



# Conservation Volunteers International Program

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## Project Report Volunteer Trip Torres del Paine National Park, Patagonia, Chile March 11 – 23, 2013

### Executive Summary

Conservation Volunteers International Program (Conservation VIP) organized and led a volunteer trip to Torres del Paine National Park in the Patagonia Region of Chile March 11 - 23, 2013. After discussions with FantasticoSur, which manages some of the facilities in the Cuernos region of the park, Conservation VIP decided that the volunteers would work on a segment of trail just east of Refugio Cuernos. Conservation VIP provided six volunteers including trip leader Gene Zimmerman and assistant trip leader Paul Adams. In addition, Agrupación Medio Ambiental (AMA) — a local nonprofit organization supported by FantasticoSur — provided four volunteers who worked shoulder-to-shoulder with the U.S. volunteers for two days. AMA leadership saw this as an opportunity to both improve the trail and to learn trail maintenance skills. In addition, three hikers saw the value of our work and each opted to donate 1 full day of volunteer service. More than 396 volunteer hours were dedicated to approximately 3.5 km of trail east of Refugio Cuernos on the “W”, a part of the world famous Circuit Trail. Most sections of the trail which were worked on can now be qualified as in “excellent” overall condition; however, some segments are so steep that they will remain in only “fair” condition until rerouted.

The Conservation VIP volunteers got along fantastically, and integrated well with the AMA and hiker volunteers who joined in the work. The volunteers took the opportunity to use all tools during the course of the work. Weather was pristine with temperatures in the mid to upper 70s (22 C), mostly sunny, and no wind or rain during our work days and stay at Refugio Cuernos. No rain or wind gear was required!

The team performed routine trail maintenance — tread repair, brushing and pruning, water drainage, stair step creation, trail reroute and alternate construction, etc. — on 3.5 km of trail. Significant improvements were made through removal of large boulders that hindered hikers and horses from safely negotiating the trail. Each day’s work began at the previous day’s stopping point as we worked further out from Refugio Cuernos. This section of the Circuit has not been previously maintained by Conservation VIP. It is estimated only minor upkeep will be required over the next five years.



### Detailed Trip Report

**Boulder Removal:** More than 800 boulders were removed from the trail resulting in significant safety enhancements and easier navigation for hikers and horses. Some boulders measuring larger than 3 feet in width (1 meter) took 2-3 volunteers to dislodge and move off the trail. One large rock dyke approximately 3 foot x 8 foot (1 meter by 2.6 meters) was removed from trail center by 4 volunteers. This effort allowed

hikers and horses to pass safely. Boulders that were shouldering the trail tread were also removed. Where required on the tread, holes were backfilled leaving the trail in “excellent” condition.

*Erosion Control and Drainage:* To ensure the trail does not erode from heavy, consistent rains common in the Patagonia region, more than 110 cross drains were spaced appropriately apart where necessary on 3.5 km of trail. Cross drains were constructed on all sections of the trail where the slope indicated there was the potential for eroding the trail tread. Most cross drains required in-depth analysis and significant labor to dig out the necessary distance for adequate drainage off the trail. In addition to cross drains, 30 puddle drains were designed and constructed where a low spot was detected to permit water shedding off the trail from both directions. In some cases, two volunteers worked meticulously together on each puddle drain for more than 30 minutes to ensure adequate sloping and drainage. Volunteers took great pride in learning the importance of water drainage off the trail and commented several times about hiking with “different eyes” due to their increase of trail maintenance knowledge.

*Brushing and Pruning:* Many sections of the trail had heavily encroaching brush. As a result, volunteers worked every day on pruning back the brush so that the trail can be navigated by hikers without brush impeding their travels. Where brush growth and/or tree branches encroached upon the trail width or height it was cut back and dispersed. Significant quantities of large tree roots on the trail tread presented a hazard for tripping and were sawed off by hand and discarded off the trail. This effort greatly improved trail quality and safety.



*Trail Resurfacing:* In some areas the trail tread was made up of loose boulders, making it awkward and unsafe for hikers. Approximately 80-feet of such trail were resurfaced. Dirt was filled in over small to medium-size boulders, resulting in a smooth, safe hiking surface. Approximately 20-feet of slough removal was completed to raise trail tread for water shedding.

*Trail Reroute:* Improved ingress and egress of existing alternate trails was completed by clearing boulders and terrain so hikers could clearly identify the trail. Volunteers designed 50-foot embankment for wet-weather trail route. To ensure a dry passageway during the rain, volunteers designed and built two alternate trails, one of approximately 80-feet and another approximately 60-feet in length. Social trails were covered to route traffic onto existing trail where necessary.



