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**Project Report
Volunteer Trip
Torres del Paine National Park, Patagonia, Chile
March 3 – 15, 2014**

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 southern Chile March 3-15, 2014. Eighteen volunteers and four Conservation VIP leader-volunteers participated, along with part-time assistance from four volunteers from Agrupacion Medio Ambiental (AMA – a local non-profit organization) and their leader. Gene Zimmerman was the Conservation VIP trip leader, assisted by Chris Braunlich, Mark Hardgrove, and Jon Stewart. Work consisted of trail maintenance and new trail construction on “the W”, a part of the world famous “Circuit” trail, which circumnavigates the central massif in Torres del Paine National Park. Work was accomplished on several segments of trail, located both east and west of Refugio Cuernos, where the group was lodged. A significant portion of the work was on Estancia Torres del Paine, a private inholding within the Park which The Circuit crosses. Approximately 1200 hours of volunteer labor were donated by Conservation VIP volunteers and leaders.

Detailed Trip Report

Trail Rerouting: Some sections of the existing “W” trail are located on wet, boggy areas or traverse steeply up/down slopes and are severely eroded. On this expedition, we elected to replace four such segments of trail by rerouting the trail to a better location. New segments of trail were constructed, totaling over 1700 feet in length. Typically the new construction consisted of finding an appropriate new location, clearing brush and small trees, building the trail tread by moving dirt and rocks, and obliterating the old trail by strategic placement of rocks and cut brush and trees. These four segments are further described below:

Approximately 4 miles east of Refugio Cuernos, a new trail approximately 800 feet long was built to provide easy and direct access to the east end of a new suspension bridge built by Fantastico Sur 3 years ago. Prior to construction of this segment, hikers had to traverse a section of deeply eroded and muddy trail and also navigate a section of “trail” that went steeply straight up and down the slope. The new segment built by the 2014 volunteers provides a nearly contour replacement for this bad situation.



Building 800 feet of new trail tread leading to the suspension bridge



Group proud of a job well done

About 1.5 miles west of Refugio Cuernos a second segment of trail, approximately 150 feet long, was constructed to bypass a very wet, boggy section of the existing trail. Because of the mud and water, hikers repeatedly walked adjacent to the trail, creating parallel trails, called a braided trail system. (See photo at right)



A team of the 2014 volunteers (see photo above) cut through thick vegetation to build a new section of trail located higher on the slope, which now provides a trail that is on dry, well drained ground, and should provide a better hiking experience for some time to come.



Further east, a 240 foot section of trail was built to replace a steep section of trail beginning at the park's trail marker designated as 45 IT-LC. The new trail segment has a more appropriate standard, utilizing gentle grade and switchbacks. While lengthier than the original trail, the new trail will be considerably easier to hike. As soon as construction was wrapping up, hikers began choosing the new trail over the old one.





The fourth new trail segment was 545 feet long, and was located just over a mile west of Refugio Cuernos. This trail segment also replaced a steep and heavily eroded segment of trail with a new trail built to a more appropriate standard. This new section of trail is much easier to traverse, and will not be prone to significant erosion. One of the switchbacks on the new trail provides a very nice view of Lago Nordenskjöld (see photo below).



It should be noted that another section of trail which would significantly benefit from relocation was identified and marked with flagging. This section, near the access trail to the new Refugio Frances, would involve replacing a very, very steep and deeply eroded section of trail with approximately 500 feet of new trail, built utilizing a much gentler grade. However, due to the dense vegetation and steep slopes, the new trail will be very difficult and time consuming to construct. Due to time and terrain constraints, it was not possible this year to find a new location that would eliminate the steep, eroded section entirely. Perhaps Conservation VIP can construct this trail in the future.

Trail Maintenance: In total, this volunteer group provided trail maintenance to over 3.6 miles of trail within the Park. In 2013, Conservation VIP volunteers accomplished heavy maintenance on 2.1 miles of the “W” trail, starting just east of Refugio Cuernos and proceeding east towards Refugio Las Torres. This year, we again spent time on this section; however, there was no boulder removal or brushing necessary. Because of the quality of the work done in 2013, this year’s work on that section – maintaining water bars and drains -- was accomplished quickly, demonstrating the benefits of routine, periodic maintenance.

