

## **ROARING FORK LIFESTYLE MAGAZINE: SPRING 2017**

### **Muddy Hands, Happy Hearts**

How do you foster a deep and sustaining sense of stewardship for the land? By getting your hands good and dirty in it. That's the founding belief of the Roaring Fork Outdoor Volunteers (RFOV), a Basalt-based non-profit that offers opportunities to pour your sweat equity into a full slate of trail work and ecological restoration projects from Aspen to Rifle.

Since 1995, Roaring Fork Outdoor Volunteers has channelled the labour of nearly 22,000 volunteers to build and maintain over 500 miles of trails, restore 20 acres of wetlands and remove invasive weeds from nearly 50 acres of local public lands. In addition to a full summer schedule of public work days, the organization offers local clubs, schools, organizations and businesses opportunities to volunteer on focused projects in its Group Work Day program. RFOV is also highly vested in creating opportunities for Roaring Fork Valley youth to develop strong relationships with our stunning local landscapes; their Young Stewards Initiative fosters this through programs ranging from half-day outdoor service learning opportunities for local middle school students to a seven-month long classroom-based Sustainable Outdoor Leadership program that educates students on the ethics behind wilderness land management, Google Maps trail building and a host of related topics.

RFOV's extensive reliance on volunteers and hands-on approach is intentional. Executive Director J. David Hamilton experienced the intense success of a similar participatory model during a previous professional tenure with Denver-based Volunteers for Outdoor Colorado (VOC), a state-wide organization that has been involving citizens in public land stewardship since 1984. VOC's success confirmed that when Coloradans get their hands in the dirt to improve and restore the local lands they recreate and live in, they get invested in ensuring those lands remain healthy in a powerful and lasting way. Hamilton helped bring the VOC model of citizen involvement to the Roaring Fork Valley as a way to harness the deep passion locals have for their landscapes and mountain recreation and use it to help preserve, maintain and enhance wetlands and trails.

What do these volunteers get in exchange for donating precious summer evenings and the occasional weekend to one of RFOV's summer projects? A lot. The organization estimates they've had volunteers spanning an age range from three to ninety-three-years-old, and all ages share the sense of pride, ownership, connection and the fun they gain with each volunteer stint. Students in Carbondale's Waldorf School adopted the Perham Creek Trail in 2008 and subsequently began taking their parents and friends hiking on the trail to show

them what they'd accomplished. And RFOV's large contingent of long-time volunteers can't seem to stop coming back for more projects, year after year.

"Participating in projects with RFOV has given me a sense of connectedness to the land," says Elaine Wysocki, a New Castle resident who has volunteered on several RFOV projects every summer for the past fifteen years. "Trails take us to some incredibly beautiful places that you might never get to experience otherwise. It's very rewarding to go back year after year and see the rock walls I helped build, the stairs I helped create on the Hanging Lake trail, and the native vegetation that was restored along the river banks from years of tamarisk removal projects. The improvements are long lasting and are enjoyed by so many residents and visitors, both now and for generations to come. It feels great to give back to our public lands, which have been a source of recreation and enjoyment for me for the past twenty years."

"I have been a hiker since I was a teenager, but I had never thought about trail work until I saw a flier from RFOV asking: 'Do you use this trail? If so, help us maintain it,'" says Helen Carlsen, a long-time Basalt local who has volunteered on more than fifty RFOV projects over the past twenty years. "Now I understand how much work previous generations of trail users and volunteers have put in on thousands of miles of trails all over the country, and I look at and appreciate trail work wherever I am hiking."

Such sentiments are precisely what RFOV's founders hoped to instill in locals when they started the organization over twenty years ago.

"When I think about the thousands of volunteers we've involved and the amount of work we've accomplished on our public lands, it doesn't seem possible," says Hamilton. "We never imagined how our success would continue to build over these 22 years with new ways to reach volunteers with our Group Work Day and Young Steward's Initiative programs."