



# **VOLUNTEER STEWARDSHIP EXPERIENCES: KEY LEARNINGS SUMMARY REPORT**

A guide for integrating volunteer stewardship experiences into visitor itineraries.

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This report provides context, case studies and best practice recommendations for organizations and businesses that are interested in supporting or developing visitor itineraries that include volunteer stewardship experiences.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Regenerative tourism is an approach that is predicated on the notion that the travel industry can be a force for good. Cultural, social and environmental impacts are all taken into consideration, along with the potential for economic impact. Travel Oregon defines “regenerative tourism” as more than “doing no harm” when traveling. The goal of regenerative tourism is for visitors to make a positive impact on a destination – leaving it better than they found it.

In Oregon, one potential approach to regenerative tourism is the integration of volunteer stewardship experiences into visitor itineraries. In response to unprecedented wildfires along the McKenzie River in September of 2020, a coalition of regional partners and local businesses aligned to create a series of organized trips based out of the town of McKenzie Bridge. Participants had the opportunity to engage in an immersive experience, visiting a small Oregon community and helping to take care of a landscape in need. In the process, it allowed them to deepen their connection to people, place, the community and each other.

This approach to travel has the potential to transform the industry, supporting a sustainable model that can better support Oregon’s communities, while ensuring that they have a stronger voice in how tourism is developed and managed. Over time, it can also help care for the surrounding natural landscape and infrastructure, to support the myriad recreational opportunities that are utilized by both visitors and residents.

For all its potential benefits, there may also be challenges. These types of itineraries are complex and require collaboration across land managers, destination organizations and small businesses. This approach cannot easily be replicated, as each itinerary must be custom built from the ground up, tailored to a unique place with consideration for local values. Given the complexity of partners and experiences involved, the trips can be quite expensive, making them less accessible to many travelers.

All of that said, this approach has real potential in Oregon. Given the spirit of collaboration that runs deep here, and stewardship ethos built into Oregonians’ DNA, there is a real opportunity for Oregon to build upon successful approaches and develop a model that could be replicated elsewhere. If successful, this approach can help normalize the concept of giving back while traveling and create immersive experiences that appeal to visitors, support Oregon’s communities while also taking care of the landscape. A regenerative approach to travel that integrates volunteer stewardship can help ensure that Oregon’s tourism industry will benefit current and future generations.

## OVERVIEW

This summary report provides a detailed overview of how to integrate volunteer stewardship opportunities into itineraries throughout Oregon. It will outline good practices for designing these opportunities and provide a blueprint for working through the necessary steps and channels to bring these experiences to market.

The report will:

- Provide resources for Regional Destination Management/Marketing Organizations (RDMO), local Destination Management/Marketing Organizations (DMO), outfitters and guides, and other tourism partners interested in developing volunteer vacations.
- Consider a successful pilot along the McKenzie River, which was implemented by a group of innovative partners, with Travel Oregon's support, in the wake of the 2020 wildfires.
- Consider related opportunities to normalize the concept of giving back.

The focus of this summary report aligns with Travel Oregon's vision, which is to create a welcoming destination where tourism drives economic prosperity, benefits the natural environment and celebrates rich, diverse cultures. In Travel Oregon's [10-Year Strategic Vision](#), regenerative tourism is identified as a key lens that will be used to implement the organization's destination stewardship approach. This approach includes activities that "give back" and create lasting positive impacts on the environment, communities and future generations.

While this report will primarily focus on the specific opportunity of expanding the scope of stewardship experiences or volunteer vacations in Oregon, it will also provide a brief overview of the broader concept of regenerative tourism.

## INTRODUCTION

Oregonians have long cherished the state's vast natural environments and public lands featuring varied landscapes and ecosystems, with boundless opportunities for outdoor recreation. For travelers, scenic beauty and outdoor recreation are one of the primary drivers of visitation to and around Oregon. Recreation on Oregon's public lands has been on the rise for several years, but the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated this trend, posing new challenges for resource management agencies and gateway communities. At the same time, catastrophic wildfires and other natural disasters have limited access to popular destinations, disrupted visitation patterns and impacted communities throughout the state. In response to these evolving dynamics, several

tourism stakeholders have worked to employ strategies that integrate volunteer stewardship opportunities into visitor itineraries. This approach to tourism development has created direct opportunities for travelers to engage with efforts to restore natural landscapes, maintain and improve trails, and help provide economic stimulus to impacted communities.

