

The Power of Wilderness: A Citizen Science Experience
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“Embrace the suck!” I thought to myself every time I felt my hip belt rub into my raw sides or the stinging under my shoulder blades. It’s something a good friend and an experienced backpacker told me to remember in preparing for the three Citizen Science trips I participated in this summer.

The Citizen Science program through the Wilderness Institute at the University of Montana has been taking volunteers of all ages and backgrounds into the backcountry since 2005. It is an effort to engage citizens in the monitoring of the ecological and social aspects of our wild lands. Many of this past summer’s trips also involved trail work to better improve access.



Backpacking with a crosscut lobbed over your shoulder is no joke, but in the wilderness, you’re always going to be somewhat uncomfortable. Whether it rains during your entire four-mile hike into base camp soaking everything on the first day of a trip or you accidentally get poison ivy on your backside, nature’s obstacles are always there to challenge you.

But as challenging as it is, being in the wilderness brings you back to life.



My first trip this summer was to the Salmon River Breaks area of the Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness in Idaho. Our group, led by our fearless leaders, Jesse, Julia and Janine, was sent to clear a trail that used to be an old mining route.

We cleared the trail, which ran along the river and then skyrocketed up the mountainside, with cross cuts, axes and my personal favorite, the “ninja sword”. Along the way, we also collected data using GPS units.

Throughout the hiking and trail clearing, we learned about native plants, the history of the area and gorged ourselves on huge swaths of huckleberries and thimbleberries that weaved through fields of vibrant Indian paintbrush and blooming bear grass.

On our final day, after hiking back to our vehicles at the trailhead, we drove the six hours back to Missoula. As we wended up and out of the wilderness, I thought about the previous five days and felt more fulfilled and full of life than I have in a long time. It’s a feeling that only a strong connection to and respect for nature can evoke.

This first trip was the most powerful for me, but my other two trips brought about the same feelings of fullness and life.

The Salmon River Breaks is a rugged and harsh environment. It's also one of the most beautiful places I have ever been. At the top of the canyon, the spectacular views make you forget about your burning calves and heavy breathing.

I realized that because we had cleared that trail, now others could go and experience the same beautiful, rugged land I did. And when more people enter and embrace the wilderness, our awareness of the need to protect these precious places also grows.



Laura Sheer participated in the Wilderness Institute's Citizen Science Program this summer as a volunteer and extern. She contributed 156 volunteer hours to trail clearing and trail condition surveys in the Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness. The Citizen Science Program is funded in part by the National Forest Foundation and the USDA Forest Service.