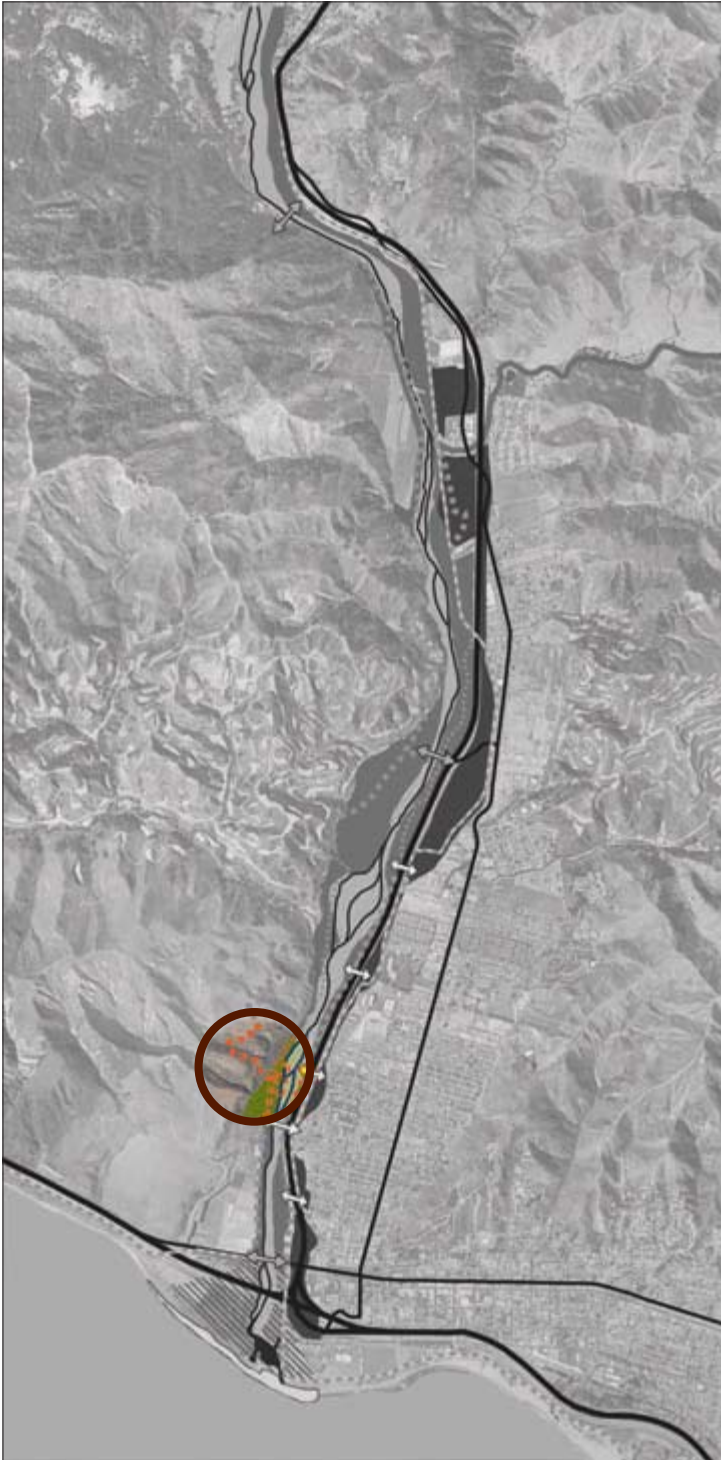


CHAPTER 11: COTTONWOOD JUNCTION



FIGURE 11.1 Bluffs above the western bank of the Lower Ventura River.



Existing Conditions

This chapter of the Vision Plan explores the concept of creating a small site at the junction of several potential trails on the west side of the river, which will serve as the focus for nature experiences for parkway visitors.

