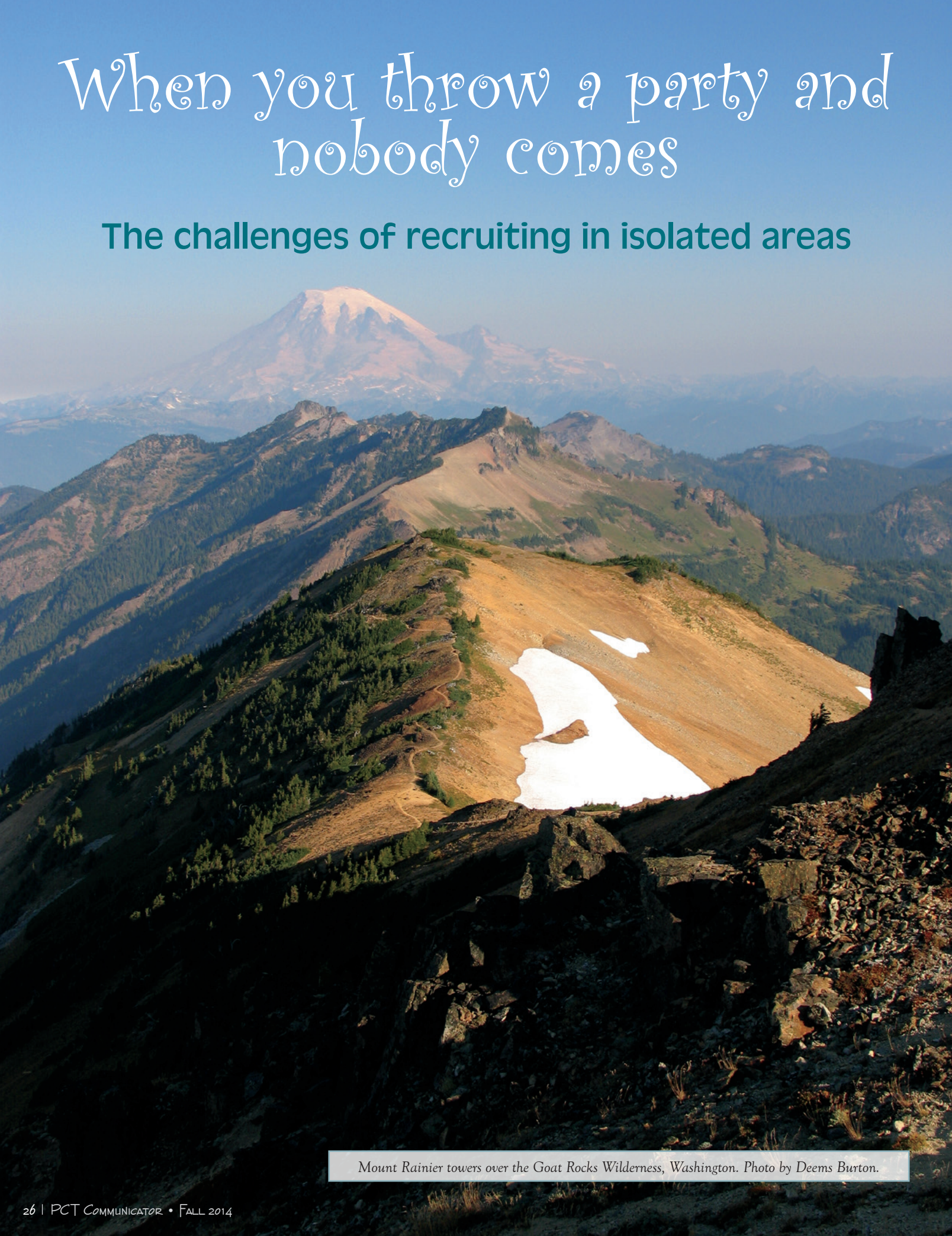


When you throw a party and nobody comes

The challenges of recruiting in isolated areas



Mount Rainier towers over the Goat Rocks Wilderness, Washington. Photo by Deems Burton.

By **Dana Hendricks**, PCTA Regional Representative

The setting was fabulous – Goat Rocks! – the food amazing, the project fulfilling. We went out of our way to do more outreach than usual. Still, minimal attendance.

