

Wild Utah Podcast, Episode 35: All Hands On Desert

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Dave Pacheco:

Welcome to Episode 35 of Wild Utah, the podcast of the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance. I'm Dave Pacheco. In this episode we bring you up to date on all things related to SUWA's hands-on Stewardship Program. It's hard to believe it's been three years since we chatted about this fun and effective program, in Episode 9 of Wild Utah, back in April 2019 when both the stewardship program and our podcast were still relatively new. Joining us to talk stewardship are Program Director Jeremy Lynch and Program Coordinator Jack Hanley. Guys, thanks for joining us.

Jeremy Lynch & Jack Hanley:

Thanks Dave. It's great to be here. Thanks Dave.

Dave Pacheco:

Let's start with you, Jeremy. You've been the anchor of this program since it's inception getting it off the ground in its formative stages and directing its growth for those unfamiliar with Sue's stewardship program. Give us a quick overview of what we mean when we say stewardship program, what are the origins of the program Forsa and what are the overall program goals?

Jeremy Lynch:

Our stewardship program began as most things with a grassroots effort in the past. Staff have periodically worked in a volunteer capacity with the BLM on the ground on public lands, however, until 2016, no formal program to support these efforts was in place from the beginning. The vision has been to offer opportunities to literally physically join the effort to preserve the integrity of Utah's wild places. We provide programming in the form of projects and trainings to transform some of our recreation into service or stewardship, and not only to do the work that is needed, but in the process to further discussions around how we all spend time on public lands and how we can decrease not only our literal impacts our tire tracks, footprints and fire pits, but also the behaviors that lead to deeper impacts think use and exploitation versus engagement, activism, education, and community building. In essence, our stewardship program seeks to build stronger relationships between our staff and agency staff from the BLM and forest service, specifically those tasks with managing wilderness quality and our well lands across the state that's America's red rock wilderness act, which I'm sure much of our listenership is familiar with, but our, our flagship legislation over here at, to protect wilderness in Utah. And we're also looking to build relationships between the public and those same agency staff, as well as between our own staff and our membership and supporters. So that's our starting point.

Dave Pacheco:

Well, thanks for the explanation. Jeremy, tell us how many individual projects that we've successfully completed since the program started. And how many projects do you intend on putting in the field this year in 2022?

Jeremy Lynch:

You know, I just looked this up, we've done 98 projects and trainings thus far, we've got 19 more on the calendar this year. That'll likely be a few more than that once fall rolls around. And so our next project in the labyrinth canyon wilderness will be number 99 and then the, a hundredth will be a few days later in the booklets. So there's a milestone. That's about 193 days at work in the field, 932 volunteers over 12,078 hours. And to be clear, this doesn't include the uncounted days of travel undertaken by our volunteers just to arrive in the middle of somewhere to work. At some point I'll crunch the numbers regarding signs installed miles of non-permitted routes for mediated, campsites cleaned and the rest, but suffice it to say the numbers are high and growing higher. And we've been documenting these over the past few years in particular.

Dave Pacheco:

Well, that's great. Thanks for sharing those numbers with this army. Let's take a deeper dive also into the strategic purposes of these kinds of projects. You touched on this a little bit in the response to my first question, but elaborate a little on how Sue's stewardship program compliments the work long done by our legal and Wildlands teams. And does it serve as a follow up to the common we provide the agency on various proposed projects or does it serve primarily as volunteer labor for the federal agency? That's always short on staff and funding. So basically what drives the need for the program?

Jeremy Lynch:

What drives the need for this program is that wilderness designation is in my account only half the battle. Uh, we support everything that you have mentioned above, but when we start to think about it, wilderness

implementation and management and perpetuity is what's essential. Here we are here. Our program is in places like Emery county post the Dingell Act and in WSAs and other Rolands to ensure that management keeps pace with the wilderness vision. We are all working toward, and this pushes us down a path of deeper around what exactly wilderness is and how it thrives in relationship to modern human settlement. In other words, what management is required to preserve wilderness during our current period of dramatic climate disruption here, hang any number of questions, but we can't begin to answer the question of, for example, what is the ideal fire regime prescribed or otherwise for a given area or what happens when and non impairment is the reality until we one protect these lands and perpetuity, and two begin to engage as land managers from active, how should I put it relational and community management until we see ourselves as part of the ebb and flow of wild places, we won't know what these places require.

