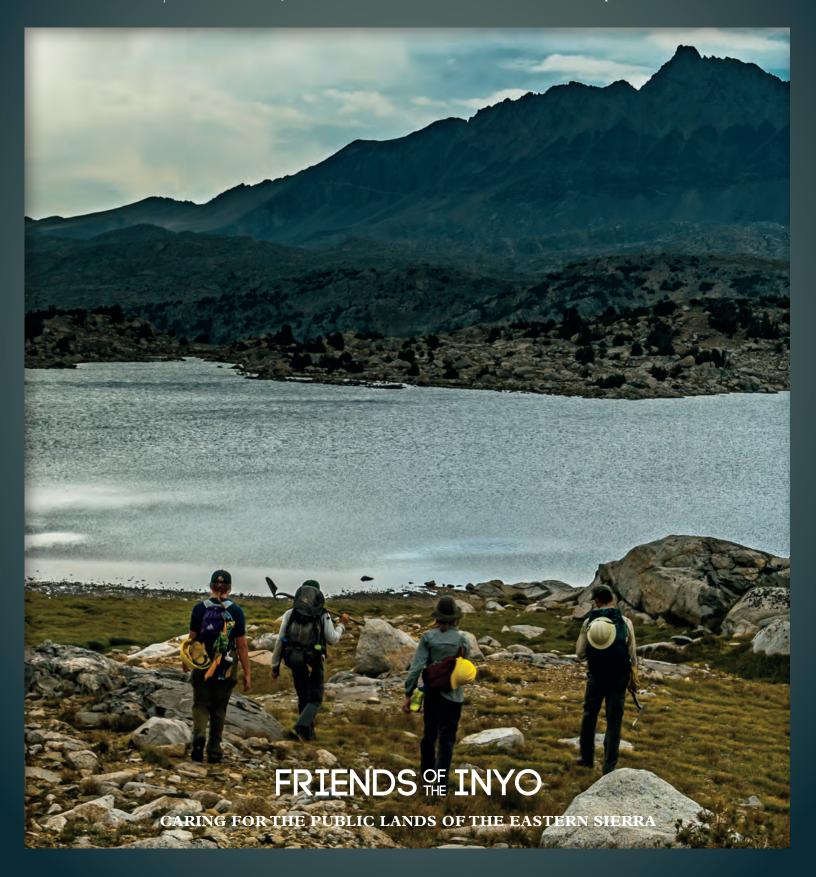
Jeffrey Pine OURNAL

FALL 2018 | VOLUME XVI, ISSUE II

A Dog Among Kings Jeff Kozak: An Ultrarunner's Intro to Climbing

Fighting for the Eastern Sierra Keeping Long Valley Green

Trail MusingsTrail Ambassadors Report from the Field



NEWSLETTER OF Friends of the Inyo



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Friends of the Inyo is dedicated to the preservation, exploration, and stewardship of the Eastern Sierra's public lands.



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COVER PHOTO

The views from Chocolate Mountain show the true convergence of biomes that is the Eastern Sierra.

Joanne Hihn

Inyo is a Paiute word meaning "dwelling place of the Great Spirit." For us, this dwelling place extends from the bottom of Death Valley to the top of Mount Whitney, from Owens Lake to Topaz Lake, from the crest of the Sierra Nevada to the roof of the Great Basin atop the White Mountains. The Jeffrey Pine Journal, named after the Eastern Sierra's most aromatic conifer, is distributed free to all members of Friends of the Inyo and wherever great spirits tend to dwell.

Never a Dull Moment in the Eastern Sierra

by Wendy Schneider, Executive Director

It's been a challenging year for me in our Eastern Sierra backcountry. I've been recreating in these mountains, summer and winter, for almost thirty years. This season challenged my assumption that I know what to expect. On a springtime backcountry ski

trip, I never really skied because the snowline was so high and the lakes no longer frozen. The monsoon system that graced us in July turned an idyllic backpacking trip with my family in the Sabrina Basin into a freezing, water-logged experience when we got trapped behind mudslides that closed the trail and the road. My climbing trip to the Palisades ended early after I was struck by rockfall in a gully rendered unstable by the same system. Oh, and smoke lingered during my family's trip to Yosemite.

It is probable that all of these surprise conditions were caused by climate change. And it may very well be that these conditions are the new normal.

So what does this mean for those of us who protect and care for our beautiful Eastern Sierra lands? Well, we have to meet the challenges presented. All summer long we've had (hiking) boots on the ground doing a combination of planned and impromptu activities. When the aforementioned storms caused landslides and washouts in the Sabrina Basin and Pine Creek Canyon, our Stewardship Crew and Trail Ambassadors

dropped what they were doing to aid the Forest Service in clearing the debris. And we continued to take local and visiting youth into the backcountry to show them why these wild places are so important.

We've also had to be adaptable on the policy side of things. While we're still keeping our eyes on Conglomerate Mesa (one giant mining company walked away, but the claim owners are shopping around for another one) and engaging with the Forest

Service to make sure the next Forest Plan does all it can to protect this beautiful place, we've also made time to jump in with Mono County, Mammoth Lakes Recreation, and others to fight LADWP's surprise efforts to de-water lands in Long Valley near Mammoth. Read on; this issue of the Jeffrey Pine Journal will definitely show you there's never a dull moment at Friends of the Inyo.





Below the Surface

by Michael Cleaver, Operations Manager

In the summer of 2007 my father and I dripped with tropical sun while riding a small wooden tender boat from our live-aboard dive ship in Indonesia. This scuba trip was my graduation present, and the scene felt a world away from the environmental science classes and grey, cold mist of the Oregon Coast. We chose the Raja Ampat Islands for their biodiversity and unique location. These islands bridge three ocean basins and are located about as far away as we could find someone to take us.

Our host arranged lunch on a small island as we sat among wooden frames suspending a catch of small fish. The scene was idyllic, but my intestines churned with disgust, and I could feel the heat of rage radiate down from between my temples.

