

**PROJECT REPORT**  
**Volunteer Trip**  
**Torres del Paine National Park, Patagonia, Chile**  
**February 17 - 29, 2020**



**SUMMARY:**

Twenty volunteers from Conservation Volunteers International Program including three volunteer trip leaders, David Summer, Garry Oye and Norman Hageman, traveled from the United States to construct a series of new boardwalks in Torres del Paine National Park, Chile. This project was a very important project in Torres del Paine because it will allow the Park to open a new trail, providing an alternate route to reduce congestion and foot traffic on a very popular and heavily traveled trail in the park.

ConservationVIP® started construction on this new trail in February 2017. Our objective this year was to complete a critical section of the trail requiring special boardwalk construction because it crosses environmentally sensitive wetlands.

The project was also very special for ConservationVIP® and Torres del Paine National Park because it was made possible by [a grant which Conservation VIP® received from the Adventure Travel Conservation Fund's "Adopt a Project" program](#). The grant was

funded by REI Adventures, which has provided invaluable support to ConservationVIP® over the years, recruiting volunteers to help with trail maintenance and trail building in Torres del Paine.

The ConservationVIP® volunteers were joined on the boardwalk project by 20 Chilean volunteers recruited by the local Torres del Paine Legacy Fund (TdP Legacy Fund). Also joining in on some days were park rangers from Corporación Nacional Forestal (CONAF).

Volunteers worked on a total of 550 feet of new boardwalk in four locations across a sensitive/wetlands area. The group also built approximately 600 feet of new trail approaching the boardwalk on both ends.



ConservationVIP® purchased the project materials with the REI Adventures-ATCF grant funds and arranged for delivery of the materials to a staging area in the park. CONAF was responsible for flying the materials to the project area by helicopter. Helicopter delivery can be unpredictable in Patagonia because of the erratic winds and the sporadic availability of the helicopter which is also needed for other critical Park functions. The volunteer group then had to hand carry the lumber from the helicopter landing zones to the boardwalk construction areas. The total weight of the material

exceeded 30,800 pounds. This hand carrying was very labor intensive. Towards the end of the project, materials were carried nearly 1,500 feet per trip.

ConservationVIP® volunteers contributed 1,275 hours of volunteer labor to the Park on this project. CONAF and TdP Legacy Fund contributed approximately 240 hours of labor specifically for the boardwalks and hundreds of hours for new trail construction. In total 550-feet of boardwalk was completed in four distinct locations: a 176-foot boardwalk, a 210-foot boardwalk, a 56-foot boardwalk and a 108-foot boardwalk.

## **SENSE OF PLACE:**

Our first two days together were about creating a team, in a special place, embracing the culture of Chile. We learned about each other and individual expectations for the trip. We learned about the unique opportunity to be a part of a special project with REI and CONAF. On the way to the Park we viewed wildlife, looked inside the life of a sheep ranch, stayed at Weskar Lodge Hotel, which was excellent, ate the local food at Bahia Mansa, drank the local wine and explored the landscape outside the park.



We had planned to visit Grey Glacier by boat, but the winds on Lago Grey exceeded 50 mph, so the captain cancelled the trip, but we still walked the beach and got a real-life experience of the strong winds. We rode the catamaran to Paine Grande Refugio where we spent our first night in the park. We all agreed that this was an incredible opportunity to give of ourselves and our time and energy, to make a difference. We did ask that each volunteer be aware of their surroundings, focus on safety and look out for each other. We needed to be mindful of everything we were doing so we could stay healthy and strong. We asked that they listen to the sounds of nature and enjoy!

## SPECIFIC ACCOMPLISHMENTS:

It is magical what can be done with the spirit of volunteers committed to making a difference in a special place. This trip captured all those characteristics and led to an awesome outcome. From adversity came strength. From challenges came success. From physical exhaustion came compassion. From laughter came happiness. From strangers became family.

The first day required each volunteer to relocate all their personal gear from Paine Grande Refugio to El Francés, a distance of approximately 6 miles. Packs that averaged 30-35 pounds were strapped on the backs of the volunteers. This relocation would shorten our daily hike to the project site to about 2-3 miles each way.

On the second day in the park, we were able to start the construction of the boardwalks...and the magic began. We showed the volunteers the work of the previous year's team, a 550-foot boardwalk, and was able to share an example of the construction requirements for our boardwalks.



Working together, the group cleared all four of the corridors through the vegetation and across the landscapes to create the space for the boardwalks. With the help of a chain saw, pruning saws and a lot of sweat equity, the corridors were created.

Then the layout for the posts was marked on the ground and the installation of the cypress posts began. We needed two posts on seven-foot centers installed into the ground for each boardwalk. Each hole needed to be dug and posts carried to the site and pounded into place.



