Case Description

The San Gorgonio Ranger District of the San Bernardino National Forest has found a very resourceful way to stretch its thin budget by harnessing the dedication and energy of the San Gorgonio Wilderness Association (SGWA). This 200-member organization donated more than 15,000 person-hours of volunteer time to the District in 2002, and made more than 15,500 visitor contacts during volunteer wilderness patrols. Its volunteers also provided all of the staffing for the District's Barton Flats Visitor Center, conducting interpretive programs and interacting with over 6,500 forest visitors there.

The impetus for this beneficial relationship began more than thirty years ago during a heated wilderness battle in the 1960s. Nestled high in the beautiful San Bernardino mountains but within an hour's drive of more than 7.5 million people, the forest was and is a favorite destination of southern Californians eager to escape urban living for the weekend. Hiking enthusiasts formed a group called the Defenders of the San Gorgonio Wilderness and waged a successful battle to have the area designated as wilderness rather than a downhill ski resort. Over the next decade their love for the area and commitment to its protection evolved into a desire to work to maintain the wilderness area and teach visitors how to minimize their impact on it. When the Forest Service solicited volunteers for backcountry wilderness patrols twenty years ago, many Defenders and other wilderness enthusiasts eagerly signed up. Within a couple of years, these volunteers decided to band together into an organization, and the San Gorgonio Volunteer Association was born. In 2000, the organization changed its name to the San Gorgonio Wilderness Association. The Defenders were instrumental in getting the infant SGVA on its feet by helping out with initial funding and organizational needs. Alice Krueper, the late Secretary of the Defenders and one of the founders of the SGVA, explained the motivation of the volunteers, “The San Gorgonio is so important to many of us, such a part of our lives.”

The SGWA has filled a neglected niche for the district. According to Barb Ward, the district's interpretive specialist, there was a “need for a Forest Service presence” in the Forest due to its popularity as a recreation site. The San Gorgonio is one of the most visited wilderness areas in the nation and, as Krueper described, was being “loved to death,” with certain popular areas being trampled into “dustbowls.” Bob Shuker, the wilderness manager for the San Gorgonio Wilderness at the time, saw the volunteers as an opportunity too good to pass up and began organizing them into wilderness teams to patrol the area's seven trailhead entrances.
In the late 1980s, volunteer use was expanded. The District's small visitor center in Barton Flats, which had been closed during the budget cuts of the early 1980s, was re-opened using all volunteer staff. Under their care, the center has expanded from being solely an information and book-selling operation to including interactive exhibits and programs. In addition, the Forest now hosts an annual summer celebration at the center which takes approximately 25 volunteers to staff.

The volunteer program was later expanded to include naturalist interpretive activities. These include both campfire programs in the campground and programs at the 26 children’s camps within forest boundaries. Some 30,000 children, primarily from inner-city areas in southern California, pass through these camps each summer. Interpretive volunteers also help provide support for guest speakers, such as with audio-visual equipment or answering questions about the area, and walk around the campgrounds before programs inviting all campers to come, an activity which Forest Service staff says “doubles attendance.”

In addition to wilderness patrols, interpretation and staffing the visitor center, the SGWA performs trail maintenance work and has rebuilt the visitor center. The Association also periodically helps pay for District projects, such as interpretive exhibits, and repair of the water system and toilets at the visitor center, from money collected selling books and maps at the visitors center. The District has invested much time and energy into cultivating and training the volunteers. Three Forest Service employees -- the interpretive specialist, recreation manager and wilderness coordinator -- attend the SGWA Board's monthly meetings. They also train the volunteers for all activities they will perform on the National Forest. Volunteers are asked to attend a weekend training session in May where they learn such things as the history of the Forest Service and the San Gorgonio National Forest. For interpretive program volunteers, there is a day-long interpretation training on how to plan programs. One year, District staff also organized a field trip to the Joshua Tree National Monument so the volunteers could observe programs there.

**Accomplishments of the San Gorgonio Partnership**

The San Gorgonio Wilderness Association partnership is considered a huge success by the District because, through the volunteers' efforts, some 30,000 additional visitors have had personal contact with a Forest Service representative. The volunteers all wear a Forest Service uniform bearing a volunteer badge. According to the District Ranger, “It goes
without saying that without the association's involvement, the[se]...contacts would not have been made.”

In a high-use recreation area such as the San Gorgonio Wilderness, these interactions benefit both the people and the Forest: visitors receive educational programs which help increase their appreciation and enjoyment of the Forest; volunteer wilderness patrols teach visitors how to minimize their impact on the Forest environment. Krueper attested to the positive impact of having volunteer patrols present in the wilderness to ensure that all visitors have proper permits, thereby avoiding overuse in any one area: “It took some 15 years for some nice areas to recover after they began the wilderness permits patrols. One of the nicest things about volunteering has been watching these areas come back.”

Likewise, the interaction between volunteers and the inner-city school children who attend the large number of summer camps operating within the Forest is another benefit of the volunteer program. Ward stresses the importance of being able to provide the campers with volunteer-staffed environmental education programs. “For many of them, it's their first contact with a forest ranger. We want it to be positive, for them to come away having had a good experience with nature...to help teach them an environmental ethic.”

What has fostered progress?

