



PROJECT REPORT
Volunteer Trip
Torres del Paine National Park, Patagonia, Chile
March 23 – April 3, 2025



Summary

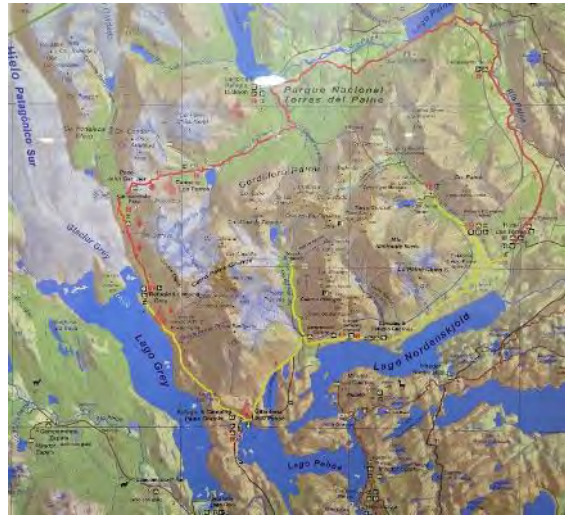
In March and April 2025, a dedicated group of volunteers traveled to Torres del Paine National Park in Chilean Patagonia to contribute to trail maintenance and conservation efforts. ConservationVIP® has long partnered with the park and other agencies to construct and maintain trails, including the new trail to the towers and sections of the “W” and “O” trekking circuits. Trail management is complex, as the lower portion of the trail to the towers crosses Las Torres Reserve (private land), while Corporación Nacional Forestal (CONAF) is responsible for all the other land and trails within the National Park.

The team on this trip was tasked with improving and maintaining the trail north from Refugio Grey up to the Mirador Grey viewpoint, as well as a trail section south toward Paine Grande. Using hoes, Pulaskis, McLeods, loppers, and hand saws, they enhanced

drainage, improved tread, and removed obstacles such as rocks, roots, and brush. Additionally, they eliminated numerous social trails due to high foot traffic and water bypassing.

The group successfully completed **616 hours of trail work**, maintaining 2.6 miles north from Refugio Grey past Suspension Bridge #2 to Mirador Grey, as well as 2.5 miles south toward Paine Grande. These hours do not include transportation, rest days, or exploration. The demanding work involved removing rocks and roots, clearing overgrown vegetation—often including prickly Calafate bushes—improving drainage, and reclaiming social trails by disturbing the soil with hoes and Pulaskis. They also reinforced closure of these social trails by adding sod removed from trail edges to encourage regrowth and strategically placing large debris, such as fallen trees, to deter further use. Additionally, the team completed several labor-intensive rock projects, including constructing a large rock step on the trail and replacing unstable planks with more secure footing at a water crossing near a broken bridge.

Throughout their journey, volunteers encountered the park's breathtaking landscapes and diverse wildlife, including hares, a fox, various birds including birds of prey such as the majestic condor, as well as pink flamingos, ostrich-like rheas, and guanacos on the return to Puerto Natales. The park is also home to elusive species such as the huemul (Andean deer), pumas, and skunks.



Despite being late summer, the park remained active with hikers tackling the W and O Circuits, as well as day hikes. Trekkers of various nationalities, some solo and others in guided groups, frequently stopped to thank the volunteers and inquire about ConservationVIP®. Notably, one volunteer learned about the organization from his daughter, who had previously encountered a ConservationVIP® team while hiking, a testament to the enduring impact of these efforts.

Volunteers stayed at Refugio Grey from March 24 to April 1, sharing four-person rooms with bunk beds. The Refugio provided breakfast and dinner, while packed lunches included sandwiches, granola bars or nuts, and chocolate. The location offered easy access to work sites on the O and W Circuits and scenic Mirador Grey viewpoints. From April 1 until departure, they stayed at Refugio Torres Central, enjoying warm meals and packed lunches. Accommodations varied between six-bed rooms and raised two-person tents with thick sleeping pads and warm sleeping bags.