Heavy Maintenance: Just east of the suspension bridge at Refugio Cuernos, a small section of steep trail was improved by chipping steps into steep, slick rock and by strategic placement of stone steps. This work greatly improved hiker safety on this short segment of trail.

On this expedition, the heaviest trail maintenance we accomplished was in three areas along the trail to the west of Refugio Cuernos where the volunteer group encountered heavily encroaching brush, hundreds of boulders in the trail tread, lots of erosion and numerous “social trails”. The area nearest Refugio Los Cuernos, which receives the heaviest use due to the number of hikers who camp near the Refugio, was intensively improved by volunteers. Boulders were removed, the trail tread was improved, significant brushing was accomplished and water bars and drains were installed to remove water from the trail.



Further along the trail towards Refugio Frances, volunteers worked on some of the worst sections of trail, brushing, doing tread work, fixing erosion issues, draining puddles, obliterating social trails, and removing boulders. In total, 1.5 miles of trail was maintained and 29 new water bars and drains were installed to the west of Refugio Cuernos.

General Information

Social Interaction: The team of volunteers worked and “played” extremely well together and friendships were nourished. One volunteer lost a piece of luggage on the way to the Park and other volunteers generously shared clothing with her. Every day, trip leaders would ask the volunteers how they were doing. Individually and sometimes as a group, the response was always with thumbs up. The team enjoyed every meal together, and spent a lot of time together in the evenings gathered around the wood stove visiting and telling stories. An occasional glass of wine was consumed.

Transportation: The transportation from Punta Arenas and return was by private carrier, arranged by Fantastico Sur. The bus was newer, clean and in good repair. The driver was always early, very safe, and loaded our baggage and tools very carefully. Lunches were provided on the bus both going to the park and returning from the park.

Safety: The volunteers were attentive during all safety discussions. They clearly understood the need for safe work habits, being so far removed from medical facilities. Tools were used and carried in a safe manner. Required safety gear was worn as necessary. Volunteers reminded each other to adhere to all safety practices. No medical or first aid injuries occurred, however, there were 3-4 band aids applied and lots of mole skin was used on blisters.

Two potential safety concerns arose but were resolved without incident: In the first case, one volunteer’s work/hiking boots disintegrated on day 2 of the expedition, and she had to wear soft sided shoes for the remainder of the trip. Trip leaders discussed the safety issues, she continued participation with running shoes, and did not sustain any injuries as a result of inadequate shoes.

The other concern arose because the volunteers had different levels of hiking capacity and stamina, so they were allowed to hike in small groups rather than staying in one large group. They were instructed to always hike at least in pairs, and preferably three people together as a minimum. Certain volunteers elected to ignore our direction, and occasionally hiked by themselves. On our last hike, one of the volunteers left his small group and later missed a turn in the trail, resulting in his hiking 3-4 extra miles and being late to the destination, causing concern. Just as we were about to undertake a search for him, he arrived safe, and a bit tired, at our destination.

Accommodations: Trip leaders arrived in Punta Arenas before the start of the expedition, in order to purchase tools and rest. We stayed in Hospedaje Magallanes, a bed and breakfast located near downtown, within safe walking distance of stores and restaurants. The owners, Sebastian Borgwardt and Marisol Arteaga, went out of their way to ensure all of our needs were met. Sebastian spent much of one day driving us around to different hardware stores as we purchased tools, and then he allowed us to store them in his van until they were loaded into our bus.

Refugio Las Torres was adequate with acceptable bath facilities and sleeping arrangements. The Refugio was out of Pisco Sour, but cheerfully provided wine in replacement. The staff provided no-cost storage for personal gear that was not needed at Los Cuernos.

