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US Forest Service Intern

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COLLEGE OF THE ENVIRONMENT



Internship Title: Forest Service Intern

Student Name: Kathleen Castleberry

Internship Dates: June 12, 2022 - October 1, 2022

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STUDENT SIGNATURE 

DATE: 1/4/2023

The Organization and History

The United States Forest Service, Department of Agriculture, was officially founded in 1905 by Theodore Roosevelt and Gifford Pinchot. The agency was originally created to assess the quality and conditions of the forests in the West, largely for logging purposes. Today, the goal of the Forest Service is to protect the country's forests and grasslands in order to meet the needs of future generations. Unlike the United States National Park Service, the Forest Service's goal is to use the land for resources as well as recreation purposes. This means that national forest lands can be used for logging and mining. Things like motorized and nonmotorized bicycles, four-wheelers, snowmobiles are legal to drive and operate in the national forest unless otherwise posted.

Over the years, the United States Forest Service has continually been defunded bit by bit. I saw firsthand during my time working for the Forest Service how little money is given to the organization and how job positions are cut almost every season. Positions such as climbing ranger and backcountry trail work assistants are not being filled again when employees decide to quit or retire.

The National Forest can be split into different sections that abide by different regulations. Wilderness areas are the most secluded and protected areas of the national forest with the most regulations in effect. Any wheeled object is prohibited in wilderness areas, drones are not allowed to be flown, and groups cannot be larger than 12 people unless a special use permit is given. These are just a few examples of wilderness regulations and restrictions. Whereas recreation areas allow vehicles like snowmobiles to ride off road and trail in the winter months, and permit groups larger than 12 people to gather.



The Heather Meadows Visitor Center and Glacier Public Service Center are two historical sites in the North End Glacier District of the Mount Baker Snoqualmie National Forest. The Glacier Public Service Center is located in Glacier, WA just off Highway 542. This building and others located around it were built by the Civilian Conservation Corps in 1938. Today it is used as an information center for visitors on their way up the Mount Baker Scenic Highway. Workers inside provide

information about hikes in the area, local weather, and road/trail conditions. Visitors can also purchase recreation and backcountry passes required to visit the forest and the national park. There is a 24/7 information area outside the building for visitors to use when the Service Center is closed, as well as public restrooms. A few fascinating items can be found on the Service Center's grounds such as a cross section of a very old and large Douglas fir tree and

a statue dedicated to the workers of the Civilian Conservation Corps who built the Glacier Public Service Center.

The Heather Meadows Visitor Center is located further up the Mount Baker Highway only a few miles from the end of the highway. This beautifully placed building was also built by the Civilian Conservation Corps just a couple of years later, in 1940. It was originally built as a warming hut for skiers who needed a break from the cold and snow. Today it serves a similar purpose as the Glacier Public Service Center. It provides a place for visitors to stop by and get information about the local trails, roads and weather. The building houses a gift shop that is run by North Cascade Institute where visitors can purchase books, maps, toys, and recreation passes. Inside the main room is a stone fireplace with log benches in front for visitors to warm up or eat their lunch.



Responsibilities

This internship opportunity was offered through the Student Conservation Association which works with Americorps, but the work that I took part in was for the Forest Service. My title was Developed Recreation Crew Member. The main purpose of my work and the goal of the Forest Service, is to serve the people. That meant that I did what most benefited the public, protected the natural environment, and educated its visitors.



A large part of my work this summer was focused on cleaning public outhouses at trailheads. We disinfected the area on and around the toilet with disinfecting spray and paper towels. We frequently sprayed down the whole area inside the outhouse with water from a pump in the back of the work truck. On a semi-regular basis, we were required to scrub inside the toilets and spray them down to help keep them looking clean. Lastly, we would restock toilet paper rolls when holders were empty. This was a daily task, some days easier to deal with than others. Visitors were not

always the most sanitary or respectful when it came to keeping the outhouses suitable for the next person. Many days we would find piles of toilet paper, feminine hygiene products, and trash such as underwear or water bottles on

the floor. Thankfully, trash pickers were provided for us to remove the mess caused by visitors. Pump trucks are scheduled to come just once during the season to pump out all the human waste from the toilets. This process involves contacting businesses that do this kind of work and making sure that the drivers of the pump trucks know where they are going. Often the drivers would get confused on what outhouse needed to be pumped and pump the wrong one since some outhouses are close to one another.

