



Mysteries of the Volunteer Work Party revealed

How are maintenance projects prioritized? How far will you hike as a volunteer?
What can you expect in the field? PCTA staff tells all

Compiled by Janet Fullwood, *Communicator Editor*

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 overriding 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 or eroded a particular stretch of Trail is, the amount of use it receives and the type of users it attracts (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 study needed. Of course, weather and season play an integral role in putting together the schedule of projects.

Jenn: Sometimes a project is scouted with a particular volunteer group in mind. If the project is very technical, the PCTA and local land managers will provide specialized training for volunteers.

Q: Are all the projects on public lands?

Ian: Generally, yes. In my case the work is on **U.S. Forest Service, California State Parks** or **Bureau of Land Management (BLM)** lands. That said, we do maintenance on the PCT where it crosses private lands, but in that case we're working within the narrow boundaries of the easement.

Q: Who provides funding for volunteer training and coordination of maintenance activities?

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, base-camp 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 worksite is usually shorter. On an extended front country project, volunteers may hike up to two miles each way 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 base-camp gear. It's a pretty good deal!

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

Jenn: PCTA's volunteer opportunities are offered to you free of charge. For one-day projects, volunteers need to bring a lunch. Each volunteer is asked to bring a daypack containing extra clothes, food and at least four liters of water. Everyone needs to wear long pants, a long-sleeved shirt and sturdy boots.

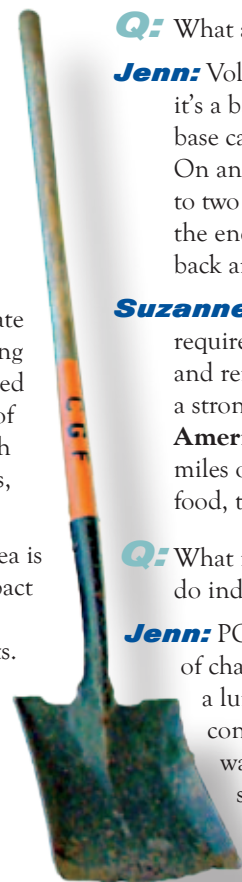


Photo by Lois Settlemeier

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?

Suzanne: PCTA volunteers range from high school students to retirees. We celebrated a 91st birthday at a trail project one year! More and more we have crew leaders in their 20s, but our more common volunteer is retired and looking for a way to occupy time, give back, meet other outdoorsy people and feel a sense of community and accomplishment.

Q: What is expected of a first-time volunteer?

Jenn: No experience is necessary to join a trail maintenance project. Once a volunteer has signed up, he or she needs to arrive at the scheduled time and place to meet the crew leader and volunteers with their pack ready to go. After introductions are made, crew leaders will give a safety talk, go over the plan for the day, delegate tasks and provide instruction and training. On multiday projects, everyone is expected to help out at base camp with tasks such as filtering water, washing dishes or preparing meals.

Q: What kind of training is offered to volunteers?

Suzanne: Basic trail maintenance techniques and tool use is taught on every project to all newcomers. Most projects offer something for everyone, from easy brushing and lopping to digging tread. The PCTA also teams up with land managers to host more technical trainings like chainsaw and crosscut-saw trainings, rigging workshops, wilderness first-aid courses, rock workshops and packer demonstrations.

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 with a daypack 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.

INTERESTED IN A VOLUNTEER WORK PARTY?

Descriptions of upcoming trail maintenance projects are posted on the PCTA website, www.pcta.org. Click the "Volunteer" tab on the right side of the home page, then go to "Volunteer Projects Database."



Photo by Lois Settlemeier

Anitra: A first-time experience is usually different than volunteers expect. They usually find they have muscles they didn't know existed. But at the end of the day, they'll find a sense of accomplishment that's hard to beat. Volunteers often realize they are part of something bigger, and that they are enhancing other people's recreation opportunities.

Q: How primitive are the camps in regard to potable water, toilet facilities, etcetera?

Ian: PCTA base camps are expected to follow **Leave No Trace** (www.ltn.org) principles, particularly when camped in the backcountry. The camp setup can vary greatly depending on location. In the front country, a vehicle-accessible camp allows for more creature comforts. We sometimes utilize national forest or state park campgrounds with running water and flush toilets. Occasionally, a front country camp will consist of a dispersed camping area where we provide portable toilets or latrines. In the backcountry, camps usually are located within a short walk of a water source. Water is filtered for drinking. Usually, a backcountry toilet consists of a communal trench strategically located to allow for adequate privacy.

Q: What are some of the factors that go into creating a good volunteer experience?

Ian: A skilled crew leader is integral to the success of a trail crew—someone who knows the work and stays aware of the well being and safety of volunteers. Also, the project must be worthwhile and interesting enough to keep everyone involved in the day-to-day tasks. It's hard to create the perfect crew dynamic, but we strive to provide the ingredients.

Anitra: Having an emergency plan in place – and hopefully never having to use it – is crucial. Usually, when you're prepared, bad things don't happen. PCTA crew leaders all come prepared with injury instruction packets, emergency action plans and a trailhead communication plan.

Suzanne: A good volunteer experience begins with great FOOD! The PCTA provides delicious meals for the crew. We work especially hard to provide a safe place to work and camp.

The organization and planning of the project make a big impact on volunteers, as well. Receiving information ahead of time is important. Knowing what to expect helps volunteers feel prepared and creates a less intimidating situation for newcomers. PCTA volunteers usually have some good stories to tell about hiking, working or riding on the Trail.

Jenn: Each person adds something valuable to the group's efforts. Having a sense of accomplishment at the end of each day keeps volunteers coming back. 🍌