

USACE VOLUNTEERS ENHANCE FACILITIES AND SERVE VISITORS

By David A. Brown

When Penny and Virgil Bray noticed suspicious behavior at Dent Acres Campground in 2012, their coordination between park rangers and helpful visitors led to the apprehension of burglary suspects, as well as the resolution of an intentional boat sinking at this Dworshak Dam facility, located in Ahsahka, Idaho. Although rare events for these fifth-year volunteers, such awareness and response exemplifies their commitment to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) and the natural resources within its scope.

Day to day, in USACE's Walla Walla District, the Brays' work as visitor center hosts plays out light on the drama, but the diverse duties that they and their many nationwide counterparts perform are no less important. Indeed, the diligence and dedication so common among those who devote their time and talents to USACE lakes and river projects yields a twofold benefit: service to the public and savings for USACE.

First, let's take a look at the latter. According to USACE national volunteer coordinator Heather Burke, 2012 saw 53,054 USACE volunteers contribute 1,580,099 hours of work with an estimated value of \$34.4 million. This equates to approximately 13.5 percent added value to the \$250 million annual recreation program budget. Those numbers further equate to a lot of work that aids park rangers in accomplishing their daily duties.

"With federal budgets and staffing in decline, volunteers help bridge the gap to continue to provide a healthy environment, safe facilities, and top-quality services to our visitors," Burke said.

Good example: Over the past nine years, Jay and Trish Cleveland have volunteered at several USACE lakes and currently serve as park hosts at Center Hill Lake in Silver Point, Tenn., located within USACE's Nashville District. Their typical duties include trail guidance, sign painting, landscape maintenance, and boat ramp direction. While these are certainly needed tasks, Jay Cleveland believes such activities shouldn't occupy a park ranger's demanding schedule.



"We provide a link between visitors and staff," Cleveland said. "There are so many mundane tasks – like taking inventory of life vests – that volunteers can do to give the paid staff time for things we cannot do. It doesn't tie up a ranger by requiring them to go around and [attend] to those things and that frees them up to handle other priorities."

Leslie Sullins, who volunteers at the Walla Walla District Swallows Park Boat Ramp in the Lower Granite Lake Project in



Photo courtesy of volunteer Deb Peters. Photo courtesy of Jeff and Geneva Jones, USACE photo by Ben Peters, USACE photo by Johnny Cantrell. Photo by Brittney Hauptert



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: • Penny and Virgil Bray striping the Dworshak Visitor Center parking lot, located in Ahsahka, Idaho. • Jeff and Geneva Jones at Stanislaus River in the Sacramento District, Calif. • Leslie Sullins assists visitors with the life jacket loaner program and provides water safety education using the FAD (Family Against Drowning) at the Swallows Park Boat Ramp, Lower Granite Lake in Clarkston, Wash. • Kelly Warren (middle) helps install a blue bird nest box at DeGray Lake in Arkadelphia, Ark. • Sally and Ross Giacomo working at the Dworshak Visitor Center Information Desk.

Clarkson, Wash., added: “I know that budgets are tightening everywhere, I’m glad that I can help keep these facilities open and available because I think they are national treasures.”

MOTIVATION AND REWARDS

For many, such personal affinity for the natural splendor of USACE lakes and river projects and their terrestrial surroundings initiates volunteer interest. Common duties range from interpretation and education to construction and maintenance. Some work with their hands, others with their voice – all with their hearts.

“We enjoy the water resources that the Corps has available for recreation like fishing, camping, boating, and swimming,” Bray said. “We also like to be with people who are involved in preservation. In the past, [Virgil and I] were ATV riders and we don’t like to see the hills and rivers misused. With the Corps’ projects giving designated areas for this, other areas are undisturbed. Plus they make sure there’s no environmental impact on the water resource from either camping or fishing.”

There’s also a strong people connection. A retired Army chief warrant officer three, Cleveland said he enjoys nothing more than seeing a grandfather returning from the lake with a grandchild beaming over his first fish. Understandably, he and his wife see their volunteer efforts as ensuring outdoor recreation for the most important people in their life.

