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Opportunity Knocks — A Volunteer's Viewpoint

By Suzie Berregaard

I spent the summer of 1982 working for the U.S.F.S. in the Dillon District of the Arapaho National Forest in Colorado as a volunteer in their intern program. As an intern, I seemed to have the best of two worlds. I was treated as any other seasonal employee--I worked the same number of hours, had a specific job duty, and underwent the same training (fire fighting, chainsaw maintenance and safety, visitor compliance)--while at the same time I was "free" to work with other specialists in the District, as time permitted. As a result, besides being intensely trained in the skills required by my job, I also acquired a general knowledge about the goals for the entire District which most other seasonal employees were not exposed to.

My job dealt with the management of the District's middle-country which is a relatively new area of management within the National Forest System. Middle country is that land outside the developed recreational areas and excludes any land designated as wilderness. This land is used for dispersed recreational activities such as hiking, horseback riding, camping, and the largest use, and certainly the one with the most impact--off-road vehicle use including snowmobiling and jeep touring.

As an intern, I was also given a project to work on throughout the summer. My particular project involved completing an inventory (by mapping) of the 4wd and jeep trails which existed in the district. Looking back, this was an incredible assignment as it included mining trails, logging roads, and remnants of the road system which once helped pull the wealth from the mountains in Summit County.

Overall, the intern program is a worthwhile one in that it allows projects to be completed which may otherwise have to be abandoned due to sub-adequate funding and/or personnel time constraints. As an example, I recently talked with the head forester

for the Dispersed Recreation in the District, and he informed me that funds have been cut so drastically that the only middle country program they will have for this summer will be two interns and part-time supervision from last summer's supervisor who will be working in visitor compliance in the developed recreation areas. Those two interns have an incredible job cut out for them, but if it were not for them, the Forest Service would have no contact with the public that uses such a substantial part of the district's land area.

Being "hired" by the Forest Service as an intern is also good in that it gives pre-professionals the opportunity to experience being part of "the system." Being an intern as opposed to a paid employee, I was exposed to the same delights and frustrations which resulted from the size, strengths and weaknesses of the agency and its structure. The red tape, and the ways to get around it, are truly amazing. This opportunity gives the intern the chance to decide if working for the federal government (specifically, the Forest Service) is where they really want to be.

So everyone should be an intern, right? I didn't say that. I'm convinced that the program is mutually beneficial, both to the intern and the agency, but I get an uneasy feeling about students needing to "subsidize" the federal government. It irritates me that students need to work solely for an experience--after all, good work is good work. For now, however, the intern program is helping to keep public land management and the Forest Service out of trouble, and it seems to be the best answer.

When a forester has children, will those children be "chips off the old block," or wood shavings?!

