

# Unplugged!

## Youth corps get outside to help Colorado municipalities

By Jennifer Freeman, Colorado Youth Corps Association associate director

Getting kids off the couch and outside isn't easy these days. With the increasing prevalence of television, iPods, MySpace, video games, extra curricular over-scheduling and busy parents, many children and youth today are missing a healthy dose of the great outdoors. Too much virtual reality and not enough of the real thing may be more harmful than we previously thought.

Colorado youth conservation corps offer "the real thing" to more than 800 young people each year, and your town or city can be the beneficiary of this youthful energy. That is because youth corps are employment, not recreation programs, meaning that youth participants work full-time on projects for local, state and federal land managers.

Richard Louv, in his book *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature Deficit Disorder*, warns of the dangers

associated with a limited connection to nature. Research indicates that the prevalence of loneliness, depression and attention problems – not to mention obesity – increase when kids spend too little time outside.

Clearly, living and working in the out-of-doors with a youth corps is a powerful antidote to "nature deficit disorder." Not to mention that youth participants are helping to create outdoor opportunities for other young people in their communities by constructing and maintaining recreation amenities.

Sure, corpsmembers have fun and enjoy being outside with their new friends, but they also get hot (or cold), sweaty and dirty restoring a trail, installing a fence, planting willows and even eradicating tamarisk. They learn basic work skills such as how to take direction, stay on task, work as a team and accomplish a job to specification. Even a video game with awesome graphics is a poor substitute for this kind of reality, and Colorado corps have 5,380 alums who can attest to this.

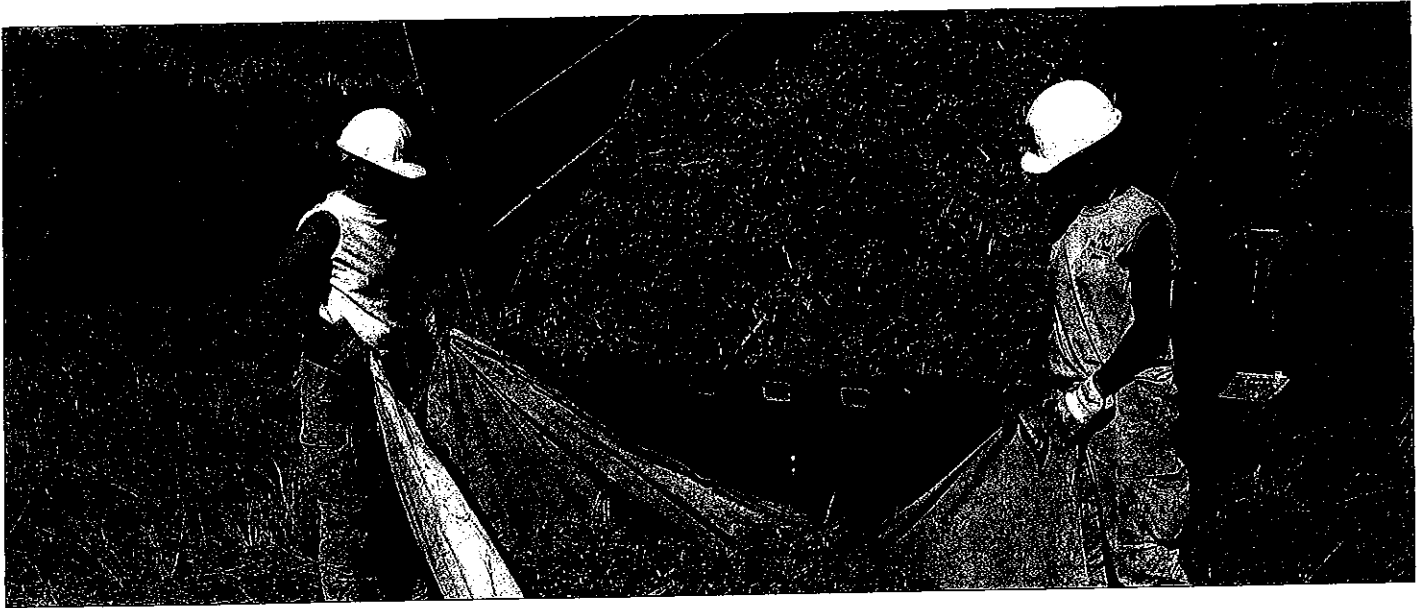
### What are youth corps?

Corps are crew-based employment and training programs for young people, ages 16-25. Based on the Civilian Conservation Corps of the 1930s New Deal days, youth corps programs put their participants to task on labor-intensive conservation and stewardship projects.

Not your average youth development program, youth corps produce tangible results for cities and towns. Crews make a sweat and muscle investment in the community, leaving behind a restored trail, a newly constructed fence or defensible space around public buildings. What the youth take with them is a paycheck, a college scholarship and their pride. They bring their friends and families to showcase their hard work for years after their corps term is complete. Greg Clifton, Ridgway town manager and sponsor of many corps projects, says, "crew members continue to return to the project site to see the progression of all the native plantings, the use of the park and the enhanced wildlife habitat that they helped create."