THE WESTERN BANK OF THE RIVER

The western edge of the Lower Ventura River has not been urbanized, and currently there is very little structural development. A panorama of stunning views, abundant natural processes and educational opportunities grace the lands along this bank between the Main Street Bridge and Casitas Vista Bridge. However, most of the property abutting the river is privately held and few people have the opportunity to experience it. At the northern end of the proposed parkway near Foster Park and Casitas Vista Bridge, Mission Avocado is an active orchard that reflects Ventura's agricultural heritage. The central section of the proposed parkway features oil extraction operations that cover an extensive swath of largely isolated hillside land. Aerial images indicate a disturbed but vegetated landscape. These combined factors indicate that this area provides moderate habitat value. Two row-crop fields are actively cultivated at the southern end of the western bank, representing an aspect of the economy of Ventura today, and provide large areas for stormwater to infiltrate the aquifer, but large farming operations this close to the river may also present risks for increased nitrates in river water due to fertilizer runoff. In addition to presenting natural and agricultural resources that would add richness to a visitor's experience, these farming operations feature packed-earth service roads adjacent to the river.

THE SITE

The scope of this vision plan and current restrictions on access preclude a detailed ground-level study of the west bank of the lower river. However, the site identified in figure 11.6 has characteristics that make it an appropriate example of a suitable site for a gathering area. This niche lies in an apparently undeveloped area between the northern and southern extent of the row crop operations on Taylor Ranch property (Philips 2000). It is nestled on a strip of terraced land between steep bluffs to the west and a drop to the riverbed to the east, with a packed-earth service road passing through.

FIGURE 11.2 Proposed location of Cottonwood Junction.

