

# Friends of the Inyo: Eastern Sierra Wilderness Stewardship Project

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**Abstract**—Friends of the Inyo is a non-profit, conservation organization dedicated to preserving public lands and wildlife of the Eastern Sierra. First founded in 1986, Friends of the Inyo hired its first staff person in 2000. Today, the organization enjoys a vibrant and growing membership of 500 individuals and employs three people—Executive Director, Paul McFarland (the organization's first staff person), Wilderness Stewardship Coordinator, Jamie Anderson, and Bookkeeper, Darren Jones. Together, they carry out a diverse program of monitoring, education, and natural history interpretation on the public lands of Inyo and Mono Counties, California. Over the last five years, Friends of the Inyo has led over 500 people, from locals to folks from South Africa and Denmark, on nearly 125 publicly noticed, free natural history outings and wilderness stewardship hikes; organized numerous Clean-up Days in and around locally popular recreation areas; and published numerous interpretive brochures in order to acquaint people with the stories of resident plants, animals, and rocks. The organization has also spent considerable time working to ensure that the public land management agencies—the Inyo National Forest and Bishop Field Office of the BLM—have sufficient resources to carry out their duties.

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## Stewardship Project

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To combat the perfect storm brewing in the Eastern Sierra with increasing visitor demand coupled with decreasing Forest Service management capacity, Friends of the Inyo established the Eastern Sierra Wilderness Stewardship Corps in May 2005 as an ongoing program to develop projects and recruit volunteers for work in wilderness areas on the Inyo National Forest. By actively connecting individuals and groups with ecological restoration work, resource monitoring activities, and recreational/interpretive development projects, we are working to deepen the public commitment to preserving our national natural heritage while actively bringing designated wilderness areas into compliance with regulatory and legislative guidelines. The Eastern Sierra Wilderness Stewardship Corps is alive and well in the Inyo National Forest wilderness areas of California (fig. 1).

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In: Watson, Alan; Sproull, Janet; Dean, Liese, comps. 2007. Science and stewardship to protect and sustain wilderness values: eighth World Wilderness Congress symposium: September 30–October 6, 2005; Anchorage, AK. Proceedings RMRS-P-49. Fort Collins, CO: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Rocky Mountain Research Station.

## Problems

The Inyo National Forest, located along the eastern edge of California, is one of the most heavily visited national forests in the nation. Within a five-hour drive from four of the West's major (and growing) metropolitan areas—Los Angeles, San Francisco, Reno, and Las Vegas—the grand mountain and desert vistas, pristine mountain streams teaming with wily trout, and thousands of miles of backcountry wilderness trails wandering through the High Sierra draw more visitors each year than Glacier, Yellowstone, and Grand Canyon National Parks combined. In 2003, nearly 160,000 hikers, anglers, climbers, and equestrians camped overnight in the Inyo National Forest's John Muir Wilderness. This number excludes day users, who, to judge by the cars filling trailhead parking areas, may increase this use number by two to three times.

Unfortunately, just as more and more people head for the hills to recreate, the capacity of the Inyo National Forest is rapidly declining. For fiscal year 2005, the Inyo National Forest is poised to lose over 20 field and specialist positions due to budgetary shortfalls. To put this in perspective, only 30 fulltime Forest Service employees out of a total of 4,000 in Region 5 (California) manage the nearly 4.5 million acres of Forest Service wilderness. This increasing use coupled with decreasing federal management capacity is creating a perfect storm for designated wilderness in the Eastern Sierra. Conflicts have already erupted over perceived damage to wilderness values, and recently proposed corrective management measures have been characterized as draconian. Given the current trend of decreasing staff and increased use, these problems and the resulting polarization are bound to magnify both locally and in the broader Forest community.

## The Solution: Putting People Back on the Ground to Care for Their Land

To bridge the gap between the public who owns and loves the designated wilderness areas of the Inyo National Forest, and public land managers who are entrusted with sustainable management of these national treasures, Friends of the Inyo established the Eastern Sierra Wilderness Stewardship Corps. Monies from the National Forest Foundation—2005 Wilderness Stewardship Challenge, matched by funds from a private foundation, were used to hire a Wilderness Stewardship Coordinator to implement a cooperative program of engaging citizens and organizations in active stewardship—ecological restoration work, resource monitoring activities, and recreational/interpretive development projects—within designated wilderness areas on the Inyo National Forest (Golden Trout Wilderness, John Muir



**Figure 1**—Owens Valley Native American environmental youth volunteers—happy Friends of the Inyo (photo by Friends of the Inyo staff).

Wilderness, Inyo Mountains Wilderness, Boundary Peak Wilderness, and Ansel Adams Wilderness).

The Wilderness Stewardship Coordinator works with Inyo National Forest wilderness managers and seasonal crews from the Student Conservation Association (SCA) to identify, design, and implement stewardship projects utilizing community volunteers. By engaging and empowering visiting and local wilderness users in the active management of their public wilderness resource, the Wilderness Stewardship Corps has created a deep and lasting connection between citizens of all stripes and past times, wilderness managers, and the land we all love. It is the hope of all involved with this project that the Eastern Sierra Wilderness Stewardship Corps will become a model for other “Friends” groups around the West working to become part of the solution.

### Wilderness Stewardship Projects Completed as of September 26, 2005

- Winnaduma Monument Road Closure, Inyo Mountain Wilderness—10 volunteers X 7 hours = 70 hours
- Fish Creek Valley Restoration and Trail Project—7 volunteers X 54 hours = 378 hours
- Campsite and Fire Ring Inventory (removal) of 7 lake basins—10 volunteers X 7 hours = 70 hours
- Sherwin Creek/Valentine Lakes Wilderness Volunteer Patrols—5 volunteers X 10 hours = 50 hours
- Native American Youth June Lake Project—25 local youth volunteers X 3 hours = 75 hours

- Mono Lake Committee L.A. Inner City Environmental Education—15 volunteers X 6 hours = 90 hours
- Mono Lake Committee Redondo Church Group—17 volunteers X 6 hours = 102 hours
- Fern Lakes Trail and Campsite Restoration—3 volunteers X 5 hours = 15 hours
- Sherwin Creek Trail Day and Lakes Basin Inventory—3 volunteers X 4 hours = 12 hours
- Gibbs Lake and Wilderness Tour Project—3 volunteers X 4 hours = 12 hours
- Walker Lake Restoration Project—15 volunteers X 6 hours = 90 hours
- Dana Lakes and Glacier Canyon Wilderness Clean Up—6 volunteers X 7 hours = 42 hours
- Green Lakes Wilderness Restoration Project—2 volunteers X 5 hours = 10 hours

### Total Volunteer Hours = 1,016

#### Wilderness Project Details

62 campsites removed and rehabbed  
 0.5 miles of road removed  
 36 pounds of trash removed  
 9 square meters of invasive plants removed  
 12 miles of trail work completed  
 82 miles of trails surveyed, toured, and scouted  
 121 volunteers engaged  
 124 hours on-the-ground work  
 1,016 volunteer hours invested