All of the state's 11 corps programs focus on environmental education and training in a variety of life and job skills for their corpsmembers. Some corps even offer GED courses in the evenings. Participants earn a wage and may receive an AmeriCorps Education Award between \$1,000 and \$4,725 for college or trade school. The Colorado Youth Corps Association, which supports the network of youth





corps, has distributed more than \$1 million in Awards to more than 1,000 young people since 1999.

One of the most common questions asked about youth corps is “who do corps enroll and how do you find them?” Finding applicants is not hard. Statewide, corps have about three applicants for every available position, especially in the summer. Clearly, there is a need and a desire for corps – even if there aren’t electrical outlets outdoors! Many who join a corps live in neighborhoods with no open space or trails and whose families don’t take weekend camping trips.

While some, but not all, corpsmembers might be considered at risk, all who enroll display enthusiasm for making a difference in their community and look forward to working in the out of doors. Some corpsmembers have dropped out of high school and are looking for a way to finish their GED and gain work experience, some plan to return to high school or college, and still others enroll as a step toward a career in natural resources.

### **A life altered**

Yvette Chischillie, a member of the Navajo nation, not only worked for the corps but made the corps

work for her. The first member of her community to join, Chischillie began at the Southwest Conservation Corps as a corpsmember, became an assistant crewleader on a trail construction crew and, in the fall of 2006, became the crewleader for the SCC’s Wildfire Prevention Program in the Four Corners area. “Having the opportunity to work, help and make a difference to the environment and community is an expression of [my] attitude towards helping others,” she says.

Chischillie earned two AmeriCorps Education Awards worth more than \$3,300. “This winter, I plan on taking the opportunity to use the AmeriCorps scholarships I earned to continue my education.”

According to Harry Bruell, SCC executive director, Chischillie displayed courage and leadership in each position she held in the corps. “She managed the crew dynamics. She led the technical aspects of the project. She incorporated lessons focused on the local environment, Navajo culture and local history into each workday, broadening the experience for all corpsmembers. When difficulties arose, she found solutions. When SCC had to make a major presentation to a local funder, Yvette was the primary speaker. The

funders were so impressed, they invited Yvette to record a radio interview promoting the project.”

Chischillie is now a nominee for Corpsmember of the Year, one of only a handful of nominees from the ranks of 23,000 corpsmembers nationwide. With the nomination, she hopes to “share [her] experience with other young adults in making a difference for people, the environment and the movement of helping.”

### **What can the corps do for your town?**

Youth corps crews can serve as your local team for labor-intensive projects, filling the gap between municipal staff and volunteers. Many cities and towns throughout Colorado have discovered that youth conservation corps provide the critical mass to complete the work in a timely and quality manner.

Corps are popular with resource-strapped land managers because the crews are turn-key operations requiring little oversight by municipal staff. They arrive on site with the tools, equipment, expertise and adult supervision necessary to complete the project. In some instances, they can camp at or near the work site, minimizing travel time to and from the project.



### **How to fund a youth corps crew**

Corps are entrepreneurial ventures that leverage private funds to help towns and cities provide the matching funds for these and other fund sources.

Youth corps have worked for more than 25 cities and towns in the state, including Pagosa Springs, Grand Junction, Aurora, Ridgway, Mancos, Colorado Springs, Frisco, Denver, Lochbuie and Brighton. Some municipalities fund the youth corps' weekly fee-for-service rates from their operating budgets; however, most municipalities need assistance to support the cost of a crew. These towns and cities look to several funding sources in Colorado that support, encourage, and will help pay for the use of youth corps crews. These sources include the Colorado State Trails Program and the Lottery-funded Great Outdoors Colorado, which has heavily invested in the development of youth corps programs throughout the state.

GOCO has a strong commitment to CYCA and the youth corps network. GOCO even provided the impetus to reinvigorate Colorado's

use of youth corps in 1996, from the belief that youth are the future stewards of our natural resources. "Youth corps are a terrific vehicle to expose our youth – many of whom may not get such an opportunity otherwise – to what Colorado's outdoors has to offer while providing them with a rewarding experience," said GOCO Executive Director John Swartout. In the last decade, GOCO has provided close to \$3 million to build the capacity of the organization and to make it a critical part of Colorado State Parks and Colorado Division of Wildlife projects.

Wally Piccone, senior program manager for GOCO Local Government Park & Outdoor Recreation Programs, points out that local governments also have the opportunity to partner with youth corps on projects ... a decision that could help them score better in GOCO's competitive process.

"Youth corps have a proven record of doing high-quality work at a reasonable cost and you will be contributing to the long-term stewardship of Colorado at the same time." While several local governments have worked with CYCA on trail projects, Piccone added, "the same opportunity exists on community park and outdoor recreation projects."

Youth corps are also long-time partners of the Colorado State Trails Program. According to State Trails Program Manager Lori Malcolm, everyone wins when corps work on State Trails-funded projects. "Youth corps with their energy, enthusiasm and hard work, have taken up the challenge to care for our trails and land," says Malcolm.