Moments before, as we pulled up at the

small dock, others steadied their camera upwards at the rock outcropping. Backlit vistas and suspended shacks framed primitive working docks. As they furiously snapped their waterproof cameras, I unfortunately looked down.

Coral pieces, sand, and dull detritus swaddled a dead juvenile shark. Its sleek colorful body was shaped like a bowling pin upside down, staring into the blue.

The shark had drowned silently in the waist deep sand. Villagers might have finned it just before we arrived, and discarded it to preserve our illusion. The fins likely commingled the drying racks at our lunch.

I'd felt the same heat and disgust, years ago and a world away, when I learned that Georgia Pacific ran an effluent pipeline under our picturesque Oregon town. The

state's second largest polluter gushed a plume of heavy metals and wastewater directly off Newport into the ocean. At low tides my dad and I would hunt razor clams and gather muscles within the same plume. The waste was clearly visible on Google Earth.

Sadly even the farthest flung vacation spot can hold its own dark secret just below the surface. Beautiful places can disguise dark environmental corruption. I will never forget growing up that day in Raja Ampat.

I joined Friends of the Inyo because the organization sees beyond the glossy image of our beautiful mountains, and understands what's at risk. We challenge forces below the surface like international mining interests, water grabs, and land management cronyism while empowering local voices to fight for the nuances and little things we hold so dear.

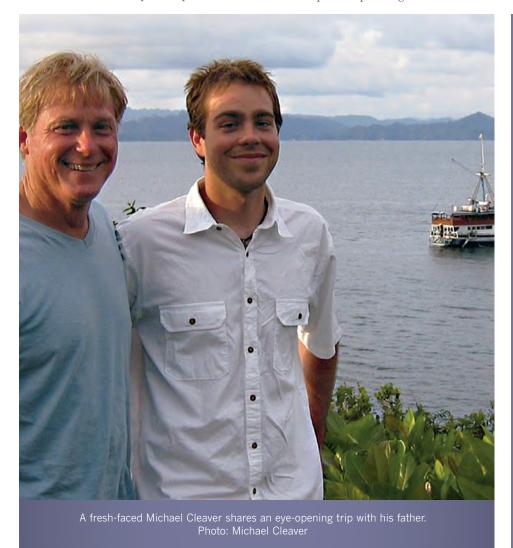
New Board Members

We're so excited to welcome three new members to our group of hardworking, tireless board of directors.

Jeff Dozier has spent lots of time in the Eastern Sierra since his childhood, and joining Friends of the Inyo gives him the opportunity to help protect one of California's iconic regions.

Meghan Miranda moved from the mountains of North Carolina to the Eastern Sierra in 2016 for a job with Mammoth Lakes Tourism, where she manages the website VisitMammoth. com. As a member of the Friends of the Inyo board of directors, Meghan is excited about helping visitors and locals alike connect with the Eastern Sierra on a deeper level by joining in Friends of the Inyo's efforts to protect the lands we love.

Paul Shock joins us as an avid hiker and lover of the Sierra. In fact, Paul and his wife Marjorie learned of Friends of the Inyo after a chance trailhead meeting with a board member after coming off of a long backpacking trip. He is excited to help us develop our fundraising strategy to help the lands he loves.



POLICY

Forest Planning for the Future

by Jora Fogg, Policy Director

What's in a Forest Plan?

Since my time at Friends of the Inyo began some five years ago one of my primary tasks has been engaging our organization and citizens in the Inyo National Forest Plan revision process. Engaging activists hasn't been easy. As soon as you say "Forest Plan" you lose people quickly. Now, as we round the corner and head down the final stretch on the latest set of revisions, I want to share some thoughts about why the Forest Plan is so important, and how people came out to make a difference, this time and in the past.

What We Were Born to Do

Friends of the Inyo's history is deeply rooted in Forest Planning. Our namesake and mission emerged from the 1988 plan, when in 1983 a group of concerned citizens came together to advocate for not only wilderness recommendations, but protection from timber harvest, which was much more prevalent at the time. In that last round of proposed revisions, large swaths of old growth red fir and Jeffrey pine were designated as suitable for timber harvest.

Lovers of the Inyo National Forest were concerned about the prospect of losing so many old-growth trees. Local citizen scientists crunched the numbers provided by the Forest Service to prove their calculations of economic gain from logging were incorrect. They demonstrated that this forest is important habitat for marten and goshawks, species the forest tracked as critical to forest health. Local activists worked for the inclusion of specific language in the plan to ensure old-growth would not be cut. Changes in plan language shaped how the forest transitioned over the next twenty years from one of multiple use and timber harvest to one of recreation and water.

Roadless Areas: the New Timber Harvests

In the same way that timber harvest threatened to change our

forests irrevocably in the 1980s, today we face the loss of our roadless areas. By our estimates, there are some 600,000 acres of roadless areas that have yet to be categorized as such. Why are these areas so important? When appropriately identified, roadless areas are able to be managed as areas of primitive, non-motorized use. But they need to be identified to be protected, and as Congress currently tries to undo the law that allows for that protection, time is of the essence.

What makes it into the Forest Plan matters. This is the blueprint land managers will use for the foreseeable future. If these roadless areas aren't identified in the Forest Plan, who knows what our public lands will look like in another thirty years. Roads allow development; paving the way (pun intended) for roads, oil pads, pipelines, and much more to be built.

As James Wilson, the late conservation visionary of the Eastern Sierra and founding board member, put it in a June 2015 Letter to the Editor in the *Inyo Register*,

"As California continues down the path of rampant population growth and sprawling, increasingly complete development across our landscapes, the wild lands of the Eastern Sierra become more and more valuable; to our local economy, for visitors seeking places that are unpaved and quiet, and to our collective souls, which need unspoiled and peaceful places to recreate and restore ourselves."