Sunday, March 23

Volunteers gathered at Hotel Natalino at 4:00 p.m. for orientation, including introductions, project briefings, and trip logistics. A pizza dinner at Base Camp restaurant provided the perfect setting for camaraderie. The group's enthusiasm for ConservationVIP's mission was evident, with a mix of returning and first-time volunteers.



Monday, March 24

After breakfast, the group departed by private bus to Hotel Grey, then hiked a short, forested trail and beach along Lake Grey to board a catamaran. Following a 45-minute boat ride, they arrived at the Refugio Grey dock and settled into their accommodations.

Tuesday, March 25

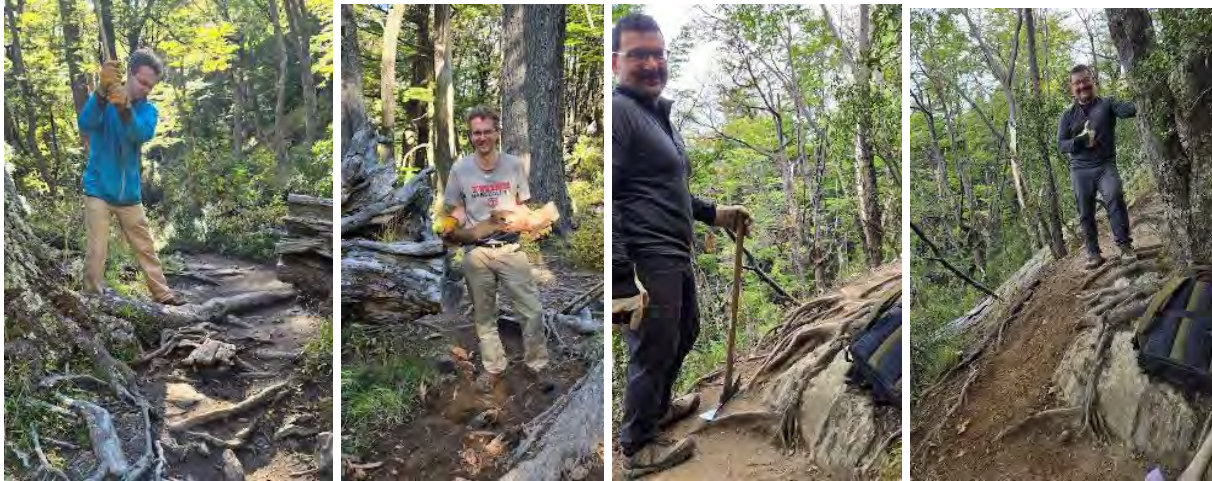
After attending a tool safety talk with trip leaders and local rangers Javiera and Francisco, the group carried nineteen tools to Suspension Bridge #2. They admired the stunning scenery while testing the impressive suspension bridges including the bridge at Puente Braunlich, named after our Board Chair's husband who designed the bridge. After lunch at the Glacier Grey viewpoint, they split into two teams to block social trails and shortcuts and to improve trail tread south of the bridge and from the bridge north to the viewpoint. They were joined by local rangers Francisco and Javiera who were interested in learning our approach and execution. Garry also provided insights into the bridges and trail history which he would continue to do during the trip.



Before and After removing social trails and shortcuts

Wednesday, March 26

Hiking again 5 miles roundtrip and 1,700 feet elevation gain to Suspension Bridge #2, the group split into teams: one group continued to work on improving tread and removing rocks toward Grey Mirador, while the other group continued improving trail toward Suspension Bridge #1. Another sunny day brought numerous trekkers who expressed gratitude for the improved trail. At the end of the day, the group stashed tools midway between the two bridges.



Before and After removing thick wood and branches from the often-steep trail

Thursday, March 27

Continuing toward Suspension Bridge #1, the group cleared brush, enhanced drainage, removed rocks, aligned and elevated trail, and eliminated roots to reduce tripping hazards. Trekkers stopped to learn about ConservationVIP® and thank the volunteers.



