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Hiking: San Gabriel Mountains

Angling for Better Trail to Fish Canyon Falls

By JOHN MCKINNEY

You've heard fish stories before—tales of secret spots, anglers' heavens and the big one that got away.

This is a story about Fish Canyon and its enchanting but elusive waterfall, whose story has become as legendary a tale among Southland hikers as any fish story concocted by local fishermen.

For earlier generations of hikers, Fish Canyon and its handsome 80-foot-high waterfall enjoyed a reputation as one of the most attractive destinations in the foothills of the San Gabriel Mountains. The five-mile round-trip hike to the falls was considered a most pleasant front-country saunter, particularly in spring.

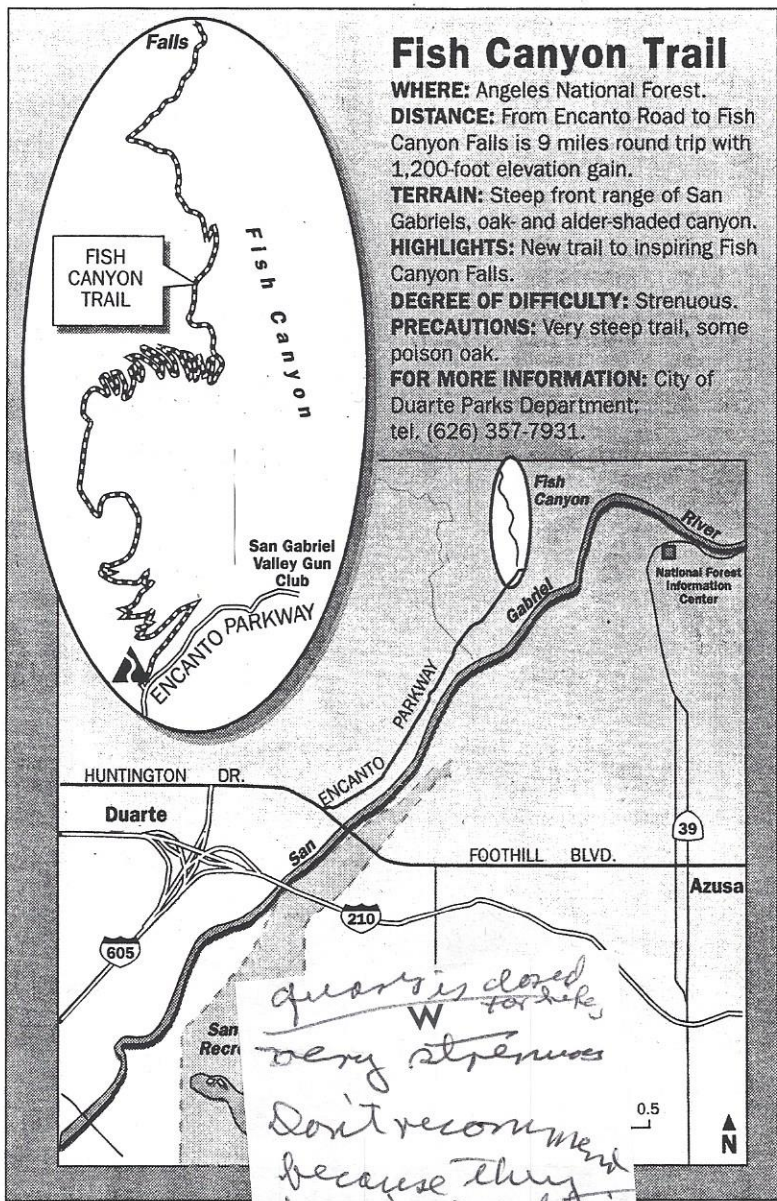
The good times ended in 1956 when the Azusa Rock Co. began quarry operations in the mouth of Fish Canyon. This was in the era of dig-first-ask-questions-later, and the company was not required to explain—much less mitigate—the adverse environmental impacts caused by moving and removing millions of tons of rock.

