

Armstrong Redwoods State Natural Reserve

Austin Creek State Recreation Area

Annual Operations Report

2019/2020



STEWARDS OF THE COAST AND REDWOODS

Operations Report – July 1, 2019 to September 2020

Armstrong Redwoods SNR/Austin Creek SRA

Prepared by Michele Luna, Executive Director

Hours of Operation

- Austin Creek, like Armstrong Redwoods, is open daily from 8 am to one hour past official sunset.
- Bullfrog Pond Campground was open from July 1, 2019 until March 24, 2020 when it was shut down due to Covid-19 until June 26. Then it was shut down again on August 17 due to the Walbridge Fire.
- Three backcountry sites were closed from March 24, 2020 and never reopened due to Covid-19 and Wildfires.
- The entrance station at Armstrong Redwoods is normally staffed year-round on the weekends, most weekdays with shortened hours during the winter, early spring and late fall, and 7 days a week during the later spring, summer and early fall. Due to Covid-19 the parks were closed from March 24 to May 14, 2020 and then after August 17 due to the Walbridge Fire.

Visitor Services & Public Safety

AUSTIN CREEK PARK VISITATION:

Year	Camping	Free DU	Paid DU
2013-2014	5,240	227,896	25,390
2014-2015	8,093	251,687	29,906
2015-2016	10,426	264,646	35,990
2016-2017	9,311	212,760	36,856
2017-2018	9,898	218,646	38,603
2018-2019	8,007	198,388	34,971
2019-2020	6,288	160,175	27,322

ARMSTRONG REDWOODS VISITATION: (Stewards handles fee collection)

Year	Free DU	Paid DU
2013-2014	820,523	53,672
2014-2015	886,020	60,656
2015-2016	923,816	71,981
2016-2017	717,403	73,392
2017-2018	745,047	77,200
2018-2019	676,473	69,934
2019-2020	538,871	54,638

- In the past year visitation decreased, due to wildfires and Covid-19. There were 152,898 less visitors than in 18/19. Camping was less by 1,719 campers. Overall visitation in both parks for 19/20 was 787,294, which was 200,479 less than 18/19.
- With limited Ranger staff time at Armstrong Redwoods, Stewards continued to handle most of the Visitor Service non-law enforcement operations in Armstrong and Austin Creek. Armstrong has its own maintenance staff. Our Ops team continue to provide

excellent visitor services under the leadership of our Field Operations Manager, Scotty Lawyer.

- Our reservation system with Hipcamp continued to provide camping reservation services at Bullfrog Pond campground. Sixteen sites are reservable 7 months in advance and 7 sites are first come, first serve. This effort increased camping revenue from \$71,014 in 13/14 to 94,425 in 17/18. In 19/20 camping went down to \$60,385. Hipcamp continued to make enhancements to their software based on our needs and recommendations and they lowered their commission to 1%.
 - Office and kiosk staff handled the customer service issues including cancellations and complaints (of which there were very few). There is a \$10 cancellation fee per night.
 - Our overall customer service rating was 91% based on 1530 responses with Hipcamp users. We consistently get positive comments about how clean the campground and restroom are.
- Stewards has a few public assistance volunteers who give out information, provide directions, dispense water, and report any unusual activity in the back country.
- Stewards continues to meet with CalFire annually to get feedback on our fire prevention plan, which includes having campers sign a fire permit whether they are allowed to have fires or not. Fires in the backcountry would have been closed off by Mother's Day, but since the park units were closed due to Covid-19 we didn't need to concern ourselves with this issue. The campground at Bullfrog Pond was reopened on June 26th, and we needed to put the fire ban in place on July 5th due to already hot and dry conditions.
- Trees in the campsites were limbed and we maintain a 10-foot perimeter around each fire pit. Our move to put buckets at each water spigot and ask campers to use water to put out their fires at the end of the night in the past four years has been very successful. Camphosts were also watchful of the campfires in the campgrounds. In addition, communication was maintained with Cal Fire and to discuss fire prevention strategies before the Walbridge Fire in August 2020.
- Stewards has also raised grant funds to assist State Parks with fuel reduction in Austin Creek SRA. This is helping reduce underbrush and ladder fuels that can impact the park in the event of a wildfire.

Walbridge Fire

The Walbridge wildfire started outside Austin Creek SRA on August 17th 2020 due to lightning strikes. The parks were evacuated and the fire proceeded to burn 3800 acres in Austin Creek SRA and 511 acres in Armstrong Redwoods. There was extensive damage done the campground including the water system and one restroom, signage, food lockers, picnic tables, fencing and a tool trailer with tools was burned. The outbuildings near one park residence burned and another residence was lost completely. A barn near the burned house also lost and it contained more tools and supplies belonging to Stewards and State Parks, including our wood splitter. Pond Farm Pottery was saved due to a specific request made by State Parks to firefighters. By the time the fire got to Armstrong Redwoods it burned low and slow through the park. No structures were lost even though it burned very close to a number of them. There were lots of root fires and trees that fell but the largest iconic trees were all saved. The land in the wilderness areas should recover very well but the campground needs lots of repairs and renovation and the parks are not expected to reopen

until late Spring/early Summer 2021. We hope to have the campground open by August 2021.

