

Cleaning up litter bugs' trash can

EARTH DAY

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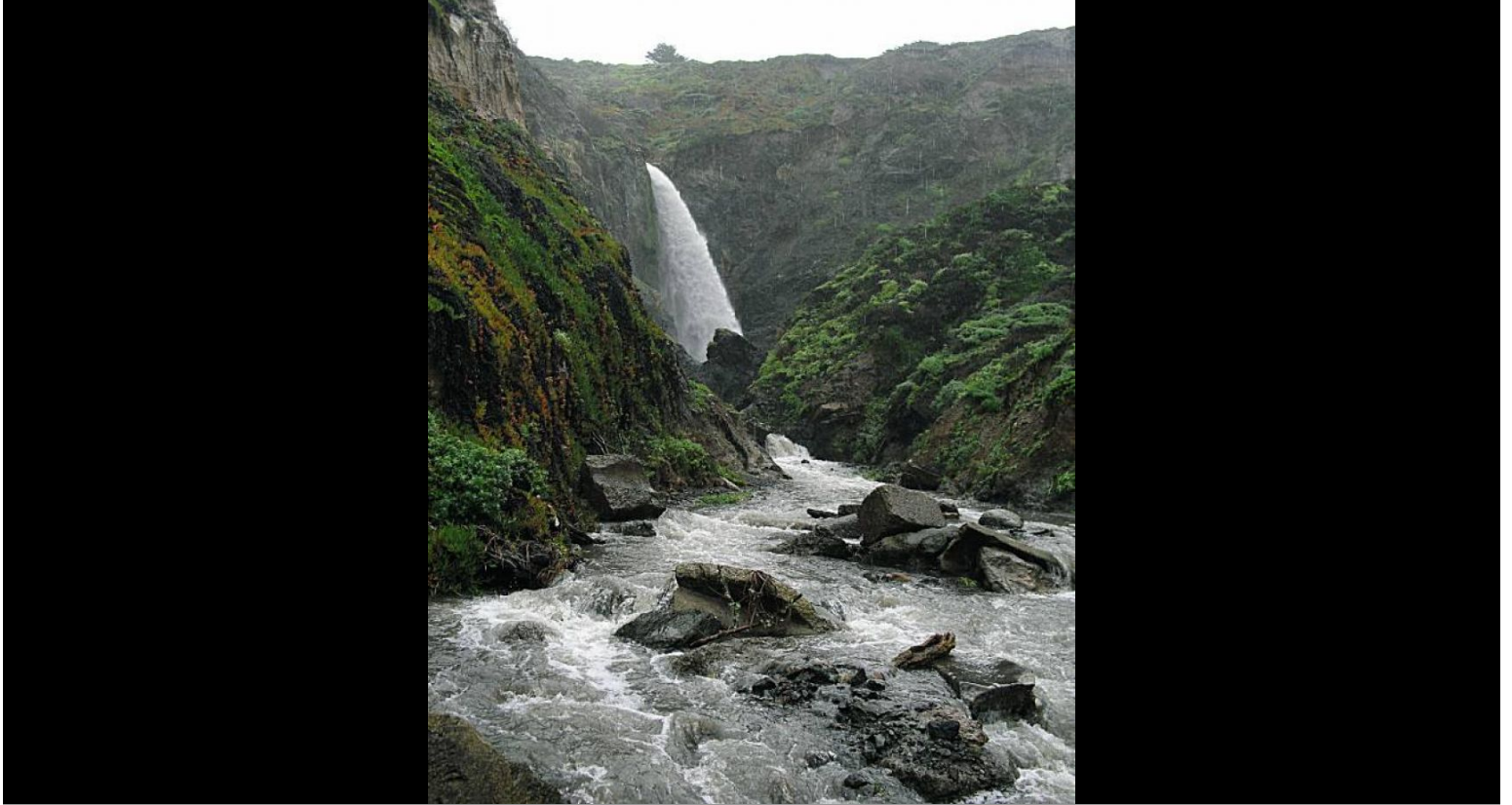


IMAGE 1 OF 2

The "hidden" waterfall near Pacifica in full stream during a rainstorm earlier this winter (late February or early March)

A hidden waterfall 15 minutes from San Francisco is testimony to how Earth Day could work everywhere, every day.

Like many streams that run into the ocean and bay, the creek that feeds this waterfall is a litter trap. One man, **Ian Butler**, has led a drive to clean it up and transform it into his personal paradise.

Tucked away on a cliff near the coastal border of Daly City and Pacifica, a chute of water pours out of a culvert and over the brink about 45 feet into a rock basin at the bottom of a canyon. It then runs about 100 yards over rocks, out to the beach and into the ocean.

At peak flows, it's like a scene out of Yosemite. At other times it looks like a garbage dump.

The waterfall does not have a name, but most call it "Pacifica's Secret Waterfall." The creek that feeds it is an

underground stream that was routed below the surface when Daly City was built. The stream picks up drainage from surface streets in southern Daly City and northern Pacifica. In turn, any litter that is in gutters or on streets gets swept off by rainfall and then carried into the underground creek that feeds the waterfall.