We threw more work parties in the same area, with similar results. Well, it made us scratch our heads. Never for a moment considering our party-throwing skills weren't up to snuff, we had to ponder what other factors might be contributing to the lack of volunteers. In some isolated areas, it's just not so easy.

Factor one: Isolation from big populations. Distant locations mean longer driving distances, and that seems to deter volunteers, even when it doesn't necessarily deter recreationists. It may surprise you to know that, through the Goat Rocks and William O. Douglas wildernesses, the PCT is perpetually in bad shape because it has no regular volunteer maintainers. Sure, the PCTA holds a few work parties, but largely by begging, borrowing and stealing volunteers who normally work other regions of the trail. Work parties that would fill quickly closer to Portland or Seattle are very slow to fill near White Pass. At the same time, Goat Rocks remains wildly popular for backpacking. Over Labor Day weekend last summer, I passed a group almost every two minutes near Snowgrass Flats.

Factor two: Isolation from roads. Being roadless is the primary prerequisite for an area to be designated as wilderness. Part of what makes the PCT a world-class experience is that it has more designated wilderness than any other long-distance trail. Washington state has a large share. Lack of nearby roads makes the PCT hard to access, and this of course is both the charm and the curse. Some of the most spectacular and well-loved scenery along the PCT is found in these remote areas. How many times have you seen Goat Rocks as the poster child for the beauty of the PCT? And yet, some of the worst tread erosion problems persist there, simply because it takes crews a long time to get in there. It's six miles along many typical access trails before one reaches the PCT. Day trips are pretty much out of the question. Unlike the Snoqualmie Pass area or Mount Hood, where roads are relatively abundant and day trips are king, in Goat Rocks you pretty much have to head out for at least three days to get anything done on the PCT. A week is preferable. That means work parties take a lot more planning and preparation, and volunteers have to put in more time all at once.

Factor three: Isolation from a social scene. A sense of belonging, rapport with peers and the pride of shared accomplishment is what keeps many volunteers coming back for more. A strong social network bolsters some of our most sophisticated volunteer chapters,

such as the Mount Hood Chapter. Beyond the comfortable reach of big cities, it turns out to be harder than you'd think to rustle up trail maintainers, even when you've got spectacular places like Goat Rocks and William O. Various small towns are scattered within a couple of hours' drive, but with that kind of dispersion, it's more of a challenge to build a sense of belonging and community among trail maintainers. People live far apart from one another, and it's hard to get together for regular meetings or a potluck.

Solution one: Hold more parties. Even when long trips are what's needed, make smaller ones available. Day trips are doable on the couple of miles on either side of White Pass itself. Short sections, but they need some work. Shorter work parties can allow new volunteers to build up confidence to take on longer ones.

Solution two: More outreach. Use social media. Do outreach in person. Keep going back. Make presentations at outdoors stores and events. Develop relationships. Engage existing outdoorsy clubs. **Intermountain Alpine Club** of the Tri-Cities area has taken an interest in PCT maintenance. Its president, **Steve Ghan**, has issued a friendly challenge to his members to participate in our work parties. Hooray I-MAC!

Solution three: Send experienced volunteers from other sections of the trail to lead and mentor new local volunteers in isolated areas. We thank Mount Hood Chapter and North 350 Blades for sending some of their finest to help out near White Pass. There's nothing that inspires passion in volunteers like working with passionate volunteers.

Solution four: Whatever works. Rinse and repeat.

Of course, holding miscellaneous work parties like we are doing now can only put a Band-Aid on the worst spots of tangled and eroded trail. Our goal, in keeping with the PCTA strategic plan, is to train maintainers to adopt sections of the PCT and provide the kind of regular care the trail needs to keep it clear, open and draining properly. Still, the PCTA doesn't have a single formula for what each regional group should look like and how it should operate. We find that each region has, and should have, its own flavor. As a placeholder, we are calling this yet-to-be-formed group the White Pass Chapter. But, slowly, the two wilderness areas that flank White Pass will develop their own PCT devotees who may come up with another name, and we're here to facilitate and inspire that evolution. We don't know what the group will look like, but we do know that the trail will benefit from its efforts. 🐦

Would you like to call a slice of this subalpine sublimity your own?
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