“It started out as giving back for the grandkids,” Cleveland said. “If we work and help maintain it, maybe it will still be here for the grands and great grands. That was our first motivation, but then we started meeting people and we just had so much fun we said, ‘Hey, we’ll just keep going.’”

Along the way, volunteers find life enrichment of the predictable and pleasantly unexpected kind. Mrs. Bray delights in teaching children about USACE history, while Sullins enjoys the ambience of trail maintenance duty, where random “thank-yous” from appreciative visitors maintain her enjoyment. Often, a volunteer’s personal interaction with visitors blossoms into lifetime friendships with travelers domestic and international. Across the board, inner fulfillment bears strong motivation.

“I like to do something worthwhile,” Sullins said. “I really enjoy working where I feel like I’m contributing to something good. That’s what I feel like I’m doing with the Corps of Engineers. I feel like I’m making something a little better for the public – even by something as simple as picking up litter.”

SERVICE AND PR

They come from different backgrounds and they take different courses, but most USACE volunteers arrive with a passion for the outdoors and a genuine desire to serve. Ross Giacomo spent 25 years in the Army – 10 of those as a presidential staff chauffeur during the Reagan and Bush Sr. administrations. A self-described “people person,” he said his career instilled a service-oriented perspective that has translated well into his volunteer work.

Expounding on this thought, Burke said that volunteers create advocacy for USACE parks; often punctuating their public relations message with personal donations. Such enthusiasm presents a strong case for additional donor support.

“Volunteers have an increased appreciation for the lands and waters where they serve, and share that passion with the public through the many outreach and education programs that they conduct for us,” Burke said. “Volunteers energize donors. Philanthropists like to see projects supported by a strong volunteer corps.”

Complementing the broader effort, USACE volunteers are well versed at providing meaningful service one visitor at a time. Sullins, for example administers the Life Jacket Loaner Program for boaters who arrive with a personal flotation device shortage. Elsewhere, Cleveland said he enjoys assisting young anglers during annual free fishing days, while Giacomo takes great pride in hosting educators and religious leaders who visit USACE parks and then return for group events.

In all activities, Bray said, volunteers serve as the extended eyes and ears for park rangers. That, she said, also entails keeping the public aware of park regulations with a lighter touch. As Bray noted, volunteers don’t enforce, they suggest.

“We learned so much from the Army Corps, like the aspects of customer service and what to look for in the parks and how to make the visitors’ experience more fulfilling,” Jones said. “The Army Corps has tremendous training that they afford to the volunteers and we took advantage of that training. I spent much of my time working side by side with a ranger and that really opened up my ideas on what a park ranger does from day to day.”

At DeGray Lake in Arkadelphia, Ark., first-year volunteer Kelly Warren said her work provides invaluable experience and insight for the natural resource management degree she’s seeking at Henderson State University. From eagle surveys and bluebird box maintenance, to aquatic invasive species monitoring and gypsy moth trapping, Warren said she’s learning while serving at this Vicksburg District location.

Down the road, Warren’s looking forward to advancing her involvement in “Keeping DeGray Lake Beautiful,” the annual event held in conjunction with National Public Lands Day and the Great American Cleanup. In her routine duties, riding around with rangers keeps her immersed in the magnificent natural environments she enjoys, while also helping her develop a good eye for habitat maintenance.

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“A ranger once told me, ‘You are the presence of the Corps. You are the good guys,’” Bray recalled. “He said, ‘We, as rangers, can be the bad guys. We are the ones who come behind and enforce the regulations.’”

As Cleveland pointed out, this communication is a two-way street. “The campers have the Corps’ ear without the Corps having to pay for the manpower for that connection. Campers have a great ability to see what can be improved or changed because they actually use the area and volunteers can pass the ideas along. The Corps staff gets the input from the campers without having to spend the time the volunteers do.”