Outside every outhouse there are bear safe/resistant trash cans which we installed at the beginning of the season. This was executed by hauling them into the work vehicles and then unloading them from the bed of the truck to their designated place. Because of the incredibly high number of visitors during the peak of summer season, many of the trash cans would fill up, and sometimes overflow, in a single day. This would result in us having to haul away four or five bags of trash instead of just two in one stop. We would take out the bag of trash, tie the top to prevent leakage of trash in the trucks, throw it in the bed of the truck, drive back to the Glacier compound, and toss them in the dumpsters. There are a lot of disputes between employees in the district I worked for about how to deal with trash problems in the mountains. Such as, should we even provide trash bins at trailheads? Of course, if there were no trash cans people would be more likely to litter and throw small trash items on the ground such as wrappers and water bottles. Another view is that it does not make much sense to have hundreds, or thousands of people bring their trash up the mountain just to have us bring it back down to the Glacier, WA compound the next day. It is wasteful in terms of fuel consumption for the vehicles and the added staff time it takes to deal with it.



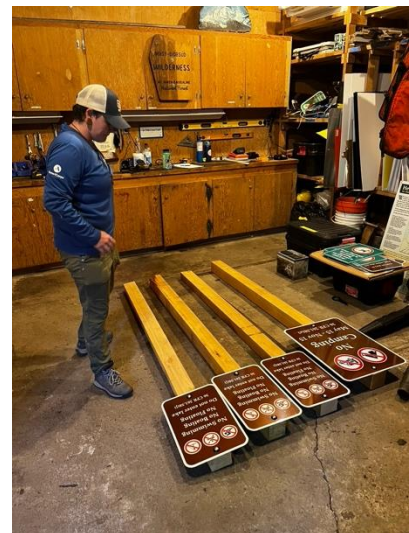
Along with trash bins also, unfortunately, comes litter. Often, we were required to drive up forest roads to keep an eye on visitors and clean up any litter left behind. We used latex gloves, trash pickers and plastic buckets to pick up an assortment of items left in the woods. Any item that you can imagine we found at some point this summer, from entire abandoned campsites to plastic bags filled with human feces.

Trailhead maintenance also included smaller tasks that focused more on visitor use, rather than cleanliness. While patrolling trailheads and cleaning the outhouses, we were also required to count the number of cars, collect trailhead registers and give out warning notices to any car that did not display the correct pass. Trailhead registers are sheets of paper posted

in wooden boxes at the beginning of each trail that hikers can sign their name, indicate the number of people in their group, if they have dogs and/or stock, and any comments they may have. The purpose of collecting these registers and counting cars is to keep a loose record of visitor use at each trailhead throughout the season. This is helpful for future planning purposes by getting a better understanding of what trailheads need more, or less, patrolling. It is also helpful to know approximately how much a trail is getting used so other departments of the Forest Service can study the impacts of visitor use on certain plants and animals. A large one being the mountain heather, a high alpine, low growing plant that is extremely sensitive and fragile. Just a few times stepping on this plant can cause it to die.

Developed trailheads - trailheads with a picnic table, an outhouse, a trash can, and signage - require visitors to purchase a parking pass. The passes that are valid for the National Forest in the state of Washington are Northwest Forest Passes and America the Beautiful Interagency Pass. Visitors must display either one of these passes on their dashboard while out on the trail. If they were not displayed, we were required to give them warning notices. These warning notices contained an envelope that the visitor could mail to the main district office in Sedro-Woolley, WA, or they could choose to pay at the Glacier office on their way down from the mountain.

Signage is an important part of the infrastructure of the forest and another large part of this position. We were required to build, design, print, laminate, and post many different types of signs this summer. These included signage along the highway which help direct visitors to trailheads and fee stations. Trailhead signs were posted at every trailhead which displayed information about the given trail such as milage, elevation gain, safety information, and potential trail closure. Near the beginning of the season once the snow started to melt away, we were responsible for hauling these directional and trailhead wooden and metal signs up the mountain from the compound in the work vehicles. After being told where each sign would go, we would then install them. Sometimes this entailed using a post hole digger to dig holes deep enough to support the signs. Rocks were placed around the base of the sign in the holes we dug, and rock bars were useful for securing the sign in place by jamming the rocks further into the hole.



A few trails in the Heather Meadows area at the end of the highway are interpretive trails. An interpretive trail means that as visitors walk down the trail, they are met with multiple informational signs that relate to the sights, smells and sounds around them. Some of these signs may talk about the history of the area such as how certain mountains or rock formations came to be. Others talk about the wildlife that one might be lucky enough to spot or even hear. Interpretive trails are generally easier grade trail. This is so anyone can access

these signs and enjoy the beauty of the area, no matter their skill level. When we installed the signs, we simply had to place them into posts that are permanently in the concrete.



The last type of sign that we were required to post were trail closure or trail warning signs. Near the end of the summer, fire season was pushed into full effect and multiple fires were local. Many trails were closed for the safety of visitors due to the proximity of the wildfires. The head of the forest service district sent out a forest order to my supervisor which we posted along with the closure signs. The closure signs were designed by my boss. We then printed and laminated them. After creating them we taped them to sandwich boards, stapled them to trailhead signs, and zip tied them to posts.

