



PROJECT REPORT
Volunteer Trip
Torres del Paine National Park, Patagonia, Chile
March 2-14, 2015



SUMMARY:

Seventeen volunteers, including two trip leaders and a photographer performed approximately 648 hours of work on the "W" trail between Refugio Frances and Refugio Los Cuernos. Predominantly, the work consisted of new trail construction necessary to provide hikers a safe bypass around a very steep and deeply eroded section of the "W" trail. Other work consisted of minor amounts of trail maintenance -- approximately six puddles were drained and 3 miles of very light brushing were accomplished. We were joined for three days by volunteers and leaders from Agrupacion Medio Ambiental (AMA), a local nonprofit. They contributed approximately 250 hours.

SPECIFIC ACCOMPLISHMENTS:

Approximately 1500 feet (450 meters) of new trail was constructed. Our original intent was to construct new trail and completely eliminate the bypassed section. Upon review on the ground, it was clear that the new trail would not be suitable for horses, so the old section of trail was left open for horse use. Signage now delineates which trail is for which use. This new situation is much safer for both horses and hikers.

The trail construction was on very brushy, very steep terrain. Determining the exact location of the trail was difficult and time consuming. Subsequent brushing was tedious, as much of the trail location was covered with tall brush, with a dense mat of short brush underneath. Clearing the location where the new trail was to be built was probably the most difficult work, as the short brush root system required that the entire width of the trail be excavated to one foot deep. This excavated material was then removed, as it was too organic to be used to support the lower side of the trail. Upon clearing the trail, the hillside was excavated to build the trail tread (walking surface). Because of the steepness of the hillside, several hundred cubic yards were excavated in order to build the trail.

Some sections of the trail presented particular problems. Six switchbacks (sharp 150-160 degree turns) were constructed. Each of these required the movement of large amounts of earthen material. Several sections were built in wet areas, so rock had to be moved, one bucket at a time, to stabilize these areas. Some areas were built so water could run under the trail. This was accomplished by using larger rock, then topping it with smaller rock. One section of trail was built between the bottom of a large cliff and the top of a landslide. A large quantity of rock was moved uphill to buttress the lower side of this section. At some point, this section will need constructed steps, as it's quite steep.

GENERAL INFORMATION:

The volunteers worked very well together, had fun together and clearly enjoyed their time on the trip. The vehicles that transported us to and from the park as well as within the park were in good repair and the drivers were safe and likeable.

The group stayed in four different refugios. The first and second nights were in Refugio Torre Norte and Refugio Paine Grande, respectively. The working part of the trip was based out of Refugio Frances, where the group stayed for seven days. Then we began the hike back to Refugio Torre Norte, staying one night in Refugio Los Cuernos on the way. All aspects of refugio living were good with one exception -- considering the weather, the domos we stayed in at Refugio Frances should have been heated. Food was consistently good, particularly the dinners and breakfasts at Refugio Frances. Lunches were repetitious.

The last night the group stayed at the Hotel Glaciares in Puerto Natales. It was clean and adequate.

AMA provided about 15 volunteers for two days. Without their help, the trail construction would not have gotten completed. Their help was invaluable. However, their attention to basic safety practices needs improvement. Three AMA staff people worked with the trip leader, with the objective of learning how to build and maintain trail.

On the way out of the park, the group stopped at CONAF Headquarters, where we donated 24 pairs of hiking boots to their field rangers. They were extremely thankful. The boots were donated by REI. Gonzalo Cisternas, a CONAF manager, gave an interpretative presentation to the group, which was much appreciated. All our tools were stored at headquarters.

Because of the complexity of moving people, baggage and tools to and from the work location, logistics for this trip were the most complex which Conservation VIP has experienced at this destination. However, all logistics worked perfectly, thanks mostly to the attention to detail provided by all the Fantastico Sur employees who were involved.

SUMMARY:

The trip was very successful. The volunteers worked and traveled safely with no accidents, they clearly had fun, and a lot of work was accomplished. Travel, baggage and tool logistics all worked to perfection. Had there been heat in the domos at Frances, everything would have been perfect.

Gene Zimmerman, Director
Conservation Volunteers International Program

Project Photos

Before Trail Construction



Trail Construction





Completed Trail Segments