These roadless areas represent the legacy of wild lands to which James is referring. Friends of the Inyo believes that losing public lands to development is a detriment to the Eastern Sierra's character. We will continue to fight for the health of our public lands, its users, and the critters that call it home. It's how we started as an organization, and something we won't let go of as we weigh in on this (and future) forest plans.



POLICY

The Conglomerate Mesa Story

by Wendy Schneider, Executive Director

In Hollywood, they say there are really only four stories. These include: boy meets girl, a stranger comes to town, the hero's journey, and the conservation movement favorite: David v. Goliath.

In this version of the David v. Goliath story, Goliath is played by Silver Standard Resources, Inc. (SSR). They are a large Canadian-based mining company with projects all over the world, and entered our Eastern Sierra stage on its southern edge, just outside of Death Valley National Park. SSR hoped to set up shop there, in a place known as Conglomerate Mesa, by building roads, bringing in heavy machinery and drilling some very deep (1,000 foot) holes. SSR hoped to do these things in furtherance of its ultimate goal of developing a gold mining operation. Many who love the Eastern Sierra were concerned about SSR's proposed activities. Conglomerate Mesa is a very ecologically and culturally sensitive area that is well-loved by locals and visitors.

Enter the David of our story. A coalition, led by Friends of the Inyo, stepped into the arena, interested in protecting Conglomerate Mesa from the big changes that would occur if Goliath were successful in achieving its goals.



David—our coalition—learned of Goliath's intentions, learned that Goliath was just about as big and well-funded as mining companies get, and decided to fight anyway. We fought by doing all of the things underfunded and outgunned coalitions have always done when faced with a fight: we talked to the people of the area, let them

know what was going on, and asked them to speak out against this type of mine in this special place. And they did. The decision-makers listened a little bit. Though they still approved SSR's exploratory drilling plan, they did not allow the creation of any roads, instead requiring SSR to bring in its big machines by helicopter.



Believing that this requirement did not even come close to effectively protecting Conglomerate Mesa, the coalition then marshalled its forces and filed a Request for Review with the California State Bureau of Land Management Office (BLM), arguing that SSR's approved plan was not in compliance with the law. The day following the filing of the request for review, we learned that SSR had announced its intention to withdraw its approved plan and would not move forward. David had loaded up the slingshot and struck Goliath right between the eyes.

But our strike may have merely stunned Goliath; Conglomerate Mesa is still unprotected. The unfortunate truth in all these battles is that, as David Brower said, "Victories are temporary, defeats are permanent." The BLM is allowing the owners of the mining claim to keep the approved plan active while they hunt for another operator.

We are looking for a way to permanently protect Conglomerate Mesa from inappropriate industrial-scale mining developments. And we have some ideas. Keep checking our web page for the very latest!

Fighting for Long Valley's Water

by Wendy Schneider, Executive Director

In March, the Los Angeles Department of Water & Power (LADWP) eliminated irrigation allotments from leases between Crowley and Mammoth. This water is critical to a healthy Eastern Sierra. It not only supports pasture, but maintains important wetland habitat-habitat that was lost when LADWP built the Long Valley Dam and created Crowley Lake. In destroying these wetlands (one of the most effective areas for CO² exchange) LADWP is exacerbating the effects of climate change that are already impacting the Eastern Sierra. The de-watering brings with it numerous environmental impacts to the area, such as increasing the likelihood of wildfire and unhealthy dust levels. In addition, LADWP's plan will have negative impacts on the area's recreation economy, as these fields turn from green to brown and become an eyesore. Friends of the Inyo has joined with Mono County, Mammoth Lakes Recreation, and others to ask LADWP to reinstate the irrigation allotments at their previous levels.



STEWARDSHIP

Putting the Finishing Touches on a Great Season

by Julia Runcie, Stewardship Director



Astra, Lauren, and Melissa come together to form "The Pine Creek Rockers." Photo: Tyler Junker



Our Stewardship Crew caring for the lands we love! Photo: Dylan Welcome

Il winter and spring, we at Friends of **1**the Inyo are busy designing, funding, and scheduling an ambitious summer of stewardship throughout the Eastern Sierra's public lands. By June this year we had fifty-six days of volunteer events on the calendar, and projects planned from greenhouse gas sampling near Kennedy Meadows to a meticulous rebuild of the Lundy Canyon Trail. But it was all somewhat hypothetical until our eight new seasonal staff filed into the conference room on their first day of work. Suddenly our office was a hive of fresh energy. The Stewardship Crew and Trail Ambassadors brought diverse talents to our organization, with backgrounds ranging from fine art to grassroots community organizing. While some were new to the Sierra, others had explored its canyons and peaks for more than a decade. They came ready to apply their many skills to the monumental task of caring for our public lands—and teaching other people to care, too.

In the following pages you'll read our crews' own words about their experiences this summer, and their thoughtful, creative approach to their work. What they won't tell you is how much they accomplished during the few short months of their season. In addition to patrolling 414 miles of trail and intensively maintaining close

to 50 miles, they shared wilderness ethics with thousands of visitors from around the world. After violent storms closed the Piute Pass and Pine Creek Pass Trails, our crews worked for days to clear away literal tons of debris. Outfitting urban youth with shovels and hard hats, our staff turned trail work into something fun and meaningful that the kids will carry with them when they return to their homes.

We're grateful to Astra, David, Dylan, Lauren, Melissa, Robin, Tyler, and Zak for acting as the faces of Friends of the Inyo this summer. Their hard work and passion turned our eight months of dreams and plans into an exciting, fulfilling reality.

WE APPRECIATE IT

Friends of the Inyo thanks the partners and supporters that helped make our Stewardship events and programs a success this summer:

- Inyo County Water Department
- Inyo National Forest
- June Lake Trails Committee
- LA River Expeditions
- Los Angeles Department of Water & Power
- Lone Pine Paiute-Shoshone Tribe

- Mono County
- Mono Lake Committee
- Mono Market
- National Wilderness Stewardship Alliance
- Owens Valley Committee

STEWARDSHIP

"The Places That Humans Can't Go Are Getting Smaller and Smaller." by Astra Lincoln, Stewardship Crew Member

I think of the above line from *Alpinist 58* through the radio static as FM 106.5 fades out.

