

Conservation Matters

A monthly column focused on conservation education, as the result of collaboration among several area conservation commissions and organizations. If your town's commission or conservation organization would like to contribute articles, please contact Jessica Tabolt Halm jesshalm78@gmail.com

Title: Valuable Volunteers: The Importance of Service in Conservation Work

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77.4 million. This number, according to the Corporation for National & Community Service, is the number of people who volunteered in the United States within this last year. To put that in perspective, that's nearly 1 out of every 4 of us. In addition to forging stronger communities and fostering a culture of generosity, volunteerism contributes real work that has an estimated monetary value of nearly \$167 billion a year. Although these statistics encompass a broad range of volunteers and volunteer organizations—the focus of their service can be anything from removing invasive plants to visiting long-term hospice patients. When looking specifically at the field of conservation, volunteers play a critical role.

The Squam Lakes Association (SLA) based in Holderness, NH, is one of the many conservation non-profits that owe much of their success to the hard work of countless dedicated volunteers. These volunteers, who gave over 1,500 hours of service to the SLA this year, have a hand in nearly every aspect of the non-profit's hands-on conservation work. This maintaining more than 50 miles of hiking trails, collecting water quality samples, removing terrestrial invasive plants, and protecting loon chicks and adult loons.

Recognizing the importance of volunteerism in the Squam Watershed and beyond, the SLA created a collaborative service program. The Lakes Region Conservation Corps (LRCC) is a partnership between the SLA and other Lakes Region-based conservation non-profits that provides each partner organization with a number of long-term AmeriCorps members. During the LRCC's inaugural year beginning in November 2017, 18 AmeriCorps Members were distributed amongst the SLA, the Squam Lakes Conservation Society, and the Lakes Region Conservation Trust.

The LRCC AmeriCorps members spend much of their time working directly with community volunteers. Whether they're leading a crew on trail-work days or taking a group out on the frozen lake to collect winter water quality samples, these AmeriCorps members often represent the first face-to-face interaction that a community volunteer may have with the SLA. The relationships that result from spending service days working alongside the same AmeriCorps members fosters a direct connection to the SLA and their efforts to protect the Squam Watershed. Ultimately, as the LRCC AmeriCorps Members continue to engage the public with the SLA's mission, they are essentially ensuring the longevity of conservation efforts in the Lakes Region.

And the benefits of volunteerism go both ways. Volunteering—at the SLA and beyond—is a fantastic way to gain new experiences and perspectives while simultaneously supporting a

worthwhile cause. Now, after the incredible success of the program's inaugural year, the LRCC has more than doubled in size as they welcome four new partners: Green Mountain Conservation Group, Newfound Lake Region Conservation, New Hampshire Lakes, and the Lake Winnepesaukee Association. For some of the partner organizations, in addition to directly increasing their general conservation capacity, the influx of volunteers that results from joining the LRCC marks the first time that they'll be able to continue conservation work year-round rather than on a seasonal basis. Overall, if there's one thing that the LRCC has demonstrated, it's that when passionate volunteers and a group of value-driven, conservation non-profits can come together to work towards a mutual goal, they can become a true conservation force to be reckoned with.

Want to get involved and make a difference within your community? If you'd like to volunteer with a conservation non-profit or would like to read more about the work that the LRCC and all of their partner organizations are doing, please visit the Squam Lakes Association website at www.squamlakes.org. For those who live outside of NH's Lakes Region, the volunteer website Nature Groupie, www.naturegroupie.org, is another great resource for finding volunteer opportunities within conservation across all of New England.