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Friendship, shovels and whales



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On a Sunday night at the Odlin County Park picnic shelter, sixteen mouths were fed.

There was laughter and smiles. It was a typical family reunion, no doubt. Well, sort of. But why the wheelbarrows, coolers, shovels, hard hats and work gloves? The “family” gathered for an annual event, like most reunions, but this group is unique. It’s made up of unrelated individuals, every one a member of the American Hiking Society, here to help land management agencies in the San Juans create or fix up trails and improve landscapes.

So, why participate in a “working vacation” anyway?

This crew and 65 other AHS crews at similar projects elsewhere have big hearts and unwavering dedication to “give back.” Getting dirty is par for the course. When the spaghetti feed ended, the host, Lopez-based BLM Recreation Planner Nick Teague stood at an easel and explained the scope of the work ahead.

“It’s finally stopped raining, so we’ll work in Odlin with Jodie Snapp, the park’s manager, then head to the south end of Lopez,” Teague said. “Tuesday — Orcas with Doug McCutcheon [SJI Steward]. Bring yer ponchos and rain gear, just in case. Thursday — Odlin. Friday — boat ride.”

A cozy campfire closed the evening and conversation flowed with questions like, “Where have you gone with AHS? How was the food? Any mosquitoes? When’s breakfast?”

Part of the camaraderie on the crew came from everyone pitching in with the meals and being guided by a veteran leader like Teague.

“I love these work weeks — everyone helping out so cheerfully,” exclaimed a longtime participant.

AHS fills requests for crews yet it also advocates conservation in partnership with regional trail clubs. Members eagerly sign up, knowing a soul-stretching, horizon-expanding experience awaits.

It was mid-June, so dawn came early. Soon sausage and eggs, hot beverages and OJ were served and then we ventured out onto Odlin trails. By 10 a.m. four carloads headed to Iceberg Point with Teague. The mandatory tool safety talk is given, with Outer Bay shimmering in the distance. We strike out through the woods to the point. Whatever Teague asks, the crew is sure to complete. For six years running, AHS has had a week-long crew on Lopez. Uppermost on everyone’s mind is whether the scenery and marine life will measure up.

“Will there be whales out in the Strait, Nick?” Someone asked. “Probably not,” he replied, “...haven’t seen any for three months. But wait until you see the Olympics in the distance.”

The pulaskis, fire rakes and pruners were in able hands and work was underway.

Suddenly a sound of a whale spouting was heard and a shout went up, “A fin... Look... Three... Five.” Soon, many dorsal fins knifed through the smooth surface of the water below the cliffs. Teague was ecstatic and announced this was one of the three resident orca pods. They glided by the point.

We had this all to ourselves — a rare moment without a whale boat in sight or spotter helicopters or any humans, save us. It was sweet. We spent the rest of the day carving trails, lunch breaks with sweeping views and pulling up boards on an old dock with Marine Park Manager Ted Schlund on Stuart Island, whose stories about the Pig War, the private wildlife ranch and how Native Americans managed natural resources for thousands of years, enriched the day. Sailing away, the volunteers waved to Teague standing at the Turn Point Light Station high above the water’s edge.

“See you next year,” he said. The San Juans will beckon us back, that is certain