Some of our scientists know these things, and we find many among us among our volunteers who do in part to their long experience or relationship with, for example, the San Rafael Swell carry perspectives on management worth incorporating. But to double back on your question, however, we work directly with Sue's legal and other staff to assess conditions on the ground, gather data and gear our projects toward larger organizational concerns, such as travel management and recreation planning, which really are our two primary areas of interest because that's where we're dealing with off-road vehicles, the impacts of dispersed camping and other motorized mechanized uses that really have a tremendous impact in place that we go to work

Dave Pacheco:

Well, let's break Jack Hanley into the conversation, Jack you're the program coordinator. Tell us about your role. It's most challenging moments and it's most satisfying aspects.

Jack Hanley:

So I often joke with Jeremy that I get to do all the fun stuff, and that's only partially true, cuz Jeremy has a lot of fun too. But my role is essentially is to lead our on the ground project. So everything from communicating with our volunteers beforehand, to selecting a campsite for us all, to finding the work that we need to do and communicating with agency staff about what tools it's gonna take to get that job done. And then really the meat and potatoes of it is project facilitation. So guiding our crews, getting everyone ready to understand what we need to do and creating a camp that we can all share at the end of the day. And my role has many challenging moments and even more satisfying moments. As Jeremy mentioned earlier, you know, one of our programs emphasis is bill building bridges with the bureau of land management.

And, you know, this can sometimes offer some challenges, building bridges with BLM field offices in a way that is distinct from other programs within our organization in contrast, or rather complementary to Sue's legal work that is often challenging BLM with what I'll call a fight and fist. I see the stewardship program as the open hand offering cooperative solutions for better managing wilderness in Utah. And as a relatively new program, it can take time to earn trust and build relationships within BLM. If there's a particular field office that holds a predetermined of HoWSA relates to their work. So that can be a challenge sometimes to kind of create a new narrative around HoWSA engages with the BLM. As the stewardship program is really distinct in the way that we are offering our helping hand in the management of these lands. As far as the satisfying moments go there, just too many to count the nature of our hands

on work, it's inherently satisfying and the results at the end of the day's work, they're really tangible. This is such a great anecdote for, uh, people and in a time that can often feel too small to create change in the face of all the overwhelming issues that face our a planet. You know, we can look back at a landscape once scarred by offroad vehicle abuse that we've now spent days naturalizing and we can say, wow, look, we did that work together. And the ecosystems here are better off because of what we've done,

U of U Alternate Break Student, Hailey:

Even though I might be one person and we're here in a group that even just by building fences or naturalizing the area, that's a big contribution and I might be one person, but every little thing adds up. It's like a ripple effect where you have one thing that it happens and then it just continues. And then we're really fighting for that change and to really push against climate change. Now.

Jack Hanley:

So personally, I get a lot of great satisfaction, uh, when our work crews really get into the flow during a project. And that's typically, you know, during the second day of work, everyone seems to find their rhythm within the work. You see people begin to interact with the land in an intuitive way where they're, self-directing their tasks and engaging with healing, the land in ways that are unique to them as a person, the crew becomes a well-oiled machine and the inside jokes are firing on all cylinders. I just love it.

Dave Pacheco:

Well, it's, it's also pretty clear that this isn't all new to you, Jack, tell us a little bit more about yourself and about your history of working in the backcountry service field.

Jack Hanley:

Well, for the past decade or so, I've spent my time guiding groups outside, be it backpacking or as a rock climbing or canyoneering guide or as an interpretive ranger in the national park service that experience with the national park service was also really formative for me in getting to work in land management. And before becoming a park ranger, I was volunteering with the national park service and volunteering and working with park partners and nonprofits in the national park service system. And so really that culmination of land management and guiding groups outside those two really come together beautifully in this position for me. And so it's really kind of a culmination of a lot of the experience I've had the past decade.

