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Many hands, lighter work: teamwork on trails



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By Mark Hetrick

As most islanders know, Mitchell Hill was transferred to the National Park Service from the Washington State Department of Natural Resources earlier this year.

The DNR had very little if any hands-on management, except for logging it 20 years ago, and as a result, an extensive and complex system of trails has gradually been carved out on that land over time. Some trails follow deer paths, some follow contours or drainages, some are old motorcycle trails and some are even historic trails from the Pig War era.

Many connect to either the national park portion of Young Hill (English Camp) or to Roche Harbor Resort land and, as a result, make a large, contiguous natural hiking, biking and horse riding area. Roche Harbor graciously allows day-use of their land and trails.

Historically, the National Park does not allow horses or mountain bikes within its boundaries. However, this diverse set of user-groups have been using and maintaining these trails for many years, and now with the guidance of the NPS, the Bureau of Land Management and the San Juan County Land Bank, we are learning to preserve and conserve this resource while still enjoying our chosen recreation on it.

In July, National Parks, the BLM, the Land Bank and private citizens met at Mitchell Hill for a trail maintenance workshop.

The workshop was led by the Land Bank's Doug McCutcheon and Nick Teague of the BLM, with National Parks' David Harsh and several other rangers providing assistance and support.

Then last Sunday, Aug. 7, a small group of private citizens, representing all user-groups and age groups, and two NPS maintenance workers, David Harsh and Todd Narum, built a turnpike measuring 72-lineal feet over a historically boggy part of a trail.

This trail had been identified in the earlier workshop and the equestrians donated money for materials, National Parks brought equipment and personnel and the community pitched in to help make a positive, right-now improvement.

Very special thanks to Harsh, who donated a day off to be there and to make this happen.

There are many people who've worked behind the scenes helping to get this going, and it did happen relatively quickly — on a governmental scale — with a large amount of co-operation involved.

Thanks to Peter Diederich, national park superintendent, for getting the ball rolling, as well as to the San Juan Trails Committee, the Land Bank, Nick Teague of the BLM; Rik Karon and the equestrian group, the San Juan Trail Riders, and to all the volunteers who showed up and worked really hard; not one ranger ever put his hand on a gun, but actually all they brought were shovels, rakes, hammers, lumber and gravel, in addition to their hard work and cooperation.

— Mark Hetrick lives and works on San Juan Island, and often rides his bicycle on Mitchell Hill. His wife, Beth, often walks her dog (on a leash) on Mitchell Hill, as well.