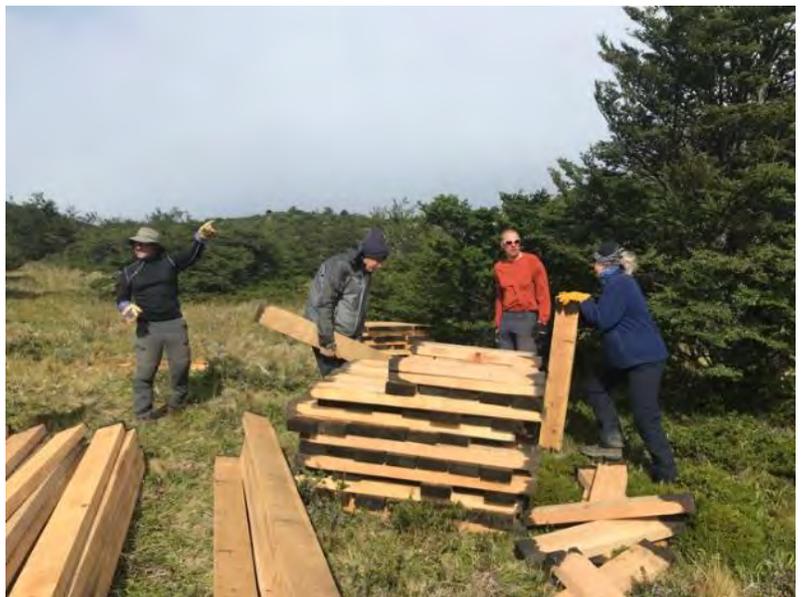
Once the posts were secured and leveled, a beam was attached to the post and leveled to hold the stringers.



Two stringers were placed per each seven-foot section and secured with metal brackets. Once the stringers were in position, the decking was secured with self-tapping screws. The final touch was trimming the boards to provide an aesthetically pleasing boardwalk.



The volunteers contributed many hours of hard physical labor, so the project would be completed. Everyone gave of themselves and contributed to the best of their abilities. Each volunteer walked 80 – 100 miles while working in the park.



The boardwalk and staircases should last for 20+ years. We estimate that as many as 5 million hikers may benefit from this project.



## GENERAL INFORMATION:

The ConservationVIP® volunteers ranged in age from 27 to 72, with the average age about 50. Eighteen volunteers came from the United States, one from China and one from Singapore. Our work day began with a 7:00 am breakfast and a departure to the work site by 8:15. The group then hiked approximately 2-3 miles to the work site, returning to the refugio no later than 5pm. Individual work crews were usually a mix of ConservationVIP® volunteers, Chilean volunteers, and local CONAF rangers. Dinner was at 7 pm followed by laughter, sharing stories and getting ready for the next day. The ConservationVIP® volunteers clearly enjoyed working with the Chilean volunteers and the park rangers. At 8 pm, we would assemble to critique the day, evaluate our safety, check in with everyone and line out the next day's assignments.



The weather on this trip was varied and provided for a real wild Patagonia experience. We had estimated wind gusts of over 60 mph giving the volunteers a taste of “real Patagonia weather”. It was generally sunny most days. As always, the ConservationVIP® volunteers were impressed with the beauty of Torres del Paine, so rest breaks were a perfect time to enjoy the wonderful landscape and to photograph the stunning views from our job site.



Similar to previous trips, the volunteers sincerely appreciated the opportunity to work with the Chilean volunteers and park rangers. Working with the TdP Legacy Fund is always a joy. Wes, the field manager of TdP Legacy Fund and each of his volunteers worked very well with the ConservationVIP® volunteers. Bruna the crew supervisor led her people seamlessly into the operation.

CONAF Park Manager Michael Arcos hiked out the new trail and visited with volunteers, which was greatly appreciated. He was very complimentary of and thankful for their work.

To allow rest time for ConservationVIP® volunteers, they were provided time off as needed. Most of the volunteers used that rest time to visit some of the most impressive geologic and scenic wonders of the park, hiking up French Valley.



On our last day in the Park, on our way to overnight in Puerto Natales, our group stopped by the Park's headquarters where the volunteers had the opportunity to enjoy the interpretive exhibits and hear from Park Management.



The travel logistics and other arrangements worked as planned and really supported the success of the project. The providers were safe, timely and friendly. The people of Chile are very kind and generous.

Our final night in Puerto Natales was spent in Hotel Costaustralis, which provided very nice accommodations. We had a final celebratory meal at Restaurante Factoria whose appetizers, dinner and desert were especially appealing after the time in the park. We acknowledge our collective success and shared how proud we were of our safety and production while enjoying our time together.

### **FINAL THOUGHTS:**

The trip was extremely successful. The pride of our accomplishments was obvious and heartfelt. The volunteers worked and traveled safely with no accidents, and safety was the top priority. It was physically challenging, but everyone found success. We celebrated one birthday for volunteer Jessica.

We all enjoyed working with and appreciated the support of the Torres del Paine Legacy Fund. A special thanks to Wes and Bruna for their leadership. We also appreciated the CONAF support and the visits of the park rangers.



Most importantly, we offer our heartfelt thanks to REI Adventures for their extraordinary generosity in funding this very important project.

The beauty of Torres del Paine National Park is world class and incredibly captivating. We very much appreciate CONAF's role in protecting this magnificent place—they have immense challenges and limited resources. Their welcoming spirit towards our volunteers is uplifting and heartwarming. We did make a difference on this trip and it will make a difference for visitors into the future.