Throughout the season we were also responsible for keeping an eye on the state of all the signs and making sure that they stayed in good condition and were still up. If they were not, we would repair them and put them back up. All signs that we installed at the beginning of the season had to come down at the end of the season. This made for more work on either end of the season and less work in the middle.

On a weekly basis we were scheduled to work at the Heather Meadows Visitors Center and sometimes fill in at the Glacier Public Service Center. While working at both places, our main job was to talk with visitors, giving them information about local trails, roads, conditions, weather, and any possible closures or hazards present anywhere in the forest. While working in the Glacier Public Service Center we were also responsible for operating the cash register and helping visitors purchase their gift items or required parking passes. Visitors often came in to ask about which trails were



recommended based on skill level and the kind of experience they are looking for. Giving out informational fliers, brochures, and maps was an efficient way to offer options to visitors. We were also trained to know some history of the building and local historical figures.

The Glacier Public Service Center is a historical site that was built in 1938 by the Civilian Conservation Corps. The Glacier/North End District takes extreme pride in this space. That pride was passed down to me as one of the new interns. I was taught how to correctly maintain the grounds around the compound. This entailed mowing and weed

whacking the lawns, trimming bushes and trees, washing the patio area, leaf blowing, cleaning out the gutters, and organizing/cleaning a few of the buildings. Doing these things required the use of tools which we were taught to use properly and safely. This also meant learning how to take care of these tools, so they stay in good condition for as long as possible.

Along with yard tools, we were taught to use power tools such as table saws, routers, chainsaws, etc., to build and fix signs, cut locks and bolts, and cut through trees. We used these skills throughout the entire summer to accomplish miscellaneous tasks we were given.



Occasionally, and especially while snow was still on the ground, but melting, we were told to hike up certain trails to create a trail report which could then be shared with visitors. These trail reports were usually gathered by me and one other coworker while hiking along a given trail, and observing and recording the conditions along the way. We would talk with hikers, answer any questions they had, or give directions along the way. Any trash that we found on or around the trail we would pick up and collect in small plastic bags. After hiking the trail out and back and returning to the compound in Glacier, we were responsible for writing a trail report on the computer which was then sent out to the district and printed in the office to be posted for visitors to read.

Writing a trail report is a fairly simple process that includes explaining any hazards present on the trail such as steep snow patches or snow bridges, as well as providing the exact milage/location of the hazards. It was also encouraged, but not required, to record any other sights such as animal activity in certain areas or flowers that were in bloom.

What I Learned

This internship opportunity was one of the best experiences of my life. I changed and grew tremendously as a person, learned so much, and made so many connections that will last a lifetime.

One thing I have found is that there is never really one satisfactory solution to a problem. No matter how hard we try to come to a good conclusion, there will always be disputes and differences in opinion. I experienced a lot of these disputes this summer about many different topics. One that stands out to me is the topic of restoration and conservation within the National Forest. As stated before, the National Forest is public land that's purpose is to be used, whether that be all types of recreation, mining, logging, etc. This means that there is less preservation of the land in these areas of the forest. Volunteer work parties and

Forest Service trail crews will hike up trails to improve trail conditions. They will try to restore the land around the trails by covering or trying their best to cut off “social trails”. Social trails are trails that are created by many people walking on a section of the ground off the main trail. This constant foot travel tramples subalpine and alpine plants and ultimately killing them. Although each Forest Service district does have trail crews, these crews don’t go out to replant the plants that were trampled on. There are efforts to push for more conservation and restoration within the National Forest, but it is hard to push for this since the National Forest is simply to be used and enjoyed by the public. The National Parks, on the other hand, have more rules and regulations enforcing conservation and restoration of the land. Their goal is to keep the land as untouched as possible. In conclusion, it is difficult to agree on a solution when there are laws in place and when everyone has different main focuses in their work.

Doing the kind of work that we did every day for several months does teach you quite a lot and changes your perspective on things. With the knowledge that everyone is doing their best in life, it also made me realize that a lot of the time people are not as respectful to their surroundings as you would imagine. Cleaning up after people in the outhouses, at trailheads, and along trails shows how little people stop and think about how their actions impact the world around them - including the environment and other people. Often when we were cleaning outhouses, we would place a sign outside the door that alerted visitors that the bathrooms were temporarily closed for cleaning. People would almost always ignore the sign and walk in while we were in the process of cleaning or would get mad at us for closing the outhouses for just a few minutes. Both very frustrating situations that tested my patience, but also served as a reminder for me try and have patience with people and understand that they may be having a bad day.