We drive—two of us commuting from Mammoth to our Bishop office—and then drive more and feel blessed for the monstrous AC in our 4x4, giving me goosebumps on a 103 degree day. I drink coffee to warm up. In this blessed old work truck with worn-through shocks, we feel sporty getting air when we hit rocks on the road; it expands our sense of where we're entitled to go.

struggle to balance on one foot while I use my nut tool to garden some early-season crack. My fingers pry for just two pads of semi-dry friction. In *Alpinist 58*, Paula Wright discusses the risk climbing poses to vertical ecology; a study near Toronto reveals that "on climbed faces, nearly a quarter of the ancient eastern white cedars had suffered catastrophic damage."

Wright goes on: "Because, historically, they have been difficult to access, cliffs are one of the few sites free from the disturbances that come with human intervention in I quoted author David Whyte in an Instagram post last season in one of many rants about picking up trash, about the anthropocene, about loving something until it hurts: "The only choice we have as we mature is how we inhabit our vulnerability, how we become larger and more courageous and more compassionate through our intimacy with disappearance."

As this summer's fires, storms, and seemingly endless landslides tore through the Eastern Sierra, our labor felt ever more like being brave in spite of the grand



Independence Elementary students filled up their water cans to lend a hand (and sustenance) to bitter brush.

And all day we labor to expand that sensibility for others, for you, the public. On trail we dig holes and fill them. I chop the heads off lupine, columbine, a spectre of paintbrush with the sharpened end of my grubber. When I hit a rock hidden in the soil, sparks shoot and metal shards vanish in the humus. As a crew we roll rocks out of the ground, upending the homes of many small ants and their maggoty young, and some of these rocks tumble into the river below. Despite the visual, tangible, actualizable nature of trail work, I must admit that eight seasons into this labor it too feels esoteric. I've run out of new, interesting thoughts to have about why I'm doing it in the moment the tool's in my hand.

I sigh and dream of after-work hours: my new ultralight trail runners pounding the soft dirt in the golden hour, or the crunch of a climbing shoe on sandy granite as I a landscape, including animal grazing and controlled burns... [Mountaineers] reached the tops of the highest peaks, they had transferred their exploratory fervor from untouched summits to pristine vertical walls." The places we couldn't go got smaller.

I cut trail, and sixty hikers thank me for clearing their path. I say "you're welcome," but what I mean is, "Do you think this landscape can feel the breaking of a trail through a field of wildflowers?"

What I mean is, "What are we doing here?"

Naomi Klein, in her book *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. The Climate*, warns against feeling for the earth "as if it were an endangered species, or a starving child far away, or a pet in need of our ministrations." She reminds us: we are the fragile and vulnerable ones. Not the earth.

disappearing act that is living in climate change. So the question remains; what are we doing here, cutting trail? I feel like the answer lives somewhere in my bones, rattles around in a way that feels like muscle memory, and I recall a Terry Gross interview on *Fresh Air* with a long-haul trucker. He said something akin to, "There is a spiritual practice to the repetitive motions of manual labor." Maybe that's the answer to why we cut trail, but also to why we go out and try hard in the outdoor spaces we cherish. It's for the grace we find in trying hard.

A few weeks after writing this piece, I attended Connie Millar's climate change talk at the Mono Lake Committee. She said that the rock walls and reinforcements we often build along trails provide excellent habitat (and habitat connectors where previously intact stretches have been interrupted by human use) for the pika. There is hope yet.

TRAIL AMBASSADORS

Stories from the Wilderness

by Diana Dikovsky, Friends of the Inyo volunteer

I'm back to the comfort of home, and for better or worse, it is home. I know where everything goes as I unpack: a tent, a rainfly, a ground cloth, a sleeping bag, and two mattresses I carry just in case one pops. A tiny stove. Camp clothes. I unpack feeling sadness—the wilderness trip I'd looked forward to so much is over.

I come from the "lowlands," according to John Muir, and hence the question: how do I find myself on a wilderness project that requires eight miles of hiking and 2,000 feet of elevation gain on the first day? While carrying a backpack that is NOT a day pack and (even without my food, a bear canister, and a few other items the packers brought in for me) is not exactly ultralight? I am in love and have been in love for many years—with the High Sierra. I bring family and friends here every summer as if I'm a local. I'm not. Of all the places, I live in Brooklyn, New York. I moved here long ago from an "Evil Empire"—the Soviet Union.

It's been nine years since my last wilderness trip with Friends of the Inyo, and I realize I've been missing volunteer projects. I see on Friends of the Inyo's website a project I desperately want to be a part of: helping to restore illegal campsites and fire rings on the Sierra National Forest, in Humphreys Basin over Piute Pass.

Some snapshots: the Ascent. Friends of the Inyo Crew Member Zak's everlasting patience with my slowest turtle-like pace. Sierra National Forest Wilderness Ranger Tim's, "Ten minutes to where the group is waiting" is like an encouraging parent's "just around the corner." Bill Bryson's quote from *A Walk in the Woods* comes to mind, "Distance changes utterly when you take the world on foot. A mile becomes a long way, two miles literally considerable, ten miles whopping..." Especially in my case, while I'm still acclimating. But I do welcome the challenge! Later I read in a blog post about the trail that it's described as, "Bloody difficult—uphill all the way."

Once on the other side, we look for our gear drop around the lake where we'll be camping. It's not there. Where did the packers leave our stuff? Gus, the Sierra National Forest Wilderness Ranger Intern (whose stipend was generously donated by Friends of the Inyo members), assures us with a big smile that he has a lot of food to share even if we don't find our bear canisters that night. But finally Tim and Gus do find the drop, a thousand feet below where we expected it, and somehow they are able to fit it all in their backpacks and bring it up to camp. We marvel—we have our tents and food!

