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37 Restoring the McKenzie River Corridor, OR

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Merriam-Webster defines “regeneration” in part, as “renewal or restoration of a biological system after injury,” and “a spiritual renewal or revival.” Try to keep that in mind while we navigate some rough waters.

The wildfire season in the Northwest has been particularly brutal over the last handful of years. In 2020, the Holiday Farm Fire torched an estimated 173,393 acres along the McKenzie River corridor, making it one of the largest in Oregon’s history. The losses suffered could aptly be described as catastrophic—forest flora and fauna, personal property and even human life. In addition, the area has been one of Oregon’s premier gateways to outdoor recreation for generations.

Enter the McKenzie Regenerative Travel Project. A collaborative effort to support communities along the McKenzie River corridor, the project seeks to create volunteer tourism packages that will actively engage visitors in the stewardship of the region. The hope is to increase visitation to McKenzie River communities while simultaneously improving access to recreation opportunities—the embodiment of something known as “regenerative tourism.”

Regenerative tourism operates under a three-pronged approach of learn, serve and immerse. Giving back to the community and the planet through learning, volunteerism and actively immersing yourself in experiences that generate an appreciation and understanding of all aspects of that

destination. Last year, local outfitter First Nature Tours partnered with Global Family Travels, Cascade Volunteers and other local community-based non-profits, to offer regenerative tour packages within the McKenzie River corridor.

Participants choose from a list of multi-day tours, each offering a different volunteer project, typically trail maintenance, somewhere within the McKenzie River Ranger District of the Willamette National Forest. Work intensity levels vary, as do the outdoor recreation outings offered, from mountain biking to hiking and/or rafting. Overnights and food are provided by local restaurants and lodging facilities.

Participating in one of the initial outings last year was an honor, an eye-opener and initially a bit of a gut punch. Driving through the corridor and witnessing the stark contrast between a thriving and a decimated forest was indeed jarring. As was hearing about the toll the fire exacted on the affected communities. But learning more about forest lifecycles and the rallying efforts and aid being provided thus far did provide some comfort.

What provided even more solace was the day of trail work and education we received the next day with the Cascade

Volunteers. Seeing expressions of joy and occasional awe from hikers along the McKenzie River Trail and at Clear Lake was its own reward. Being a part of an effort to keep the trails accessible for those who come after added a substantial layer of depth to the prize. That evening, dinner, drinks and conversations that regularly pivoted from informative and thoughtful to jovial and celebratory, brought the day to a redemptive end. And finally, the opportunity to mountain bike with new friends along that same trail we worked on, one of the most storied and revered in the nation, was an experience I’ll always treasure for too many reasons to count. Not the least of which is a newfound sense of appreciation.

Silver linings aren’t always the easiest things to see, and 2020 and 2021 made us all squint pretty hard to spot them. But if we are able to play even a small role in the regeneration of our public lands and communities, to experience and better understand the importance and the needs of both, then surely our own minds, bodies and spirits will benefit from renewal as well.

Please check the McKenzie Regenerative Travel Project’s website at trips.globalfamilytravels.com/t/global-family-travels/oregon-national-forest-adventure to see how you can help. 🌲

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