



PROJECT REPORT
Volunteer Trip
Torres del Paine National Park, Patagonia, Chile
February 4 – 16, 2019



SUMMARY:

Twenty volunteers from Conservation Volunteers International Program including two volunteer trip leaders, David Summer and Garry Oye, traveled from the United States to construct a new boardwalk and stream crossing in Torres del Paine National Park, Chile. This project was a very important project in Torres del Paine because it will allow the Park to open a new trail, providing an alternate route to reduce congestion and foot traffic on a very popular and heavily traveled trail in the park.

ConservationVIP® started construction on this new trail in February 2017. This was a critical section of trail requiring special boardwalk construction because it crosses environmentally sensitive wetlands.

The project was also very special for ConservationVIP® and Torres del Paine National Park because it was made possible by [a grant which Conservation VIP® received from the Adventure Travel Conservation Fund's "Adopt a Project" program](#). The grant was funded by REI Adventures, which has provided invaluable support to ConservationVIP® over the years, recruiting volunteers to help with trail maintenance and trail building in Torres del Paine.

The ConservationVIP® volunteers were joined on the boardwalk project by 10 Chilean volunteers recruited by the local Torres del Paine Legacy Fund (TdP Legacy Fund) and from AMA Torres del Paine, another local nonprofit. Also joining in on some days were several park rangers from Corporación Nacional Forestal (CONAF).

Volunteers worked on a 560-foot section of new boardwalk across a sensitive/wetlands area and constructed an 18-foot bridge. The group also built new sections of the trail approaching the boardwalk on both ends, for approximately 500 feet of new trail construction.



ConservationVIP® purchased the project materials with the REI Adventures-ATCF grant funds and arranged for delivery of the materials to a staging area in the park. CONAF was responsible for flying the wood to the general project area by helicopter. Helicopter delivery can be unpredictable in Patagonia because of the erratic winds and the sporadic availability of the helicopter which is also needed for other critical Park functions. The volunteer group then had to



hand carry the wood from the helicopter landing zone down to the boardwalk construction area. This hand carrying was very labor intensive. Towards the end of the project, materials were carried nearly 1,000 feet per trip.

ConservationVIP® volunteers contributed 1,148 hours of volunteer labor to the Park on this project. CONAF and TdP Legacy Fund contributed approximately 752 hours of labor. All 560-feet of the boardwalk sub-structure was completed, as was the bridge. Only 260 feet of decking installation was required for the boardwalk to be complete. The decking was delayed, waiting for the final delivery of decking material via a helicopter. When the final materials are flown in and delivered to the boardwalk location, it should only take a day or two for two personnel with the proper equipment to finish the boardwalk.

SENSE OF PLACE:

Our first two days together were about creating a team, in a special place, embracing the culture of Chile. We learned about each other and individual expectations for the trip. We learned about the unique opportunity to be a part of a special project with REI and CONAF. We toured the area, viewed wildlife, looked inside the life of a sheep ranch, ate the local food, drank the local wine and explored the landscape outside the park.

We then visited Grey Glacier by boat, rode the catamaran to Paine Grande Refugio and spent our second night in the park. We all agreed that this was an incredible opportunity to give of ourselves, and our time and energy, to make a difference. We did ask that each volunteer be aware of their surroundings, focus on safety and think with their heart and their head. We asked that they listen to the sounds of nature and enjoy!



SPECIFIC ACCOMPLISHMENTS:

It is magical what can be done with the spirit of volunteers committed to making a difference in a special place. This trip captured all those characteristics and led to an awesome outcome.

This project started as a real logistic challenge. Our first day in the park required a 4 ½ mile hike, one way, carrying tools and hardware to the project site.



The second day required each volunteer to relocate all their personal gear from Paine Grande Refugio to El Francés, a distance of approximately 6 miles. Packs that averaged 30 pounds were strapped on the backs of the volunteers. This relocation would shorten our daily hike to the project site to about 2 miles each way.

On the third day in the park, we were able to start the construction of the boardwalk...and the magic began.

