The Forest of Nisene Marks

State Park

Our Mission

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The Forest of Nisene Marks State Park
Aptos Creek Road, off Soquel and
State Park Drive, Aptos, CA 95003
(831) 763-7062

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Nearly ten thousand acres of forest offer a hushed oasis with panoramic ocean views from its hilltops.

The serene trails within The Forest of Nisene Marks State Park give scant hint of the redwood forest's turbulent natural and human history. For centuries, the jagged terrain of these 10,000 acres saved the original trees from loggers and settlers. Today the second- and third-growth forest canopy in earthquake country shades a recreational oasis with 30 miles of maintained trails and roads for hiking, biking, and running.

PARK HISTORY

The local first people were the Costanoans (now known as Ohlone). The native people harvested resources on the edges of the forest, but little evidence exists that they ever lived among these deep redwoods. Two Mexican land grants to the Castro family in 1833 and 1844 partially form the boundaries of today's park.

Loggers on platform supported by springboards, ca. 1895

Shortly after California became a state in 1850, loggers built wooden skids and used oxen teams to drag smaller harvested trees for "split stuff" and tanbark. The forest's more reachable redwoods were milled during the Gold Rush building boom, but lumber interests found the steep canyons impenetrable for logging giant redwoods.

In 1880, however, the Southern Pacific Railway (SP) arrived in nearby Monterey. SP financed the purchase of tree-filled Upper Aptos Canyon, the Loma Prieta Lumber Company, and the Loma Prieta Railway. Chinese laborers cut and graded the rail line seven miles up the canyon. By 1883, standard-gauge railway tracks had been built to haul the huge redwood logs to mills.

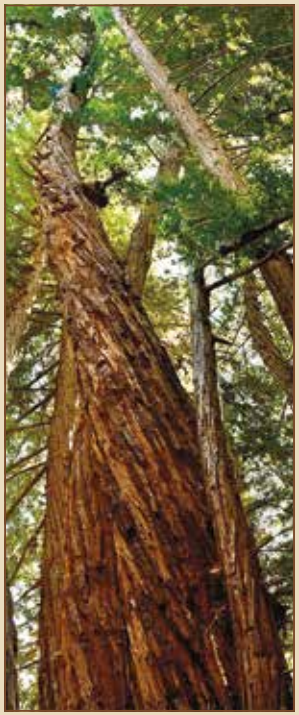
The 1880s cost of building this railroad, part of today's main Fire Road, was estimated at $50,000 per mile. The Loma Prieta Mill became the largest in the 19th-century Santa Cruz Mountains until disastrous landslides during San Francisco's 1906 earthquake paused logging efforts.

Reforestation began when the lumber company planted 50 acres of redwood and non-native eucalyptus seedlings. Logging resumed from 1909 until 1924, when most of Loma Prieta's mill was dismantled and abandoned—after processing 140 million board feet of redwood.

The Marks family of Salinas deeded more than 9,000 acres to the State for use as a public park in 1963. Named for matriarch Nisene (a Danish name) Marks, the gift deed specified that the "natural preserve" be used for camping, hiking, and nature study. Other donations have increased park acreage to nearly 10,000 acres. The Forest of Nisene Marks honors forest regeneration and preservation efforts.

Photo courtesy of the Santa Cruz Museum of Art and History

Historic logger's cabin (lost in 1982 flood)



Trees shifted by the Loma Prieta quake twist as they grow to self correct.

GEOLOGY

Three earthquake faults—San Andreas, San Gregorio, and Zayante—influence the park's geology. The San Gregorio Fault runs slightly southeast of park boundaries. The Zayante Fault crosses the park's Aptos Creek Canyon while the San Andreas Fault, extending nearly the entire length of the state, parallels the park's northeastern border below Santa Rosalia Ridge.

The San Andreas Fault's devastating 6.9 magnitude earthquake caused upheaval throughout Northern California in 1989. That quake was named after Loma Prieta ("dark hill"), the mountain near the quake's epicenter in the park.

Ancient sea floor sedimentary rocks—mostly sandstone, chert, and siltstone with embedded marine fossils—are found in the Aptos and Bridge creekbeds. For most of the park's history, it was a shallow inland sea. The park's unstable sandy and loamy soil is susceptible to landslides.

HABITATS

In the cool and quiet semi-wilderness of the park, tall trees shelter creeks and canyons. Park elevation ranges from sea level to more than 2,600 feet. The park contains grassland, scrub, chaparral, woodland, and forest riparian communities.

Eighty percent of the hilly park is covered in coast redwood (*Sequoia sempervirens*) forest, with trees ranging in age from 80 to 120 years old and reaching 125 feet tall. These second- and third-growth redwoods often sprout from the collar surrounding cut stumps; the sprouts are usually genetically identical to the parent tree. A few old-growth redwoods still survive within the park.

Redwood species once grew throughout Asia, Europe, and North America. The remaining range of coast redwood is limited to the Pacific Coast fog belt between Oregon and the Big Sur coast.

Scientists fear that climate change, with decreasing fog and increasing temperatures, will result in even more redwood habitat loss.

