

*This year marks the 80th anniversary of the establishment of the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). It is also the 20th anniversary of AmeriCorps National Civilian Community Corps (NCCC), which is modeled on the CCC.*

*Unlike the CCC, the NCCC's integrated teams are open to all regardless of race, sex, or income. During their 10-month NCCC term, the 1,200 young adults who serve nationwide each year work in teams of eight to twelve people. Their projects address critical needs related to natural and other disasters, infrastructure improvement, environmental stewardship and conservation, energy conservation, and urban and rural development. To mark these two anniversaries, Forest History Today has asked a recent NCCC member to reflect on her experiences.*

# FROM THE MOUNTAINS TO THE PRAIRIES

*REFLECTIONS ON MY 21 MONTHS WITH AMERICORPS*

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**T**wo years, 21 months, 5 states, 8 nonprofit organizations. Over 3,000 hours. There is no doubt that the statistics surrounding my two years of service with AmeriCorps National Civilian Community Corps (NCCC) are impressive, even if you have no idea what NCCC does. However, the true impact

of my service goes beyond how many places I went and how many hours I worked. It extends to things such as miles of trail constructed, structures built or renovated, community members assisted with tax returns, acres of land restored, and miles of fencing replaced. What I spent the past 21 months of my life doing reaches past the NCCC taglines of "Getting Things Done for America" and "Serving Communities, Developing Leaders." It reads more like: pronghorn fence modification, forest fire erosion restoration, invasive species removal, and interventions with hospitalized children.

Needless to say, AmeriCorps NCCC puts young people in the position to make a real and tangible difference across this country, from the most crowded schools to the most remote valleys.

When you are placed with NCCC, you don't get to choose your campus. Placement is based on when you will begin your service. As an applicant for the fall term I had two possible fates: Denver or Sacramento. Now, nothing against our West Coast friends but I was really hoping for Denver. Something about the mountains, the snow, and the promise of 300+ days of sunshine really called to me. After spending four years in Vermont for college, Colorado just seemed like a bigger version of a place I loved so much. Bigger mountains, better snow, less rain, more people. So I'm sure you can imagine how happy I was when, after six months of waiting, I was finally placed at the Southwest Region Campus for NCCC.<sup>1</sup>

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**BY CHRISTINE E. AMORESANO**



PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR

*The author, taking a break from hiking in Paria Canyon, Utah, during her Corps Member (first) year. The team was going in to do second and third treatments of tamarisk removal using a cut-and-spray method with water-safe herbicides and to inspect the effectiveness of previous treatments.*

The move out West was a huge transition for me, but one that I accepted with open arms. There are fewer people here per square mile than where I come from in New Jersey. Everyone tends to be friendlier (not that we Jersey residents are mean). The sun shines bright, the sky is bluer (that's a fact), and the view is gorgeous. Despite my initial issues with the thinness of the air (being a mile high and all), I love how fresh and clean it is. People here are active and engaged in their communities and the environment so, naturally, I followed suit. I spent my first few months hiking, walking, lying in the sunshine, and learning what Colorado was all about, and now I'm here to stay (at least while I finish my master's degree at the University of Denver).

Serving out of the Denver campus, my projects were more often than not environmental in nature. Of my eight "spikes," as we call them, five involved working directly on the land in the mountains, desert, and plains of the southwestern United States. NCCC requires a

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certain degree of service learning related to each project. Why are we here, who are we helping, what's the point? I can say with confidence that I am more educated than the average 24-year-old woman on erosion, fire, dams, land usage, and invasive plants.

Requirements aside, my education is in large part due to the enthusiasm and knowledge of the individuals I worked with and learned from. I have learned that there is a huge community of passionate advocates for public lands and their protection. My eyes have been opened to the existence of organizations such as the U.S. Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, national and state park services, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the relationships among them. I am also familiar with individuals and community organizations working hard to make a difference, from Topeka to the House Rock Valley of northern Arizona.

I have witnessed the struggles and triumphs that come with working on and advocating for the land. How can you cut out a riverside invasive





*The pay may be low but some things are priceless, like this view from atop Spencer Trail in Lee's Ferry, Arizona, overlooking the Colorado River and the beginning of Grand Canyon National Park.*

species that travels by water if you are only permitted to treat it on one portion of that river? Isn't it amazing how much natural willow has returned to the riverbank? Why remove honeysuckle when it looks so nice? How great to see how much natural light is restored to this part of the forest now! Replacing perfectly good fence in the hot sun is exhausting. Check out that group of pronghorn antelope! The daily "angel on one shoulder, devil on the other" effect of land conservation was not lost on me, even as a lowly volunteer.

However, it is the victories we must take with us as we continue to serve the land. The homeowner who can sleep easier now, knowing that her home is protected from erosion flooding. The mom who can tuck her children in and not worry about forest fires due to surrounding thick vegetation. The youth who can mountain bike after school instead of participating in gang behavior. These are all the result of caring and excited land stewards putting in their time.

Stewardship is perhaps the greatest victory of all. In July 2013 AmeriCorps NCCC Southwest Region graduated 237 members, many of whom I can say with certainty have worked on public lands and will go on to become stewards of these lands through action and word. This is the direct result of 132 sponsoring



*The author at her very first outdoor project, an independent service project planting trees at a dog park in Denver.*



*Not every job was in a scenic location. Here the author takes a breather in an old tub while cleaning out a storage shed at the Mt. Morrison CCC camp in Morrison, Colorado.*

organizations putting time and energy into hosting and educating teams about their work. It is the difference that the Grand Canyon Trust makes when they invite a team to view California condors being reintroduced in Arizona. It's the extra effort Volunteers for Outdoor Colorado (VOC) makes when they take time to feed and thank their volunteers, urging them to come back and work with VOC again. It's the opportunity to mountain bike on their newly constructed trail that the City of Casa Grande Parks and Recreation Department gives its volunteers. These organizations are inviting young volunteers to work, learn, and in the case of NCCC, live as part of a community of people who care about their lands.

In my opinion, aside from on-the-ground conservation efforts, creating young stewards who care about public lands is the most important work any of these agencies can be doing. Educating young, open-minded citizens who are still developing themselves and their interests can do wonders for stewardship in our country. Hosting youth volunteer groups can show young people that conservation is more than policy meetings and planting trees. Youth stewardship training is a reliable source of future park rangers, land advocates, and wildland firefighters. I'm not saying every organization needs an AmeriCorps NCCC team to better fulfill its mission (though you should really think about it), but I am saying that my experience with NCCC and the nonprofits I have served has turned me into a young steward of the land, even if that only means reminding my friends to leave no trace when we go hiking. □

*AmeriCorps NCCC is administered by the Corporation for National and Community Service. The corporation improves lives, strengthens communities, and fosters civic engagement through service and volunteering. For more information about AmeriCorps NCCC, visit the website, at <http://www.americorps.gov/nccc>.*

*Christine Amoresano is a 24-year-old graduate student pursuing a master's degree in social work at the University of Denver. She hopes to continue to volunteer on the land and encourages others to do the same.*

## NOTES

1. The Southwest Region campus in Denver is one of five regional hubs in the United States and serves eight states in the southwest part of the country. The other campuses are located in Perry Point, Maryland; Vinton, Iowa; Vicksburg, Mississippi; and Sacramento, California.