Working together, the group cleared an 850-foot corridor through a fire scar, to create the space for the boardwalk. With the help of a chain saw, pruning saws and a lot of sweat equity the initial corridor was created.



Then the layout of all the posts were marked on the ground and the installation of the cypress posts began. We needed two posts on seven-foot centers installed into the ground for 560 feet. Each hole needed to be dug and posts carried to the site and pounded into place.





Once the posts were secured and leveled, a beam was attached to the post and leveled to hold the stringers.



Two stringers were placed per each seven-foot section and secured with metal brackets. Once the stringers were in position, the decking was secured with self-tapping screws. The final touch was trimming the boards to provide an aesthetically pleasing boardwalk. The structure was solid and once final decking is secured, will be available for future use.



We also needed to build a bridge across a live stream. The bridge was built with two eighteen-foot stringers and we applied the appropriate decking. Secured to the boardwalk, this provided a safe and effective crossing of the stream.





One ConservationVIP® volunteer, Tom, took on a leadership role doing stone work on the trail and providing technical expertise to the boardwalk design. Another volunteer, Johnny, a construction foreman, was critical to our success in getting the sub-structure level and installed. All volunteers contributed countless hours of hard physical labor, so the project would be completed. Everyone gave of themselves and contributed to the best of their abilities.

The boardwalk and bridge should last for 30+ years. We estimate that as many as 5 million hikers may benefit from this project.

GENERAL INFORMATION:

The ConservationVIP® volunteers ranged in age from 31 to 72, with the average age about 60. All came from the United States from 10 different states. Our work day began with a 7:00 am breakfast and a departure to the work site by 8:15. 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, Chilean 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. At 8 pm, we would assemble to critique the day, evaluate our safety, check in with everyone and line out the next day's assignments.

The weather on this trip was varied and provided for a real wild Patagonia experience. We had estimated wind gusts of over 80 mph giving the volunteers a taste of "real Patagonia weather", but otherwise the winds were moderate to low. It rained some days and was sunny on other days. 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 landscape and to photograph the stunning views from our job site.

Similar to previous trips, the volunteers sincerely appreciated the opportunity to work with the Chilean volunteers and park rangers. Working with the TdP Legacy Fund is always a joy. Their executive director, her staff and each of their volunteers worked very well with the ConservationVIP® volunteers. Bruna and her TdP Legacy Fund crew fit seamlessly into the operation.



CONAF Park Manager Michael Arcos hiked out the new trail and visited with volunteers, which was greatly appreciated. He was very complimentary of and thankful for their work.



To allow rest time for ConservationVIP® volunteers, they were provided time off as needed. Most of the volunteers used that rest time to visit some of the most impressive geologic and scenic wonders of the park, hiking up French Valley. ConservationVIP® leaders used the rest time to review logistical support and to investigate the condition of the sanitary facilities in the Park (another project sponsored by ConservationVIP®).



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 as planned and really supported the success of the project. The providers were safe, timely and friendly. The people of Chile are very kind and generous.

Our final night in Puerto Natales was spent in Hotel Natalino, which provided very nice accommodations. We had a final celebratory meal at Restaurant Bahia Mansa, whose appetizers, dinner and desert were especially appealing after the time in the park. We acknowledge our collective success and shared how proud we were of our safety and production while enjoying our time together.

FINAL THOUGHTS:

The trip was extremely successful. The pride of our accomplishments was obvious and heartfelt. The volunteers worked and traveled safely with no accidents, and safety was the top priority. It was physically challenging, but everyone found success. We celebrated two birthdays, for volunteers Mary and Dena.

We all enjoyed working with and appreciated the support of the Torres del Paine Legacy Fund. A special thanks to Bruna for her leadership. We also appreciated the CONAF support and the visits of the park rangers.



Most importantly, we offer our heartfelt thanks to REI Adventures for their extraordinary generosity in funding this very important project.



The beauty of Torres del Paine National Park is world class and incredibly captivating. 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. We did make a difference on this trip and it will make a difference for the users into the future.