I was taught many new hands-on skills such as using tools correctly and building different things, such as signs and tables. Being able to use my hands to do work is such a rewarding feeling because I got to see, firsthand, the progress and work I accomplished. It is a rewarding feeling to go back to a place where we installed a sign we built, or see a section of trail that we helped fix. I felt proud of the hard work that we put in.

Over the summer I worked with a variety of different people. Everyone came from different places around the country, had different backgrounds and were all different ages. I learned how to work well with and get along with many different types of people. I became extremely close and comfortable with many of my coworkers, some of which I never thought I would. At the end of the day, it doesn’t matter where someone is from, what their age is, and what background they come from, it only really matters if they are kind, understanding of others and open-minded about opposing opinions.

As mentioned earlier in this essay, there are many differing rules and regulations within sections of the National Forest as well as the National Park. Before starting this internship, I was extremely confused about the difference between each section of the forest.

During our first week we looked intensely at maps of our district of the forest as well as surrounding areas to get a better understanding of where each section of the forest is located and how each differs. The three main sections in the Mount Baker Snoqualmie National Forest are the general National Forest areas, the Wilderness areas and the National Recreation area.

How Western Prepared Me

Going into this internship, I didn't think that I had gained the knowledge or skills from Western that would help me, or apply to the work with the Forest Service. Once I started working and learning new things, I realized how wrong I was.

I was taught a tremendous amount about the land around me. One class I took at Western that stood out to me most when learning new things was Physical Geography. Land formations such as tarns (small glacially formed alpine lakes) were often mentioned when talking with visitors about the land around us. If I had not taken that class, I wouldn't have felt as knowledgeable or prepared in my summer environment. Physical Geography also taught me a lot about weather systems and how to identify certain weather patterns just by looking at clouds. This was also helpful when out in the field talking with visitors who asked about what the weather was going to do that day.

Most of the other science classes that I took at Western were helpful, not necessarily for my work, but in the sense of being aware of my surroundings. Chemistry and Biology classes have made me more aware of what goes on in the environment around me on both a small and large scale. From how plants photosynthesis to the population dynamics of different organisms. Since I was working outside every day, it was helpful and exciting to have this knowledge and awareness.

Outside of knowledge that I learned from classes, attending Western has taught me many personal and social skills. Interacting with students, professors and advisors has helped me become a more open-minded, understanding and flexible person. I have learned how to ask questions when I need help as well as help others when they need it. All these skills helped me immensely when I was getting comfortable with the work I was being taught. I never felt afraid to ask questions in order to learn the skills I needed to the best of my ability. Being understanding, open-minded, and able to ask questions confidently made it much easier to get to know and build solid relationships with my coworkers, which was extremely important in order to get work done efficiently and have fun doing so. Another situation where good social skills was extremely beneficial was when working at the visitor centers. Talking to strangers has always been a struggle for me as an introverted person. Continually having exposure to new people and situations at Western has loosened me up a bit and made it easier for me to be more sociable around strangers.

Lastly, Western taught me that it is okay to push myself outside of my comfort zone, and that some of the greatest experiences happen when I push past that comfortable place. Without this confidence and acceptance of uncomfortable experiences, I probably would not have chosen to do this internship because I was required to move away from Bellingham and live in a house with people I did not know. Having had a previous experience of moving far away from the place I call home and where I knew nobody, prepared me tremendously for this internship.

Looking into my Future

Since I started college at Western Washington University, I knew that whatever I was going to do in the future was going to revolve around the outdoors and conservation. Whenever someone asks what I want to do with my Environmental Science degree after I graduate, I tell them, “work outside”. When I saw the flyer for this internship opportunity, I was extremely excited and immediately jumped on applying for it. This opportunity opened so many doors for my future and made me even more excited and motivated to keep trying to get jobs that require outside work.

I had such a positive experience at this internship that I reapplied for the same position for this coming summer 2023, this time as an actual government employee instead of as an intern. I have yet to find out if I have gotten the position but am very hopeful. Working in this seasonal position again would give me a better chance at getting a permanent job in the Forest Service since I would be employed by the government.

The connections I made this summer are another huge plus that have helped me succeed after finishing the internship and will help me in the future with finding jobs and opportunities to work and play in the outdoors. I developed relationships with many people who are very knowledgeable about things such as mountaineering, backcountry skiing, EMT training, and the Forest Service in general. I’ve learned that connections are the best way to get into things that you enjoy and progress in life. Putting yourself out there and making genuine connections will get you extremely far.

I plan to graduate from Western within the next year and hope to take all I’ve learned from Western and this internship and use it to the best of my ability at future jobs and careers. My goal is to travel around the country for a few years seeing new things and meeting new people while doing seasonal jobs. This seasonal position will hopefully increase my chances of easily getting hired in different states across the country. After this, I don’t have a whole lot planned, but as already stated, I just hope whatever I end up doing, it is outside and that I’m able to help the people and the environment around me.

Citations

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