



Volunteer Contributions to Invasive Plant Program

Introduction

The Invasive Plant Program at Saguaro National Park could not function without dedicated volunteers. Their contributions help make the program successful and sustainable. In 2008 alone, their efforts were equivalent to \$164,118 of labor costs (www.independentsector.org/volunteer_time) but their work is worth so much more! Volunteers contribute in many ways, including surveying, mapping and removing invasive plants. Volunteers maintain plant specimens for identification, collect and clean seeds for restoration, collect and enter data and more. There has been a surge in volunteerism in the Invasive Plant Program in the past few years (Figure 1). This increase could be due to more education and awareness about invasive plants, but it is more likely a result of the new volunteer programs in 2007 and 2008. The majority of volunteers participate in one of three programs:

Buffelgrass Pulls

Since the early 1990's, Saguaro National Park has been hosting buffelgrass hand removal projects or "pulls." These pulls have been primarily performed by large groups, such as Boy Scout troops, church groups, Sierra Club, Americorps members, college clubs and other community service groups. These groups work from one to several



The effects of a volunteer pull are immediate

days removing buffelgrass and other invasive plants. In 2007, more formalized monthly buffelgrass pulls were initiated. On the second Saturday of every month, anyone from the community is invited to join park employees to remove buffelgrass from designated locations within the park. The size of an infestation varies from a patch small enough to be tackled in one day, to larger patches that may take months or years to complete.

Training for volunteers is minimal and consists of a discussion about environmental and human safety, plant identification, and demonstration of proper plant removal.

The response to this program has been great. In recent months, there have been up to 24 volunteers at each event. Volunteers report it to be an easy, structured opportunity that allows for both individuals and groups to get outdoors, get some exercise and be involved in the park.

In 2008, Citigroup employees were the recipient of the Intermountain Region George B. Hartzog, Jr. Award for their community service of buffelgrass removal. For more information on buffelgrass, see <http://www.nps.gov/sagu/naturescience/invasive-plants.htm>.

Weed Free Trails

Established in 2008, the Weed Free Trails program trains volunteers to map and remove a suite of invasive plants from the park's trail system. This program appeals to volunteers who already enjoy hiking and want to help maintain the trails they love. It aids the Invasive Plant Program by keeping trails, a major corridor for seed dispersal, free of invasive plants. Volunteers are able to help preserve the resources of the park and the staff are able to focus their efforts on infestations in the back country.

Trails below 5,000 ft elevation have been assigned a route. The routes have varying degrees of difficulty and lengths. Volunteers choose a route to hike and survey for invasive plants along the trail. When invasive plants are found, the volunteers remove them, map its location using a Global Positioning System unit, and records information about the size and density of the infestation.

A two day orientation and training is required and includes plant identification, data collection, cultural resource protection, safety. Working with experienced volunteers, new volunteers are able to quickly learn to identify the invasive plants. Saguaro National Park asks that only trained volunteers in park approved programs attempt any invasive



Weed Free Trails volunteers

plant removal. Plant removal of any kind by visitors is prohibited.

Since the Weed Free Trails program began, it has grown from 3 to 25 volunteers and has proven to be a popular activity with retirees.

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Youth Groups and Interns

Saguaro National Park has been a strong advocate for exposing young adults to environmental careers. The park has hosted individual interns and young adult groups since Congressional designation of the park in 1933. Some of the more recent groups include the American Conservation Experience (ACE), the Southwest Conservation Corps (SWCC), and the Student Conservation Association (SCA). Interns contribute to protecting the plants and animals of the park by removing invasive plants and rehabilitating disturbed sites.

ACE and SWCC are groups of 8-20 young adults that travel around the southwest region working on projects that help protect the natural and cultural resources on public land. The youth are given opportunities to learn about the environment in which they work, gain new skills, explore job opportunities and develop environmental awareness.

The SCA is a nationwide internship program that works with federal and state agencies (www.thesca.org). Their mission is to build the next generation of conservation leaders and inspire lifelong stewardship of our environment and communities by engaging young people in hands-on service to the land. Interns have worked at the park in assignments ranging from three months to one year. Past SCA interns have developed environmental education and outreach materials, worked on the invasive plant management crew, served as volunteer coordinators, and assisted with restoration, seed collection and invasive plant data management. The park has hosted three SCA Native Plant Corps teams in the last several years. These teams have worked in several parks addressing a variety of invasive plant problems including cutting salt cedar (tamarisk) with chain saws, burning invasive grasses, and spraying herbicides on problematic plant species.

Conclusions

Without our volunteers, the Saguaro National Park invasive species program would not be as successful as it is today. We would like to extend a huge thank you to everyone who has volunteered in this program over the years.



ACE Crew and SCA interns ready to fight buffelgrass with park staff

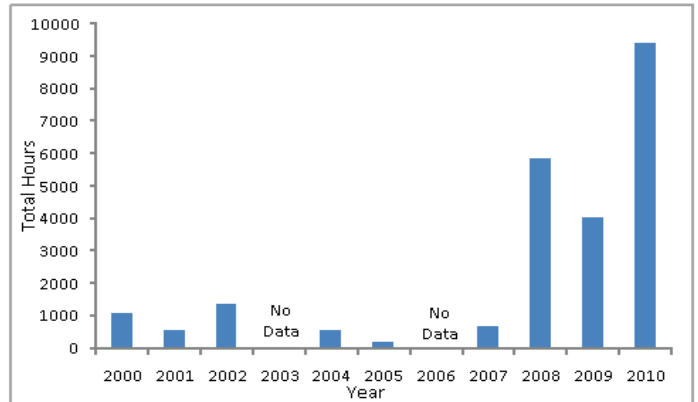


Figure 1: Invasive species plant volunteer hours by year

More Information

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