

[DONATE](#)

Shaping the Future of Trails in the Santa Cruz Mountains

August 28, 2025



By Zionne Fox

Director of Relational Conservation

[« All Blog Posts](#)

Are our trails working for everyone?

That's one of the underlying questions in a unique regional study by the [Santa Cruz Mountains Stewardship Network \(SCMSN\)](#), a collaboration of 25 organizations — including POST! — working together to care for the wild and beautiful Santa Cruz Mountains.

Some of you may remember our request for input to help us better understand how people use (or don't use) local trails. After a two-year period of surveys and analysis, we're pleased to share some findings, both expected and unexpected.

THE CHALLENGE

Caring for our region's vast open spaces is a mighty feat. It takes an equally mighty network of organizations and agencies, working both independently and together.

DONATE

across those differences and imagine a regional trail network that's healthy, welcoming, and resilient for both people and nature.

THE STUDY

The study takes a bird's-eye view of the Santa Cruz Mountains — covering 1,195 square miles from redwood-covered peaks to bay coastlines.

PARKS AND OPEN SPACE

SCMSN STATE OF THE TRAILS

MANAGING ENTITY

- California Department of Fish and Wildlife
- California Department of Parks and Recreation
- City, County
- National Park Service
- Non Governmental Organization
- Other Federal
- Other State
- Special District
- US Bureau of Land Management
- US Fish and Wildlife Service

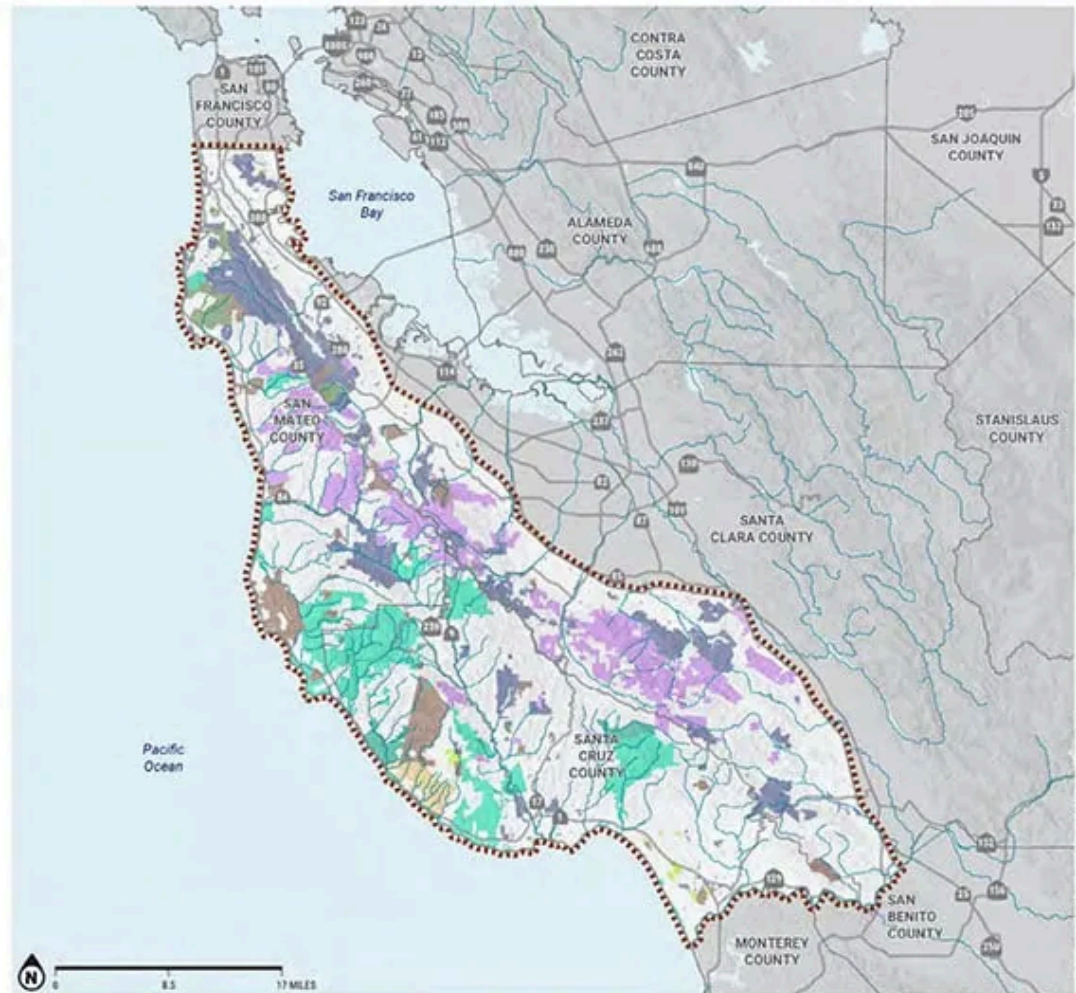
— Key Riparian Corridors

BOUNDARIES

- SCMSN Boundary
- County Boundary



alta



On this map, the dotted line marks the study area. Open spaces within are both highlighted and color-coded, with each color representing a different managing agency—showing how many groups are working together to maintain the trails.

