



PROJECT REPORT
Volunteer Trip
Torres del Paine National Park, Patagonia, Chile
February 22 – March 5, 2016



SUMMARY:

Fifteen ConservationVIP volunteers, including two trip leaders, traveled from the United States to work on the "W" trail between Refugio Paine Grande and Campamento Italiano. They were assisted by six volunteers from the Torres del Paine Legacy Fund, which raised money for power tools and materials used on the project. Corporación Nacional Forestal (CONAF) provided ten park rangers who worked part-time, shoulder-to-shoulder with the other volunteers. In addition, CONAF provided all necessary lumber and miscellaneous supplies, which they flew to the work site via helicopter. Lastly, two volunteers from Eco Camp, based at Refugio Las Torres, participated for three days.

ConservationVIP volunteers contributed 817 hours of volunteer labor. CONAF and Legacy Fund volunteers contributed another 292 hours of labor.

SPECIFIC ACCOMPLISHMENTS:

Our project site was an eight mile round trip hike from Refugio Paine Grande, where the volunteers were lodged. It consumed nearly half of the eight hours we set aside every day for working. Fortunately the easy gradient of the trail and the eight days of unusually benign, stunningly gorgeous Patagonia weather helped make the hike a pleasant beginning and end to each day.

For the first day and a half, the group did traditional trail maintenance -- restoring trail tread, brushing and building waterbars. Specific accomplishments included constructing 26 water bars, lightly brushing four miles of trail, restoring $\frac{1}{4}$ mile of trail tread and installing two additional steps at the bottom of a steep set of stairs.



Most of the work involved building 310 feet of new boardwalks through extremely marshy terrain. The new boardwalks were located generally where previous boardwalks had been destroyed by fire or simply rotted away.

The boardwalk work began after CONAF was able to deliver the lumber for the boardwalks to the site via helicopter at noon of work day two. The work entailed setting vertical support posts, attaching horizontal stringers atop and between the posts, attaching decking (the walking surface) to the stringers, and finally applying preservative.



Initially, making the vertical posts was very time consuming, as it was a one-person job, cutting cypress logs into 3-4 foot pieces using a brushing saw, and then sharpening one end with an axe. On the third afternoon, CONAF delivered a chain saw for our use, and this greatly simplified and sped up the process. The stringers and decking required only occasional cutting to length.

Nearly all the materials were attached using lag screws, which were screwed in using battery-powered drill-drivers. This process went very quickly and provided for an extremely strong structure.





In addition, 90 feet of existing boardwalk was refurbished. Refurbishing the existing boardwalk consisted of rebuilding the decking utilizing used material scavenged from piles of discarded materials that were nearby. Finding good material took time, but in the end, a good boardwalk was assembled.

While we understand we accomplished all the new boardwalk construction that CONAF had planned for ConservationVIP, we used only about half the lumber delivered to the site by CONAF helicopter. There are additional locations where some of this material could be used. CONAF rangers indicated they intend to complete more boardwalks this season using at least some of this material. If they do not, perhaps there is additional work for ConservationVIP volunteers at some future time.

GENERAL INFORMATION:

The volunteers bonded quite well...they genuinely liked each other, worked well together, looked out for each other's safety and had fun together. Some volunteers took on leadership roles, supervising other volunteers building segments of the new boardwalk. One of our ConservationVIP volunteers was a Spanish speaker, who facilitated working with Spanish speaking CONAF rangers. One volunteer posted pictures on Facebook and another organized photo sharing when she returned home.

The staff at Refugio Paine Grande was very helpful and supportive of the entire group. They even baked a birthday cake for one ConservationVIP volunteer who celebrated her 40th birthday while we were at Paine Grande so we could "throw her a party." However, there were two issues during our stay there. The lunches at the Refugio were generally the same

every day, and we were only partially successful in our efforts to convince the manager and the chef to provide more variety.

A bigger issue was the failure of the water pump that pumped water out of the lake to supply the refugio. This resulted in at least 36 hours of no water in the refugio and associated campground. Many who were staying there started washing themselves, clothes and dishes in the lake, likely compromising water quality. We then encouraged our volunteers to fill their water bottles from creeks flowing from the springs in the hillsides while walking to and from the project site.

A last minute change in itinerary occurred. We had planned to tour the penguin sanctuary near Punta Arenas on the way to the Park. However, the Penguin Sanctuary changed its hours in February, so we substituted a stop at a sheep ranch. While costly, this stop was well received. The superb food, gracious hosts and sheep shearing and herding were all big hits – especially since many in the group had already seen penguins on their own.

The ConservationVIP volunteers, Legacy Fund volunteers, and CONAF staff all worked well together and all were proud of their shared accomplishments. Having the Torres del Paine Legacy Fund involved was a huge asset. Natasha and Annie helped with Spanish language issues, but more importantly, their fundraising was used to purchase four high quality drill drivers, about 2,200 lag screws, and numerous hand tools, all of which greatly facilitated construction of the boardwalks. The crew on the catamaran provided free passage for all ConservationVIP and Legacy Fund volunteers. This significantly reduced our expenditures!

To allow rest time for volunteers, the schedule included two non-work days. Most volunteers used this time to hike to the iconic towers and to Lago Grey. Because we were working within a couple kilometers of Campamento Italiano, shortening the work hours one day allowed six of the volunteers to hike up French Valley to the viewpoint one afternoon.

Our transportation was via a very new small bus driven by a safe and courteous driver. Several volunteers spontaneously commented on how safely he drove. Luggage was transported in an enclosed trailer towed behind the bus.

At the conclusion of the trip, we stopped by CONAF headquarters. CONAF showed their appreciation to the volunteers by providing a lavish sit down lunch, as well as giving each individual a Torres del Paine Tee shirt.

SUMMARY:

The trip was very successful. The volunteers worked and traveled safely with no accidents, they had fun, and a lot of work was accomplished. Travel, logistics, and all arrangements worked to perfection. Relationships were built with the Torres del Paine Legacy Fund and were strengthened with CONAF.