## OVERVIEW OF REGENERATIVE TOURISM

With a regenerative approach to tourism, the emphasis is not on growth, but rather a consideration of how tourism can deliver social, cultural and environmental benefits, in addition to positive economic impacts. Travel Oregon defines “regenerative tourism” as more than “doing no harm” when traveling. The goal of regenerative tourism is for visitors to make a positive impact on a destination – leaving it better than they found it. Simply put, “sustainability is about making sure that the resources we enjoy today will still be available for the generations that follow; regeneration is about making sure that what we do now feeds back into the system from which we benefit.” (World Travel & Tourism Council).

Classically, tourism development strategies focus on meeting the needs of visitors, developing infrastructure and related itineraries to cater to their interests and desires. A regenerative approach shifts that approach and starts with the community, affirming its self-identity and deeply honoring the values held by residents. With this starting point, it becomes possible to develop and communicate about visitor experiences that help reinforce local values and culture, while also appealing to visitors. The advantage of this approach is that these efforts will resonate with visitors that share these values, leading to a dynamic where visitors and residents will ultimately connect over shared passion. Most importantly, the community has a greater sense of ownership in the development and management of tourism.

## INTRODUCTION TO REGENERATIVE VISITOR ITINERARIES

A volunteer service project can be embedded within a larger itinerary and paired with other visitor experiences that may include outdoor recreation, cultural heritage and/or agritourism. These visitor experiences could include whitewater rafting, mountain biking, or hiking, paired with a visit to a nearby restaurant, brew pub or winery. In this way, it is possible to design an itinerary that will find the appropriate balance between giving back and having fun.

## CASE STUDY: MCKENZIE BRIDGE PROJECT

In early September of 2020, high winds and continued dry weather led to the rapid expansion of multiple wildfires in Oregon. The Holiday Farm Fire originated along the Willamette National Forest's upper McKenzie River, and quickly spread west through various nearby communities. When finally contained, the Holiday Farm Fire had burned 173,383 acres. The communities of Vida, Blue River, Mohawk, McKenzie Bridge, Leaburg and Waterville were all evacuated, and roughly 400 homes and businesses were destroyed in the blaze. Tourism, which has been an important economic engine for many of these communities, effectively ground to a halt.

As the full scope of the devastation became clear, local and regional partners recognized that an innovative approach was needed to bring visitors back to the area. The McKenzie River Regenerative Travel Project was born. The goal of the project was to increase visitation to the McKenzie River gateway communities while improving access and dispersion among recreation opportunities, but also provided an opportunity for visitors to actively participate in recovery efforts. The project involved several key stakeholders and partners:

- **Willamette Valley Visitors Association:** Regional destination management organization (RDMO) that championed the need for this work and convened partners to implement.
- **Travel Lane County:** Local destination management organization (DMO) that supported marketing and promotion of the stewardship events.
- **Cascade Volunteers:** NGO partner of the Willamette National Forest, working to engage volunteers working on stewardship projects.
- **U.S. Forest Service:** Land manager for Willamette National Forest, where the stewardship projects were located.
- **First Nature Tours:** An established Portland-based outfitter that took the lead on marketing and running the trips.
- **Global Family Travels:** A global outfitter that specializes in regenerative travel opportunities and effective marketing.
- **Horse Creek Lodge:** A local outfitter and lodging entity based in McKenzie Bridge with strong local connections.
- **Travel Oregon:** Supported the project and funded elements through a grant from their 2020-21 Destination Ready program.

The McKenzie River Regenerative Travel Project launched a series of three itineraries, each focused on different types of outdoor recreation and stewardship activities. See the table below for itinerary details.

Itinerary Classification	Stewardship Project	Fun Activity	Difficulty Level
Nature Lovers	Tree planting in the Terwilliger burn area	Hiking at Blue Pool + Rafting the McKenzie River	Easy
Hikers	Trail maintenance in the McKenzie River Ranger District	Hiking at Blue Pool + Rafting the McKenzie River	Moderate
Mountain Bikers	Trail work on the McKenzie River Trail	Rafting the McKenzie River + mountain biking the McKenzie River Trail	Difficult

These itineraries intentionally focused on “spreading the love” throughout the community of McKenzie Bridge, engaging with an array of partners and supporting a variety of restaurants and small businesses. In the process, the project generated much goodwill and press coverage. One of the weekends was sponsored by a local brewery, which increased awareness of the opportunity and helped reduce the cost for participants. This support resulted in a public relations win for the brewery, while also increasing engagement.

