

## ***Yard work at 7,600 feet***

EAGLE CAP WILDERNESS, Ore. (AP) - The shovel bites into the earth, propelled by a swift kick from my sturdiest hiking boots. A twist of the handle, and I've dug up a heavy spadeful of earth and random plant life.

I carry it a few yards to a dirt-filled trench that, when we arrived, was a beaten-down, unused hiking trail. As a fellow worker plants my "plug," I pause to look through swirling snow at the gray profile of Eagle Cap mountain.

This is how I spent my summer vacation: doing yard work for America.

It's the second time I've spent a week as a volunteer trail worker on a trip organized by the American Hiking Society. It's one of several groups that arrange a slate of "volunteer vacations" each year for outdoor enthusiasts who are willing to spend their free time repairing the wear and tear caused by backcountry visitors.

"The most frequent reason that I hear is that (volunteers) want to give back to a resource that they enjoy," according to Sweyn Wall, the U.S. Forest Service wilderness coordinator who organized and escorted our trip. "The other reason that I hear on a fairly regular basis is that they just want to get out of the office and do some real work."

The benefit for the Forest Service is obvious: free labor on projects that might otherwise not get done. But the ulterior motive is to instill in visitors a love of the land - and an appreciation that nature doesn't stay natural without a little help.

"It's critical for us to build this base of people who love wilderness and are willing to fight for wilderness. Getting people out on these projects is one of the ways we accomplish that," according to Wall, who is based at the Wallowa Mountains district in Enterprise. "Any time an issue of wilderness preservation comes up, they're going to be on our side."

AHS has been running volunteer vacations since 1979, when it organized 20 projects using 200 volunteers in 15 states. In 2003, the program had 89 projects in 29 states using 607 people - more than half of them repeat volunteers.

AHS plans about 100 projects for 2005, but backcountry working vacations are also organized by the Sierra Club and Wilderness Volunteers. All three groups have posted their calendars for 2005, and it's not too early to sign up, as some destinations fill up fast.

Last year, I joined Wall and a small crew to remove wire cattle fencing from former ranch lands in the Hells Canyon Wilderness on the Idaho border. This year, I was one of nine volunteers who spent the week before Labor Day on a "revegetation" project in the East Fork Lostine River valley.

We used primitive tools and the aid of pack mules to fill in a section of rutted trail with dirt-and-plant plugs, adding water bars and other erosion control devices. The week started in tank-top daytime heat and ended in weather cold enough to merit a campfire at our lunch break.

Our group ranged in age from late 30s to late 50s and came from eight states. All but one had or were retired from office jobs. Two were married and two had met on a prior trip, but the rest were strangers.

"We see all kinds out here," Wall said. "We've had everything from 16-year-old kids to ... 70-plus-year-olds and everything in between."

All had done at least one volunteer vacation before with one of the three groups. The primary differences between them are price and level of organization. AHS charges the least, but leaves it to the volunteers to sort out such things as kitchen duty, while Sierra Club and Wilderness Volunteers have designated trip leaders who make those arrangements, or do the work themselves.

Nancy Holmes, a retiree in her late 50s, has been on three AHS trips - including our Hells Canyon jaunt in September 2003 - and two with Wilderness Volunteers.

Her first trip, reblazing an abandoned trail in Washington state, brought an immediate sort of satisfaction that wasn't always there when she was a civilian employee of the Air Force.

"You didn't always see the results of what you were doing. You just kind of did your thing and yeah, maybe you made a difference but it was hard to tell," she said. "So it was really nice to see you had accomplished something."

Which trip she chooses each year is based not on the sponsoring organization but on the type of work and location - she tries to pick someplace new each time - and how it fits her calendar. Because her husband stays home in New Meadows, Idaho, Holmes appreciates the security of traveling with a group to an unfamiliar area.

"It's nice to have some company to go in there with you, especially backpacking," she said.

The trips provides togetherness of a different sort for Willi and Gail Van Haren from Blue Mounds, Wis. Willi travels to canoe and ski races on some weekends and Gail takes a weeklong bike touring trip with friends in the summer, along with cross-country skiing weekends. A working vacation is generally the one trip they make together.

They've taken several trips with the Sierra Club; our Eagle Cap trip was their first with the hiking society. For Gail, part of the appeal is the almost enforced familiarity with one backcountry locale.

"You end up spending more time in depth - sort of in one spot - than you would if you were just backpacking," she said. "If you were just going on your own, you wouldn't stay six days in one spot, probably. But it's kind of fun to make your home in one valley for a week."

They've started a second generation of volunteers, bringing their youngest son on three earlier trips. Their 26-year-old daughter "was kind of inspired that we were doing it" and has now made an AHS trip alone.

John Notsch, a computer programmer from Rockville, Md., is signed up for an AHS trip to Texas at the end of January. He took his first working vacation about five years ago, with the Sierra Club to the Nantahala National Forest in North Carolina. It was a cautious first step - "almost a hybrid service trip - staying in a lodge and being fed real well all week. So even if I didn't enjoy the work, I'd have a roof over my head and good food to eat."

He definitely enjoyed it, and particularly appreciates the company of people who aren't too worried about the menu and accommodations.

"They're not the ones that expect to sit around the swimming pool and have a waiter bring them margaritas and fresh towels all day. It's an attitude for the most part I'm comfortable with," he said

Notsch now averages three trips a year - 15 total, so far, from Maine to Puerto Rico to Oregon. "I can say pretty much I haven't had a bad trip. ... For a week, it's a real nice office to have."

### **More info**

**VOLUNTEER VACATIONS:** These trips usually involve trail or campground maintenance or restoration, though some include wildlife research, invasive plant eradication or other aspects of environmental work. Most last a week and include a day of free time.

Participants must be physically fit, but prior experience usually is not required. Some trips accept participants under 18 if accompanied by an adult.

Volunteers provide their own transportation to a meeting or work site and must bring sleeping bags and other personal gear. Host organizations provide tools and guidance.

Fees go toward organizational costs, park fees, transportation and planning. Sierra Club and Wilderness Volunteers also provide food and cooks, and pay expenses for volunteer trip leaders.

**AMERICAN HIKING SOCIETY:** [www.americanhiking.org/events/vv/](http://www.americanhiking.org/events/vv/) or (301) 565-6704. Volunteer Vacations cost \$120 for newcomers, which includes a year's membership in AHA, or \$95 for members. Additional trips in the same year cost \$75. Most expenses are tax-deductible. About 100 trips are planned for 2005.

**SIERRA CLUB:** [www.sierraclub.org/outings/national/service.asp](http://www.sierraclub.org/outings/national/service.asp) or (415) 977-5522. National service trips are open to Sierra Club members; nonmembers can join when they sign up. Prices range from \$350 to \$600; trips to Alaska or Hawaii cost more than \$1,000. Expenses generally are not tax-deductible because the Sierra Club also is a political lobbying organization. About 90 trips in the United States, Canada, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands are planned for 2005.

**WILDERNESS VOLUNTEERS:** [www.wildernessvolunteers.org/](http://www.wildernessvolunteers.org/) or (928) 556-0038. Trips cost \$219 for mainland, \$239 for trips to Alaska and Hawaii. Most expenses are tax-deductible. About 50 trips across the United States are planned for 2005.