

Trip Report: Patagonia Volunteer Project

March 18-April 1, 2006

In our second year supporting Torres del Paine National Park, over 30 volunteers from the United States and Chile worked on repairing the most heavily used trail in the park from Refugio Pehoe to Refugio Grey. The work included marking and rerouting trails, removing rock obstructions in the trails, constructing water bars and dips, and widening the trails for safe foot travel. Volunteers completed the assigned work in record time and were also able to repair additional trail segments overlooking Lago Pehoe.

TPF is thrilled to report that, because of the generosity of its donors, TPF was able to fund the travel expenses of five Chilean volunteers. Cesar Hernandez and Jorge Herrera are students at the Universidad del Desarrollo in Santiago and were awarded the opportunity to accompany us on the trip in recognition of their academic achievements in ecotourism studies. Javiera Zambrano attended in her role as the volunteer coordinator for CODEFF, Chile's oldest environmental nonprofit organization. Pilar Heran and Carolina Torres live in the nearby town of Puerto Natales and represent the crucial link between the park and the community that supports it.

In addition to sponsoring five Chilean volunteers, the generous donations of TPF's volunteers and donors also provided:

- Replacement trail tools that had broken from heavy use during last year's project;
- Additional tools to round out our supply and ensure that each group of volunteers had the most effective tools at their fingertips; and
- The travel, room and board costs for all volunteers.

The volunteers' hard work paid off, and the quality of the trail dramatically improved. Pictures from the March 2006 trip can be seen on TPF's website at the following link: <http://www.thepatagonianfoundation.org/project6.php>

Background

Rising from the Patagonian steppes with breathtaking abruptness, the craggy mountains of Torres del Paine are an impressive sight, and have been internationally recognized by the United Nations as a World Biosphere Preserve. However, increasing visitation to Torres del Paine is outpacing Chile's ability to protect what many believe to be one of the world's greatest wilderness areas. TPF's trail maintenance project endeavors to protect the sustainability of the park by uniting volunteers, communities, government, business, nongovernmental organizations and universities.

US/Chile Environmental Cooperative Agreement

In 2005, the United States and Chile reached an agreement on a program of work to advance environmental cooperation between the two countries. This agreement is part of the US Chile Free Trade Agreement. The work program concentrates on the following areas:

1. Building capacity to improve compliance with environmental laws and regulations;
2. Encouraging sound environmental practices and technologies;
3. Promoting sustainable management of natural resources including wildlife and protected areas;
4. Encouraging civil society participation in environmental decision-making;
5. Improving environmental education; and
6. Fostering information exchange on a range of issues, including environmental health, climate change, natural disasters, and public-private partnerships.

The Patagonia Volunteer Project

The Patagonia Volunteer Project was selected as one of the first projects under the new cooperative agreement. In 2005, TPF, the U.S. Forest Service, the Chilean National Park Service (CONAF), and Fundación Patagonia (an organization based in Chile), joined together to launch this environmental improvement project in Torres del Paine. Our first group of volunteers traveled to Chile to work on the trails in March 2005 and were so successful that we were invited to return.

Forest Service Technical Support

The Forest Service promotes sustainable forest management and biodiversity conservation internationally, providing technical support and leadership for protected area management worldwide. Rather than simply a trail maintenance project, the Forest Service and CONAF designed the project to build capacity for environmental protection and community economic growth by providing training opportunities and creating partnerships between volunteers, park managers, local communities, non-governmental organizations, universities and business.

US Embassy Support

The US Embassy actively supports our efforts. Upon their arrival, volunteers met with US Ambassador Craig Kelly and Environmental and Natural Resources Staff Officer Jacqueline Ward. In addition, representatives of the US Embassy arranged for volunteers to meet with the Wildlife Conservation Society to learn about Karukinka, a 600,000-acre preserve managed by WCS in Tierra del Fuego.

Other Support

From Within The Park

The project received substantial support from a number of private entities within the park. Vértice, the refuge where the volunteers stayed, provided discounted rates for room and board and helped us celebrate the end of the project with a wonderful banquet with smoked salmon, wine and pisco sours. Refugio Lago Grey also offered volunteers discounted rates for room and board on one of their days off. The Explora Hotel donated funds that paid for the volunteers' box lunches. The guide service Big Foot Patagonia offered volunteers discounted rates for their popular ice hike on Glacier Grey. Hielos Patagónicos, the company that runs the catamaran across Lago Pehoe, donated a round trip ticket to each volunteer. Finally, Antares Patagonia provided overall in-country communication, logistical and business support.

From the United States

TPF received financial support for this project from a number of sources, and we sincerely appreciate all of them. We would specifically like to recognize Robert and Rebecca Blickenstaff for their generous support. TPF would also like to thank The American Hiking Society for providing operational support and Patagonia, Inc. for their generous donation of two huge boxes of clothing for the volunteers and park rangers. This project would not have been possible without any of you!

What's Next?

The Patagonian Foundation looks forward to working with the U.S. Forest Service and CONAF to provide additional volunteer opportunities to work on the trails in Torres del Paine National Park and other trails throughout Chilean Patagonia. We were thrilled with the dramatic increase in Chilean involvement this year and continue to seek to encourage and support participation by Chilean volunteers and park rangers. One of our primary goals is to create a fully sustainable project that can eventually be completely managed and operated by our Chilean colleagues and friends.

If you have any questions about the Patagonia Volunteer Project or any of our other projects, please consult our website for news and further information.