

Partnerships to Stewards: Leveraging the Growth in Recreation Demand into Successful Shared Management

BY LISA MACHNIK

What's behind the scenes of Central Oregon's popular and well-managed trail networks, imaginative interpretive talks, and opportunities to snowshoe with a ranger? An incredible network of partners and volunteer stewards. Participation in forest-based recreation activities has grown exponentially in recent years as visitors to the area and new residents enjoy all that Central Oregon has to offer. With several million visitors annually to the Deschutes and Ochoco national forests and Crooked River National Grassland, the forests rely on partners to help provide opportunities for recreation that meet the public's expectations and resource stewardship needs.



Connecting users to the forest through partnerships and/or volunteering helps develop a sense of stewardship that confers broad benefits in the long run. Partnerships can range from individual and small group volunteer efforts for cleanup efforts in wilderness or along a river to large-scale restoration and trail enhancement projects. Not every forest user sees beyond their own feet (or bike, or boat, or pack)—but every user has a potential impact on the infrastructure, the wildlife and native plants, and the social expectations or experiences of others. Offering partnership experiences opens an opportunity to develop long-term stewards of the land.

From fly-fishing to off-road motor-sports, recreation managers benefit from an invested user base. Almost every user has a favorite place or pastime that can be translated into a partnership with the national forests. However, increasing pressures to pro-



PHOTO COURTESY OF MOLLY JOHNSON, FOREST SERVICE WILDERNESS RANGER

The Friends of the Cascade Crest Wilderness collected 50 pounds of trash at this year's Love It and Leave It wilderness clean-up event.

vide recreation facilities and opportunities for a growing number of user groups may be more than the resource base (and the recreation program managers) can handle. Even the scope and scale of individual interest in volunteering can overwhelm smaller programs. Competition for physical space as well as resources, such as grants and a volunteer base, necessary to support different activities adds complexity to the mix.

Enter the Deschutes Trails Coalition, or DTC (www.deschutes-trailscoalition.org). Inspired by the Central Oregon Trails Summit in the spring of 2016, the mission of the DTC is commitment to sustainable solutions and advocacy for a regional recreational trail system that is ecologically and socially responsible.

Starting with a core group of a dozen members representing a diverse cross-section of trail users, the group has developed a collaborative strategy in a shared effort to address escalating challenges to the trail system. Currently, the group has 32 partners representing recreation user groups from mountain



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At their last meeting, the Deschutes Trails Coalition (DTC) welcomed two new partners, got updated on the Oregon Office of Outdoor Recreation plans, and shared updates from the fundraising, stewardship, technical, programs and partnerships, and communications and outreach committees. Abby is a member's service dog and a very sweet member of the DTC.

bikers to cross-country skiers, long-distance runners to adaptive sports participants, snowmobile clubs to equestrians, wildlife and wilderness advocates, land trusts, local businesses, and more. The DTC vision for the future is for: "A deliberately designed and sustainably maintained regional trail system where community-wide stewardship acknowledges both the ecological and social limitations of such a system (carrying capacities). Through collaborative strategy, wildlife needs are prioritized, trails are shared equitably among a diverse and growing number of trail users, and a quality experience is maintained, thereby fostering a shared sense of place and community."

An early DTC success story is the establishment of a small grants program. In 2018, using funds raised

through a local \$1 for Trails Campaign, matched by the Forest Service, \$60,000 was awarded to partners. To date, these funds have helped purchase trail maintenance equipment, supported two wilderness/trail interns with the Forest Service, enabled the construction of a new snowshoe trail, contributed to three restoration projects (Ryan Ranch restoration trail bridge; Todd Lake Meadow and Trail restoration; Sun River Key Elk enhancement),

produced a two-minute video that entertains and educates users on equestrian-biker interactions (<https://youtu.be/a-oSMRzu7YU>), and initiated a longer-term communication plan to help recreation users understand how to protect and enhance wildlife habitat.

Coordinating partners who may have traditionally competed for scarce resources (grants, volunteers, access) under a larger vision, the DTC organization could not have happened without the dedicated efforts of Discover Your Forest (DYF), the official friends group of the Deschutes National Forest. While smaller-scale partnerships may not require substantial agency resource support, successfully scaling up needs some investment. The DTC operates under the umbrella of DYF, allowing for fundraising, part-time staffing (which is critical to getting group and paperwork management done), and a clear structure so that all partners see both the terms of their engagement and a beneficial shared future.

The Ochoco National Forest and Crooked River National Grassland are also experiencing steady increases in demand for forest recreation. As hikers, mountain bikers, and equestrians seek new trail experiences, demand on the agency to provide resources has increased. Rather than defaulting to a

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traditional agency-led and managed process, the forest has been working with the Ochoco Trails Strategy Group (OTSG) to define the areas of highest need for additional non-motorized trails or trail extensions.

Coming to agreement on an appropriate balance of trails, trail types, conservation concerns, and public perspectives isn't easy. The OTSG's success so far is due to the community-based efforts led by non-agency staff. Specifically, the Crook County Chamber of Commerce and the Central Oregon Intergovernmental Council helped bring the group together to ensure broad stakeholder involvement and provided professional facilitation. An open public meeting in the fall of 2018 helped the group further refine their ideas and resulted in a proposal for a trail system that responds to user interests, minimizes the potential for impact on wildlife and other resources, and provides the agency with a baseline understanding



PHOTO COURTESY OF KASSIDY KERN

Hiking is a popular activity in Central Oregon.

of the social values that need to be considered in the traditional NEPA analysis process. This group has also come under the fiscal umbrella of Discover Your Forest and is currently focusing on fundraising and strategic planning.

Ultimately, the transition to large-scale, coordinated partnerships requires investment. Sometimes the primary investment is patience and time, sometimes strong leadership support is needed, and sometimes a funding commitment is key. Usually a combination of the three is necessary. While the benefits to the public and to resource managers are real, a solid understanding of relationships, roles, and the relevant policy and legal sideboards is essential. For example, federal agencies must be clear on the Federal Advisory Committee Act law and must follow established agency grants and agreements practices under the appropriate legislative authority.

Demand for recreation across the Central Oregon landscape will continue to increase as the local population grows and visitors are drawn by the opportunities for high-quality experiences. The development of partner groups like the DTC and the OTSG took different paths, critically reflecting the unique community and user



PHOTO COURTESY OF LISA MACHNIK

A young skier explores the snow at Virginia Meissner SnoPark. Meissner Nordic is a non-profit club thatrooms 40 kilometers of cross-country ski trails at Virginia Meissner Sno-Park for local community use.

groups' priorities of the time.

However, some underlying similarities that lead to success at this scale include: 1) dedicated facilitation and effective meeting management for clear communication; 2) commitment to a consensus-based process; and 3) acceptance that these large coalition partnerships take time and patience, with the occasional derailment to be expected as part of a growth process.

Partnerships have become an essential part of the land manager's toolkit; investing in the time to consider your particular needs and how different partnership models will best meet them is fundamental to long-term success. All recreational users can be stewards, and partnerships are a great way to get there. ♦

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