A photograph of two workers in a forest. They are wearing grey long-sleeved shirts with a green logo that says "Southeast Conservation Corps" and yellow hard hats. One worker is using a shovel to dig in the soil. The background is a dense forest with sunlight filtering through the trees.

THE POWER OF CONSERVATION CORPS LIAISONS

A PROJECT WITH CONSERVATION LEGACY



National Park
Foundation



OVERVIEW

Founded in 1998 to continue the legacy of the Civilian Conservation Corps of the 1930s, Conservation Legacy was born from the commitment to effectively and efficiently support local programming and is dedicated to meeting the needs of unique individuals, communities, and partners across the country through national service.

As a national entity supporting a cooperative of local organizations, Conservation Legacy provides a foundation of administrative, marketing and external relations, risk management, and development support, allowing programs to focus on operations that meet the needs of their local stakeholders. Conservation Legacy programming is replicable and adaptable, allowing the organization and programs to stay nimble and localize impact while still tapping into the strength of scale as a national non-profit.

In partnership with the National Park Foundation, Conservation Legacy engaged young Americans through paid service and volunteer stewardship projects through the Love Your Park Conservation Corps (LYPCC) program. The LYPCC highlights, improves, and preserves National Trails and unique visitor experiences. Through projects identified as critical to visitor use, visitor safety and engagement of new visitors, the LYPCC focused on infrastructure and stewardship projects at various National Park Service Locations.

Projects were chosen because: 1) the locations/trails are currently degraded and a high priority for improvement, 2) projects will significantly improve visitor safety and/or access 3) projects have strong support from NPS staff, and 4) are applicable for additional volunteer engagement.

Conservation corps engage committed, energetic, passionate, and mission-driven young people who have the desire to make a positive impact on national parks. These young people are key resources that can help reduce the maintenance backlog issues facing parks and conduct projects that improve the visitor experience. Conservation Legacy conservation corps liaisons highlight and amplify the value and importance of service in parks to peers, communities, and other volunteers.

During their experience with a corps, liaisons utilize their strength and passion to be a powerful voice and excite more people to commit their time and energy to improving our national parks, while also serving on a conservation corps in national parks. Engaging additional volunteers, organizing volunteer events, and helping others engage in critical conservation work is a meaningful and successful experience for both corps and for community volunteers. Sharing this passion and desire with others through crews and volunteer events fosters deeper relationships between corps, corps participants, volunteers, communities, and parks. The liaison role was piloted in partnership with NPF in 2018 and the pilot year of this work provided valuable insight into how to improve, develop, and focus the role moving forward.