After gathering the available knowledge from maps, data, and past projects, the SCMSN went straight to the people — trail lovers and trail newcomers alike — to learn what's working, what's missing, and what people dream of for their outdoor experiences and inform sustainability goals. These include:

DONATE

- **Foster Equitable Access** to recreational opportunities for all people, particularly for those who have historically been excluded, and reduce barriers to entry.
- **Balance Recreation and Biodiversity Conservation** by providing connections and access opportunities in a way that adequately protects regional biodiversity.
- **Protect Natural and Cultural/Historic Resources** as a primary focus in designing, building, and maintaining trails.

KEY FINDINGS



- Planting trees is one of many tasks that land stewards attend to while maintaining open spaces.

Tailor Trails to Community Needs. Instead of funding projects people might not want, the study revealed areas where SCMSN partners can maximize resources. Over 75% of equestrian users want more equestrian trails, over 50% of dog-owner users want more on-leash dog trails, mountain bike and e-mountain bike users want more bike trails (66% and 75%, respectively), and 25% of respondents want more hiking trails.

- **Create Trails Everyone Can Access.** Trail awareness (outreach), access (transportation, physical ability), and inclusion (hospitality, culture, language) are all equity considerations. For example, 69% of study respondents identified as white, but representation for non-white trail users was much lower than in the general population.
- **Balance Recreation and Conservation.** Trails are popular and demand is growing. That means open space operators need practices that can meet rising visitor expectations while still preserving natural habitat.
- **Nurture Natural Resources.** Most responses focused on accessing and using trails, but some were concerned with managing invasive plant species, habitat,

DONATE

- **Horses are a Mane Attraction.** One surprise? Most equestrian users (44%) are from Santa Cruz County. In addition, 10% of riders stay overnight compared to 1% of other trail users.
- **More Time, Please.** Thirty percent of users would like to embark on multi-day trips (only 6% of trail users do that currently).

THE PEOPLE'S CHOICE

Wondering what the study area's most popular trail is?



You can't beat the bluff-top views from this popular multi-use trail.

[Wilder Ranch State Park](#) is by far the top destination for hikers, runners, dog owners, and bikers!

These are the 5 most popular open spaces after Wilder Ranch. How many have you visited?

- [Henry Cowell Redwoods State Park](#)
- [The Forest of Nisene Marks State Park](#)

DONATE

- [Big Basin Redwoods State Park](#)

What's Your Frequency? Over half (52%) of trail users are out in open space every week, while nearly 30% visit monthly and 11% visit daily.

WHAT'S NEXT

SCMSN partners are rolling up their sleeves to figure out where their individual expertise and resources can enhance trail experiences for everyone. For example, [Santa Cruz County Parks](#) will use this data to help develop its first-ever trail master plan. And other partners are in the early stages of exploring options for improving amenities, connectivity, and building new trails.

Remember, caring for our trails is a community effort, and you can be part of it. Learn more about the [Santa Cruz Mountains Stewardship Network](#) to see how 25 organizations are joining forces to shape the future of our open spaces. Then, take the next step: hit the trail at one of the region's most-loved parks, volunteer with local partners to keep them healthy, or support efforts that make trails more welcoming and resilient for everyone.

RELATED POSTS

[o Bay Trail Destinations](#)

[The Bay to Sea Trail: A Bold Visic](#)

ABOUT POST

DONATE

South Bay for the benefit of all. Since its founding in 1977, POST has been responsible for saving more than 93,000 acres as permanently protected land in San Mateo, Santa Clara and Santa Cruz counties. [Learn more](#)

STAY IN TOUCH**SUBSCRIBE TO OUR NEWSLETTER**

First Name

Last Name

Email

SUBSCRIBE NOW**Peninsula Open Space Trust**

222 High Street, Palo Alto, CA 94301

T: (650) 854-7696 F: (650) 854-7703



Copyright © 2025 Peninsula Open Space Trust.

[Contact Us](#) [Media Resources](#) [Careers](#) [Financials](#) [Sitemap](#) [Accessibility](#) [Privacy Policy](#)

Peninsula Open Space Trust is a nonprofit, tax-exempt 501(c)(3) charitable organization. Our tax identification number is 94-2392007. Donations are tax-deductible as allowed by law.