

AmeriCorps workers improve themselves—and their job prospects—while helping make Montana's state parks better places to visit.

BECOMING BETTER

BY LAURA LUNDQUIST

In 2015 Jacob Jost was grinding out 50-hour work weeks as a mortgage broker in Las Vegas. Between meetings and emails, he dreamed of a completely different life, one without fluorescent lights and ringing cell phones. "I was making good money, but I realized what I really wanted was a career in the outdoors," he says. Not knowing what that entailed, Jost decided that becoming a park ranger would combine his passion for the outdoors with his desire for public service. "I Googled 'How to become a park ranger.' That led me to AmeriCorps and Montana State Parks."

After working a two-year AmeriCorps stint at state parks near Seeley Lake and then two state parks jobs, Jost, 30, is now a ranger for the Bureau of Land Management. He works at Log Gulch Campground on Holter Reservoir near Helena. "I've always wanted more adventure in my life, and now I have it," he says. "Everything

I'm doing is what I wanted to do. I haven't had a bad day yet."

STATESIDE PEACE CORPS

Congress founded AmeriCorps in 1993 as the stateside equivalent to the Peace Corps. Qualified individuals are matched with employers that need help with everything from designing and teaching education programs to digging wells. The organizations usually have tight budgets and limited staff and need cost-effective ways to hire quality help.

Because AmeriCorps has a reputation for working mostly on inner-city poverty projects, people are surprised to learn that participants are also getting their hands dirty in state parks. It's still a relatively new development for state parks' staff, too. Ken Soderberg, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks' State Parks Division operations chief, says

the agency didn't realize AmeriCorps was a possible manpower resource until 2011. At the time, the division was facing unforeseen expenses and needed to recruit more volunteers. The Governor's Office of Community Service suggested AmeriCorps. "It turns out our program fits within the AmeriCorps objectives of environmental stewardship," Soderberg says. "Once we got the grant in 2012, we worked with our park managers to identify appropriate projects for AmeriCorps service members."

Each year since, roughly 20 AmeriCorps members have eased park managers' burdens by creating interpretive trails, controlling invasive weeds, teaching in outdoor classrooms, organizing volunteer events such as spring cleanups, and more. "Many of us oversee two or more parks, so we greatly appreciate the additional help," says Ryan Sokoloski,

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: JOHN WARNER/FWP; FWP; FWP

MOVING OUT—AND UP
Previously a Las Vegas mortgage broker, Jacob Jost traded his desk job for a position working for Montana State Parks through AmeriCorps. He's now a ranger for the Bureau of Land Management in central Montana.

"I wanted more adventure in my life, and now I have it."

who manages several parks in western Montana.

AmeriCorps service members receive an allowance of \$13,700 over a 44-week term of service to cover basic living expenses. They also qualify for an educational award of up to \$6,000 when they complete their term. As is the case with Peace Corps service members, full-time (1,700 hours over 12 months) AmeriCorps members are eligible for student loan deferments, health care benefits, and child care assistance. They must be at least 18 years old and have a high school diploma or GED. Most spend a year or two in AmeriCorps after graduating from college. The program is funded by an independent federal agency and administered in Montana through the Governor's Office of Community Service. "It's a great way to gain job skills, earn money for education, and help local communities," says Joe Naiman-Sessions, who coordinates the FWP program. "Many [AmeriCorps service members] have told us their work

also gives them a strong sense of stewardship in our state parks."

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

AmeriCorps service members regularly interact with the communities surrounding



BIRDS OF A FEATHER AmeriCorps service members Savannah Sloan and Lena Fontana take a break between events at Makoshika State Park's Buzzard Day event.

the state parks where they work. Ryan Timmerman graduated from St. Olaf College in Minnesota before joining AmeriCorps in 2012 and working at Chief Plenty Coups State Park, near Pryor on the Crow Indian Reservation. After he arrived, tribal members invited Timmerman to a sweat lodge, where he took part in the traditional healing and cleansing ceremony. At the park, he helped test water and taught visiting students about local natural history and the famous American Indian leader for whom the park is named.

State parks rely on AmeriCorps service members for presenting and interpreting human and natural history to park guests, local students, and others. Statewide, AmeriCorps members offer a total of 500-plus educational and interpretive programs each year, in which 12,000 to 16,000 youth and adults attend. "I'm in touch with more than 300 teachers in our area, and I hear how AmeriCorps makes the state parks education programs function," says Laura Law, educational specialist at Glacier National Park.