It is important to note that not all communities or regions will have a natural disaster to compel action and broader collaboration. More often, this type of endeavor will be the product of interested partners working together to foster regenerative strategies, to merge tourism and stewardship with the goal of protecting, caring for and improving local communities and regional assets.

**THE PROCESS**

Timeline

When designing these types of itineraries, one of the most important considerations is to allow for plenty of lead time. It can take months to connect with various partners, work to find alignment and create a reasonable plan on how best to proceed. If an itinerary includes experiences on public land, it’s required to work with the appropriate agency to secure the necessary permits. These timelines and processes can be highly variable. In general, a good guideline is to begin planning and design six to nine months prior to going to market. While it is possible that the process could take even longer, this timeline will work in most instances is the effort is aligned with a group of key partners.

## Partner Engagement and Related Considerations

Regenerative travel experiences aim to meet the needs of the local community. And thus, to successfully design a regenerative itinerary, it is important to work with a variety of partners and stakeholders and tourism partners are a solid starting place. Connect with RDMOs, organizations that oversee one of Oregon's seven different tourism regions. RDMOs partner with Travel Oregon to achieve the vision and stewardship approach. Local DMOs are key partners and often collaborate with RDMOs to leverage budgets, advertising, services and information for the benefit of all tourism entities in their destination. The RDMO and DMO partners can help make connections and provide insight on key community stakeholders. Travel Oregon may be able to support the design and development of itineraries and offer help with promotion and sales.

There are other elements that should be considered in working with communities. It is important to ensure that relationships and any related agreements are mutually beneficial. An excellent way to spread equity is to be sure to include a range of local products and services throughout an itinerary. This will help spread the love throughout small businesses in the community. Consider supporting organizations that work beyond tourism, including social enterprises that provide training and skills, and may be considering a larger context of impact. Additional partners that should be considered when designing a regenerative itinerary:

- **Land and Natural Resource Managers:** itineraries on public lands or waterways generally require specific permissions and/or permits to proceed. Consult with the appropriate management agency to learn more; build in ample lead time.
- **Tour Operators & Guides:** Tour operators can play a key role in implementing an itinerary, providing logistics, transportation and/or guiding experiences. Tour operators and guides generally hold deep knowledge in planning itineraries, including logistics, permitting needs, insurance considerations and more. They are also likely to have marketing and branding expertise, to help take a trip to market and secure bookings.
- **Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs):** Often, NGOs that specialize in volunteer stewardship have the relationships, equipment, skills, insurance and training necessary to host a volunteer work party. These NGOs may have established relationships with land managers.
- **Overnight Accommodation:** Accommodations are a critical component of any multi-day itinerary, and there are a wide range of options to consider, from camping to glamping to luxury accommodations. Lodging is a major element of the trip cost and thus may dictate the target audience. An extended wilderness outing will almost certainly need to build in a camping option, which can help

reduce overall participant cost. A higher-end camping opportunity can also minimize costs, while also offering more comfort and amenities. Some entities may be willing to reduce costs if there is commitment to fill a block of rooms. In some cases, the lodging entity may also be an outfitter, which could help streamline planning and facilitate the permitting process.

- **Food and Dining:** Food is another critical component of any well-organized trip, as it can make a lasting impression and help differentiate an itinerary. In designing a regenerative itinerary, an optimal strategy is to work with an array of local and hopefully sustainable restaurants, food vendors, and farmers, helping maximize the economic impact. Ideally food vendor sources regionally, further helping local businesses and minimizing the carbon footprint of transportation. Over time, establishing relationships with local restaurants, farmers and food vendors can help deepen the connection to the community and lead to long-term partnerships.

It is important to do advance research and develop a draft stewardship concept before connecting with the appropriate resource management agency. Identifying and establishing contact with stewardship organizations that work in the region is a great way to identify specific needs and areas where the work can be located. Next steps are to arrange a meeting with the appropriate land manager, who will review the concept and provide additional input and direction. If the proposal is to move forward, it will be necessary to secure volunteer service agreements. Other considerations include insurance, emergency response plans and liability waivers. Partnering with an established tour operator is the best way to ensure that all these necessary components are in place.