*Step Construction and Repair:* To increase safety and pass-through at a large step up/down (approximately 30 inches in height and 3 feet width), three volunteers constructed one massive step on trail tread, securing it with large boulders and dirt backfill. Each day as we hiked back over this spot, volunteers cheered the ease and improvement on this portion of the trail. Two volunteers worked for more than 3 hours creating steps to better articulate a 15-foot section of trail that consisted of solid rock, steep, and consistently wet surface. This significantly improved safety for hikers. Volunteers built or repaired more than 8 steps at various locations of trail where significant incline was observed. Three volunteers created a staircase at creek run-off for safer uphill ingress for hikers and an alternate horse route was cleared.

## General Information

*Social Interaction:* The team of volunteers worked and “played” extremely well together and friendships were quickly formed. At the end of each day an EQ (Emotional Quotient) rating was taken to determine the overall spirit of the group. Each person rated their EQ on a scale of 1-10 (10 being the highest, most

enthusiastic), with average over 6 work days of 9.79 (days 3 and 6 were less than 10 due to tiredness and moderate fatigue)! The team enjoyed every meal together, visiting during leisure time, and the sense of humor was high and always in good taste. Contact information was exchanged with numerous pictures and emails shared within the first few days after the trip. A Pisco Sour or Chilean wine was enjoyed by all!

*Safety:* The team readily and cheerfully adopted all safety guidelines for tool usage and tool transport. Required safety gear was worn while working on the trails by all personnel. Volunteers cordially and occasionally reminded everyone to adhere to all safety guidelines throughout the work days and no occasions for injury were noted or reported.

*Transportation:* The van transportation from Punta Arenas and return was provided by FantasticoSur. The van was clean and in good repair. The driver was on-time, very safe, and ensured tools for trail



maintenance and luggage arrived at our destination for transport to the worksite. On return to Puerto Natales the driver offered the option of an excursion for viewing waterfall vistas of glacial melt and explained the additional time required, which the group heartedly agreed to.

*Hostels/Refugios/Accommodations:* Prior to the “official” start of the expedition, the trip leaders and one volunteer stayed at Hospedaje Magallanes in Punta Arenas. This bed and breakfast hostel is located conveniently near downtown where shops, groceries, and restaurants are within safe walking distance. The hostel provided outstanding and affordable accommodations with clean rooms and facilities. The owners, Sebastian Borgwardt and Marisol Arteaga, went out of their way to ensure all details and needs were provided including transportation and language translation for procurement and storage of new trail maintenance tools.

Refugio Las Torres Norte (March 11) was adequate with acceptable bath facilities and sleeping arrangements.

Refugio Los Cuernos (March 12-19) was consistently busy and full most days. The management kept up well with the facilities given the volume of human traffic and impact. Food was sufficient in volume and nutrition and served in a timely fashion with courtesy and attention to detail. Box lunches provided met the needs of the team and were prepared well with a variety of sandwich options.

Two nights at Refugio Las Torres (March 20-21) were in the main building and the accommodations were especially clean and well maintained with very comfortable bedding. Service offered at Refugio Las Torres was excellent and no-cost storage of personal luggage was cheerfully provided and secured during our extended stay to Refugio Los Cuernos.

Last night in Puerto Natales Hotel Glaciares: On March 22, the group stayed in Puerto Natales. The rooms were quiet, clean with comfortable beds, and on-suite bathrooms. Hotel location was good for restaurants and close to all downtown shopping. Staff was friendly and accommodating.



*Corporacion Nacional Forestal (CONAF) Cooperation:* Upon our arrival at the park entrance, we stopped at the CONAF entrance station and were cordially greeted by Ranger Sesse who showed appreciation for our efforts. Although an invitation was extended to greet the Park Superintendent as we departed from the Park, we regrettably were unable to do so due to a road closure.

*Overall Logistics:* Everything worked as planned. Our co-branding partner REI Adventures, our local arranger FantasticoSur, and all the service providers did a notably fine job ensuring all details were as expected and the volunteers' enthusiasm to consider additional volunteer trips highlights the positive impact made. Of particular note was the help provided by Marcela Vasquez, Executive Director of AMA, and the tool and luggage transportation to and from Refugio Cuernos provided by FantasticoSur.

*Tools:* Conservation VIP had to purchase new tools for the trip because many of Conservation VIP's tools had been lost in a major fire in the Park the prior year. With the gracious help of Sebastian Borgwardt of Hospedaje Magallanes, tools were easily located and purchased at reasonable prices in Punta Arenas. Upon completion of our work, the following tools were inventoried and stored at Refugio Cuernos per signed agreement with FantasticoSur: 3 rock bars; 2 loppers; 2 hand saws; 4 pickmatics; 2 shovels; 1 rake; 2 hoes.

### **Summary**

The volunteer experience was a huge success based upon feedback from all volunteers and their overall performance. The knowledge gained, the skills acquired, and the work completed resulted in marked improvements and increased safety on this section of the "W" trail. Most importantly, our volunteers will never look at a trail again in what they referred to as "the same old way."