That is why the 100 yards of outflow, between the waterfall and the ocean, is a garbage trap.

"What we see at the secret waterfall is happening at every outflow to the ocean and the bay," said **Lynn Adams**, president of the **Pacifica Beach Coalition**. "It's not an isolated case. The trash on the street ends up in the creeks, the bay and on the beach."

Butler, a tree trimmer by profession, said he is fascinated with nature and how humans impact it.

"I had seen the waterfall decades ago and it made an imprint on me," Butler said. "Then in 2007, I was hiking along the beach and I found this creek. I followed it upstream and there it was, the secret waterfall. It was really a beautiful place, but it was also a really ugly place. Garbage was everywhere, several feet deep. Frogs and snakes were trying to live in this filth. My thought was, "This place could be awesome if we could just fix it up."

That moment changed his life, he said. For the past 2 1/2 years, cleaning up the waterfall canyon has become Butler's passion.

Butler, aided occasionally teams of volunteers, has picked up about 4,000 pounds of garbage: plastic bottles, plastic bags, pieces of Styrofoam, food wrappers, tennis balls, cigarette butts, tires, shopping carts, and even a small refrigerator and lounge chair. "I've even found about \$20," Butler said. "Every once in a while, there's a bill in the trash. It's like a treasure hunt."

The secret spot has thus become Butler's sacred spot, where he has learned the power of place.

"After I've cleaned it all up, I go, 'Wow, I helped make this place beautiful. We actually helped make it this way,' " he said. "There's no greater feeling."

In the process, Butler says he has learned that when you love a place and share it, others become inspired to protect it. Keeping it a secret, on the other hand, allows it to be perpetually trashed with no plan or volunteers available for cleanup.

"I discovered this cool place and would tell people about it," Butler said. "They wouldn't believe me. I knew that if I kept going there, kept cleaning it up, that people would discover it and come to appreciate it. People need to know about this place. Then they will want to save it."

Butler said he visits the waterfall about three times a week. He always brings garbage bags with him, just as he suggests all should do all the time.

"We all think of litter as something people do on purpose," Butler said, "but a lot of litter just happens, accidentally, and we all contribute to it, whether we know it or not. We each need to do our part to make up for that."

On his trip this past week, Butler picked up about 5 pounds of trash, mainly plastic bags, bottles and junk food wrappers. This was a huge reduction from early March, when after a rain storm, Butler made 10 trips in two weeks and picked up 150 pounds of debris.

"It was so bad, he almost cried," Adams said. "But then he turned it into a beautiful place again. He's become an inspiration."

Because the creek is paved over upstream, it doesn't take much rain for the runoff to rise quickly. In early March, a small trickle of a creek was transformed into a raging torrent.

"The high water flows are dramatic," Butler said. "But they can be deadly. The wildlife, the frogs and snakes, can get washed out to sea. It's dangerous for people. It's a very narrow passage the water runs through. The water can suddenly rise to waist-deep. It can be impassable to get out of there. I actually love the place just as much when the flows are low."

Adding to the intrigue is that the waterfall is not on designated, signed parkland. It is along a public beach roughly north of the Manor area near a transfer station; the brink is below a subdivision a short distance away. There is no parking area or sign at the trailhead. The path down has no sign and is steep and narrow, and it heads down a slope where several spots have been eroded by rain. The trail used to emerge at the beach, but that washed out last year. Now the trail comes out along the banks of the creek, about halfway between the waterfall and the ocean.

The waterfall has become a signature spot for the Pacifica Beach Coalition. This group started in 2005 on Earth Day with 150 volunteers for their work day. Last year, it had 3,700 volunteers and next month is hoping for 5,000. Volunteers pick up litter, work on habitat restoration, plant trees - that is, any activity that can improve an area.

"For people outside of our area, the best thing they could do is step outside and clean up their street, right where they live," Adams said. "Cigarette butts, plastic pieces, Styrofoam, bottles, cans and tennis balls. All this stuff ends up getting washed on the beach."

Butler said the introduction of trash into the creek with every rain is symbolic of other streams in the Bay Area. "The waterfall is a small location, a very little spot, but it is a microcosm of what is going on with pollution and habitat."

In the future, Butler hopes this canyon can become part of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area. That would solve many problems, including access and long-term protection.

He also believes the secret waterfall is a Bay Area example for the 40th anniversary of Earth Day - technically April 22, but April 24 is set up as the volunteer work day.

"The waterfall shows how a near-wasteland can be transformed into a paradise with a little effort," Butler said.

What you can do

Pacifica beach clean-ups: Earth Day, April 24 (work day); others scheduled most Saturdays; sign up at www.pacificabeachcoalition.org. Lynn Adams, (650) 355-1668.

Coastal clean-ups: Adopt-A-Beach, [California Coastal Commission](http://www.coastal.ca.gov), (800) 262-7848, www.coastal.ca.gov - click on "our programs."

Do your part: Keep a plastic garbage bag with you at all times and pick up litter when you see it, not just when you're out on adventures.

Take a look: A three-minute video of "Pacifica's Secret Waterfall" and trash pick-up is at youtube.com/watch?v=8UOZZYCQBY8.

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