



PROJECT REPORT
Volunteer Trip
Torres del Paine National Park, Patagonia, Chile
February 20 - March 4, 2017



SUMMARY:

Twenty ConservationVIP volunteers, including three trip leaders, traveled from the United States and Canada to work on trails between Refugio Paine Grande and Campamento Italiano in Torres del Paine National Park. More specifically they built boardwalks and started construction on a new trail that will, when completed, offer outstanding views into French Valley. The volunteers were assisted by 4-6 volunteers from the Torres del Paine Legacy Fund. The Legacy Fund purchased and/or provided miscellaneous hand tools, electric drills,

a portable tool sharpener, and the necessary screws for the boardwalk. Corporacion Nacional Forestal (CONAF) provided six rangers one day to move lumber for the boardwalk, working side-by-side with the other volunteers. In addition, CONAF provided all the necessary lumber and miscellaneous supplies, which they had brought to the park in 2016.

ConservationVIP volunteers contributed 895 hours of volunteer labor. CONAF and Legacy Fund contributed approximately 275 hours of labor.

THE VOLUNTEERS:

The twenty ConservationVIP volunteers ranged in age from 22 to 76, and came from the United States and Canada. Seven states and one province were represented. The day began around 6:15 and breakfast was at 7am. The group assembled at 8am for a debriefing regarding the previous day, a briefing on the day's activities and individual work opportunities, a safety talk, and a personal "check in" on how everyone was doing, issues, and concerns. The volunteers clearly cared for each other, with lots of examples of compassion and concern. We were always back at the refugio by 5pm, with dinner at 7pm, followed by storytelling, laughing, and visiting. Legacy Fund volunteers blended in extremely well with the ConservationVIP volunteers.

SPECIFIC ACCOMPLISHMENTS:

We worked on two separate projects simultaneously. We continued to work on the boardwalk project that we started last year, which was on the existing trail between Refugio Paine Grande and Campamento Italiano. The walking distance from Refugio Paine Grande to the project site was measured, using GPS, at 3.5 miles. Hence nearly half of every workday was consumed by walking to and from the worksite. Five of our seven work days were perfect for working, and the other two days were part days, due to heavy rain and wind.



Working on the boardwalk construction

The work involved building 205 feet of new boardwalks through extremely marshy terrain. This footage consisted of extending some of the boardwalks we built last year as well as some new sections of boardwalk. The actual work entailed setting vertical posts (piers), attaching horizontal stringers atop and between the posts and attaching decking (the walking surface) to the stringers.

The boardwalk work was made more difficult by the fact that the lumber was in several different locations, necessitating much hiking with planks and beams. In addition, there was a shortage of new lumber appropriate for piers, so piers from the previous boardwalk were reused. Lastly, this year CONAF was unable to provide a chain saw for cutting beams and posts, necessitating that they be cut with hand saws...a laborious task, to say the least.



Working on the new boardwalk



Checking out the new boardwalk

Much of the boardwalk was assembled using lag screws and battery powered drill-drivers, which was fast and provided an extremely strong structure. Because on-site CONAF rangers asked us to build more boardwalk than we had originally planned, the remainder of the boardwalk was built using nails.

The second project involved starting the construction of a new trail. We understand that the new trail, when complete, will either replace the existing trail between Refugio Paine Grande and Campamento Italiano or provide a second route between the two points. The existing trail is poorly located and is somewhat grueling for amateur hikers with large packs.



View of the Cuernos from the new trail

The new trail will be built to better standards, and will provide a very pleasant hike with absolutely stunning views of the major peaks and French Valley. It roughly follows an old horse trail, however, much rerouting will be necessary

We were able to accomplish approximately three-quarters of a mile of new trail construction. Tread width is approximately 24" wide and clearing is approximately six feet wide. Rock structures include three dry stream crossings, several water bars, and approximately 35 feet of walls to support the downhill side of the trail. After most of our group departed the park, under the direction of one of the ConservationVIP leaders and the Legacy Fund, local volunteers installed another 28 rock water bars on the new trail.



Brushing before cutting in new trail



Cutting in new trail with pick mattocks



Finishing up segment of new, improved trail

Our trail construction stopped in the middle of a very steep rock gorge. The remainder of the trail within the gorge will need considerable rock work to raise the trail out of the bottom of the gorge to separate the natural water course and the trail. Beyond that section is about 1200-1500 feet of relatively easy construction to the stream, where a bridge will need to be installed before proceeding on towards Campamento Italiano with the trail. After most of our group departed the park, under the direction of one of the ConservationVIP leaders and the Legacy Fund, local volunteers constructed approximately 1 kilometer of new trail beyond where our group left off.



Starting to build rock wall



Rock wall

While in the park, one of the ConservationVIP leaders walked the remainder of the old horse trail, and flagged a new location, reducing the amount of boardwalk that will need to be built to complete the trail. The entire new trail location was measured, using GPS, at four miles.

Five of our seven work days were perfect for working, and the other two days were part days, due to heavy rain and wind.

GENERAL INFORMATION:

The volunteers bonded quite well...they genuinely liked each other, worked together well, looked out for each other's safety and had a lot of fun together. Some volunteers took on leadership roles, supervising other volunteers as needed and appropriate. In particular, one volunteer was very good at doing stone work, and trained and supervised several other volunteers who wanted to learn. Two of our volunteers spoke Spanish, which facilitated our conversations with non-English speaking locals. Another volunteer provided GPS services both while in the park and providing maps after he returned home.

The staff at Refugio Paine Grande were helpful and supportive of our entire group, even providing several bottles of wine and a cake our last evening in the park. There were two issues that we could not get resolved. The lunches were the same every day, which got very monotonous. A more problematic issue was the cleanliness and operational issues associated with the restrooms and showers. We were unsuccessful in our efforts to convince management to make any changes.

Gonzalo Cisneros, a CONAF manager, spent considerable time with our group. With his big personality and warm smile, he made a great impression on the volunteers.

The ConservationVIP volunteers, Legacy Fund volunteers and CONAF staff all worked well together and all were proud of their shared accomplishments. The director of the Legacy arranged free passage on the ferry 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 Grey Glacier. Because we were working within a couple kilometers of Campamento Italiano, slightly shortening the work day allowed several volunteers to hike up French Valley, and still get back to Paine Grande for dinner.

Our transportation was via a very new small bus driven by a safe and courteous driver. Luggage was transported in an enclosed trailer.

On our last day in the park, we stopped by CONAF headquarters. Michael Arcos, the new superintendent, graciously spent considerable time with our group.

Our night in Puerto Natales was spent in a new hotel, which was a huge hit with the volunteers! And while we struggled in planning the menu for the final night's meal, the volunteers loved it

FINAL THOUGHTS:

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, thanks to the support of Vertice. We enjoyed working with and appreciated the support of Torres del Paine Legacy Fund. The beauty of Torres del Paine National Park continues to inspire us. Most importantly, we very much appreciate CONAF's role in protecting this wonderful park, and their welcoming us so we can assist them in their efforts.

