



PROJECT REPORT
Volunteer Trip
Torres del Paine National Park, Patagonia, Chile
October 30 – November 11, 2017



SUMMARY:

Eight volunteers from Conservation Volunteers International Program, including two trip leaders, traveled from the United States to work on constructing a new trail between Refugio Paine Grande and Campamento Italiano in Torres del Paine National Park, Patagonia, Chile. These volunteers were joined on the project by 18-20 Chilean volunteers from the local Torres del Paine Legacy Fund. Also joining in on some days were park rangers from Corporacion Nacional Forestal (CONAF).

The volunteers extended the construction on the new trail that ConservationVIP® volunteers started in February 2017. The group also improved sections of the trail previously built.

ConservationVIP® volunteers contributed 401 hours of volunteer labor. CONAF and TdP Legacy Fund contributed approximately 900 hours of labor. About nine-tenths of a mile of new trail was constructed.

SPECIFIC ACCOMPLISHMENTS:

Working together, the group constructed about nine-tenths of a mile of new trail. Work consisted of determining the location, cutting small trees and brush - - with special care needed to cut the calafate bushes with their impressive thorns - - and removing vegetative material - - no small task as some sections of trail had brush with a deep root mass - - and removing soil and rock to rough-in the trail tread.



Lopping



Calafate Thorn



Lopping



Cutting in Trail



After the brushing and roughing in of the trail tread, the “finishing crew” followed, making the walking surface smooth by raking and, where necessary, spreading shale gravel on the trail surface.

Then structures were built, including 40 feet of rock walls to support the downhill side of the trail on steep slopes, 36 rock steps to make steep sections easier for hikers, and 16 rock water bars to minimize erosion of the trail tread. Three rock water crossings were also built.



Rock Wall



Building a water bar



Tom, the rock star!

One ConservationVIP® volunteer, Tom, took on a leadership role doing stone work on the trail. Volunteers who worked with Tom greatly appreciated his leadership and teaching style and all agreed his work was excellent.

The week prior to the group’s arrival, the area had the heaviest rain event they have experienced in many years. This enabled the leaders to determine where prior work needed improvement. Some previously built sections were very muddy and there was some spot erosion on one section of the new trail that ConservationVIP® built in early 2017. On the final work day of this volunteer trip, again working together, the group repaired and improved these sections. The group was divided into four teams, each with a mentor. Each team was directed to determine what the problem was and what the solution was. They then presented

their collective thoughts to their mentor, and after discussions with and approval by their mentor, they undertook the necessary repairs and improvements.



Muddy area needing repair



Repairing the Muddy Area



In total, the repair work included building 8 rock drains, building 20 feet of rock wall, and graveling 500 feet of trail surface. In some locations, the mud was deep enough that the entire trail section was surfaced with large rock prior to graveling. The rocking and surfacing was a huge task, involving moving the material via buckets over long distances.

After all the work was completed, each team presented their findings and final product to the other teams. Each team received accolades and applause from the other three teams. All the volunteers seemed to have a great sense of accomplishment using this process. They realized they could assess a bad trail situation, determine how to fix it, and accomplish the necessary work. Most importantly, they realized they had learned a great deal about trail work in the previous six days.





The four winning teams explained their design and methods to the group

GENERAL INFORMATION:

The eight ConservationVIP® volunteers ranged in age from 38 to 77, with the average age about 50. All came from the United States, with the majority from California, Oregon and Washington. Work days began around 6:15 am, with breakfast at Refugio Paine Grande at 7:00, and “assembly” at 8:30. Assembly consisted of a de-briefing of the previous day and a briefing on the day’s activities and individual work opportunities, a safety discussion, and a personal “check in” on how everyone was doing—whether they had any issues or concerns, or anything to share with the group. The group then hiked approximately 2 miles to the work site, returning to the refugio no later than 5pm. Individual work crews were usually a mix of ConservationVIP® volunteers, TdP Legacy Fund volunteers, and local CONAF rangers. Dinner was at 7 pm followed by visiting, reading, and getting ready for the next day. The ConservationVIP® volunteers clearly enjoyed working with the Chilean volunteers and the park rangers.

The weather on this trip was the best we have ever encountered in working in Patagonia. One of our seven work days was extremely windy, giving the volunteers a taste of “real Patagonia weather”, but otherwise the wind was moderate to low. An extended period without any significant rain facilitated the work. On several days, the temperature was unusually warm for Patagonia - - in the low 70’s F. - - so volunteers were encouraged more frequently than usual to keep up their water intake and take rest breaks to avoid overheating. As always, the ConservationVIP® volunteers were impressed with the beauty of Torres del Paine, so rest breaks were a perfect time to enjoy the wonderful display of spring flowers and to photograph the stunning views on the new trail.



One challenge for volunteers on this trip was that the entire group had to cross a stream every day going to and from work. It became an event of sorts, bringing out grins, laughter, and a bit of nervousness. ConservationVIP® hopes to help the Park build a bridge at this site for a proper stream crossing in the future.





Similar to previous trips, the volunteers sincerely appreciated the opportunity to work with the Chilean volunteers and park rangers. Park Superintendent Michael Arcos hiked out the new trail and visited with each volunteer, which they greatly appreciated. He was very complimentary of and thankful for their work. The group also met and enjoyed hearing from Gonzalo Cisternas, one of the senior park managers.

Working with the TdP Legacy Fund is always a joy. Their executive director and each of their volunteers worked very well with the ConservationVIP® volunteers. The executive director also arranged for free passage on the catamaran for all the volunteers, greatly reducing our expenditures.

To allow rest time for ConservationVIP® volunteers, they were provided two days off. Most of the volunteers used that rest time to visit some of the most impressive geologic and scenic wonders of the park, hiking to the iconic towers and to French Valley. Some hiked to Grey Glacier. ConservationVIP® leaders used the rest time to review the condition of the trail to the towers, to scout ahead for evaluation of the best way to tie the new trail into the old trail, and to investigate the condition of the sanitary rest stations in the Park (another project with which ConservationVIP® is trying to help the Park).

On our last day in the Park, on our way to overnight in Puerto Natales, our group stopped by the Park's headquarters where the volunteers had the opportunity to enjoy the interpretive exhibits.

The travel logistics and other arrangements worked exactly as planned, thanks to the support of CGH - Gestión Hotelera & Turística. The staff at Refugio Paine Grande were helpful and supportive of our entire group, even providing us with made-up beds so sleeping bags were unnecessary. As in the past, the bag lunches provided by the refugio were monotonous, but the dinners and breakfasts there continue to improve and generally the volunteers had positive comments about the food.

Our transportation was via a very new small van driven by a safe and courteous driver. Luggage was loaded in the back of the bus. Our night in Puerto Natales was spent in Hotel Natalino, which provided very nice accommodations. We had a final celebratory meal at Cormoran de las Rocas, whose fresh vegetables and seafood were especially appealing after the time in the park.

FINAL THOUGHTS:

The trip was successful. The volunteers worked and traveled safely with no accidents, and a lot of work was accomplished. We all enjoyed working with and appreciated the support of the Torres del Paine Legacy Fund. We also appreciated the CONAF support, particularly the Park Superintendent's visit and the park rangers. The beauty of Torres del Paine National Park is world class and incredibly captivating. Most importantly, we very much appreciate CONAF's role in protecting this magnificent place—they have immense challenges and limited resources. Their welcoming spirit towards our volunteers is uplifting and heartwarming.



Volunteers from ConservationVIP and TdP Legacy Fund with Michael Arcos, Park Superintendent