Going to sleep happy.

That night, while Tim and Gus are still out looking for our gear, Friends of the Inyo Crew Member Tyler brings us apple and cherry pies he packed all the way in for us, and that act of kindness is touching beyond words.

Gus (just an intern, really?) shares his profound knowledge and love of the night sky's endless constellations. The morning after we try to remember some of the names, and only two come to mind: Vega and Deneb. With Gus's help we recall the third one: Altair. Another lesson!

And the project itself, of course. The work that brought us to Humphreys Basin, supported by the National Wilderness Stewardship Alliance. We collect all the trash we can find by Lower Golden Trout Lake and dismantle illegal fire rings. Tim and I work close to the trail, meeting backpackers from all over the country. Getting appreciation from them feels good.

We cook our last evening's meal together and share food. I add a special ingredient: "The Onion," as Tim, Ken, and Gus call it (they found it on the trail). The Onion is red and fresh and makes the meal perfect.

Hiking out already? I'm just getting acclimated—more or less—I think to myself. We do a bit of cross country hiking and soon are at Piute Pass again. From here, it's all downhill. Yay! And then the trail brings me right to a feast: Friends of the Inyo Board Members Sydney and Martin greet us with an abundance of watermelons, chips, salsa, and guacamole! And cold beer! I think of all the volunteer projects I've been on, and realize this one has the warmest welcome back!

As I drive north, I'm overwhelmed with emotions and feelings of deepest appreciation for what Friends of the Inyo does and the excitement that I've been a part of their wilderness work.

I'm at my favorite, almost-wild beach, on a weekday when there's no one there, even if it's only thirty miles from home, and it's New York. I go in. The ocean takes me in, inviting and soothing: it's okay, you're home. And yet I long for the Sierra, its bluest skies and pines, pristine lakes and creeks, white boulders and glaciers, and wonder where home really is.







Crew members 7ak & Tyler balance work with play. Photos by Ken Miller

TRAIL AMBASSADORS

Practicing the Art of Seeing

by Lauren Newey, Trail Ambassador

The author Annie Dillard wrote in her essay, "Seeing," an account of a group of blind people that underwent cataract surgery to allow them to see for the first time. When the bandages were removed they were exposed to an entirely new world of color and shape that was initially too overwhelming after a life of learning to calculate depth through touch and sound. However as the fresh eyes began to adapt to their new ability, they became more in awe of their surroundings. With this gift of seeing the world for the first time they saw the details that most of us take for granted.

Most humans have learned a big picture approach to taking in our surroundings. Our obsession with efficiency doesn't allow the time to observe the details. Time is money. We must get from point A to point B as fast as possible. We are constantly plagued by the tasks we have to do back home or the important meeting we must attend next week. We're anxious, impatient and always thinking about what's next. The beauty of landscape has the ability to soothe our nervous system while the vastness of the wilderness can humble our trivial stresses. But for so many of us, it is just a tiny fraction of our time spent. We move on with our lives with only a fleeting recognition of the relaxation our passage through nature briefly provided.

With our priorities elsewhere, it becomes ever more important to drink up our time spent in nature, to savor every moment and recognize that this place is not just a huge aesthetically pleasing picture for us to look at. It is the diminishing environment that our wild ancestors once thrived in. We must respect wide open space for the purity of its grandiosity, but also for the individual pieces that make up the whole. By breaking down the hugeness of the landscape, it becomes more accessible, more relatable.

Yes, the flowers are pretty, but they become ever more fascinating as we investigate their structure, their petal shape, their particular hue set off by other contrasting shades nearby. Many of the plants are edible with medicinal uses, and as we learn to identify their shapes and fragrances, we create a multi-sensory memory of the place. The granite monoliths on the skyline are pleasing from a distance, but as we get closer we see that every block is made up of interlocking crystals formed from the imperceptibly slow cooling of magma. The pockets of trees are made up of entities whose structure and growth pattern tell the story of the tree's life, what it has witnessed and tolerated to survive thus far. Every alpine lake possesses its own specific shade of blue-green.

You can recognize these traits from a scientific perspective if that's how your brain works, or keep it simple by practicing the art of seeing, by slowing down enough to notice the details and ponder the history. By letting go of the inner chatter and anxieties that we humans are so good at creating.

It takes repeated reminders to slow down and truly see, but when we do we allow ourselves a kinship that is so often forgotten. Seeing is a gift we can take with us anywhere. A gift that creates lasting connections with our surroundings and reminds us that we have a much stronger relationship to this landscape than as mere visitors in pretty scenery; the Sierra is one fraction of what remains of our disappearing natural home.



Trail Ambassador David Wieland gets to work on the Starkweather Trail.

THANK YOU!

A huge thank you goes out to the following partners and sponsors for making the Trail Ambassador Program happen in 2018:

- Eastside Sports
- Inyo National Forest
- Mammoth Lakes Recreation
- Mt. Williamson Motel & Base Camp
- National Forest Foundation
- Patagonia
- Rock Creek Lakes Resort
- Southern California Edison
- Town of Mammoth Lakes
- The Westin Monache Resort



Trail Ambassador Robin Hirsch shares fungal fun on an interpretive hike.

Photo: Frich Warkentine

EXPLORATION

A DOG AMONG KINGS

by Jeff Kozak

"When you are in perfect condition there seems to be no end to your endurance, your appetite or your enjoyment."

- Bolton Coit Brown

Like the underbelly of a Sierra Wave lighting up with the ephemeral simmer of sunset, the vision that fleetingly flashed across my mind stopped me in my tracks. It burned with the intensity of alpenglow; and then it was gone. Visibly startled, the slender pole of the cramped, ultralight tent I refer to as my "glorified bivy sack" dropped to the ground as my eyes scanned the talus sprawling downward off of North Cotter to the meadowside patch of dirt claimed as my own for the night. What I was looking for, I did not know. Something to ground me in reality, in the present, perhaps? The feeling had been as palpable as it was improbable. Attention returning to camp setup chores, it was quickly forgotten.

