

## 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 Zak & Tyler balance work with play. Photos by Ken Miller