Laura Lundquist is a writer in Missoula.



NO LACK OF PROJECTS

AmeriCorps service members can choose from a wide range of work opportunities at various state parks. Clockwise from top: Victoria Miera and Josh Parken give a presentation on the Corps of Discovery at Travelers' Rest State Park; a crew installs an interpretive sign at Lewis & Clark Caverns State Park; Brian Turner pulls invasive mullein.



Teresa Wenum, conservation education specialist at Flathead National Forest, says, "I've really been impressed with the enthusiasm and high level of skills and energy the Lone Pine State Park AmeriCorps members show in developing and carrying out events and programs."

INNOVATION ENCOURAGED

Sokoloski says AmeriCorps service members not only work on projects that he and other managers identify but are also encouraged to come up with new ideas for

improving visitor experiences, solving infrastructure problems, and helping parks save money. He says Jost suggested an idea to make it easier for more people to take advantage of the many camping opportunities at the parks where he worked. "Some people love the idea of camping but are intimidated by all the gear they need, so they don't go," Sokoloski says. "Jacob suggested that we provide the gear at a low cost. We came up with the idea of 'Camp in a Trunk.' For \$10, we supply everything for a family of four to go camping."

The trunks had barely made their debut at two Seeley Lake valley state parks in 2017 when families started asking for them. Sokoloski says the rental camping gear is becoming increasingly popular as more people learn about it. "The kits have been a big hit and are doing what Jacob envisioned—getting more people out camping," he says.

Work experience and personal contacts gained through AmeriCorps can further service members' careers. While at Lone Pine State Park, Laura Rognerud, from Minnesota, earned enough educational

ALL PHOTOS: FWP

"I am the person I want to be because of AmeriCorps."



grant credit through AmeriCorps to pay for nearly a semester of college online classes. She's now pursuing a degree in criminal justice in hopes of landing a career in wildlife law enforcement. Between pulling knapweed and creating new trail maps at the park, Rognerud talked to area FWP

game wardens about their jobs and her prospects for future employment. "I plan to keep an eye on upcoming state and national park positions," Rognerud says. "That was my initial reason for joining AmeriCorps: to not only gain experience but also to discover if I'd like working in wildlife enforcement or state park management. And now I definitely think I would."

Jost, the mortgage-broker-turned-park-ranger, credits AmeriCorps for helping him find his calling. "I'd never have advanced this quickly without it," he says. "AmeriCorps got me to Montana and helped me develop skills I never would have had."

Casey Fuson, of Illinois, says her very identity was crystallized while working for Montana State Parks through AmeriCorps. A prized memento of her time working at Lone Pine State Park is a portrait of her in a tan Montana State Parks shirt drawn by a Kalispell third-grader. The girl had trailed Fuson during a spring field trip. When the AmeriCorps service worker received the drawing in the mail a few weeks later, it was clear the girl had paid attention. The drawing included several animals that Fuson had mentioned in her lecture, and even the necklace she had worn. "If I'd asked someone to draw a picture of me, this is exactly what I'd want them to draw," she says. "When I first looked at it, I had an epiphany of 'I am the person I want to be because of AmeriCorps.'" 



FOSSIL FINDER Working with Museum of the Rockies paleontologists, Ayleen Gutierrez helps identify and categorize fossils at Makoshika State Park. AmeriCorps service members often find work opportunities at Montana state parks within their areas of interest but can also branch out into additional fields.



Montana State Parks AmeriCorps Achievements

In 2018, 18 AmeriCorps service members worked at 16 Montana state parks as well as two regional headquarters offices and the Helena headquarters.

Their accomplishments:

- ▶ improved 264 acres of state parks land;
- ▶ offered 577 education and interpretive programs that attracted 9,268 youth and 5,120 adult participants;
- ▶ improved or developed (with curriculum, interpretive panels, brochures, etc.) 168 educational or interpretive products;
- ▶ engaged 369 volunteers (250 of whom had not previously volunteered at a state park);
- ▶ took part in 455 community outreach activities; and
- ▶ engaged in 42 new community partnerships.



Sara Parks educates students on bull snakes