

Habitat protectors

Eric Crider, a 16-year-old Eagle Scout candidate, works to prevent illegal trails from Talega into the conservancy.

By FRED SWEGLES
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The problem: A remote corner of the Donna O'Neill Land Conservancy, bordering Talega in San Clemente, is an attraction for hikers and bicyclists who trespass on a ridge-line, carving unauthorized trails through habitat.

The solution: Enter Eagle Scout candidate Eric Crider and volunteers from Boy Scout Troop 724.

Scouts erected two informational signs on Monday to raise awareness and a cactus patch to turn away trespassers. "I'm using cactus as a natural barrier to keep people out," says Crider, 16, of Mission Viejo.

At the spot where people typically go off the authorized Talega trail and onto the land conservancy, Crider and crew put up a sign blocking access, directly behind an existing no-trespassing sign and a string of barbed wire that trespassers have ignored. The sign tells about the land conservancy. Behind it, the Scouts planted

cactus to discourage anyone on foot or on bicycles.

It isn't an easy place to reach. It takes a steep climb from the end of Via Belleza in Talega to the top of a hill that commands a 360-degree view of south Orange County.

"Trespassing is a huge problem," says Heidi Keller, executive director of the 1,200-acre nature reserve. "People think it's very benign to ride on trails like this. Every trail they cut is taking out habitat."

"They've been cutting down plants and making bike trails and jumps," Crider says.

Trespassing also can be dangerous. The primitive track that trespassers created at the top of the Talega hill includes straddling a ridge with potentially deadly consequences if a bicyclist or hiker were to make a wrong move.

It's a remote area, not easy to patrol because it's so far from the conservancy's more traveled trails. It's also at the opposite end of the property from the conservancy's entry road off Ortega Highway.

Crider, a sophomore at Santa Margarita Catholic High School, has done volunteer work at the conservancy since the seventh grade. For his Eagle project, he asked the conservancy how best he could help. Then he designed the signs, researched possible materials and chose plastic lumber — "it's just 100 percent re-



PHOTOS: FRED SWEGLES, THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

DETERRENENTS: Eagle Scout candidate Eric Crider, 16, inspects the cactus patch that he and other volunteers from Boy Scout Troop 724 planted behind barbed wire and a Crider-designed sign they installed along the boundary between San Clemente's Talega community and the Donna O'Neill Land Conservancy.

cycled plastic," he says. "There's no trees involved."

He gathered \$800 in donations and another \$248 with a fundraiser at Ruby's Diner in San Juan Capistrano.

What kind of a difference will it make? "Well, for one thing, people can't get in here after we put the cactus in," he says. "And this will educate the public. They won't really want to come in here anymore. They'll understand why the conservancy is here."

A second Eagle Scout project, due later this year at the

end of Avenida Talega, will make some improvements to a spot that could become a staging area for guided hikes into the conservancy from the San Clemente side. Presently, all hikes begin from the Ortega Highway side.

"Maybe we'll get a whole different group of people," Keller says, "if they don't have to drive all the way around to Ortega."

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A PRICKLY PATCH: Hikers or bicyclists who try to trespass will encounter cactus plants, being watered here by Andrew Pizzolo.



THE CREW: Volunteers from Scout Troop 724 of Mission Viejo gather at the Talega trailhead after completing Crider's Eagle Scout project.