

What's in a Name?

4 September 2015

Dear Editor:

America is blessed with a rich assortment of National Parks, ranging from Mount Rainier in Washington to the Florida Everglades, and including the Grand Canyon, Yellowstone, Yosemite, Death Valley and all the rest. These are places of great natural beauty whose protected status ensures environmental conservation while still allowing access for hikers, campers, photographers and nature lovers. Similarly, our California State Parks offer public access to diverse protected open spaces including beaches, mountain sites and desert locations.

I was surprised to discover that one of the recommendations in the recently released draft of the master plan is to change the name from the Claremont Hills Wilderness Park (CHWP) to the Claremont Hills Wilderness Area (CHWA).

The reason given for the recommended change is that “the term ‘park’ may connote conditions contrary to natural open space areas.” This seems to me a narrow and shallow vision of the concept of a park.

As illustrated above, the word “park” encompasses far more than just playgrounds, sports parks and amusement parks. The city of Claremont General Plan lists different categories of parks including pocket parks (e.g. Shelton), neighborhood parks (Higginbotham), community parks (Memorial), sports parks (La Puerta) and Natural/Wilderness Parks (CHWP).

Although these differ in nature and function, they share the greater purpose of “providing beauty and opportunities for mental and physical recreation” (p. 5-2 of the General Plan). Understanding this connotation, the word “park,” when preceded by the adjective “wilderness,” seems to me the most accurate way to describe our local hillside treasure.

The name “Wilderness Park” is also more appropriate than “Wilderness Area,” because the latter designation, as established in the Wilderness Act of 1964, has a specific, narrow meaning within the US National Park and Forest Service community. It refers to areas (such as the Sheep Mountain Wilderness Area in the Angeles National Forest) of near-pristine condition that lack roads and buildings, are usually difficult to access, require permits for entry, and have been minimally impacted by humans. That is certainly not an accurate description of the CHWP, existing as it does at the interface between the newly-designated San Gabriel Mountains National Monument and the densely-populated urban San Gabriel Valley. Our local hillsides have felt the impact of human activity for centuries.

As a final point, the draft master plan states that the name change is related to the goal of “environmental preservation” and is expected to result in “increased environmental stewardship.” It is not clear to me how the proposed name change would accomplish this.

In our surveys last summer at the Mills Avenue entrance to the most heavily-impacted section of the park, we discovered that many of the visitors weren't even aware that it is part of Claremont Hills Wilderness Park; they know it simply as “the loop.” Neither the number of visitors, nor the frequency of their visits, nor their behavior when they arrive will be affected by changing the official name from “park” to “area.”

If we are serious about the goal of increased environmental stewardship, we will get a lot more bang for the buck if the estimated \$10,000 allocated for changing the official name from “park” to “area” is used instead for habitat restoration, trail repair and maintenance, or public outreach and education.

A TAC meeting to discuss the Wilderness Park master plan will be held Thursday, September 10 at 6:30 p.m. at Hughes Center. The draft is available online on the city website and also at city hall, the library and the Hughes Center.

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Claremont Wildlands Conservancy