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Friends of the Forest is Manpower Multiplier

By Carol Wirkus

Friends of the Forest is a "manpower multiplier" for the Red Rock Ranger District of the Coconino National Forest. Almost 400 members strong, FOF offers teamwork to assist the Forest Service in tasks it does not have the manpower or funds to accomplish on its own.

Last year the Friends provided more than 23,000 service hours, repairing trails, welcoming visitors, interpreting cultural sites, and helping in dozens of other ways.

According to District Ranger Heather Provencio, this is the equivalent of twelve additional staff, which saved the district almost a half million dollars.

"We were formed 15 years ago to help the Forest Service maintain, protect and restore national forest lands in the Sedona area," said FOF president Roy Julian in a presentation to the Sedona City Council earlier this year. Mayor Rob Adams praised the Friends for their good work and proclaimed a 'Friends of the Forest Day.' "This reflects community recognition of the many contributions the Friends make in the Sedona area," said Julian.

You'll always find Friends at the new Forest Service Visitor Center located just south of the Village of Oak Creek. FOF volunteers assist Forest staff in providing information about our hiking trails, sightseeing opportunities, and all the other things visitors want to know. At the Visitor Center, you can explore interpretive displays the Friends helped develop and enjoy panoramic views of Bell Rock and Courthouse Butte.

Members of FOF who enjoy outdoor activity can be found on the Trail Patrol committee, keeping track of the number of trail users, picking up trash, and providing information and assistance to anyone who needs it. Hikers ask how much farther it is to the end of the trail and what trail to hike next. They also ask for restaurant recommendations, the names of our Red Rocks, and what else they should see and do. Trail Patrol volunteers really are good will ambassadors for the Sedona area.

Wherever you go, you are likely to see Friends of the Forest volunteers in their signature green vests. At Palatki and V-Bar-V cultural heritage sites, volunteers provide context to the rock art in reference to the culture of the ancient times. They encourage visitors to see through the eyes of the Sinagua Indians who inhabited this area between 1150 and 1400. The Friends provide docents to these archeological treasures seven days a week, 363 days a year, assisting visitors and protecting the sites.

Palatki has one of the few cliff dwellings in the Southwest where visitors are permitted to go inside the dwelling with the docent and learn how it was constructed. Palatki has not been restored or excavated, so it retains its original character. The ruins appear today

as they did 150 years ago when early Europeans first began visiting the site, and they look the same now as they did more than 100 years ago when one of the first archeologists took photographs of the site.

If you enjoy hiking on our national forest trails you can thank the FOF Trail Maintenance and Construction crew for working hard to keep trails safe. Recently, 12 volunteers worked on 1.5 miles of the Marg's Draw Trail, located between Broken Arrow and Schnebly Hill Road. They cleaned out 42 drainage ditches, constructed 3 new ditches, removed two trees, cleared brush, and improved the trail pathway. Similar work was recently done on Mystic, Boynton, Deadman Pass, Airport Loop, Sunset, Bandit, Tabletop, and Lizard Head Trails.

When the John Heath Ruins archeological site was being overrun by ATVs, the FOF Trail Construction crew was called in to install a barricade to protect the ancient pueblo. Friends of the Forest funded the equipment purchases and provided the labor to install two fences and 23 metal posts that were placed in holes drilled into rock with over two tons of concrete to keep them permanently in place, which took more than 114 hours of work. On the way out, volunteers removed a bullet-ridden refrigerator.

A new Friends of the Forest volunteer group is the Wranglers, who undertake projects while mounted on horseback, sometimes with pack mules carrying additional gear. Projects have included packing in supplies to Forest workers, marking creek crossings, putting up signs, conducting noxious weed surveys, and installing or repairing fences.

"With five wilderness areas on the Red Rock District and a fair amount of otherwise inaccessible country, horses are a real must for us," explained District Ranger Provencio. "The Wranglers have already accomplished more work because of the efficiency of using horses in some very rugged terrain."

Driving River Rangers, their kayaks, and gear to and from their destinations is the job of the FOF River Rats. These volunteers have completed trailer-driving classes for the privilege of seeing areas they might not otherwise get to, and enjoying long rides back to the Ranger Station with the unique aroma of men and women who have been camping out.

Of particular importance to the people who live and work in Sedona is protection from wildfires. FOF volunteers assist the Forest Service in manning the fire towers that surround Sedona, protecting property and people from fires during the dry season.

Friends of the Forest has taken on numerous tasks to support the Red Rock Ranger District, from helping organize the recent V-Bar-V Discovery Days, to sampling Oak Creek for E.coli, to constructing information kiosks. As "manpower multipliers," the Friends provide hands-on assistance to enhance the forest experience for both visitors and residents.

If you are interested in making a difference, consider joining Friends of the Forest. For more information, visit www.friendsoftheforestsedona.org or contact the Red Rock Ranger Station at 203-2900.