

## Who are those kids...and what are they doing?

by Bill Kent

You have probably noticed those young people (wearing blue shirts with a patch depicting an eagle) driving government vehicles, helping you in our Visitor Center, presenting campfire programs at Hidden Lake, or keeping our hiking trails free from downfall and encroaching vegetation. Ever wonder just who or what they were... or why they did not wear a uniform like the other employees at Kenai Refuge? They are volunteers sent to us by an organization begun in 1955, an organization whose founder believed that student volunteers could complete important projects on public lands that would otherwise not be done. Elizabeth Cushman Titus also felt that students would benefit in many ways from their experiences in the field, and would increase their understanding of the environment and their place in it.

The most successful volunteer efforts at Kenai National Wildlife Refuge over the last 15-20 years has been our partnership with the Student Conservation Association (SCA), a private non-profit organization with headquarters in Charlestown, New Hampshire. Tens of thousands of hours of work have been completed at a minimal cost through this cooperative effort. Many of the Refuge's visitor services, as well as important biological data collection, would not have been possible without the young people provided to us by SCA.

Most of the participants are classified as "Resource Assistants"; generally these are college students who are looking to gain work experience in a particular field such as biology, environmental education, visitor services, or other disciplines found in resource agencies. These participants' experience furthers their academic, career, and personal goals. Their work period lasts from twelve to sixteen weeks, and includes specialized and/or required training necessary to work on a refuge, park, or other agency facility. For example, Resource Assistants on Alaska National Wildlife Refuges must complete mandatory Bear Safety and Watercraft Safety training before beginning their assigned duties.

Hiking trails on Kenai Refuge have benefited tremendously from Resource Assistants' efforts and

through another SCA program, the "High School Work Crews." High school students from across the country pay for the opportunity to construct or maintain trails in backcountry areas on public lands across the country. (Think about that the next time you hear someone demeaning teenagers.) Many, if not most, of these teenagers raise the money to participate through after-school employment, fund-raisers, and by soliciting "scholarships" in their communities. Many of these fifteen to eighteen year-olds are away from their homes for the first time; for some it may be their first airplane trip. They and their well-trained adult leaders camp out the entire time they are working. Crews working on the Kenai Refuge are here for a total of five weeks; the last week is a recreation week reward for their hard work, and is spent hiking and camping on one of the longer backcountry trails on the Peninsula such as the Resurrection Pass Trail.

You may be asking "that's great, but you said this volunteer labor had a cost – what is that cost". A Resource Assistant's cost is \$3,000 to \$3,600 (which includes the round-trip airfare from their homes), dependent on the length of their work period. The High School Work Crews' costs range from \$10,000 to \$20,000 (this also includes the airfares for crew and leaders), based on the size of the crew; we have found that the most efficient is the smallest sized crew for work on Kenai Refuge: eight volunteers and two leaders. Both of these programs' costs is one-third to one-half the cost of a seasonal employee and allows us to stretch our shrinking budgets while obtaining excellent work products.

We are proud to have these student volunteers assisting the Refuge staff, and we think they leave with a better understanding of the mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System and Kenai Refuge's role in it. The next time you encounter one of these SCA volunteers, I hope you will give them a well deserved "thanks" for a job well done.

*Bill Kent is the Supervisory Park Ranger at Kenai Refuge; he, his wife and daughter have lived in Soldotna since 1991.*