The success of this partnership is largely the result of the dedication and energy of the volunteers themselves. As the District Ranger described, “These individuals contribute their time, money, and interest to assisting in the mission of the Forest Service. The Association is an integral part of the District team.” The strong connection which the volunteers have with the wilderness area has provided an incredible motivation for them to invest significant energy into protecting the area. Says Ward, “I keep being surprised. If you just ask people to do stuff, it's amazing what people will do for you. I think, 'No. I can't ask anyone to do that,' but then I do and they just jump right in and do it.”

John Flippin, the current SGWA volunteer coordinator, highlights the two-way nature of this partnership. The Forest Service provides the SGWA with funding for supplies, equipment, and volunteer training, and the SGWA provides needed services for the Forest. Bob Wood, Recreation Officer on the San Bernardino National Forest, attributes the long-standing partnership to the large number of people interested in volunteering. Of the 200 plus members he says, “it’s just their thing; they like to spend time in the woods hiking around.”
Another key point to the program's success has been the District's recognition of the volunteers' efforts. Each fall the District puts on a “nice big awards ceremony” for the volunteers at a mountain lodge where every volunteer receives an award in appreciation of their contribution to the National Forest. As Ward explains, “It is a very important part of the volunteer program. They all really look forward to it.” The SGWA's contribution to the Forest Service was also recognized nationally in 1991 when the group was granted the Chief's Award. Two members of the group were flown to Washington, D.C. to receive the award. Said Krueper, “Everyone back there was very appreciative, wishing that something like this would happen on their forests too.”

What challenges were faced and how were they overcome?

According to Krueper, an initial hurdle faced by the volunteer association was reluctance on the part of some agency staff. “When we started, there were some Forest Service employees who thought we were taking their jobs.” But she maintained that the reality of the situation soon diminished their hesitation: “…there was a desperate need for more manpower.”

One of the biggest obstacles to the program now is the limited Forest Service staff time to provide adequate training and oversight for the volunteers. Heavy volunteer recruiting by Forest Service staff at area community colleges and universities and via fliers sent out with wilderness permits yielded a record 120 volunteers during the summer of 1992. “There's not enough staff to go around,” says Ward. The district is in the process of trying to reorganize the program to accommodate the high number of volunteers. One of the proposals is to plan more trailwork and other similar projects where volunteer leaders can direct other volunteers, thereby minimizing Forest Service staff oversight.

Some of the challenges in keeping the partnership going over time include the ongoing management and workload as well as maintaining good communication between all of the partners. Because the SGWA has an office located at one of the Forest Service ranger stations, daily interaction improves the long-term communication. It has also been important for the Forest Service to have a liaison working closely with SGWA. For the SGWA, maintaining its core steering committee costs money and through the challenge cost-share program volunteers are able to contribute time and work while the Forest Service contributes financial support. Part of this money allows the SGWA to hire the necessary office staff.
The volunteers also have their own time and ability constraints. Most of them work from nine to five during the week and therefore are not available for Forest Service projects except on weekends. Ward also found it difficult at times to convince volunteers to donate their Saturday nights to conduct amphitheater programs. Few volunteers are comfortable giving formal presentations to large crowds of 60-100 people.

John Flippin recommends those interested in putting together a partnership like the San Gorgonio to first obtain the support of the local Forest Service managers for the concept of using volunteers and then find dedicated volunteers that are willing to put in the time, both in the administrative management of the partnership as well as in the field. He also warns of “incorrectly expecting that a lot will happen without some minimal amount of funding support of a full or part time” staff member. He adds, “I’ve seen some other organizations try to depend on a lot of that business administration and management work done purely by volunteers that aren’t getting paid. It often is successful for a short period of time if you happen to be real lucky and find a very dedicated volunteer that has a lot of time and doesn’t need income. But then if that person leaves or becomes burned out it starts falling through. To keep it going over the long term on a continuous basis for a high quality program requires some investment of funds in a permanent staff. It does take some investment to reap the benefit of all of those volunteer hours.”

**What lessons were learned?**

San Gorgonio District staff have several words of advice regarding volunteer programs. According to Ward, any District planning to undertake such a program had better expect to spend a great deal of staff time on it. Volunteers are hard to contact during the days because most of them work. So staff “spend a lot of time during evening and weekends on the phone coordinating. We all have government phone cards to make calls from home.” She cautions against starting a volunteer program just to have volunteers: “You need to have a job you want done before you go out and get volunteers.”

Similarly, it is important to provide “intensive training” of volunteers to ensure quality program work. Says Ward, “Originally I was more lenient and did lots of individual training. This was very counterproductive with respect to time.” Now the District institutes a cut-off point in the summer after which they stop training new volunteers for wilderness patrol and interpretive programs and just have them help staff the visitor center. They also have “an evaluation process that everyone is aware of up front.”
Bob Wood emphasizes the importance of spelling out what the agency’s goals are. “In this situation, the volunteers are representing the Forest Service so it is essential that they follow Forest Service rules.” The Forest Service provides all of the training for the volunteers to ensure that the volunteers are on board with Forest Service policies and procedures. In addition to adequate training, it is equally critical to provide “recognition” to all volunteers to award their generosity of time and work. Ward feels that their annual awards ceremony for the SGWA members is an essential component of making the volunteers feel a part of the Forest Service team.

Another lesson illustrated in the San Gorgonio partnership is that many national forests have a constituency of groups and individuals who care about the forest and would be motivated to act in support of it. Simply realizing this resource exists and asking people for help can reap tremendous rewards.

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