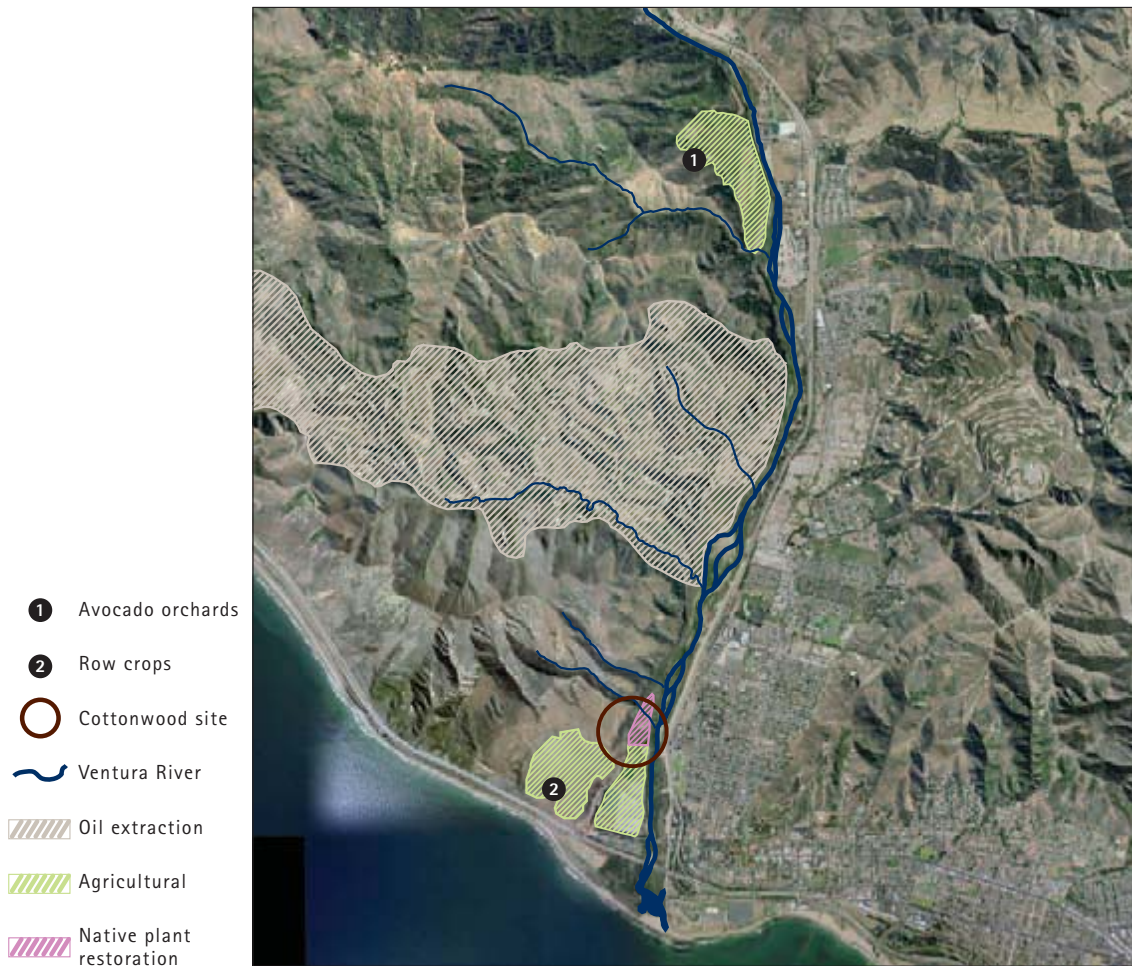


FIGURE 11.3 Existing features on the west side of the Ventura River. Orthophotography: CIRGIS.

The site itself could provide visitors with lessons about natural processes. The clay-red bluffs display erosion and the underlying geology, while the distribution and density of vegetation gives clues to the location of groundwater and ephemeral streams. The riverine and riparian ecosystems of the river are just a short walk away on one side, and several ephemeral streams have cut notches into the bluffs nearby, offering opportunities for hiking into the hills. A native plant restoration has recently been undertaken at this

location (Phillips 2000). The vegetation is representative of three ecosystems, as well as disturbed landscapes. Black sage (*Salvia mellifera*) and other low-growing plants represent the coastal sage scrub community, while oak woodland species such as coast live oak (*Quercus agrifolia*) and lemonade berry (*Rhus integrifolia*) are also present. Finally Western cottonwood (*Populus fremontii*), Western sycamore (*Platanus racemosa*), mule fat (*Baccharis salicifolia*) and other water-loving species demarcate the riparian zone and areas of



FIGURE 11.4 Service Road along the western bank of the river.



FIGURE 11.5 No trespassing signs are a frequent sight near the Ventura River.

abundant groundwater. Each of these ecosystems provides food and shelter for wildlife, as well as playing roles in natural fire regimes and soil stabilization. However, invasive species indicative of disturbance such as fennel (*Foeniculum vulgure*) and castor bean (*Ricinus communis*) are also present.

-  Cottonwood Junction day use/picnic area
-  Wildlife observation blinds
-  Nature trails
-  Ephemeral trails
-  Multi-use trails
-  Limited access bridge
-  Ventura river channels (approximate)
-  Intermittent stream with riparian corridor
-  Ventura river floodway
-  Riparian
-  Mixed riparian/oak woodland
-  Hillsides/bluffs
-  Agricultural
-  Urban

