

Switzerland's Mountain Forest Project: bringing volunteers to work in the forest

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Unskilled volunteers help with forest management activities while learning about protection forests and why it makes sense to maintain them.



Construction of access trails, Entlebuch, Switzerland

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In Switzerland, a healthy mountain forest is recognized as a major resource in the life and leisure of the surrounding communities and a protector against avalanches, erosion, rock-slides and floods. But environmental factors such as storms have decreased the vitality of the mountain forests in recent decades.

The Bergwaldprojekt (Mountain Forest Project), a Swiss non-governmental organization, organizes volunteer work in mountain forests. The first such initiative was undertaken under the auspices of Greenpeace Switzerland in 1987 and expanded with support from the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) Switzerland in 1988. In 1990 the founders set up an independent non-profit Swiss foundation, Stiftung Bergwaldprojekt. Today, about one-third of the funding for the project comes from the government (especially communes, or municipalities, which own most of the forest and pay a contribution for the work carried out) and two-thirds from private donors and foundations. Stiftung Bergwaldprojekt has spawned

initiatives in Germany (1993), Austria (1994), Ukraine (2006) and Spain (Catalonia, 2007), which now have their own organizations. Since 1987 the project has organized 8 000 days of volunteer work in Switzerland alone.

The volunteers help with the construction of access trails, dry stone walls to protect against erosion and fences to protect against wildlife browsing; they tend the forests, plant trees or clear stump areas. No forestry knowledge is required to carry out these activities. The participants are instructed by experienced project leaders.

The volunteers – individuals, school classes, service clubs and corporate volunteer groups – come for one day, a few days or a whole work week. They stay in simple cabins, which they are also responsible for cleaning at the end of their stay. A work week typically includes a half-day excursion led by a local forestry expert, and concludes Friday evening with a round of feedback. The project provides food, tools and everything the volunteers need, except

Credit Suisse volunteers construct fencing against wildlife browsing, Chur, Switzerland



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Doris Elmer works for the Bergwaldprojekt (Mountain Forest Project), Trin, Switzerland.



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Credit Suisse volunteers clear a stump area, Chur, Switzerland; by collecting twigs and branches in sheltered piles, they help to favour regeneration, to avoid flooding and landslides by preventing blockage of streams, and to conserve biodiversity by providing habitat for small fauna

in the case of corporate volunteers, whose costs are covered by the corporate partners.

With the help of the volunteers, forest owners get work done that wouldn't be done otherwise because the mountain terrain often prevents the use of forestry machinery, making the work labour intensive. Forest owners are usually surprised at the quality and amount of work that unskilled volunteers can perform – one of the reasons for their lasting involvement with the project. The project also gives forest owners the welcome possibility to explain why and how different types of work contribute to the population's well-being and safety.

Working in the forest, the volunteers experience nature with all their senses and learn that spending their taxes on the protection forests is a cost-effective way to shield the population and infrastructure from natural dangers. This hard-learned realization is the main reason for Switzerland's strong forest law.

Awareness of the Bergwaldprojekt is mainly spread through the Web and by word of mouth, although the project approaches corporate partners directly. Instead of preaching to the converted, the project aims at the most diverse audience possible. It brings together people with different views, offering them the opportunity to work as a team and discuss interesting issues. This promotes mutual understanding, social skills and a sense of personal responsibility. Additionally it is a lot of fun! The volunteer experience made such an impression on one 18-year-old volunteer that she decided to study

forest engineering and is now a leader in the Mountain Forest Project (Fahrni, 2009).

Volunteers in 2009 included, among others, more than 1 000 Credit Suisse employees (Credit Suisse, 2010). Every Credit Suisse employee is entitled to dedicate one working day on full pay to helping charitable projects. The Mountain Forest Project is one of seven partner organizations in Switzerland that the bank works with on corporate volunteering projects of different kinds. Abandoning their urban offices for a day, volunteers with the project assist in protecting young saplings from grazing by deer and other animals, in reclaiming overgrown forest trails and

Peeling off bark to prevent bark beetle infestation, Trin, Switzerland



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debarking felled trees to prevent bark beetle infestation. At the end of the day, the volunteers have the satisfaction of having contributed to creating the necessary conditions for the growth of a healthy mixed forest that can once again offer reliable protection in the face of future natural disasters.

Goals for the future of the project include reaching out to other target groups and larger numbers of participants, and encouraging the transfer of responsibilities for project preparation, organization, funding and implementation to local committees.

Further information is available at: www.bergwaldprojekt.org



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