

GIVING BACK TO NATURE WHAT SHE GIVES TO US ARTICLE AND PHOTOS BY MIKE MULLEN, NILES CANYON, CALIFORNIA

I HAD two distinct impressions when I first moved to Niles Canyon, located about forty miles southeast of San Francisco: I was immediately impressed with the natural beauty of the area and yet appalled by the trash and debris dumped there. I have developed a keen appreciation of the natural environment through my training and work as a research geologist. And as a geologist, I have traveled to some of the world's most pristine and remote wilderness areas in places like Alaska and the Arctic.

But my concern over the condition of Niles Canyon was doubly so because I live in the canyon, next to Alameda Creek. When I talked to some of the neighbors about my concerns, a long story of neglect and bureaucratic inertia began to unfold. The area is a jurisdictional nightmare in that fully six agencies claim parts of the creek and canyon, along with parcels of private property. There was no unity or agreement on what to do with the area or how to police it.

I felt it was time to take action. SGI President Ikeda has encouraged us to sink roots of trust into the community. In the San Francisco area, SGI-USA members have applied this guidance through a series of community projects. In 1997 I participated in the Parks for PEACE project in Hayward, Calif. Seventy-five SGI-USA members along with other interested citizens renovated Eden Park in July. The following September, city officials and the mayor dedicated the park, stating that the day was made special through our efforts. In the ensuing years, we engaged in several other projects in the community.

With the experience I had gained from those efforts, I began to contact people in the appropriate agencies regarding Niles Canyon and to chant for a solution. I soon found allies in the Alameda County Water District and East Bay Regional Parks District. I volunteered to work on a hiking trail project and met a supervisor for the park district. It turned out he knew my contact at the water district and together we discussed a pilot clean-up project for Alameda Creek. Things were coming together. Now I needed to rally the community, and photography would play a key role.

In my career as a geologist, I photographed geologic features as part of my mapping projects. My abilities in this field expanded to photojournalism when I began volunteering as a photographer for SGI-USA publications. I was also inspired by President Ikeda's beautiful photos. In 1998, I began a freelance part-time job with a local magazine and won two awards in the Fremont Cultural Arts Commission photo contest.

Photography has become a great source of creativity and personal satisfaction. Photographing a beautiful natural scene often becomes a spiritual experience for me. Each time I go out to shoot, I wonder what nature will give me today. As a scene develops, I experience an uplifting feeling as the sun approaches the horizon and the colors deepen over a series of receding ridges approaching the ocean or as the sunlight trickles through leaves falling upon the water. When I feel this kind of inspiration I know my photos will be great.

I began photo excursions into Niles Canyon and met several of my neighbors. When I explained my plans to clean up the area, they said they would help if I organized the project. During some of my magazine assignments, I met other volunteer groups willing to participate. When I explained the project to the local chapter of the Audubon Society they were interested. As a result, I have been invited to give a slide presentation on "Restoring

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and Preserving Alameda Creek—A Local Riparian Habitat” in April 1999.

I worked with the water district and parks district and, with the support of the Audubon Society, we came up with a plan: One hundred volunteers will descend into the canyon at the end of this summer and restore it to its natural beauty. The government agencies will provide equipment and trash bags and funding for lunches and bottled water. They are also going to give a small memento to each volunteer for their efforts. I am hoping that about half of those volunteers will be SGI-USA members from the area.

THIS effort has taught me that with persistence and the confidence I’ve gained through my Buddhist practice, one person can make a difference. I’ve learned I can use my personal talents to influence people in a positive manner. If a picture is worth a thousand words, I would like to publish volumes of positive visions.

I believe in the Buddhist concept of dependent origination—that everything is interconnected, that our lives and our environment are one. Through the Niles Canyon project, I can give something back to nature and, in turn, to others who will enjoy its beauty.

President Ikeda has encouraged us to become persons of great good—to overcome our lesser selves and express our greater selves through working for the happiness of others. I intend to continue challenging my lesser self and develop strong ties in my community to create positive images for the future. ◻

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