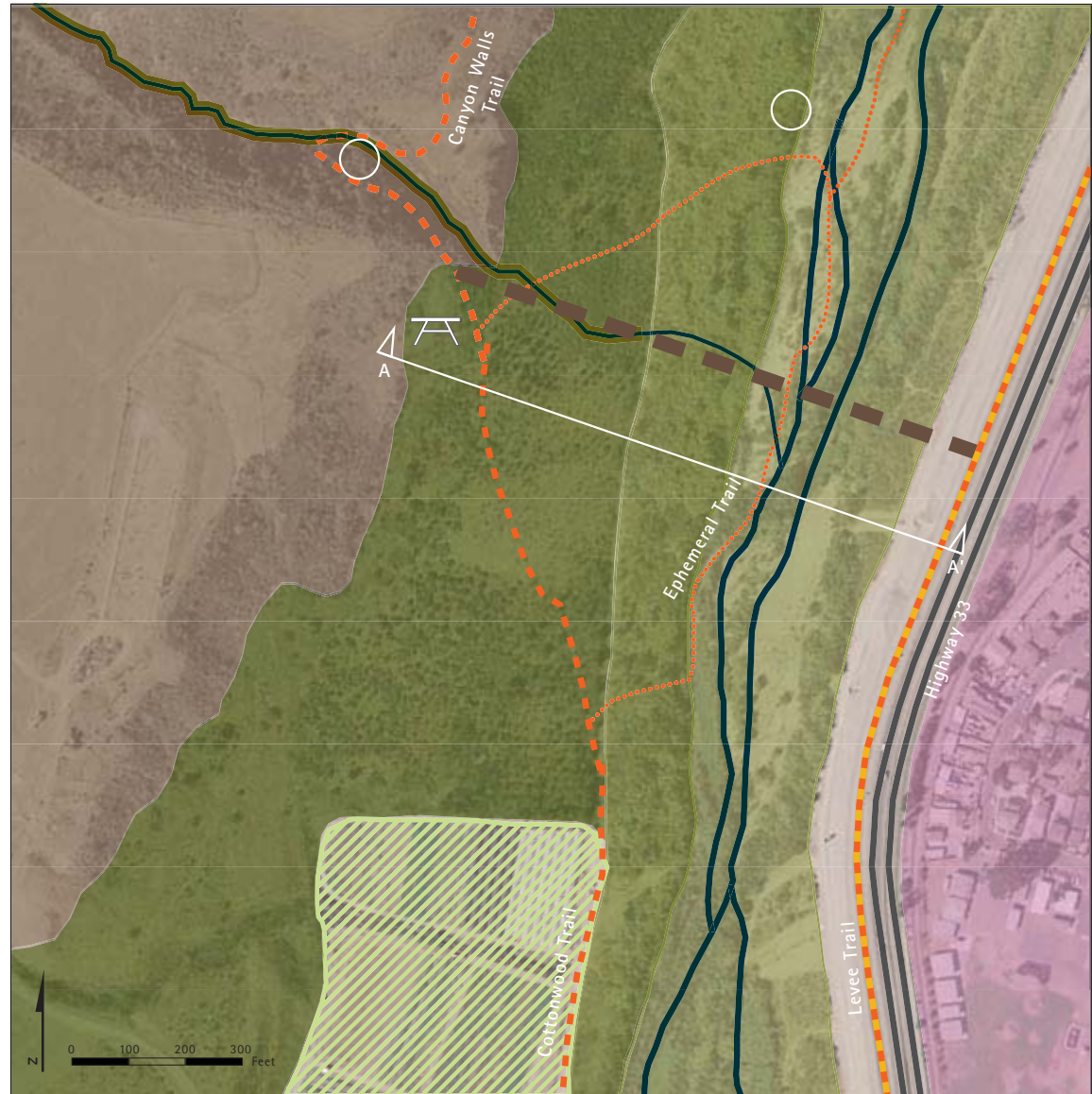


FIGURE 11.6 Cottonwood Junction, proposed plan.

Design Concepts

THE PLANS

Design objectives for this site are the protection and restoration of wildlife habitat, preservation of existing agriculture, the improvement of public access, recreation and education, and the encouragement of increased stewardship for the Ventura River. These objectives are consistent with an overall parkway objective, the permanent protection of minimally developed land and agricultural resources on the western side of the Ventura River from urban and suburban development.

Opportunities for the public to visit this area would be provided through a Ventura Wilds Trail and a public gathering area, Cottonwood Junction, along the trail. These amenities could be implemented with the least possible impact to natural systems and wildlife and would present special opportunities for the creation of future

environmental stewards. Evidence suggests that providing children with outdoor experiences which are naturalistic in character can lead to a desire to protect and care for the natural environment as adults (Wells and Lekies 2006).

The Trail

The Ventura Wilds Trail would have the characteristics of a nature trail as discussed in chapter 8, Circulation. It would give users the opportunity to move through three distinct ecosystems with different sights and smells, feeling distinct ambient temperatures and possibly encountering different types of wildlife. Several points of entry at the north and south ends, and three intermediate bridges connecting with the urban grid across the river would allow hikers to choose the duration of their trip.