Hiking in from Onion Valley that morning, the trail was packed and I found myself, as I typically do on solo outings, retreating inward, generally only speaking when spoken to. Not unfriendly by any stretch; just avoiding the butterflying of the social. Eye contact primarily with the sublime beauty in all directions. Cresting Glen Pass without breaking stride I cruised silently by several backpackers, but before I could focus on the plummeting descent to the Rae Lakes, my eyes were suddenly pulled to the right, catching sight of two people I nearly passed without noticing. Friendly 'hellos' and they vanished behind me.

I was on a quick 2-day-1-night fastpack to explore Sixty Lakes Basin, climb Mt Cotter, and get as far as I felt comfortable up Mt Clarence King, a peak that loomed much larger in Sierra mountaineering lore than its diminutive 12,905 foot stature would generally infer. Wandering blissfully without itinerary past countless blue jewels shimmering in late afternoon sunlight, I arced around the northernmost lake, realizing that, due to my aimless route, it now made most sense to find my limits on Clarence King's granite proving grounds first, before climbing the sure thing of Cotter's third class further south on the King Spur. The basin was surprisingly devoid of humanity, but, as I ascended to the upper lakes in search of a timberline camp, a tent appeared below with two people perched on a lakeside rock outcrop. Were they the same folks I had stealthily—or so I thought—passed on my earlier ramble through the lake chain, I wondered?

Not on my typical daily ultramarathon-distance backcountry mission, I lingered through a coffee-soaked sunrise. Accustomed to breaking camp in the dark to be on the move at first light, the marmot-like lethargy was luxurious. Gaining access to King's South Ridge via a saddle at 12,100 feet was straightforward, as was the approach to the headwall of the South Face. Remaining as true to the ridge as I felt comfortable kept my feet on fun, solid rock and out of the loose-scree innards where braided use trails wound around each other like sandy snakes. However, with an

alpine repertoire heavy on endurance and light on the technical, I met my comfort zone endgame disappointingly early.

Playing around with several route variations, and testing the downclimbing before gaining too much air beneath my feet, I found myself increasingly spooked, and bailed. I had hoped to at least reach the base of the summit block to see with my own eyes the crux move, capping what is largely considered the most difficult rock climb in 19th century American mountaineering history. Perspective changes dramatically when you're up close and personal, but that viewing platform still seemed impossibly far away, especially for an ultrarunner in worn-out trailrunning shoes. On to Mt Cotter.

Retracing my steps, I heard voices. Two people had just crested the ridge. Intercepting them just above the saddle we fell immediately into friendly conversation that quickly pinged from my minutes-old summit bid bail, to where we were from (Eastsiders, all), and finally to my two-day itinerary and dayhike-sized pack that contained my already broken camp. The interaction was as if between old friends reconnecting. Complete strangers, yet I felt like I knew them. The infinite silence of a calm alpine rushed in to fill the brief conversational pause...

"Well, we've got the gear if you want to join us..."

My head spun with a twisted sense of *déjà vu* for something that hadn't yet happened. For a moment that felt like an eternity, I was unable to respond, staring, disbelieving, straight through these two strangers into a vision from the evening before that was now unfolding exactly as it had flashed across my mind.

"Wouldn't want to slow you down," I stammered, vocally backstepping through lack of experience excuses while onsighting a pumpy list of suddenly numerous hangdog rationalizations.

"We're not in a hurry. Got all day."

Like that morning headspace when dreamscapes and waking reality collide, my brain struggled to process. Besides, one doesn't—or shouldn't—go climbing with just anyone, randomly. The circle of trust in a climbing system needs to be unbroken, absolute. The complete trust, and immediate bond, I felt with these two was wholly inexplicable; but it was most definitely there.

After a few more minutes of casual chatting, I accepted their invitation and we turned to The King, talking nonstop through most of the approach. We roped up at the exact spot I had bailed, which underscored the appropriateness of my earlier decision. Amy led, placing three pieces of protection, I followed with a borrowed harness which we then lowered for Jason to clean from

EXPLORATION

the caboose position; but not before I demonstrated how choice of footwear can take a 5.4 rating up a few clicks.

Uninitiated in granite crack climbing to begin with, I immediately regretted my decision to make this trip the swan song journey of my Brooks Cascadias with blown out uppers and worn-smooth outsoles. My hand jamming was passable but my footwear was frictionless as I flash-pumped my forearms while my feet Fred-Flinstoned up the steep slab. "Fairly sure I smelled burning rubber," Jason laughed. The second short pitch went much more gracefully and, suddenly, there the summit block was. It had been much closer than I realized all along.

Savoring a magnificent late-summer early afternoon on a flat perch beneath the true summit, a wave of anxiety washed over my irie meditation. It occurred to me that I wouldn't be downclimbing with a toprope belay; rather I would be rappelling.

I hadn't rappelled since a basic college rock climbing course over twenty years ago; which essentially meant I hadn't rappelled. Hesitatingly, and somewhat embarrassingly, I brought this up. Amy and Jason seemed unconcerned. A quick lesson, quicker "practice" on level rock, and I found myself getting into lowering position.

Presuming a proper anchor setup, which we had, the mechanics seemed simple enough... lean back so your feet are pushing against the

rock, keep your brake hand well below the level of the belay device and, never, ever, let go of the rope with the brake hand. No amount of simplicity though, completely overcomes the absolutely against-instincts-feeling of leaning backwards over a cliff to lower oneself. The 8mm rope seemed like pack-lashing cordelette in my hands; shockingly narrower-feeling than the 9.3mm rope I regularly used in The Gorge. It was difficult to believe there would be enough friction in the system to prevent the need for an alarming, arm-pumping grip with the brake hand.

But the friction was plentiful. Lowering myself, joy replaced anxiety almost immediately, and while my gaze fixed upon the summit block my mind travelled back to August of 1896 as I thought to myself, "What an apropos place for a mountaineering classroom."