Dave Pacheco:

Well, we're really lucky to have you Jack, but I've gotta turn the most important question to you now because SUWA provides a couple of meals during these projects. Uh, you must be a pretty good chef in order to appease the likes of, you know, say 10 to 20 people that you've just met. So what's your favorite back country meal to air and why?

Jack Hanley:

Oh yeah, this is very important, Dave, I'm glad that we've got plenty of time for this topic. um, first I've gotta say that, you know, hats off to Jeremy for also being a fantastic chef on projects. Um, and I've definitely taken a lot of inspiration from Jeremy and the menu that he created during the program's inf some of our classic timeless menu items include the SUWA Stew-a, which is a volunteer and ranger favorite. I'm a big fan of the green Curry and offering garnishes and side salads, um, really makes a big difference. You know, when you've spent a few days working in the desert to have a cooler, a cold fizzy water and to squeeze a lime on top of your Curry is a thing of beauty

Dave Pacheco:

I can't wait myself. Um, all right. Let's have a little bit more fun here. So seeing as you're the only two staff directly involved in the program, let's have each of you ask the other a question or make one comment about the program to get the other's reaction. So, uh, Jeremy, uh, you're the supervisor, you got a question for, uh, Jack or a comment

Jeremy Lynch:

Always, probably several a day, actually um, uh, Jack Jack is as, as it's sometimes put by other staff, the face of our program, someone with deep interest and experience in wild places. And ours is a constant dialogue between us, between the places we work about our program and the dynamics that emerge through bringing people out onto the land to work. It's a conversation that really should never end it's our inheritance, and it should outlast us. We're just a part of it. So with this in mind, Jack, what conversational patterns have you experienced in your time leading our field program? How would you describe the community that forms? Is there a

difference between in hosting a group of college students camping for the first time and a group of elder folk who have been visiting these places for the better part of half a century, are there conversational themes that recur and secondly, what has surprised you most about working on the field office level with BLM? And also, I understand that's a lot of questions all at once, but that's, I tend to be how I ask questions. So,

Jack Hanley:

Well, I think I could take a chip away at that. Jeremy, thank you. One of the great things about our program is that diversity of the volunteership that you mentioned, it's not uncommon to have in a group of eight people, someone who was a cartographer for the us forest service in the sixties, someone who's been a SUWA member for 30 years and has, you know, donated a lot of their money and is now excited to be retired and finally donate some time to give back to the movement. And then alongside of them, we might have a few people from our diversity scholars program. We might have young people who have never camped outside before we might be facilitating a group of college students who are on an alternative break from their spring break program to dive into concepts about environmental stewardship and doing hands on volunteer projects along the way.

U of U Alternate Break Student, Jacob:

I personally wanted to do something like this because I have always wanted to, to find ways to get more involved in environmental action, especially as someone who's been a tourist in spaces like these, doing this work, and then seeing the dissonance that it creates when you see these areas that have

been trampled by tourism, it's, it's frustrating. And I think that it helps you wake up to like the impacts that your actions have.

Jack Hanley:

I mean, as far as some of those kind of recurring themes that we get, certainly from, you know, the old, old guard, if you will, we often hear tales of, you know, I remember Moab in the sixties and boy has it changed? Um, or last time I was over at calf Creek falls was 20 years ago. And then amidst that, you know, there's also the other side where we're interacting with volunteers who are seeing the Milky way and the night for the very first time during a stewardship project and my vision for our work, it's really an amalgamation of both of those concepts. So the combination of both the changes that these places have endured and sometimes suffered through over the decades, combined with that wide-eyed awe of a first time visitor. And, and that vision is to, to tip the scales of, of this increased visitation that we've been seeing.