Sequoia sempervirens

Fetid adder's tongue, a disagreeable-smelling plant, grows among the redwoods along the Buggy Trail.

Five percent of the park is covered in Northern maritime chaparral containing coyote brush and woolyleaf manzanita.

Other habitats include a purple needlegrass grassland and a red alder riparian forest.

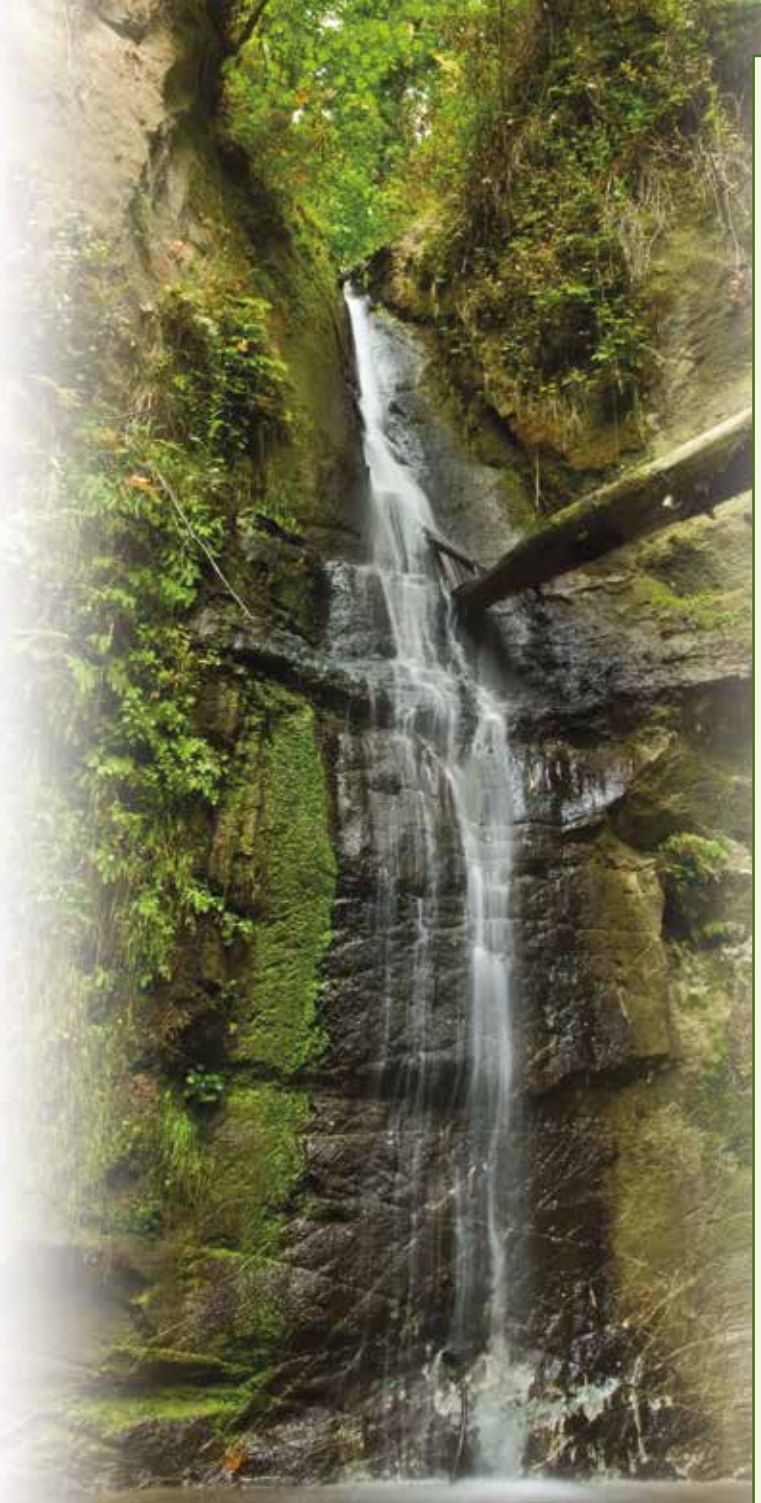
The Forest's diverse topography, abundant water, and varied plant life support many species of wildlife, including raccoons, cougar, deer, yellow-legged frogs, and the popular banana slug. Native birds include the American dipper, winter wren, and saw-whet owl. Coho salmon and steelhead spawn in the Bridge and Aptos creeks.

Fetid adder's tongue

Banana slug

ACCESSIBLE INFORMATION

Accessibility is continually improving, but there are currently no wheelchair-accessible activities at the park. For updates, visit **http://access.parks.ca.gov**.



Maple Falls at end of Bridge Creek Trail

RECREATION

The park lies north of Aptos Village on Aptos Creek Road in Santa Cruz County. Weather can be changeable year round.

Picnic tables and barbecue pits are available. Trail campsites are located six miles from the trail camp parking lot at the West Ridge Trailhead. The trail camp has no water, and fires are prohibited. To reserve, call the Sunset State Beach kiosk at (831) 763-7063.