Much needed brushing, drainage repair and preventive drainage work



Trail alignment and leveling

Friday, March 28

Rest day. Some volunteers attempted a kayaking tour to Grey Glacier, which was postponed due to high winds. Others explored the Mirador viewpoint or assessed future trail work sites towards Paine Grande, the work site for the next view days. Weather varied between clouds and sunshine.



Rest day exploring the glacier, flora, and fauna from the water

Saturday, March 29

After successfully rescheduling the kayaking tour, volunteers worked on the trail toward Paine Grande, lopping brush, removing a small tree, and grading social trails using sod, fallen logs, and rocks. They enjoyed spectacular views of Glacier Grey, a cascading waterfall, and the lake, highlighted by a soaring condor and the rarely visible Puente Grande glacier.



Before and After social trails removal on route towards Paine Grande

Sunday, March 30

Cooler weather with intermittent rain did not deter progress. Volunteers removed social trails, reinforced a rock step, and improved major drainage points before returning to the Refugio for a warm meal.



Before and After improving dangerous and slippery water crossing



Monday, March 31

On their final workday, the group took a photo with local rangers before splitting into teams. One team repaired a water crossing, replacing loose planks with heavy rocks, while the others continued trail repair, heavy brushing, and improving complicated drainage toward Refugio Grey. The day concluded with a well-earned dinner.

Tuesday, April 1

Volunteers returned tools to the Refugio Grey ranger station before exploring trails or relaxing at the Refugio. Despite rain, they departed by catamaran, stopping at additional Glacier Grey viewpoints and the Torres Ranger Station before reaching Torre Central.

At the Torres Ranger Station, the Chief Ranger gave each volunteer a book, *The Paradise of Patagonia: Torres del Paine National Park*, in appreciation of their volunteer trail work.



Upon arrival at Torre Central, the group enjoyed a wonderful salmon dinner as well as what had become their favorite Pisco Calafate welcome drink. From the dining room they were able to see the Towers in the evening sunlight. They then settled in their rooms and tents looking forward to their rest day of exploring and hiking.

Wednesday, April 2

Some volunteers hiked the 12 mile and 3800' roundtrip to the Towers, meeting Sutra, a trail planner along the way, who, with Garry introduced the group to the new trail. Garry also showed the group other improvements that ConservationVIP® volunteers made in recent years. Others explored nearby trails at the Refugio before gathering for a final group meal, reflecting on the incredible experience.



Thursday, April 3

After breakfast, the group gathered in the lobby as Garry and Susan thanked them for their significant contributions, expressing how proud they should be of their accomplishments. Two volunteers shared poems and during the bus trip to the airport, the volunteers reflected on their expectations and fears from orientation. Many had looked forward to experiencing nature's beauty while also feeling concerned about clothing and weather conditions.

As the trip concluded, volunteers bid farewell not only to each other but also to a landscape of jagged granite peaks, snowy mountains, sky-blue lagoons, crisp glaciers, Andean forests, and rushing waterfalls. The park's ever-changing weather, shifting unpredictably from icy storms to warm sunshine, provided stunning vistas throughout their journey. Each day revealed new wonders.

This unforgettable experience not only contributed to the preservation of Torres del Paine but also fostered deep connections among the volunteers, leaving them with cherished memories and a renewed commitment to conservation. Goodbyes are bittersweet, but not final - many knew their paths would cross again on another ConservationVIP® trip.



One of two poems shared by one of the volunteers:

"Lost" (David Waggoner 1999)

Stand still. The trees ahead and bushes beside you
Are not lost. Wherever you are is called Here,
And you must treat it as a powerful stranger,
Must ask permission to know it and be known.
The forest breathes. Listen. It answers,
I have made this place around you.
If you leave it, you may come back again, saying Here.
No two trees are the same to Raven.
No two branches are the same to Wren.
If what a tree or a bush does is lost on you,
You are surely lost. Stand still. The forest knows
Where you are. You must let it find you.