You know, I think we're all familiar with this concept of loving our lands to death, uh, and in too many places, you know, we can really see that happening, but with increased visitation and booming outdoor recreation, you know, think we can kind of tip the scales when we reframe how we interact with the land, with an ethic of stewardship, you know, for example, the impacts of several hundred people in a given wilderness area over a weekend or over the course of a season can be massive and inversely the positive impact of several hundred people getting involved in a volunteer stewardship program over the course of our season can be that much more of a positive impact on the land. And so I hope that with more and more people coming outside, outdoor recreation, becoming more popular, I hope that our stewardship program can create an opportunity for us to the way that we spend our time outside, the way that we interact with the landscape, because

if we can get all these people giving back in a meaningful way, then we'll make our impact on public lands, a positive impact.

Dave Pacheco:

Well, that's a very compelling answer to a, an equally compelling question, Jack, thanks for were, uh, sharing with us there, but, uh, now it's your turn. Uh, do you have a question or a comment for Jeremy?

Jack Hanley:

I do. Um, and I kind of maybe alluded to it in my answer a little bit because it's something that's been on my mind a lot in this recent season yet, somehow Jeremy, I have not actually asked you this question in person yet, so I'm gonna put you on the spot. So the mission statement of our stewardship program reads to foster a stewardship ethic and promote service as recreation. And there's a lot to unpack in those few deliberate words. Uh, Jeremy, can you describe your vision for what a stewardship ethic looks like and how can we reorient our view of recreation to be one of service?

Jeremy Lynch:

It's a good question. A fair question. I think you did a really good job of essentially responding to part of that question in talking about what it means to have, you know, a diversity of people out on the landscape all at once and learn to work together. And so I think with that phrasing, which, you know, we probably put into play right at the beginning of the program, which the idea behind it comes very much from a Southeastern Utah perspective of living in a

community or I'm based I'm based in Moab, Utah, where recreation and other forms of, of land use have become the predominant visible impact on those spaces. And part of the effort of our program is to provide a different space for people to seek more balance in what they do when they're out here. The example I can point to is from this season, anyway.

So far, we had a group of students on alternative break that Jack worked with down at the canyon rims recreation area, and they were doing some campsite and off-road vehicle management, building some buck and rail fence to direct folks where they needed to go to comply with travel management plans that are in place. And I spoke to that group day after the project and reflected on their experience and coming down here for three days. And what they did essentially was work with our program, get to see the inside of public lands management, what it takes to protect places, and then have a conversation furthering the discussion around environmental justice and, you know, regenerative design, landscape design. And so they came to Moab as a group of young people who some of whom had been here, some of whom hadn't and their experience of this place was markedly different, probably from the experience of most people who come to this community, partly because most of the infrastructure in place facilitates more exploitive activities versus those which seek to teach, help you to engage with the place and actually learn something while giving back. And so the phraseology and the mission statement, which, you know, may change at some point, but will always remain core, is what can we be doing differently while we're out having these experiences that are integral and essential to us? What can recreation look like when it's not merely use of the land, but service for the land? Maybe that's a starting point, but honestly this is the conversation I love to have with volunteers when we're out in the field. And so the more we discuss this, I think the more it's sharpened.

Dave Pacheco:

Well, thanks for that conversation, guys, that really, again, is, you know, the heart of the program. Uh, I wanna turn back really quickly to something that Jack mentioned briefly in one of his answers. Uh, and that is, as this episode is airing in the week between April 20th and 26th, that's international dark skies week. And I just wanted to, you know, kind of have one or the other of you, whoever wants to take it, elaborate a little bit on the importance of dark skies. I think we lose the, uh, perspective of that value and what it really means to us until we actually get a chance to see it. What, what do you all see in the field from people react to the dark skies?

Jack Hanley:

Well, it's often a lot of awe as I think is pretty typical. Um, even for those of us who are used to seeing, you know, dark night skies, and I think it ties into a greater connection that is available to us when we spend time outside and, and attune our, to the landscape, you know, being aware of the night sky and remembering that you're a human being on the planet earth in our solar system, in the Milky way, galaxy, I mean, when you really start to consider what that means, it, it has great implications for orienting yourself within the landscape. And that's just one of the myriad ways that we see that happening during stewardship projects. You know, oftentimes when we're looking to remediate out of bounds vehicle tracks, before we naturalize that area, we look around and take some time to take cues from the landscape around us.