Trails

Loma Prieta Grade Trail follows a steam railway bed from the mill to Hoffman's Historic Site, named after a logging superintendent. This site was a camp that once housed 100 loggers and mill workers.

The 2,700-acre Soquel Demonstration State Forest north of the park is managed by the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection. Advanced mountain bikers can ride the loops within the demo forest by entering on Ridge Trail at the end of the Aptos Creek Fire Road.

PLEASE REMEMBER

- All natural and cultural features are protected by law and may not be disturbed or removed.
- To prevent erosion of the slopes, stay on marked trails; observe all trail postings.
- By law, bicycling and mountain biking are allowed only on the Aptos Creek Fire Road and four single-track trails below its steel bridge. Cyclists may use the Aptos Rancho Trail, the Split Stuff Trail, the Terrace Trail, and the Vienna Woods Trail.
- Except for service animals, dogs are allowed only on Aptos Creek Fire Road and four single-track trails (named above) below the steel bridge. Dogs are prohibited beyond the gate at the Porter picnic area parking lot. Animals must be attended and on leashes no longer than six feet at all times.

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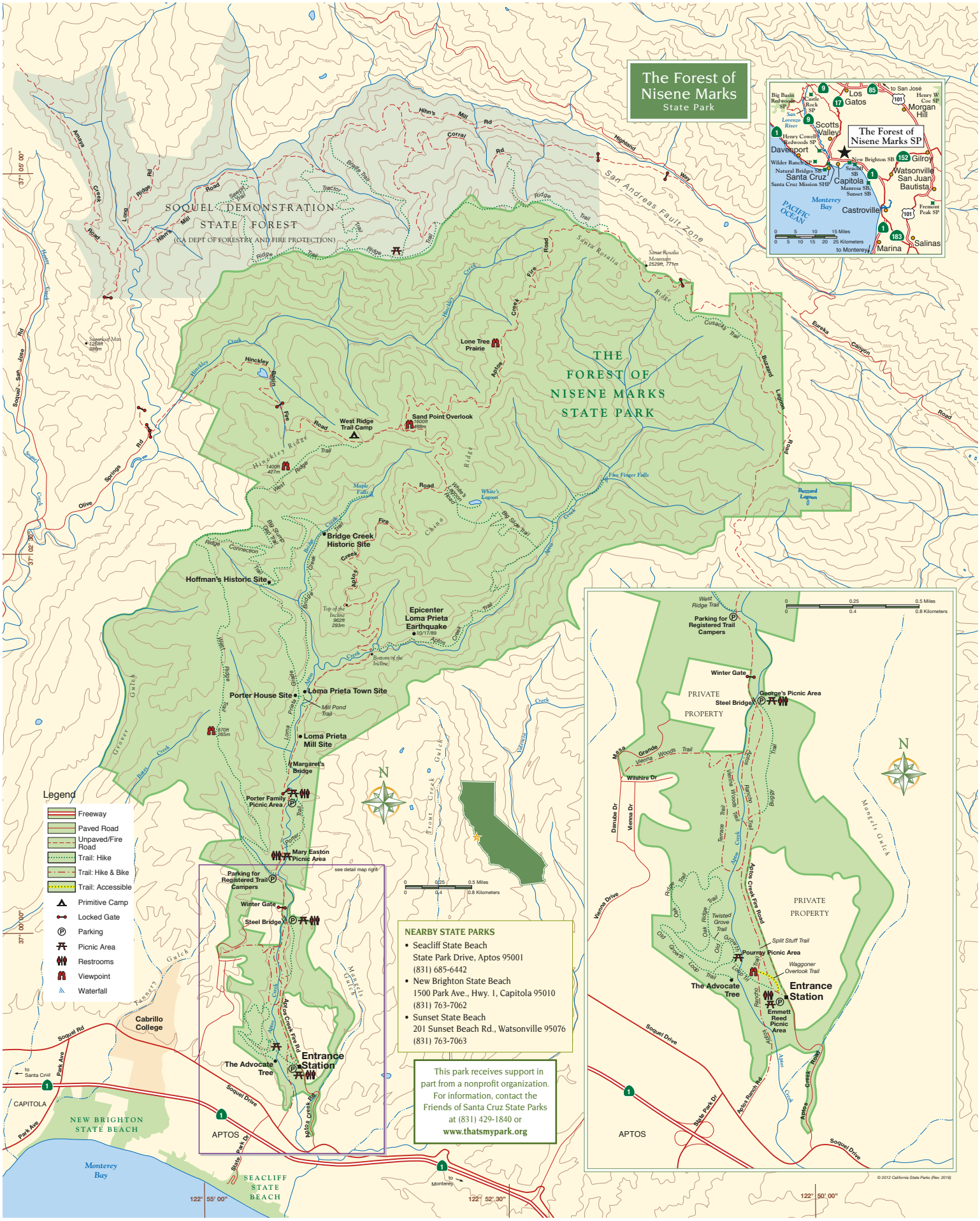

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This park receives support in part from a nonprofit organization. For information, contact the Friends of Santa Cruz State Parks at (831) 429-1840 or **www.thatsmypark.org**