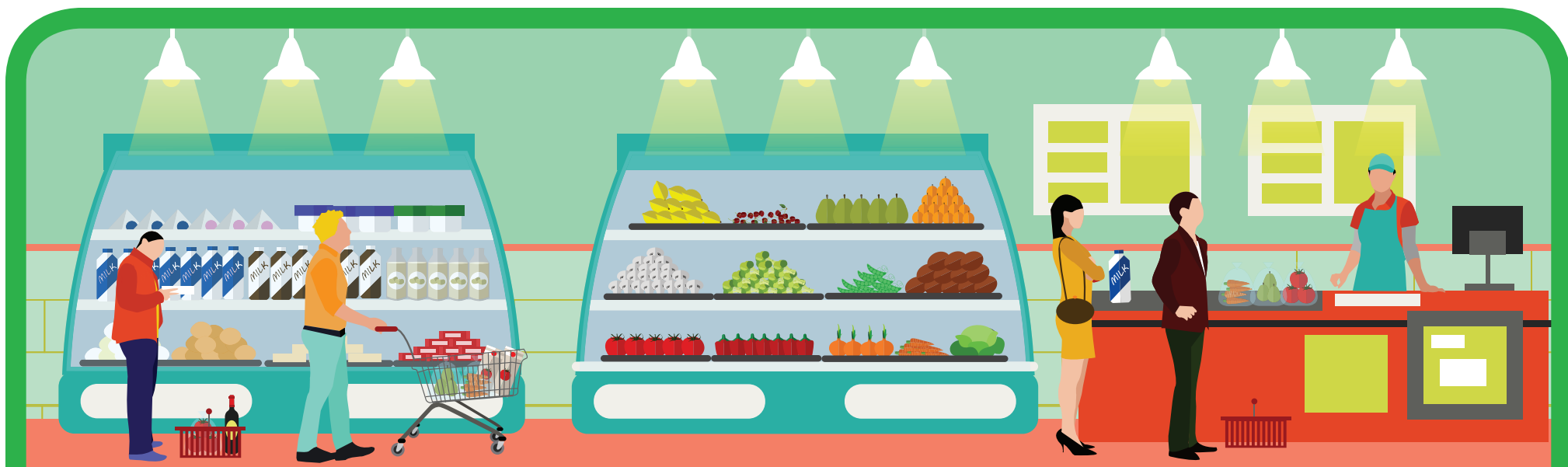


PHOTOS EDWARD STRATTON/EO MEDIA GROUP

Park Ranger Bo Ensign uses a wedge to loose his chainsaw from a log crossing the Clatsop Loop trail in Ecola State Park.



ABOVE: A large landslide over the winter forced a detour along the Tillamook Head trail near Seaside. LEFT: A 10-man crew from the South Fork Forest Camp chainsawed, mowed and raked their way over Tillamook Head, clearing the trail for the state Parks and Recreation Department.



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