Sharing the load with Washington Trails Association

By Dana Hendricks, PCTA Regional Representative

Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail travelers, beware as you wander the rough and rugged northern country! Reports abound of roving bands of magically happy faces wearing green hard hats on the trail. With sharp tools, they just might be conjuring up the tread that’s been falling away beneath your feet. In the late afternoons, they are known to make candy appear.

You might be aware that Washington Trails Association is a key partner for the PCTA and the Forest Service, hosting an astonishing number of work parties each year. In fact, our missions are amazingly similar (“preserve, enhance, and promote…” – WTA). That synergy is not surprising if you know that our organizations share a fair bit of history, including certain champions.

Perhaps most notably, Louise Marshall was a key player in both organizations, helping to drive visions and values. In the 1960s she was already an established guidebook author, having penned 100 Hikes in Western Washington, the first Northwest hiking guide, and High Trails, a guide to the PCT in Washington (then the Cascade Crest Trail). She founded Signpost magazine in 1966, noting that hikers wanted a forum to share information on trails. Under Marshall’s guidance, the trails community she helped build turned its attention to advocacy and became WTA. Today, it’s the state’s largest and most active player in trail building, maintenance and advocacy, and its work includes the PCT. WTA’s website is a thriving community forum where thousands of hikers share their adventures via trip reports and an expansive wiki hiking guide.

The Forest Service’s Pete Voodre (left) was the co-instructor for this class on accessible trails. Photo by Ryan Ojerio.
Marshall’s trails résumé continues. Somewhere along the way, she co-founded the American Hiking Society and served as its president. In 1990, Marshall became the PCT Conference’s executive director, on loan from the hiking society. Already during the 1970s, she had served on the PCT Advisory Council, so she had firsthand knowledge about goals for the trail. The Conference became the PCTA in 1993.

In a 1991 Communicator article, Marshall wrote that she wanted to make the PCT more widely known and better maintained. She listed a number of projects for improving the PCT Conference, including having a membership campaign, drafting bylaws, developing a cost-sharing agreement with the U.S. Forest Service, doing trail work and even paying a living wage to the executive director. “Let’s make it a trail we’re all proud of, every mile.” Marshall was honored with PCTA’s Lifetime Achievement Award in 1996.

Other notable champions of WTA who also loved the Pacific Crest Trail include Ira Spring, Greg Ball and Elizabeth Lunney. Rebecca Lavigne, WTA program director, said that in recent memory, WTA has always had at least one PCT thru-hiker on staff. Currently there are at least two.

PCTA and WTA continued to develop in tandem. In the early 1990s, both organizations resolutely turned their attention toward volunteer trail work. In 1993, WTA’s first work party was on the Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail at Potato Hill, north of Mount Adams. WTA’s trail maintenance program grew like crazy. In a short time under Ball’s leadership, it earned a reputation for excellence, especially in keeping volunteers happy. The program became a model worthy of emulation. Early versions of PCTA’s crew management course were based on WTA materials.

At WTA these days, trail maintenance comes in three basic flavors: Day Work Parties, Backcountry Response Teams (multi-day self-supported), and Volunteer Vacations (weeklong pack supported). The PCT being remote and hard to access in Washington State, most of their PCT work happens through WTA’s Volunteer Vacations program. A remarkable achievement in recent years has been to expand the program to serve youth. Now, 40 percent of the organization’s 42 Volunteer Vacations are geared toward those 14 to 18 years old.

WTA backcountry trips set the bar high. I remember when the PCTA started working with the Back Country Horsemen of Washington to pack in our weeklong crews. Packing is an art of precision, and it takes experience to learn how to prep gear for pack stock. My PCTA crew leaders would show up at the trailhead with loose tools and gear spread out everywhere. Our Back Country Horsemen friends would pull me aside and patiently tell me: “You know, when we do a WTA trip, the loads come pre-weighed and balanced. All we have to do is hook them on the animals and go.” I knew we had a lot to learn.

In a recent conversation with Lavigne and Tim Van Beek, WTA’s field programs manager, I mentioned that rumor has it that people wait on the edge of their seats for Volunteer Vacations signups to open. Van Beek replied, “This year it opened February 7 at 10 a.m. We had 300 sign-ups in two hours.”

I asked Van Beek what their secret is. “It’s mostly word of mouth. The community, the people, they keep coming back, they enjoy working with each other, and they want to see what projects their favorite crew leaders are doing this year.”

This year there are also 45 Backcountry Response Team projects. These fill quickly too.

It turns out that happy people with lots of experience do great work. And the Forest Service and PCTA have recognized WTA for that professional capacity. For the past decade, the Forest Service has allocated funds to WTA directly from the Pacific Crest Trail budget, much like it funds the PCTA. The money helps support work on the PCT. WTA has averaged more than 5,000 maintenance hours a year on the PCT in recent years. This is equivalent to having a 12-person crew on the ground for eight weeks, which is most of the snow-free window on Washington’s crest.

Another bright spot of the PCTA and WTA partnership in recent years has been the Trail Skills College in the Columbia River Gorge. The largest event of its kind on the PCT, this annual training attracts about 125 volunteer students who learn skills ranging from basic scouting and brushing to advanced rock work and crew leadership.

Ryan Ojerio, WTA’s southwest regional manager, has been a vital part of the organizing committee. “WTA and PCTA’s capacities complement one another,” he said. “We might not have the resources alone to pull off this kind of event, but together we can do it.”
The mission of the Pacific Crest Trail Association is to protect, preserve, and promote the Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail as a world-class experience for hikers and equestrians, and for all the values provided by wild and scenic lands.

In 2015, the Pacific Crest Trail Association renewed its “memorandum of understanding” with the U.S. Forest Service, the National Park Service, the Bureau of Land Management and California State Parks. The purpose of this agreement is to facilitate management of the Trail, coordinate the development and distribution of educational materials, encourage volunteer involvement and recognize the PCTA as the government’s major partner in the operation of the Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail.

In the agreement, the PCTA and the government agencies agreed to coordinate in the management and operation of the PCT and feeder trails, including signing, condition surveys, trail-head and trail use surveys, water development, adopt-a-trail programs, and construction and maintenance activities.