Clarence King—another prolific mountaineer of the era—may have his name adorn this graceful, triangular, summit, but it was

Bolton Brown who pulled off the daring, way ahead of its time, first ascent. After a failed attempt he returned for another go with forty feet of rope which he utilized several times simply to attain the base of the summit block. Being alone, the only real use he had of the rope was either tying a knot or a loop to jam in or toss around unseen cracks or angles, and hope like hell it held.

To attain the true high point Brown had to lasso a horn of rock, stand in and fully weight a loop he created for his feet, and swing out into free air and faith, before pulling himself up to the summit. Envisioning this as I descended, I shuddered with humility. Boldness is relative. I was a trail running dog amidst mountaineering kings. But, thanks to the kindness and patience of complete strangers, I had taken a giant step forward with my own confidence to move among the Sierra's granite castles.

Parting ways below the ridgeline saddle, I brought up the

positive premonition from the evening before as we reconnected the temporarily, yet perfectly for this particular outcome, synchronized dots of our convergent pathways. The mysterious ways of the universe tend to, in uncomprehending turn, get lost in dogmatic translation or dismissed as random. An openmindedness to possibilities seems the only route worth sending into the unknown.

Over a hundred years ago Robert Frost wrote about finding what

he was seeking in taking the road less traveled. As the main thoroughfares within the Sierra have become more congested I have found myself taking increasingly to cross country rambles to find the solitude I treasure. The roadless, traveled. The irony is in how this mindset shift led me to one of the most gratifying experiences in all of my backcountry pursuits.

Over the years, when asked what has attracted me so strongly to life in the Eastern Sierra, I often unequivocally answer: The Place. Mt Clarence King though, proved it is as much about: The People.

Jeff Kozak decided long ago that a passion for where he lived was more valuable than any potential benefits of residing where a specific career path led. The Eastern Sierra has been that passionate muse since discovering it during childhood summer trips, and ultrarunning/fastpacking has been the primary means of exploring this landscape of endless possibilities. He currently lives in Bishop ("You don't have to shovel heat...") with his longtime girlfriend, Margo, and can be reached at jeffkozak1974@gmail.com.



PARTNER PROFILE

In late August, Communications & Outreach Manager Alex Ertaud sat down on the deck of the Rock Creek Lakes Resort with Amy King Miller and Steve Miller, managers and co-owners of the aforementioned establishment. We touched on how they came into the role, what the place means to them, and how they came to be great supporters of the Trail Ambassador Program.

Alex Ertaud, Friends of the Inyo: So Amy, your parents, picked it [Rock Creek Lakes Resort] up in...

Amy King Miller, Rock Creek Lakes Resort: '79.

AE: Ok, so they were living down in Tom's Place in the winter? **AKM:** No, so they bought it in '79, and the first year they worked it either with the Colbys or the Raders, because it was a partnership. One of them stayed and worked the summer with my parents to show them the ropes. And from there on out, they were kind of on their own. And my grandparents helped them buy it, so they were up here during the summer. My mom's brother helped out some summers, and both my dad's sisters worked here a few summers, and so it's kind of like a

family thing. And they were not nearly as busy as us. They talked about how during the slow part of the day, they would all sit in the

back and play cards.

AE: Wow.

AKM: And we can't imagine. Even on our slow days I can't imagine us doing that. But what was the question? I feel like I didn't answer the question.

Stephen Miller, Rock Creek Lakes Resort: Yeah, you just took off.

AE: Where were they during the winter? They didn't live up here year around?

AKM: They did! For nine years, they lived up here in the winters. Originally they were hoping to get a winter thing going.

SM: Yeah they built two cabins off the bat that were fully winterized.

AKM: So they could rent them.

SM: And they did rent them out over the winter for a couple of years, and then they were just too much work.

AKM: Yeah they wanted to do a nordic ski resort in the winter. They were both really into racing during that time. And I think after a few winters—that's back when they didn't plow the road past Tom's Place—so after a few winters of shuttling guests all the way up the nine miles, on a snowmobile, with a sled.

AE: And back on an '80s snowmobile.

SM: Well we got a taste of that two winters ago, we lived up here...

AKM: And we used the same snowmobile [laughs]. **SM:** Same snowmobile. We got it running, it was an '81

Bombadier. Single ski in the front [chuckles]. **AKM:** It felt like we went back in time. It looks like a train, like the front of a train. There's just nothing sporty about it. It's like this

box on a track.

SM: Puts down a nice track though [laughs].

AE: I bet.

AKM: Anyways, they did that for nine years, and I think were getting progressively busier, and wanted to travel during the winter. And it was just slow and a lot of work. So they stopped doing that, and built a house in Sunny Slopes [south of Crowley], and in 1990, the house was done. So after those first nine years, just during the summer.

[...]

AE: So you said this is your fourth year co-managing it. What brought you guys back into the fold. Because I assume this was a part of your [Amy] childhood.

AKM: Yeah, my sister and I grew up here, and spent every summer of our life here. I've actually spent every summer—I've moved away a couple of times for school—but always have come back. I just love the Eastern Sierra. I'm sad when I'm leaving to go on a trip, and I enjoy my trip, but there's like an ache inside of me that makes me feel like this is my home. We just keep coming back—or kept coming back—and Steve was willing to do it. He was probably more excited about the idea at first than I was.

He was like, "We should take over this place." And I was like, "No, too much work." [Laughing]

And we just spent a few years deciding if we wanted to do that, and started managing, and I think really fully committed two or three years ago,

when we said, "OK, we're gonna do this." And so we've just kind of been in this take over process with my parents. And still really excited, still what I want to do.

AE: You mentioned a love of the Eastern Sierra broadly, but what does this place–Rock Creek–mean to you?