COURSE OF ADVANCEMENT

For Jeff Jones, volunteering at USACE lakes in Texas, California, Oregon, Washington, and Alaska state parks led to his current job as a park ranger in the Jacksonville District’s Rocky Bayou State Park in Niceville, Fla. He and his wife Geneva were actually trying to volunteer in the Sunshine State, but while they found no such opportunities, park management offered them ranger positions. (Geneva retired from her ranger job at St. George Island in early 2013.)

“The rangers are teaching me to notice subtle things like a dead tree or anything that needs to be removed to make a trail safe for visitors,” Warren said.

Prospective volunteers will find program details and current opportunities at www.corpslakes.us/volunteer. Jones suggests treating the application process with all the diligence and professionalism of any job pursuit. That means a sharp resume and timely follow-up. On the job, a balance of patience and versatility goes a long way.

“Keep an open mind and expect anything,” Jones said. “You get to see a lot. You may attend to medical emergencies; there are lost children; compliance issues – it’s going to be a unique experience. You’re going to see life from a different perspective than the normal career. But take it all in and enjoy it.”

Cleveland offers a simple formula for success: “Anyone thinking of volunteering should: Like people; have no [pre-conceived] ideas about any particular group of people [age, income, race, education, etc.]; be totally fair in applying the Corps rules [pets, parking, etc.]; be willing to listen to visitors and take that extra minute to make them feel special; accept the varying weather and maintain your on-site presence; and lastly, have fun.”

CORPS LAKES ABOUND WITH WATERSPORTS OPPORTUNITY

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) is the nation’s largest provider of water-based recreation. With projects on more than 420 lakes and river projects, USACE offers a diverse array of opportunities to enjoy the great outdoors.

For example, Greers Ferry Lake in Heber Springs, Ark., is a deep, blue Ozark Mountains’ lake with 40,500 surface acres and nine commercial marinas for a variety of watersports. Little Rock District’s chief park ranger Joe Harper lauds the stellar sport fishing, which has yielded world-record catches of trout, hybrid striped bass, and walleye.

Notably, Greers Ferry celebrated its 50th anniversary Oct. 3, 2013, and visitors to John F. Kennedy Overlook were able to stand on the very site where the former president dedicated the dam a half-century ago. Located at the base of the Greers Ferry Dam on the Little Red River, JFK Park holds a U.S. Fish and Wildlife trout hatchery, hiking trails, and productive fishing stream, while its waterfalls make photogenic backdrops.

In Greers Ferry Lake is Sugarloaf Mountain, which occupies an uninhabited island. At 540 feet above the lake, it maintains its secluded island mystique, but easy boat access allows visitors to enjoy the hiking trails and scenic splendor.

Out west, Eric Hamilton, public affairs specialist for the Portland District, said the Columbia River offers awesome windsurfing and kiteboarding, particularly around locks and dams at the Dalles and John Day. Bonneville Lock and Dam, near Cascade Locks, Ore., and North Bonneville, Wash., is well known for its salmon fishing and wildlife viewing. Many of the projects in the Willamette Valley region are a big part of the Oregon Cascades Birding Trail (www.oregonbirdingtrails.org/cascades.htm) and are included in the National Audubon Society’s list of important birding areas.

“For those looking for something off the beaten path, fly-fishing and whitewater rafting is popular along the Rogue River,” Hamilton said. “In fact, as premier fishing spots go, the William Jess Dam and Lost Creek Lake are exceptionally beautiful and somewhat secluded.”

And in the Fort Worth District, fishermen flock to the 114,000 surface acres of Sam Rayburn Reservoir. Located in southeast Texas’ Jasper County, Rayburn is the largest lake wholly within the state of Texas. This Angelina River impoundment abounds with bluegill and catfish, while *Bassmaster Magazine* ranked it the No. 2 bass fishing lake in the United States for 2013.

In south-central Texas, Canyon Lake on the Guadalupe River hails as the state’s “Water Recreation Capital of Texas,” with an annual tourism impact of \$550 million. Regarded as the “Jewel of the Texas Hill Country” Canyon Lake sees annual visitation of nearly 800,000.