And maybe we notice that it's mostly small sand dunes with black brush growing there. And so what we'll do is we'll try to create small sand dunes filled with black brush to blend in what was once a scar on the landscape into, you know, something that's more in tune with, you know, how it was before it was affected. And so we start paying attention to where does the

water move on this landscape? What kind of plants are around, where are the rocks, where aren't the rocks. Um, and I think that even these small little cues for our attention serve a same purpose, as you know, the dramatic cue as seeing the Milky way in a dark night sky, these are all ways that we can attune our presence to remember that we are a part of this landscape and not separate from it.

Dave Pacheco:

I think that really summarizes what a lot of people feel, but haven't really figured out how to put it into words. So thanks for, for doing that for us, Jack, I wanna turn back to Jeremy, Jeremy, we've talked a little bit here about the origins of the stewardship program, um, what its current emphasis is, but can you tell us a little bit more about your vision for the evolution of the program? Like where do you see our next steps or advancements to make the program even more effective at protecting Utah's red rock country into the future?

Jeremy Lynch:

You know, everything is cumulative if it intends to be impactful and with our program every year is a new year. And so the relationships we build today will persist. Even as agency staff turnover remains high. We recently signed a volunteer MOU, a memorandum of understanding with the BLM Utah's state office, which acknowledges our stewardship work and encourages BLM field offices across the state to develop partnerships and engage in collaboration with our program. So we're growing in that sense. And the truth is, as I alluded to above the work is just endless. And one doesn't just us stop stewarding the land. We've always been measured in our growth in terms of staffing. However, in the coming years, I anticipate adding field staff to ensure that as we hone

our techniques, we train even more folks in the art of wilderness, land management, most conservation stewardship volunteer programs across the west, keep a staff of four, six or more regional program coordinators. So if for us, this is the inevitable next step.

Dave Pacheco:

So where can someone listening here find the basic information about stewardship program? Like see the project schedule, how they sign up to participate and generally stay in the loop about future project opportunities.

Jeremy Lynch:

I got all sorts of URLs for you. Here's a couple suwa.org/stewardship is where you'll find our programs. suwa.org/project calendar is where you can run right over to where our projects are listed. And if you fill it a general application at suwa.org/apply, you'll receive a monthly mailing with the latest project updates and features. And this is my recommendation. Just sign up. There's no obligation to join, but you'll receive first notice of upcoming projects and trainings. And it's a direct line to our program in the easiest way. Also, I would keep an eye on Sue social media. If that's in your wheelhouse, Instagram in particular, we're putting out some great content covering our project work. So it's a great place to just keep aware of our program.

Dave Pacheco:

Well, the thanks for joining us, Jack and Jeremy, and for bringing us up to date on the SUWA stewardship program, we really appreciate your time today. And,

uh, I hope that you have, uh, a wonderful field season and get to meet a lot of wonderful folks, many of whom, hopefully listening today. We'll jump on and, uh, start applying for some of those projects. So thanks again, guys.

Jeremy Lynch & Jack Hanley:

Thank you, Dave. Thanks a lot.

Dave Pacheco:

Wild Utah is recorded at SUWA's main office in Salt Lake City on equipment purchased through the generosity of our members. SUWA is primarily member funded. Over 90% of our revenue comes directly from people who care about protecting southern Utah's redrock country. We're proud of that because it keeps our voice independent. If you'd like to help protect wild Utah today, please head to [suwa dot org](http://suwa.org) and click the Donate button. We appreciate your support.

Wild Utah's theme music, "What's Worth?" is composed by Moab singer-songwriter Haley Noel Austin. Our interlude music, "Chuck's Guitar" is by Larry Pattis. Post-studio editing and production is by Laura Borichevsky.

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On behalf of SUWA, I'm Dave Pacheco. Thanks for taking the time to listen. We hope you can join us for the next episode of Wild Utah.