



# Sharing the load with Washington Trails Association

By Dana Hendricks, PCTA Regional Representative

**P**acific 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.

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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 sign-ups to open. Van Beek replied, "This year it opened February 7 at 10 a.m. We had 300 sign-ups in two hours."



Trail advocate Louise Marshall circa 1956.  
Photo courtesy of Ann Marshall.

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."



WTA and PCTA volunteers at trail skills college. Photo by Ryan Ojerio, courtesy of the Washington Trails Association.

WTA volunteer crews, including youth, will devote about six weeks to clearing fallen logs and brush from PCT access trails and a portion of the PCT itself that have been inaccessible for a long time. A **North 350 Blades** PCTA crew will work on a nearby section of the PCT. The PCTA and WTA are planning to share base camp equipment and tools, reducing the need for redundant pack trips to the same area.

WTA crews are ready to go wherever they are needed most along the PCT. “Last year we did a bunch of great work up at Hart’s Pass,” Van Beek said. “This year we’ll have youth in the backcountry for two weeks at Indian Pass doing triage.”

Lavigne added: “In Southwest Washington, our volunteer leaders really benefit from connecting with a broader base of volunteer trail workers, sharing expertise.”

As PCTA’s presence in the Northwest has increased, we’ve sponsored more of our own extended backcountry projects. There’s plenty of work to go around, but at the same time we’ve got to be careful not to step on each other’s toes.

“It keeps getting more complex, but the coordination keeps getting better,” Van Beek said. “It’s great to see lots of players all working together.”

“The PCT means so many things to different people,” Lavigne said. “Here in Washington it can be an accessible day hike, all the way up to a thru-hiking experience. We have volunteer opportunities to match that, from day trips on up to longer, deeper backcountry opportunities.”

This summer there’s a big project in the works. The Suiattle River Road reopened in October 2014 after 11 years of closures because of storm damage. The road is a major access point for trails on the western side of the Glacier Peak Wilderness, including the PCT.

Ojerio said that especially in Southwest Washington, WTA offers trips that are closer to home for a lot of people, which may mean WTA is in a better position than the PCTA to bring on new volunteers. At the same time, the PCTA is important for its connection to the epic wilderness trail.

“The PCT is kind of the big idea,” he said. “Even if they never hike the whole PCT, knowing it’s there is inspiring.” 🐾

Want to join one of these roving bands of happy hard hats? Check out the project schedules on WTA’s and PCTA’s websites.

## Memorandum of Understanding



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.



## The PCTA MISSION

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.