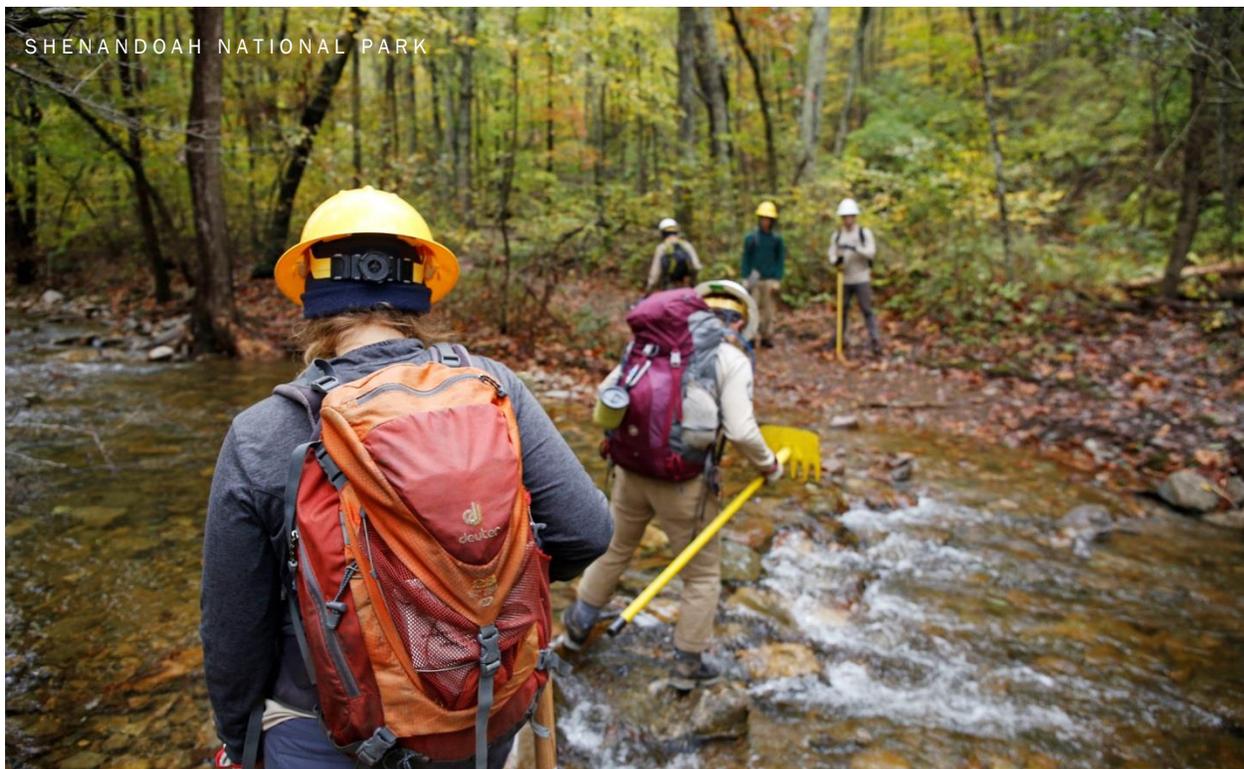
PURPOSE

Every conservation crew or group of volunteers has a different dynamic and participants absorb and process their experience individually and in different ways. Capturing why people volunteer, the impact volunteering has on the parks, the connections people develop because of their service, and the reasons why people would return for further experiences can be challenging in service projects as focus and capacity during events is usually directed elsewhere. The liaison role was developed as a pilot project of the National Park Foundation Volunteer Network to help increase connectivity between the crews and the community volunteers the LYPCCs were helping to develop and manage. The role also focused on documenting and bringing the crew and volunteer experiences and impact to life through data and content captures.

LIAISONS SUPPORT

- ✓ Community Connection
- ✓ Community Capacity
- ✓ Volunteer Capacity
- ✓ Volunteer Program Support
- ✓ Bridging Generations of Volunteers
- ✓ Developing the Next Generation of Volunteers

The liaison is tasked with building connections to local communities, engaging and managing volunteers in joint service days, capturing stories, and documenting the importance of the work via blog posts, social media, and traditional media. A liaison is part of the crew, embedded as a participant with a specific focus on community engagement, volunteer management, and marketing and communications for the project at hand. The liaisons receive some additional training and support specific to their role and are also expected to take part in all regular crew activity.



CONNECTION TO THE NATIONAL PARK FOUNDATION VOLUNTEER NETWORK PILOT PROGRAM

The National Park Foundation piloted a volunteer network through various projects with different national park partners (including Conservation Legacy's liaisons), with a focus on engaging more people in volunteerism and service, to improve the parks and the visitor experience. Through this pilot work, Conservation Legacy found that embedding a liaison in a traditional conservation corps can 1) build a connection between communities, parks, and corps programs 2) bring additional capacity for volunteer engagement 3) assist with marketing and communications for volunteer events and for national initiatives writ large 4) can help parks with less developed volunteer programming 5) bring additional capacity to engage the local community who may not already be engaged with the park and 6) can help bridge different generations of volunteers and motivate young people to be long-term park champions.

BENEFITS OF LIAISONS

The liaison role serves as a bridge between the corps, the public, volunteers, and the park. Every park and corps is different and have differing levels of capacity to be able to manage volunteers, host events, and to facilitate meaningful service on park land. The liaison role was designed to help identify these differing levels of capacity and to help step in where appropriate to build and strengthen the connections between community, corps, and park. The liaison is not the crew leader and does not have to focus on management of a corps crew and thus can spend time focusing on amplifying project needs and goals with parks and volunteers. Volunteer recruitment and engagement is challenging, especially for smaller and rural parks that have minimal capacity for this type of activity, so liaison members can be very helpful. Corps, with the help of liaisons, can help build this capacity by amplifying their local connections and presence to engage more community volunteers and implement volunteer events. The liaisons can work closely with the National Park Service to specifically assist with community outreach and management of volunteers during service events.



One of the most important elements of the liaison role is continuing to inspire additional volunteers to help in parks. The liaison model provides corps or volunteer groups with motivated, on-the-ground representatives to document projects as they happen and capture the impact of volunteerism. Every person and park have their own story, history, and purpose that can be captured and amplified to encourage more people to engage with one another and to engage with local volunteer events. The liaison role has a specific focus on marketing, communications, and storytelling. The liaison is tasked with taking pictures, recording activity, gathering insights about why people volunteer, developing blogs, writing stories, and capturing the importance of the work. The relationship that the liaison has with their fellow crew members and volunteers—as an equal and peer—provides them the unique opportunity to capture scenes and communicate within the crew in a way that an outside journalist or supervisor may not be able to. This storytelling can then be shared across various channels, including social media, blogs, with peers, and in local communities.

