

U.S. LED VOLUNTEER EXPEDITION IN PATAGONIA SUCCESSFUL

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U.S. volunteers that participated in the Patagonia Project Volunteer Expedition 2005 have returned to the United States after a successful trip to Torres del Paine (ST, March 15). The trip served as a pilot project for future volunteer work promoting sustainability and eco-tourism.

Rich Tobin of the U.S. Forestry Service (USFS), the driving force behind the project, said the energy of the 25 volunteers was high as they departed Santiago for the park, and the excitement only escalated.

After arriving in the park on March 15, nearly 50 volunteers from both the United States and Chile completed six days of challenging physical work.

The group succeeded in repairing approximately five km of damaged trails between Refugio Pehoe and Lago Pato.

"We set challenging goals, and we met them," a satisfied Tobin said.

The project also included an intensive five-day training session for rangers of Chile's National Forestry Corporation (CONAF) from parks all over the country. The instructors were sent from the USFS and taught the participants about sustainable trail construction and maintenance.

But the trails were not the only beneficiaries of the volunteer work. Jane Ruthman, a U.S. landscape architect, worked with CONAF staff to discuss the park's future development and how landscape architecture can be used to encourage eco-tourism.

Another part of the project was to visit and assess the areas damaged by fire last February (ST, Feb. 28) and discuss restoration plans. Specialists were able to assess that the majority of the burnt areas only had low degree burns, meaning that organic matter can still be found in the soil and that root systems are in a reasonably healthy condition. Some areas already had grass growing, according to the volunteers.

The project also has a commitment to the economic and social opportunities within Chile. Volunteers raised US\$71,000, including US\$5,000 worth of tools that were donated to the park to help in trail maintenance.

Tobin stressed the importance of the generosity of businesses in both the United States and Chile that made the trip possible.

Before the volunteers' departure from Puerto Natales late last week, U.S. Ambassador Craig Kelly thanked the crew for their efforts and encouraged them to continue their work in the future.

The next step is an evaluation of the project, and there is already discussion about returning to the park next year. Those who wish to follow future progress or donate may visit The Patagonian Foundation's Web site (www.thepatagonianfoundation.org) or write to Rich Tobin at rtobin@fs.fed.us.