### **Designing Regenerative Visitor Itineraries**

When designing a regenerative itinerary with a volunteer stewardship component, there are several factors that will need to be considered. In general, design an itinerary that builds in time for service, or giving back, while also allowing an appropriate amount of time for local adventure and/or relaxation. For most participants, a half-day or full-day service project will be enough, paired with two to three days of other scheduled activities (examples could include hiking, mountain biking, whitewater rafting, cultural heritage and/or agritourism experiences). Built in opportunities downtime or group reflection on the impact of the volunteer project can be impactful.

Regarding volunteer stewardship work parties, it is important to consider the type, scale and scope of the project. Ideally, include a project that is both engaging and impactful, something that will have a clear and lasting impact. A related question to ask as part of the design would be: Will participants be able to return in several months (or possibly

years) and still observe the improvement they contributed to? If the answer is no, it is possible that the participant will see their efforts as ephemeral, and not truly providing the lasting impact they had hoped to contribute.

The related challenge is that the more engaging and impactful projects often require a higher level of technical expertise, training and/or oversight. For example, removal of invasive species and tree planting are activities that require a bit of instruction and are generally suitable for beginners. Whereas trail maintenance projects can vary greatly in terms of the level of skill and expertise required. Some projects such as trail brushing have low barriers to entry and are suitable for beginners and younger participants. These projects often present valuable learning opportunities, however, they do not always deliver the same sense of accomplishment, or the satisfaction that a lasting improvement has been made.

Other projects require a much higher level of instruction and oversight and will demand a smaller ratio of volunteer crew leaders to participants. Many of these questions will be answered through partnership with the appropriate organization that will be facilitating the project.

### **Funding Opportunities**

One challenge of these types of experiences is that the involvement of various partners, providers and facilitated experiences ultimately increases the cost of delivering on these itineraries. As such, the price passed along to the consumer is often higher than the typically packaged itinerary. This can be a difficult for many visitors to understand, as there is often a sense that the volunteer service should mitigate some of the costs.

The best option to mitigate these expenses is to identify a reliable source of funding, perhaps a business or R/DMO that is willing to sponsor or underwrite a certain number of organized trips. You can also work with lodging and dining providers to see if they might be willing and able to donate a portion. That said, this detracts from the original intention, which is to extend benefits to smaller businesses throughout the community. Perhaps the best opportunity is to work with a NGO organization, to help them secure a grant that can help fund the stewardship work and other related elements of the trip.

### **Marketing/Branding**

Once an itinerary has been developed and finalized, with the necessary permits and arrangements secured, the itinerary is ready to market. This is also the time to work closely with a local DMO to determine if and how they might be willing to offer support and/or promotion of an organized trip. Assuming the DMO has been involved in the

development process, they are likely to be invested in its success and more willing to help promote. Business partners and other sponsors of the packaged regenerative itineraries may also be willing to build promotion into their existing communication channels, helping to spread the word and possibly even reach a new target market.

### Cautionary Advice

Designing regenerative visitor experiences is a very time-intensive process, with a range of variables that are likely unique to the project. Working with a wide array of resource managers may prove challenging, as policies and restrictions may vary greatly, even within the same agency. In short, these are not experiences that can easily be replicated, in other regions or perhaps even in the next watershed. As such, the focus is going to be centered on impact rather than profit margin. In short, while these offerings may be an important part of ensuring that your business is committed to giving back to Oregon's communities and landscapes, you may need to diversify your overall portfolio of offerings to ensure that you have a healthy and balanced revenue stream.

Finally, there is the element of managing client expectations. It is likely that participants have a wide range of previous experience so it's important to market and frame the opportunity in a way that aligns with their expectations. Marketing materials need to provide detailed descriptions of the experiences, along with an accurate overview of how the service project will benefit the landscape and local community. Tracking metrics over time is an excellent way to demonstrate impact. During the trip, it is important to provide appropriate framing for each of the experiences, which will help ensure that expectations are clearly outlined.