AKM: My parents actually had it for sale when I was in high school, and I was distracted just by being a teenager, but I would think about it sometimes and say, "Man, it's going to be really weird if it sells, and we can't just walk in the back door and be there". They took

it off the market after a while because they weren't getting offers that they wanted to sell it for. And I started thinking about it more and more and it was like, "Man, I really want that place to stay a part of our family." It is just so much a part of us. And I don't want to see it change that much. I guess we've changed it a little bit, you know getting rid of pies—that's a

AE: I wasn't going to bring it up [laughing].

SM: Those were dark times [laughing].

pretty big thing.

AKM: [Laughing] I think we had to just cut that off, just to figure out what we could do. And so now we've brought back the cobblers, and we've found a way to incorporate my mom's pie crust recipe—which is a huge thing for a lot of people—and use some of her filling recipes. So we don't have all the cream pies, and necessarily all the pies that we used to have, but we still have some that are just served deep-dish style and it's the same recipe with the crust and the filling. For us that's a doable way to keep her legacy going a little bit, but also be able to make it our own too.

AE: And at the end of the day, it's still serving delicious food. **AKM:** And the pies were awesome, they totally were, it just wasn't something that we were going to be able to carry and keep on doing personally.

SM: I didn't want to be the pie lady.

Amy & Steve Miller

PARTNER PROFILE

AKM: And I didn't want to be the pie lady. And we didn't want them to be made somewhere else. We wanted to keep the food under our control, and still serve really good food, but just do something that was doable for us.

AE: And make it your own a little bit.

SM: Something that we enjoy making.

[]

SM: And people need dessert, they have to have dessert. So I'm glad that we've found a way to continue the "pie." Which the definition of pie is a fruit filling topped with a pastry crust.

AE: And the cobbler fulfills that!

SM: Yeah, cobbler is in the category of pie according to the Webster dictionary. So, I just want that to be noted [smiling].

AKM: I think Steve really excitedly took over the restaurant portion, and he's excited about that and wants to keep growing that. That's a good thing to have, to have people stop in here and hang out.

AE: I mean the food's delicious.

AKM: A lot of the new stuff that's been added to the restaurant was your [Steve's] idea. That's your thing, the restaurant, and I just want this place to be an experience as a whole.

SM: Amy put a lot of pressure on me with the restaurant. She was stressed when we cut the pies. I think a lot was on Amy's shoulders, with people saying, "Why don't you just do what your mom did?"

AKM: And for me, this place needs to be about coming up, having a day at the lake or going on a hike, coming back, having a good meal, sitting on the porch, having a beer, looking at the mountains, that's what I want this place to be about.

SM: And we have seen that trending that way. People come in for breakfast early...

AKM: Then there's a gap period while people go on hikes. **SM:** So you know people were doing stuff. But with the pie, people were in here at 10:30, and most people didn't even know that the lake was right across the street.

AE: Really?

SM: We'd run out of pies, and they'd say, "Well I came all the way up here for pie." And I say, "Well, why don't you go for a hike or check out the lake?" "There's a lake?" [Laughing]

AKM: It just seems like people are exploring more.

SM: They don't feel that pressure to be here at a certain time, to get something that's going to run out.

AKM: Right, they're getting out and enjoying the canyon. **SM:** And the happy hours have been the same way. People come in late, to have an early dinner, after hiking.

[...]

AE: Well, now that we've talked about the past, and how you guys came to be a part of it, I want to talk about the way we [Friends of the Inyo and Rock Creek Lakes Resort] became partners. And that is through the Trail Ambassador program, which you generously support. I think Julia [Runcie, Stewardship Director] said it was one of the easiest pitches she's ever had to do. She said you were just so into it right off the bat.

SM: I've been hoping for something like it for a couple of years. **AKM:** I know, it was something we had kind of talked about. Getting involved with cleanups, or his mom was always saying how it would great to lead hikes out of the resort. But it would always seem...complicated.

AE: Yeah, and whenever you add something on top of what you're already doing, it gets tough. There are only so many hours. **AKM:** Yeah! So it was perfect. I didn't even know that you guys [FOI] were even doing that. So when Julia got in touch with us,



we were pretty stoked on it.

SM: Yeah, I didn't need any convincing.

AKM: No, it was definitely something we wanted to be a part of. Keeping this place clean, and educating people on how to take care of the environment, and just cool things about this area too. It's neat to be able to help with that.

AE: And we were talking about how it [Rock Creek Canyon] is not quite as busy as other spots; still very busy though. I mean if you go to Mosquito flats on a Saturday past 10 AM...good luck finding a parking spot. It's a very accessible hike, so it attracts a lot of people.

AKM: Right, you only have to hike about a half-mile in, and you're going to see amazing views.

AE: Yeah, and so I think having a presence in this canyon is so important.

SM: Yeah, before you guys started working up here, Raul–I think he was a volunteer ranger for the Forest Service–would come up everyday and hike up Little Lakes Valley. And he would tell us stories about how he had to tell a handful of people that they were doing something that wasn't super eco-friendly.

AKM: 'Cause they just didn't know. Or he would break up illegal fire rings.

SM: And he'd constantly be educating new people coming to the area. After hearing all that, with the fact that he's not doing it anymore...

AKM: Because he was just a volunteer.

SM: I was pretty worried about the state of the landscape.

AKM: Like what was going to happen? Who was going to take that?

SM: And fill his shoes, because he did alot.

AKM: And you guys [FOI] not only filled those shoes, but you took it a step further. You have cleanups, and guided hikes.

AE: Well, thanks to y'all! Without the support you were able to give us, we wouldn't have been able to do it all.

SM: That's the thing with you guys, we know exactly what our money is going towards.

AKM: Yeah, that was really cool. We got a schedule, and got to know exactly what events we were sponsoring.

SM: And we got a say in the dates.

AKM: It was really cool.

AE: Well again, thanks so much.

Log on and click on over to our blog to find out what year Rock Creek Lakes Resort was built, how Amy and Steve are keeping it all in the family, and what they have in store for the future; friendsoftheinyo.org/blog





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