Overall, there was demonstrated success with increasing connections between corps, local communities, and other volunteers by utilizing the liaison role. One liaison wrote about volunteerism and the connections that motivate people for engaging in volunteer activity, saying, “The caring for the trails and the wilderness is a common value we all share and hold close to the heart. For us, the volunteer event was not just about the physical care of the trails, but the connection with people.” During local volunteer events, the liaisons were specifically tasked with connecting other volunteers to the projects through education, training, communication, and mentoring. During one project, a group of older volunteers spoke to the liaison about their excitement that a younger generation was engaging in work in parks and expressed tremendous gratitude to the crew.

In another crew, liaisons helped to support a multi-day volunteer camping trip for Native middle school youth who had minimal exposure to national parks. During the pilot project, the liaisons helped deepen and strengthen the experience for all by increasing the connectivity between people participating (volunteers and crew members) and their shared purpose of projects they were completing. Project completion is usually the focus of volunteer projects and people feel good about the end product. Very little time is taken to recognize why people were drawn to help in the first place or the impact and the connection between people and place. Intentional communications, storytelling, and capture of the experience helps bridge this gap.

SELECTION AND IDENTIFICATION OF LIAISONS

The liaisons were selected from the general applicant pool of people applying to the corps program. In this pilot project, each program interviewed members and selected the liaison based on criteria that included past corps experience, desire to fulfill the role, and ability to take on the additional responsibility of story collection and volunteer engagement. In the future, increased specificity in the position description and recruiting process could be implemented.

After the liaisons were selected, they participated in a pre-service orientation with Conservation Legacy staff that highlighted the National Park Foundation pilot volunteer network goals and included trainings on gathering stories, photos, and media, volunteer engagement, hosting volunteer events, reporting, and storytelling. More structured time for preparation, community engagement, reporting, and storytelling could benefit future liaisons.

RECOMMENDATIONS

While the liaison role was developed specifically for a conservation corps model, it could be replicated with some adjustments for other groups. The model used during pilot projects that could be applicable for anyone interested in implementing this type of project and there are opportunities for adjustment and improvement in the future.

Preparation

The preparation of the liaisons requires specific outreach, training, education, and support. A successful liaison needs to have training on how to appropriately capture the experience of the crew and the volunteers they are serving alongside. Many young people are good at completing projects, understand what the experience means to them and the purpose behind what they are doing but lack the ability to effectively tell this story and connect it to others. Liaisons need preparation from program staff who have this expertise and will be facilitating the capture of this information in a field-based setting. A structure for communication between program staff and liaisons in the field is also an important component of the role and preparation for success.

Implementation

For replication of the liaison role, it would be advisable to start recruiting for the liaison position three months prior to a crew start date at minimum and to schedule additional training separate from the traditional crew service hours. Specific training and preparation for the liaison can help develop the skills discussed above and allow the individual to be more involved in community and volunteer outreach prior to the start of the crew. It can also help the connectivity between the corps and NPS staff in preparation for increased volunteer events. If a project is taking place in a park that does not have a solid volunteer program, it is especially important to allow for additional time for preparation and time to connect with the community.

SUMMARY

The liaison role helps promote volunteerism and a purposeful and deeper experience of giving back to parks. The liaison role provides an incredibly powerful and immersive experience for the young person in that role and it is designed to inspire others to engage. During the pilot season, the liaison role was successful in gathering the reasons why young people join corps crews and other volunteers commit time to the improvement of national parks. The stories, videos, and pictures gathered help strengthen the purpose behind the work being completed and highlight what motivates people to serve on projects with NPS and NPF. Most volunteer and conservation corps projects do not have anyone specifically focused on telling the story behind the work, highlighting the importance of the tasks, or talking about how it relates to a local community. The liaison role brings capacity to capture this information so corps, NPF and NPS have stories from the field that demonstrate the connection between people and parks. Liaisons are supportive roles that corps and other volunteer groups could consider and tailor to their own needs and programing.

“I have always loved the outdoors but working in a national park and seeing a different side of nature has opened my eyes to the many ways to give back to the environment. Whether you join a conservation corps, pick up trash in your neighborhood, educate someone about outdoor ethics, or just go for a hike and respect the world around you, you are making a difference and contributing to the growth and future of our natural world. I cannot wait to continue making a difference.”

– 2018 Conservation Legacy Liaison



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