



Creating Accessible Programs Through Strategic Partnerships

Sheila Coll is the Park Interpretive Specialist at Mount Tamalpais State Park from California State Parks. This feature explores a partnership between Latino Outdoors and California State Parks, and how these two agencies have been able to put on monthly programming that is not only free of charge, but also provides lunch, transportation, and Spanish language interpretation.

1. How did your partnership with Latino Outdoors come about? How long has this partnership been happening?

This partnership began in an interagency meeting with Marin County Parks. Kevin Wright, the External Affairs Coordinator of MCP, connected us with Alicia Cruz, the Regional Coordinator for Latino Outdoors in San Francisco and Marin Counties. She had already been leading monthly guided “Wellness Walks” through Latino Outdoors in different public parks in the Bay Area earlier in 2015. Mt. Tamalpais State Park had a pilot program that we were developing for the Healthy Parks Healthy People program that included transportation, lunch, and bilingual guides. We had been looking for outreach opportunities within local Latino communities when we were connected with Alicia, who was looking to expand the Wellness Walk program to include easier access for participants, so it was perfect timing to collaborate.

Our first program began on July 11, 2015 on Old Mine trail at Mt. Tamalpais State Park. 21 people participated, which is the most Mt. Tamalpais State Park had ever had since we began offering the Healthy Parks Healthy People hikes in 2014. We had one other event in August (a hike down to Muir Beach along the Redwood Creek trail) which also saw a large turnout. With the great success of the first two programs, we were able to secure funding for transportation and lunch for the 2016 program.

2. How did the idea for Second Saturday programs come about? What is your outreach strategy for getting people to come to your programs?

Mt. Tamalpais State Park had been participating in the Healthy Parks Healthy People First Saturday hikes since 2014, but before the partnership with Latino Outdoors began we were getting very low participant numbers. We took a look at our resources and we decided to focus our outreach on the residents of the Canal Area in San Rafael. We have two amazing bilingual Latino rangers, Cecilia Rejas and Roberto Walton, who were excited to offer guided hikes in Spanish. The problem was that potential participants may not have had access to a vehicle, and it took more than two hours and about two bus transfers just

to travel to Mt. Tamalpais State Park using public transportation. We knew that we needed to find a way to overcome any transportation barriers and also create a welcoming space for communities who may never have been to our parks before. To make this program successful, Mt. Tamalpais State Park's supporting nonprofit partner, the Friends of Mt. Tam, agreed to fund transportation and food for our pilot program.

When we partnered with Alicia, she had already been offering monthly Latino Outdoors hikes around the Bay Area every second Saturday of the month, and there was interest in keeping the consistency of the previous schedule so it would not be confusing for those who already had been participating in her program. When the pilot program proved to be a great success, we were able to secure generous grants from the California State Parks Foundation and the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy through the One Tam initiative for the 2016 programs.

Although both of our organizations promote the program, Latino Outdoors has been the primary source for outreach. Alicia has done an amazing job at connecting to local communities for the program. She does this by using a lot of social media and in-person networking to connect locals to the programs. Many of the participants who found out about the program through Facebook or the Latino Outdoors website really liked the hikes and through word of mouth would invite friends and family to attend. Latino Outdoors really has an amazing program - what began as a simple community walking program has become a nationwide movement, and we are so happy to take part in supporting that movement any way we can.

3. What is your process for creating Second Saturday programs?

I work with our amazing bilingual Rangers, Cecilia Rejas and Supervising Ranger Roberto Walton, and Alicia to design the hike location, duration of hike, and lunch. We select easy to moderate hiking routes, usually about 2-3 miles in length. Cecilia will design the educational component of the hikes, and I will take over more of the logistical components as well as the meal for lunch. We have partnered with Whistlestop Wheels and Inview Travel to provide transportation for the events, and so far they have the best deals for transportation. We have also received a lot of support for transportation and leadership from the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy through the One Tam initiative; their contributions have been invaluable. We have included other partnerships in our programs - for example, for our September 2016 program, we partnered with Environmental Traveling Companions to host a kayaking trip at Tomales Bay State Park. We have also partnered with the Salmon Action and Protection Network and Marin Audubon Society to provide guided hikes in our parks.

4. How have you seen or heard participants benefit from attending Second Saturday programs?

Many of our participants give us very positive feedback about the hikes, saying that they feel refreshed after the hike and that they look forward to it every month. Some who have consistently participated in

the hikes have said they feel stronger and have more energy. Something I hadn't anticipated was the enduring sense of community and friendship that the Latino Outdoors participants bring to the trips. We have about 15 participants who consistently show up every week and bring a lot of joy and connectivity to the events. Also, not only have we seen physical benefits from the program, but we have also been able to link several of our Latino Outdoors participants to employment opportunities within California State Parks and the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy. It is always great when the one of the benefits of outreach programs is providing opportunities for networking.

5. How has being part of a partnership focused on creating accessible Spanish language programming influenced how you approach your work as a park professional?

The U.S. Census Bureau states that 39% of California's population identifies as Latino, many of which are English language learners. It is very important for public parks to reflect the constituents that they serve, and there is a need for more outreach efforts and more accessible Spanish language media and culturally relevant programming within the system as the population changes. Our district has been looking into creating more bilingual signage and media for our parks in Marin and ways to continue our outreach efforts. It is also important for the park system employees to reflect the diversity of the population that they serve, and hopefully our outreach efforts will serve to create more employment connections and to inspire young people in these communities to seek careers in public parks.

6. What are some of the challenges that you have encountered when creating programs that are culturally and socioeconomically inclusive?

Jose Gonzales, the founder of Latino Outdoors, said this about inclusion of people of color in outdoor parks: "The largest barrier is feeling welcome in some of these spaces". When we began organizing this program we had to ask ourselves several questions, such as "How can we make it easier for local communities to visit our parks?" and "How can we foster a safe, welcoming environment for participants who may be new to Marin's State Parks?" We began looking at community surveys conducted by San Francisco State University and the Social Science Research Council. Along with transportation and language barriers, verbal and nonverbal discrimination by other park visitors came up in the report as an issue that hindered local Latino communities from being able to visit our Bay Area parks. We are very fortunate to have two amazing Latino rangers at our park who were really excited to co-lead the programs with Alicia to create an accessible and comfortable environment for participants who may be English language learners. Also, Alicia has done an excellent job of community building and establishing a safe, welcoming space for the participants who may be new to Marin's parks. It is important, whenever possible, to include community leaders in co-leadership roles for park outreach programs in order to foster strong meaningful partnerships to meet the needs of the community.

7. Do you have any memorable quotes, pictures, or testimonies that you would like to share?

Here are some quotes from the Latino Outdoors participants:

One participant who has attended every event with her husband and 5 and 7 year old daughters since we began in 2015 said that "In the beginning my daughters used to say 'Do we have to go?' and now each month they say 'When do we get to go on the hike? I can't wait to go!'"

"I always look forward to the hikes every month. It is so wonderful to be in such beautiful spaces. I wish they happened every week."

"Being in this community really makes my heart sing."

8. Is there anything else that you would like to add that I did not ask?

No, thanks for giving us a chance to tell our story!



Photo credit Paul Meyers, Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy

