Volunteer work parties are the backbone of the Pacific Crest Trail Association’s trail maintenance program. But prioritizing projects and getting volunteers out in the field is no easy task. Many factors figure into the planning process, including maintenance needs, land management partnerships and the overarching goal of providing a quality volunteer experience.

We asked key members of the PCTA staff to explain what is involved in a volunteer work party. Fielding questions were Jennifer Tripp, Coordinator of Volunteer Programs; Ian Nelson, Regional Representative for the Big Bend Region; Suzanne Wilson, Regional Representative for the North Cascades Region; and Anitra Kass, Regional Representative for Southern California.

Q: Sometimes a project is scouted with a particular goal of providing a quality volunteer experience. We asked key members of the PCTA staff to explain what is involved in a volunteer work party. Fielding questions were Jennifer Tripp, Coordinator of Volunteer Programs; Ian Nelson, Regional Representative for the Big Bend Region; Suzanne Wilson, Regional Representative for the North Cascades Region; and Anitra Kass, Regional Representative for Southern California.

Q: What types of volunteer work parties are offered through the PCTA?

Jenn: Each year there is a wide selection of projects ranging from one to 10 days. The PCTA also partners with the Washington Trails Association, Tahoe Rim Trail Association and High Sierra Volunteer Trail Crew to offer additional projects.

Anitra: Volunteer opportunities on the PCT also are available with the Student Conservation Association (SCA) and Northwest Service Academy AmeriCorps crews.

Q: How are sites selected and projects prioritized?

Suzanne: The PCTA’s regional representatives work with volunteers, agency partners and Trail users to learn about maintenance needs. Each rep meets with agency partners and volunteers over the winter to create a detailed list of projects to be completed in the coming season. Projects are prioritized by how severely damaged they are, or low equestrian use, experienced versus novice users, etc. (i.e. high or low equestrian use, experienced versus novice users, families versus thru-hikers, etc.).

Another consideration is whether or not the project area is “shovel ready,” meaning there is no environmental impact on volunteers, as well. Receiving information ahead of time about the project make a big impact on volunteers. The organization and planning of the project make a big difference.

Q: What is provided for a volunteer crew, and what equipment do individual volunteers need to supply?

Jenn: The PCTA provides tools, work gloves and protective safety gear, including a hard hat. For multiday projects, the PCTA provides food, water and kitchen supplies. Volunteers provide their own tents, sleeping bags and personal gear, including warm clothes and rain gear. On all projects, volunteers are expected to arrange transportation to the trailhead.

Q: What is the typical age of volunteers?

Jenn: The PCTA receives funding from its government partners to complete projects on the Trail. The U.S. Forest Service and BLM have agreements with the PCTA to help cover expenses for tools, basecamp gear, food, etc. The PCTA also relies on private donations to help supplement the costs of programs such as youth projects or Alternative Spring Break.

Q: On a typical day trip, what is the average distance from the trailhead (or base camp) to the work site?

Suzanne: It varies, but generally on a day trip the hike is no more than two miles.

Q: What about weekend projects? Extended projects?

Jenn: Volunteers can expect longer hikes on multiday projects. If it’s a backcountry trip, the crew may hike in five miles to get to base camp. Each day’s hike to the workspace is usually shorter. On an extended front country project, volunteers may hike up to two miles each day to work each day. Tools are cached at the end of the day so crewmembers don’t have to haul them back and forth.

Suzanne: Due to access issues, a limited number of projects require volunteers to hike 15-20 miles into the backcountry and remain for an extended period of time. The PCTA has a strong relationship with the Backcountry Horsemen of America, who provide pack support for crews going several miles or more into the backcountry. The pack train will carry food, tools and shared basecamp gear. It’s a pretty good deal!

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Q: How physically fit do volunteers need to be?

Suzanne: The PCTA offers projects for all levels of ability, so volunteers usually can find something that will fit what they feel comfortable doing physically. We do recommend that volunteers be in relatively good shape for the safety of themselves and the crew working with them. Volunteers can expect to hike several miles a day with a dappank and a tool in their hand.

Most PCTA projects are listed with a Project Difficulty Scale: Level One for the easiest projects, for example, or Level Three for a project that may include longer hikes, backpacking, significant elevation change, strenuous work activities or need for prior backcountry experience.