A trip from the north end to the south end of the parkway

(moving downstream) along the west side might occur as follows. Beginning at Casitas Vista Bridge at Foster Park, visitors would take the Avocado Trail segment through the orchards of Mission Avocado, directly across the river from the proposed Cañada Confluence area (chapter 10). Here, hikers would be able to transverse the edge of the habitat-rich river and riparian zones while experiencing a piece of the agricultural heritage of Ventura. Hikers would also have the opportunity to cross the river on a limited-access bridge and explore the Confluence area. As they reach the end of the avocado orchard, hikers would ascend a steep hill, arriving at the top of a bluff with dramatic river views. The Canyon Walls segment of the trail would continue south on top of the bluffs, taking hikers through areas of chaparral and oak woodland and traversing the property of Aera Energy. This mostly undeveloped area currently features active oil production, but presents a significant opportunity

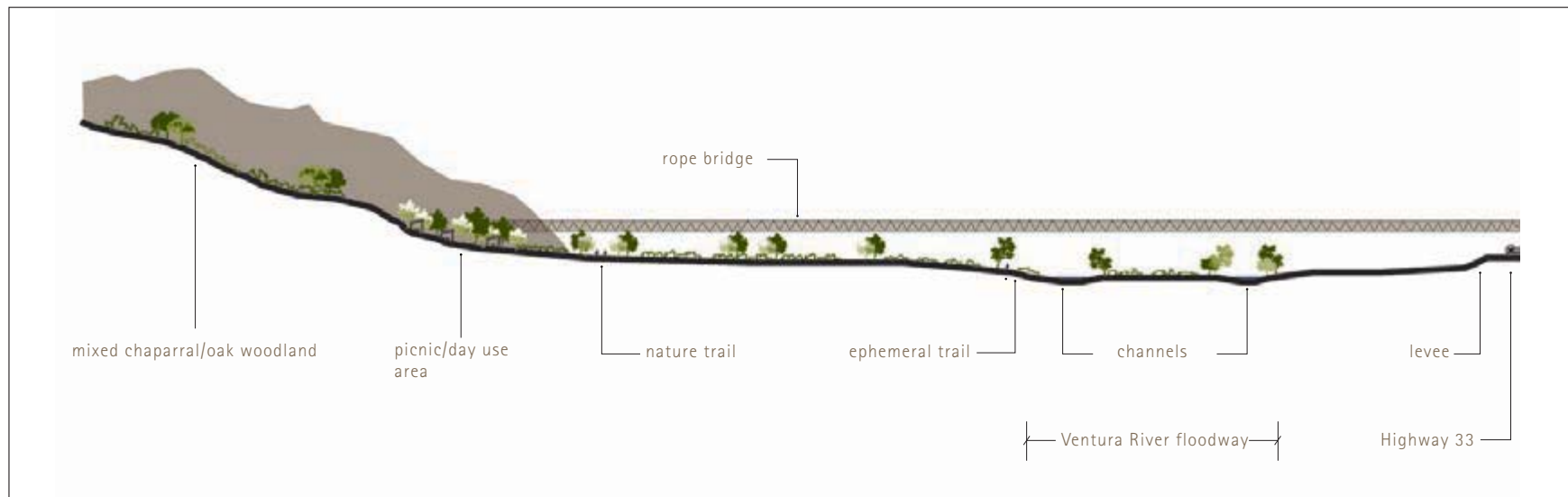


FIGURE 11.7 Section A-A: Not to scale.



FIGURE 11.8 Cottonwood Junction, north facing perspective.

for future recreational open space and habitat restoration. Arrangements for public use of the 1930s era Shell Road Bridge, or a new limited-access bridge nearby, would give hikers an opportunity to descend to the river and cross to the urban side of the parkway, while other hikers might continue along the bluffs on a stabilized trail, moving in and out of canyons formed by intermittent tributaries of the Ventura River. This part of the trail experience would depend on the development of a strong public-private partnership with Aera Energy including easements for passive recreational use. A partnership of this nature would also open up future opportunities for the creation of other programs, including ecosystem restoration.

The Junction

After passing through the Aera land, hikers could descend from the Canyon Walls segment of the trail, arriving at Cottonwood Junction. This plan envisions the area at the foot of the bluffs with the river below, as the junction or meeting point of several parkway elements, all of which might bring visitors from different directions. Hikers entering the area from the bluffs to the north would encounter others walking up the Cottonwood trail segment from the Main Street bridge downstream. Some hardy, dry-season hikers might enter the area from upstream or downstream after boulder hopping along sections of the riverbed itself. The Junction is also near the point where two ephemeral streams meet the Ventura River from the hills above, possibly bringing wildlife down to the river from the hills above.