State Trails applicants regularly work with their local youth corps when planning projects and write the corps' costs into the grant budget. Sometimes, only a portion of the project is appropriate for a corps.

For example, the corps might plant trees and benches along a concrete greenway that was poured by a contractor. At other times, the corps may complete the entire project, accounting for the entire budget.

### **How one town made it happen**

The Town of Ridgway provides a stellar example of how corps can complete important public works projects through the use of creative funding partnerships. The Southwest Conservation Corps, one of the 11 programs accredited by the Colorado Youth Corps Association, helped to complete part of Ridgway's River Restoration Project along the scenic Uncompahgre River. Over the course of five summers, the corps planted approximately two acres of wetlands and 10 acres of riparian area with indigenous species; felled and removed diseased trees in the riparian area; eradicated noxious weeds; constructed almost one mile of an eight-foot wide recreation trail; and constructed a wonderful outdoor classroom in the shade of a narrowleaf cottonwood stand for the local school district. Ridgway Town Manager Greg Clifton, and CYCA Board President, says of the project, "the corps' accomplishments are impressive."

Clifton emphasized, "this entire project, from the start, has been built upon partnerships at so many levels. Much of the funding came in through private and public foundations, GOCO gave us a huge boost with a \$500,000 grant, and private land-owners donated significant acreage and cash contributions [\$200,000] as well. The youth corps has been a significant partner all along, having spent many weeks on the project site over the span of five years. Their accomplishments are many, and their legacy is now in place for people to enjoy. What has really been rewarding is the sense of the corpsmembers' ownership and pride in their work.

Their signature is on the project for all to see.”

### **Corps stretch public dollars**

Several years ago, the Western Colorado Conservation Corps started to make a name for itself in the weed world. It didn't hurt that the corps is headquartered in Grand Junction, the epicenter of the nation's tamarisk infestation.

Now known as the premier tamarisk eradication labor force on the Western Slope, the WCCC has year-round tamarisk eradication crews trained in the use of chainsaws and chippers. The corps even operates a timber axe for mowing down large stands of tamarisk and uses rafts to access stands along the Colorado River. More interesting than the methods the crews use to beat back the water-gulping weed are the methods they employ to leverage funds to support the crews' work.

In 2005, GOCO, in cooperation with the CYCA, granted the WCCC \$12,000 to complete a two-week tamarisk eradication project along the banks of the Colorado River in partnership with the City of Grand Junction.

The corps leveraged the grant with \$4,500 from the city, the River Front Foundation, Mesa County Partners, Inc. and the Tamarisk Coalition. A local private foundation stepped up with another \$4,500 to purchase equipment for the project. Because of the crew's initial success, the city supported the corps' work at \$24,000 in 2006, another \$24,000 in 2007, and has made tentative commitments beyond 2007.

The goal is for the corps' leveraging ability to spread faster than the tamarisk. Regardless, the end result is that the residents of Grand Junction can now see the banks of the mighty Colorado River, which hasn't been seen in some areas of the city for years.

### **Corps are youth development programs that work**

CYCA is often asked if the corps make a difference for the youth participants. The answer is, absolutely!

Throughout 2004 and 2005, OMNI Research and Training, Inc., a Denver-based research firm, conducted a formal evaluation to validate what corps staff know to be true – that corps work for youth, not just for land managers. In the study, OMNI found significantly positive shifts across a number of key outcome areas including educational and career objectives, civic engagement, psychological well-being and resiliency, and environmental awareness.

Results of the evaluation demonstrate that participation in Colorado youth corps has a positive, meaningful and broad impact on its members and that youth corps accomplish their objectives to train, educate and inspire youth to be productive, caring and committed citizens.

### **The whole is greater than the sum of its parts**

CYCA supports the network of independently operating youth conservation corps in the state. CYCA has worked since 1997 to develop youth corps programs in every part of the state, from the western slope to the eastern plains, from the New Mexico to the Wyoming borders. Any young person, regardless of where they live, has access to a program and any land manager throughout the state has access to a crew's services.

CYCA accredits youth corps, connects them to funders and public land managers, develops resources and contracts for them, provides training for crewleaders and promotes youth corps to local, state and national audiences.

### **Be a part of the movement**

The youth corps movement is growing in Colorado. There are more corps enrolling more youth and completing more projects in the state than ever before. Be a part of this movement by engaging a corps on your important work. Help to get today's youth outdoors. Help to get young people, with little opportunity for jobs or education an employment experience that will change their lives.

Find out why Greg Clifton can't say enough good things about working with youth corps. "Out of the many projects that have occurred at the municipal level, I must say that this has been the most gratifying, because of the partnerships involved, the successes that have been realized and, most notably, the opportunity to work closely with the Southwest Conservation Corps."

To find out more, contact Jennifer Freeman of the Colorado Youth Corps Association at 303-863-0602 or go to [www.cyca.org](http://www.cyca.org). ■