Apart from offering regenerative visitor itineraries, there are other ways that tourism partners can begin to normalize the concept of giving back while traveling. In Central Oregon, Visit Bend promotes the Pledge for the Wild initiative, which encourages recreation enthusiasts to donate \$1 per hour for time spent in enjoying the region's outdoors. These donations support the [Bend Sustainability Fund](#), a grant program funding projects that protect, steward and create sustainable recreational resources and outdoor experiences in the region. Another emerging trend is tour operators committing to supporting conservation and stewardship initiatives through their business practices. Based in Gold Beach, South Coast Tours provides the opportunity for customers to opt-in to a \$1 or larger contribution to the Elakha Alliance, which is working to re-introduce sea otters to the Oregon Coast. On a global scale, many tour operators are working to attain B Corp certification, a designation that is earned through high social and environmental performance, along with business practices that support accountability and transparency.

In addition to supporting these types of businesses and stewardship initiatives through seed funding, DMOs can center more of their communications efforts on promotion of stewardship opportunities. Inclusion of this type of messaging in promotional campaigns can help plant the seed and encourage visitors to consider building these activities into their travel plans. DMOs can also help promote tour operators and other small businesses that are employing regenerative tactics as part of their business practices. All of these examples help support and normalize the concept of “giving back” while traveling, which can lead to a small but significant changes in perception for visitors and residents. These practices can also lead to substantive change and tangible impacts over time, creating positive outcomes for communities and landscapes.

## CONCLUSION

Integrating volunteer stewardship experiences into visitor itineraries has clear benefits for Oregon’s landscape, communities, recreational infrastructure and the various tourism partners who are involved in sharing all these treasures with visitors. If these types of experiences were to become more ingrained in the fabric of the tourism industry in Oregon, it would provide greater support for the natural resources and destinations that support the visitor economy and spread a broader range of benefits to local communities. A regenerative approach to travel that integrates volunteer stewardship can help ensure that Oregon’s tourism industry will be a force for good, for now and for generations to come. It also represents a real opportunity for Oregon to help lead the way, embracing a new way of traveling that can help shape the tourism industry as a genuine force for good. If successful, this initiative will help protect and enhance Oregon’s communities and treasured landscapes, with clear benefits for residents and visitors. At the same time, there are opportunities to integrate other regenerative strategies into Oregon’s tourism industry, to normalize the concept of giving back while traveling and ensure that it remains part of Oregon’s DNA.

## APPENDIX

### References

*Catch Magazine*, "The McKenzie Fire" by Kelley Moen

<https://catchmagazine.net/article/the-mckenzie-fire-by-kelley-moen/>

### List of Interviews / Conversations

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- Alyssa Archer, Cascade Volunteers
- Dave Lacey, Oregon Coast Visitors Association
- Elisa Spampinato, Transformative Travel Council
- Gabriel Amadeus Tiller, Oregon Timber Trail Alliance
- Jake Hauptert, Transformative Travel Council
- Jennifer Spatz, Global Family Tours
- Jordan McCauley, Travel Oregon
- Justin Randolph, Untrodden
- Kieron Wilde, First Nature Tours
- Marina Laurent, Transformative Travel Council
- Matt Peterson, United States Forest Service
- Natalie Ferraro, Trailkeepers of Oregon
- Nick Gibson, Transcascadia
- Serena Gordon, Visit Bend
- Scott Bricker, Travel Oregon

## RESOURCES

### [Travel Oregon's 10-Year Strategic Vision](#)

Adopted in June 2022, this vision and the objectives within it serve as Travel Oregon's road map to guide the organization's work.

### [Commercial Operations on Public Lands](#)

Oregon has a wealth of natural areas well suited for outdoor adventure and volunteer stewardship. There is a diverse array of landowners and agencies overseeing management of these lands. Contact info and other relevant information can be found at this link.

It is advised that you fully research permit requirements as early as possible to ensure your business will be able to operate in your preferred location before you invest significant resources in developing a concept or business.

### [Travel Oregon Tour Operators, Guides & Outfitters Management Guide](#)

A collection of resources with useful information regarding specific requirements and regulations that businesses need to be in line with to operate legally in the State of Oregon.

### [Travel Oregon Tour Operators, Guides & Outfitters Technical Assistance](#)

A resource for those seeking technical guidance on how to navigate the permitting process, connect with customers and other components related to running a tour operator, guiding or outfitting business in Oregon.