Finally, some visitors would enter the Junction on a limited-access bridge stretching across the river from the Ventura levee. If technically feasible, this would be a rope bridge. Used throughout history to span deep gorges, rope bridges are greatly admired today for their simple but solid engineering, aesthetic qualities, and adventurous character. The bridge would provide users of the Ventura Wilds Trail a unique and exciting opportunity to access the east side of the parkway, and vice versa.

The Junction itself would include amenities such as a

blind for wildlife observation, picnic areas, interpretive displays, and a space where docents could conduct nature education programs.

An Ephemeral Trail

At the edge of the Ventura River just to the east of Cottonwood Junction, a marked ephemeral trail would take visitors over the bank and down into the floodway of the river itself. An ephemeral trail in the riverbed here, perhaps with a docent guide, would give visitors a look at essential Ventura River characteristics such as braided channels that they might not otherwise see up close. Due to the effects of periodic flood scouring, repeat visitors could experience significant changes in scenery and plant succession that would reinforce their understanding of the ephemerality or temporary nature of the environment of this unique river.

End of the Trail

Downstream from Cottonwood Junction, the Cottonwood Trail would form the final segment of the Ventura Wilds Trail. Walkers on this segment, an agricultural service road, would be flanked on the east by the riverbank and riparian vegetation with several opportunities to walk up to the side

of river channels in which water generally flows. On the west side, visitors would pass active rowcrops, a reminder of where their food comes from and of one of Ventura's economic drivers. Finally, the trail would end at a proposed trailhead at the Main Street Bridge. The view would be an interesting look at the intersection of natural and structural engineering, that of the Main Street Bridge and Highway 101 rising above the river and cutting into the hillsides: the natural world overlaid by urbanization.

CONCLUSION

Cottonwood Junction would be the focal point for the themes of agriculture and nature experience that would define the west side of the proposed parkway corridor. The Junction would be a gathering space where visitors converge with programs revolving around observation of nature and respectful interactions between humans and natural communities.

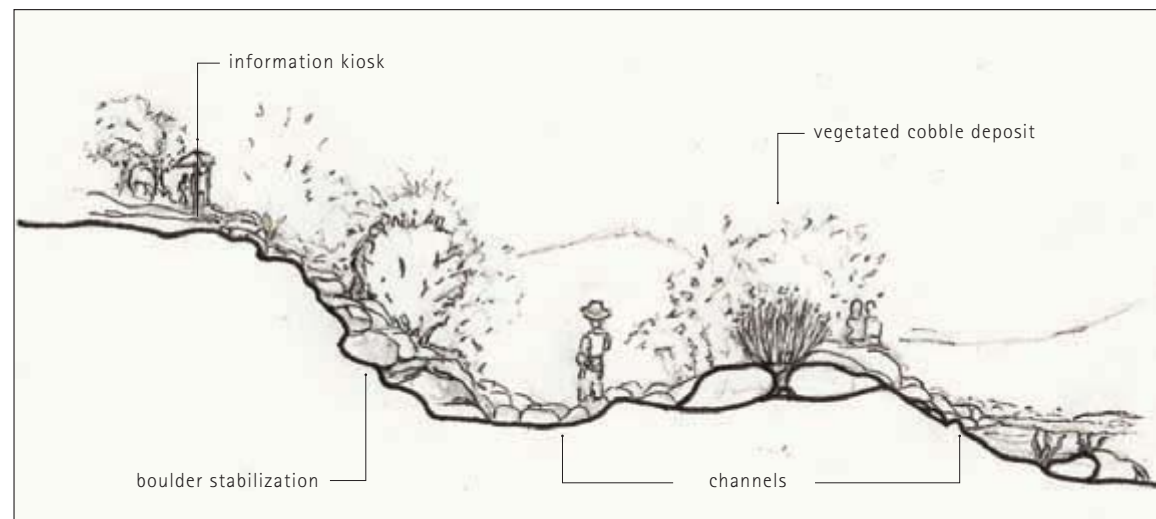


FIGURE 11.9 Ephemeral trail detail, late winter in an average rain year. An information kiosk is located just before the trail head and the river bank has been stabilized with boulders and appropriate measures to prevent erosion.