To their frustration, hikers of the 1950s found they had even less legal protection than the earth. The quarry company fenced off the canyon mouth and stationed guards to turn hikers away from Fish Canyon Trail.

After more than 30 years of hikers' protests and guerrilla hiking (sneaking past Azusa Rock Co. gendarmes), the company condescended to construct a bypass trail around its diggings in 1988. Trouble was, this path was a bloody awful, precipitous route over rocky, unstable slopes.

Now there's a new way to go. The city of Duarte, with the hard-working young people of the Los Angeles Conservation Corps, recently completed a new trail into Fish Canyon. The path, a three-mile-long bypass of the quarry operation, climbs steeply up the west wall of Fish Canyon, then drops precipitously to the bottom of Fish Canyon at a point just a few hundred yards above the Azusa Rock Co. diggings.

Given the five-decade-long



Fish Canyon Trail

WHERE: Angeles National Forest.

DISTANCE: From Encanto Road to Fish Canyon Falls is 9 miles round trip with 1,200-foot elevation gain.

TERRAIN: Steep front range of San Gabriels, oak- and alder-shaded canyon. **HIGHLIGHTS:** New trail to inspiring Fish Canyon Falls.

DEGREE OF DIFFICULTY: Strenuous.

PRECAUTIONS: Very steep trail, some poison oak.

FOR MORE INFORMATION: City of Duarte Parks Department; tel. (626) 357-7931.

struggle to gain access to Fish Canyon, it might seem the height of ingratitude to complain about the layout and design of the new trail, which follows far too steep a course for the average hiker. My impression was that the engineers left out a couple dozen switchbacks.

In short, what was an easy family hike is now a strenuous outing best left to experienced hikers and those training for a trek in Nepal.

Still, the allure of Fish Canyon Falls will still motivate hikers to

undertake this semi-masochistic adventure. "In my opinion it's the most beautiful waterfall in the San Gabriels," says Donna Georgino, Duarte Parks Department director. It is a beauty. El Niño-swollen cascades fall in stair-step fashion into a rock amphitheater. Fish Canyon's rock walls amplify the acoustics so that the roar of the falls is quite impressive.

Directions to trail head: From the Foothill Freeway (I-210) in Duarte, exit on Mt. Olive Drive. Head north to the first signal and turn right on Huntington Drive

(Old Route 66). Proceed half a mile to Encanto Parkway and turn left. Continue 1.5 miles to the signal. Fish Canyon Trail head and parking on the left side of the road.

The hike: Begin the nonsensical ascent of the west wall of Fish Canyon. The path climbs aggressively over chaparral-covered slopes and soon offers a commanding view of the mouth of Fish Canyon, whose quarry operation have left it looking like a battlefield. Adding to the war-torn effect is the echo of gunfire emanating from the adjacent San Gabriel Valley Gun Club.

Higher elevations bring more inspiring views: a couple of peaceful reservoirs, a good deal of the San Gabriel Valley and the snow-capped San Gabriel range.

The path climbs to meet a dirt road, where you bear left and pass an old rusty water tank. A very steep climb leads over the crest of a ridge, and then the path begins a rapid, knee-jarring, mile or so descent. (It's disheartening to remember that you have to hike back up this slope.)

The new Fish Canyon Trail joins the old one at an unsigned junction at the bottom of the canyon. Turn left (north) and savor what is no longer a delightful saunter along the west slope above Fish Creek.

The trail passes several stone walls and foundations, the ruins of about 50 vacation cabins that lined the creek. A 1958 fire and big flood the following year wiped out most of these cabins.

Fish Canyon Trail switchbacks a bit higher up the canyon slope before descending back to the creek. After crossing the creek, follow the mellow path along the east side of the creek to a sharp bend in the canyon walls and sudden meeting with Fish Canyon Falls.

Rest a long time at the falls before tackling the return trip.

McKinney's book "Day Hiker's Guide to Southern California" is available through The Times for \$16.45 (including tax, shipping and handling) by calling (800) 246-4042.

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