

Case Study:

The Zuni Mountains Trail Partnership and Mogollon Rim Arizona - Conservation Corps & Southwest Conservation Corps

Key Terms:

Bike Trails, Drainage Design, Multi-Use Trails, Rock Work, Single-Identity Crews, Tribal and Indigenous Communities, Wilderness Stewardship

Project Partners:

Arizona State Parks, Backcountry Horsemen, Cibola and McKinley Counties, Cibola National Forest, U.S. Forest Service Mount Taylor, Ranger District

DOT Strategic Goal Alignment:

Infrastructure, Innovation

Mogollon Rim Ancestral Lands Program

Project Work

Arizona Conservation Corps' Ancestral Lands Crew 389 worked on the Mogollon Rim for five weeks from September to October 2017. The crew consisted primarily of tribal youth from the local community, including Corpsmembers representing the White Mountain Apache and Navajo. This project involved a partnership between the Corps and the Blue Ridge Ranger District of the Coconino National Forest.

The crew of eight worked primarily on Barbershop Trail no. 91, constructing a switchback to equestrian-friendly specifications. The original route was a downhill trail into the canyon. The eventual goal is to build a sustainable trail down the Yeager Canyon section of the Barbershop Trail. The project was a continuation of a larger project from the summer and fall of 2014.

Outcomes and Successes

The crew accomplished 3,963 feet of tread maintenance, which included constructing a new switchback; improving an existing switchback; building 310 square feet of rock retaining wall; and installing or maintaining 14 erosion control structures (waterbars and drains). This also includes additional trail maintenance that was performed on the U-Bar Trail that descends into Barbershop Canyon. Materials were sourced from the brink of the Mogollon Rim and transported to the work site via ATV with assistance from U.S. Forest Service staff. This was the first project of the term for Crew 398, the “Mogollon Monsters,” who were completely new to trail work. The Corpsmembers quickly acquired and applied technical trail skills. When the project ended, the crew left with a sense of pride in their work that set them on a trajectory for a successful, productive, and fun term. The satisfying experience of working outdoors and completing a tough, physical project – combined with the technical skills that each Corpsmember gained – propelled them through their next opportunity.

“Funding for this project was acquired through a Recreational Trails Program (RTP) grant secured by Arizona State Parks and not only provides quality work needed to maintain public lands, but it also supports the personal and professional development of young adults who would otherwise not have been afforded these opportunities. Through conservation corps programs, we can amplify the impact of project funding beyond just trail work. We can provide an experience that changes lives.” – Staff member, Arizona Conservation Corps

Zuni Mountains Trail Partnership

Background

The Zuni Mountains Trail Partnership is guided by a Conservation Master Plan for the sustainable development of trails and non motorized recreation opportunities for the social and economic benefit of local communities.

The ambitious trail system plan consists of 186 miles of non motorized trails, 28 miles of connector trails, and six new trail heads managed for pack and saddle, biking, and hiking. Decades in planning, and following a competitive application process and subsequent award of a three-year sole-source agreement with McKinley County, NM, crews from Southwest Conservation Corps’ Ancestral Lands (SCC-AL) program began construction in the fall of 2018. Subsequent funding from Cibola County is expected, with an estimated completion in 2028. The Conservation Master Plan provides clear guidance for recreation development and management within the Mount Taylor Ranger District, Cibola National Forest. It also serves to showcase the ability of local partners to

support the U.S. Forest Service in managing and enhancing public lands and recreation infrastructure.

Project Work

Ancestral Lands Corpsmembers learned marketable skills in trail building and construction. Following a two-week orientation and training in trail building skills, crews of two to five Corpsmembers worked on a staggered schedule to complete more than 5.3 miles of new trail construction, and connect existing trail with more than 100 drainage structures.

SCC-AL was chosen for this project due to their experience in the region, organizational history, and connection with the local Native American communities. Working with the surrounding Native communities is a high priority for the nearby towns of Gallup and Grants, as well as for the county governments. Many tribes and pueblos in the region have a distinct need for economic development and the kind of job training for young adults that SCC-AL provides.

McKinley County manages the funding and agreement, and the Council of Governments provides leadership and staff to support construction and management. The U.S. Forest Service provides trail planning, oversight and guidance. Backcountry Horsemen provides standards for pack and saddle use, and SCC-AL provides local, all-Native American crews from the surrounding tribes and pueblos of Acoma, Zuni, and Navajo to complete trail construction.

Outcomes and Successes

Year-one of the project was a success. The Zuni Mountains Trail System will become an economic driver through adventure tourism with the goal of catalyzing job growth and business opportunities. Long-term goals for the trail system are to develop a resilient trail network that will earn recognition by the International Mountain Biking Association, and serve as a “crown jewel” among the singletrack trail systems of the Southwest.

Challenges and Barriers

Wildfires in the region posed a challenge in year-one. Additionally, soils in the Zuni Mountains are clay-based and heavy, which makes construction during the summer rainy season difficult. Also, there were staff capacity challenges at the U.S. Forest Service. Staffing to support the project from the county and the U.S. Forest Service is critical for guiding and prioritizing actions by the crew. For

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