Campground Operations and Maintenance

- Since the campground was closed due to Covid-19 from March 24 until June 26, we didn't have the typical traffic that we normally experience. When it was reopened, the usage was solid for two months. In order to provide the safest experience possible, we implemented new protocols including vinyl table covers, sanitizer stations at all water spigots and multiple daily cleanings of the facilities.
- Our camphost program has been very successful. We have two camphosts who worked the majority of the weekends and periodically during the week during the summer. Our camphosts who work weekends are paid a stipend of \$50 per 24 hours to cover their mileage and meals. Weekday camphosts are not paid a stipend.
- With increased visitation, we have to pump the septic tanks at the campground restrooms 2 times a year. In the past year we've had to replace the water line to one of our water spigots and replace and reset two fixtures due to deteriorating conditions. We were operating at the time until the California State Parks standards for water saving compliance.
- Our Ops team solicited tool donations so they now have a well-stocked shop in the Ranger Station garage. Items donated in the past year include: A few hand and power tools, which included two chainsaws, two weed wipes, which were mostly for use with the Volunteer Trail Crew. As our donation have been extremely successful in the past, we were operating very efficiently until the Walbridge fire came through
- The Trail Crew worked with a number of groups including: Fencing, Cleanup projects for Special Events, camp site renovations, improved parking barriers, firewood production, trail work to fix pot holes, and fallen debris, and hazardous tree clean up.

Special Events

- Weddings: Stewards had inquires about weddings in Austin Creek but we did not book any during the 2019/2020 year.
- The 9th Annual Armstrong/Austin Creek Trail Run in partnership with Pacific Coast Trail Runs, Inc. was cancelled due to Covid-19.
- The Seventh Annual Sunset Dinner on July 20, 2019 was held again at Schoolhouse Flat. This year was again a benefit for Pond Farm Pottery and guests met at Pond Farm first for appetizers, champagne, a tour, and kick wheel demonstration by a Pond Farm student. We enlarged historic photos and put them around the site to show what it used to look like when Marguerite was there. The dinner and appetizers were prepared by a caterer and we conducted a successful auction with pottery made by the pond farmers who were in attendance.
- Our Family Day in your Park event scheduled for June 2020 was cancelled due to Covid-19.
- Other events that were held in Armstrong Redwoods and provided support for operations in Austin Creek SRA, included the Old Grove Festival (September 2019). The event in 2019 was scheduled to be a two-day event but due to poor ticket sales we

cancelled the second day so our bottom line was not as financially successful as prior years.

Interpretive Programs

- Docent-Led Hikes took place with school groups and a couple groups camped at Bullfrog Pond campground.
- We conducted our Fourth Forest to the Sea Day Camp in June 2019 with 15 participants in 5th-8th grades attending a day at Armstrong, one in Austin Creek, and two days on the coast with being an exploration of the intertidal, and the final day and night at Bullfrog Pond Campground in Austin Creek.
- Stewards sponsored our eighth UC California Naturalist Certification Programs with about 20 participants. This 6-week course started out taking place in our parks but then had to transition to an online only program due to Covid-19.

Cultural Resource Stewardship – update this section

- Pond Farm Pottery continued with our partnership with State Parks to restore and revitalize the site for future sustainability.
 - Stewards helped coordinate a number of site visits to Pond Farm with potential donors and groups.
 - Monthly planning meetings were scheduled by Stewards' Executive Director to keep everyone updated on project plans.
 - We continued Docent-led tours monthly in 2019.
 - Artist-in-Residence Program: With the completion of the ADA improvements to the Pond Farm guest house in 2018, Stewards was ready to launch the Artist-in-Residence program at the beginning of 2019. We set up submission on www.submittable.com and we had 13 applicants the first round and 7 for the second round. We had artists in residence from February through June. We took July off and hosted artists again in August, September and October and then again in March 2020 and then closed down due to Covid-19. We hosted one more artist in July 2020 before we shut down again due to Covid-19. For more information go to www.pondfarmpottery.org.

Natural Resource Stewardship (workdays)

- Stewards' Trail Crew did stewardship workdays in Armstrong Redwoods or Austin Creek every month during the year. Activities included trail maintenance, wood splitting, campground maintenance, tree limb removals, dealing with down trees, fuel load reduction and fence building.
- Staff did significant amounts of brush cleaning, campground clean up, weed eating, and clearing of down trees in Austin Creek.
- Raised funds to support Youth Ecology Corp for 2 weeks in the summer. They did fuel reduction projects, cleared down trees and more.