Refugio Cuernos was full every day. Our group had full use of two rooms; however, some volunteers were in a third room, which meant that every day they had some new roommates. This did not cause any problems that were brought to team leaders' attention. The dining room was packed every evening for two feeding shifts, yet the volunteers seemed to enjoy the experience. The food was consistently better than that served at Las Torres, was plentiful, and was nutritious. The staff was very accommodating of the varying requests of the volunteers. The only complaints were that the lunches were somewhat repetitious, since the Refugio is unaccustomed to people staying in the same Refugio for multiple days in a row.

On our last night together in Puerto Natales, we stayed in Hotel Charles Darwin. The rooms were quiet and clean; however, there were some problems with lights not working, toilets not flushing, etc. The staff was friendly and quick to attempt to fix problems that were brought to their attention. The location is good, as it is close to both downtown and the waterfront.

Overall Logistics: Everything worked as planned. Our co-branding partner REI Adventures, our local arranger Fantastico Sur, and all the service providers did a notably fine job ensuring all details were managed as expected. Of particular note would be the superb help by Mauricio Kusanovic, the President of AMA, Rodrigo Genskowsky, and AMA Coordinator Nicolas Avendano, as well as unnamed boatmen and gauchos, who transported our gear to and from Los Cuernos.

Tools: Conservation VIP brought some small hand tools from the U.S. and purchased many larger tools in Punta Arenas, with the gracious help of Sebastian Borgwardt. Total expenditure for new tools on this trip was over \$1,200.

By mutual agreement with Fantastico Sur, our 2013 expedition left a small inventory of tools at Los Cuernos, all clearly marked "Conservation VIP". Before the 2014 trip, trip leaders tried unsuccessfully to get an inventory of what tools were still at Los Cuernos and available for our use. Fantastico Sur never responded to our repeated requests for the inventory information. This lack of information resulted in our buying extra tools in Punta Arenas. Upon arrival at Los Cuernos, we found about one-half of the tools we had left the previous season.

Upon completion of our 2014 work, the following Conservation VIP tools were left for storage with Fantastico Sur (most were at Los Cuernos, to be transported and stored at Las Torres): 7 saws, 5 loppers, 3 buckets, 1 4# hammer, 7 hoes, 4 shovels, 3 rakes, 3 rock bars, 1 axe, 14 picks, 2 chisels, 2 bags of nails, and 1 wheel barrow.

Weather: The weather was Patagonia. This expedition experienced it all: wind, rain, and nice days. Trip leadership decided to not work one morning due to intense rain, and in typical Patagonia fashion, the weather cleared up and we worked after lunch. No other weather work delays or cancellations were experienced. Occasionally, the wind was intense, perhaps reaching 80-90 miles per hour as we hiked out on the last day to Las Torres from Los Cuernos.

Free time: Volunteers were provided with two days to rest and explore the park on their own. The first was their first full day in the park, while they were at Refugio Las Torres. Most elected to hike to the iconic towers, some leaving at 3:00 am to be at the towers at sun up, and others left after breakfast. Most of those who wanted to go to the towers overlook did so, but some found the hike more difficult than they anticipated, and turned around short of the overlook. Either way, it seemed to trip leaders that they all had a great experience. The second free day was while the volunteers were based at Los Cuernos. Some volunteers elected to use the free day as a rest day, and they stayed at the Refugio. Others attempted to visit French Valley, but were unable to venture into the valley because of a Park Service closure due to avalanche hazard.

Corporation Nacional Forestal (CONAF): As on our prior trips, in appreciation of the assistance we provide to the Park, our group was granted free entrance into Torres del Paine, and each volunteer was provided a map of the Park. We hoped someone from park staff could join our volunteers during our work time; however, because the park is short-staffed and the Park was again experiencing problems due to continued significant growth in visitors, officials were unable to provide extra staff. As we departed the park, we stopped at Park Headquarters where the volunteers were treated to a very nice presentation by Michael Arcos, Park Operations Supervisor, who profusely thanked the Volunteers for their work.

Summary

The volunteers loved the park and most volunteers had a great experience. Some found the work or the hiking to be more than they expected. They either overestimated their ability or underestimated the difficulty associated with the trip. All the volunteers gained experience and skills, and participated in making great improvements to the trails which will increase visitor safety and enjoyment in this outstanding landscape.