Recreation

- Stewards maintained and operated 24 campsites (including a camphost site at Bullfrog Pond Campground. Campsites were cleaned, tree hazards were removed, and fire rings

were kept clean. Restrooms were held to a high standard of cleanliness and we continue to provide hand sanitizer for park visitors.

- The camphost site was used almost every weekend during the busy season.
- Backcountry campsites were kept clean and outhouses were serviced once a week while access was allowed.

Signage and Marketing

- Information about Austin Creek operations was kept updated on Stewards' website.
- Stewards staff worked with DPR to update the DPR website with current information about the park.
- Suggestions were also made to update the Hipcamp website. Their software upgrade now makes it easy for us to update the site ourselves. We did agree to transition to the State Park "Reserve CA" reservation system once our new co-management agreement is approved.

Co-Management Agreement

Stewards and State Parks have been working on a new co-management agreement for Austin Creek and Armstrong Redwoods. The agreement is very close to being approved. The agreement will go for five years with an option to extend for an additional five years.

Networking with other Operators

Stewards meets bi-weekly with other nonprofit operators of parks in Sonoma and Marin County. This networking provides ongoing support and collaboration among our colleagues and with the California State Parks Foundation.

Annual Revenue and Expenditure Report – July 1, 2019 to June 30, 2020

Park Unit: AUSTIN CREEK STATE RECREATION AREA

Operator: Stewards of the Coast and Redwoods

State's Fiscal Year: July 1, 2019 to June 30, 2020

Estimated Visitors: 241,366

Volunteer Hours:

	Stewardship	Public Assistance
2019-2020	490	69

ANNUAL REVENUE	Fiscal Year Total 2019- 2020
Armstrong/Austin Creek	July - Jun
Austin Creek – Camping fees	60,385
AR/AC Entrance Station – Day-Use	90,087
Other Donations and Fundraising	30,050
Artist-in-Residence	2,400
Firewood Sales	1,434
Total Revenue Austin Creek	184,356
EXPENSE PROJECTIONS	
Armstrong/Austin Creek	
Salary -Executive Staff (ED, AD)	13,664
Salary -Admin Staff (PM, OA, AA)	197
Salary -Field Operations Manager (FOM)	48,336
Salary - Field Operations Assistant	32,237
Salary - Service Aides (SA)	25,727
Benefits - 15%	18,024
Contracts - Marketing, Website, Internet and Hipcamp fees, bank fees	1,432
Insurance/Legal	10,000
Vehicles, gas, storage container	1,871
Program Expenses	7,500
Field Equipment, Supplies, Utilities	5,729
Camphosts (trailer and supplies) storage, stipends	1,550
Pond Farm Expenses, fundraising	2,401
Total Expenses Austin Creek	168,668
Net Rev/Exp Austin Creek - Cash GAP	15,688

FINANCIAL NARRATIVE

July 1, 2019 to June 30, 2020

Revenue: Stewards' operational revenue from Austin Creek day-use and camping fees generated \$150,472 during the report period, which is a decrease of \$34,327 from 2018/2019.

Stewards retained 40% of the day-use fees for Austin Creek. Closures due to Covid-19 and wildfire evacuations in 2019 accounts for the decrease in revenue.

Other revenue generated for park operations were derived from donations and fundraising (\$30,050) and campfire wood sales (\$1,434). The Pond Farm Artist in Residence program raised \$2400, which helped to cover the expenses (\$2401) associated with the program. Wood sales were down from the previous year.

In-Kind Volunteer Time: Volunteers were used to accomplish stewardship and natural resource projects. Volunteers contributed 490 hours in Austin Creek specifically @ \$29.95/hour for a value of \$14,676 of in-kind services. http://www.independentsector.org/volunteer_time

Expenses: Per the Operating Agreement, all money derived from operational revenue must be used for Austin Creek operations. During this report period, Austin Creek Operational expenses were greater than revenue by \$15,688. These funds helped to carry us through the times after July 1, when the park was closed due to the Walbridge Fire. Year-end Calendar figures for 2020 will show a significant loss.

Staffing included one full-time Field Operations Manager and one full-time assistant Field Operations Manager, and two part-time service aides. During the slow season, service aide hours were reduced. During this accounting period, Field Staff wages were only \$106,300 a decrease of \$5448 from 2017/2018 due to furloughs staff experienced from Covid-19 and the Wildfire. Overall staff were furloughed 6 weeks in 2020.

Additional staffing costs include administrative hours for Stewards' Executive Director, Administrative Director, and Marketing Communications staff. We charged \$13,861 for administrative staff time in 19/20, which covered costs for the Executive Director to administer and manage fundraising efforts and the Artist-in-Residence Program for Pond Farm.

Other large expenses incurred were for insurance, vehicle expenses and enhancements to our website. Insurance costs for just the 5700 acres of land are over \$8,000 a year.