

A NEWCOMER'S EXPERIENCE

BY AWF DIRECTOR

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June 8th started like most of my Fridays, up at five and running off to open the shop and start my day. I had plans to leave early and make my way to Anderson Mesa to work as a volunteer and remove some old barbed wire fence. As usual, there were some minor problems that would put me behind schedule. My plan was to leave work by noon, be on the road by 1 and find camp and get set up. Here I am now at almost 3 pm heading north to Flagstaff, a map to follow and not sure what I'm in for. Take down barbed wire fence to help benefit wildlife. I have never done this type of thing before and find myself a bit worried about what lies ahead.

It still amazes me, the affect pine trees have on my attitude. Two hours ago, I was running around, barking out orders to make sure no detail was overlooked and everything was covered. The smell of fresh air, the greenery around me, and now, the last thing on mind was more than 100 miles to the south. But there was still more than a mile of barbed wire to worry about. I have always been told, never volunteer for anything. I was told there would be others there to help, but no one knew exactly how many, or exactly who would be there. As I followed the map, I found camp with no problem and pulled in to find a place for me and the trailer. As I stepped from the truck, there were several friendly faces walking up to greet me and make me feel welcome. Some of the faces I recognized from past conservation events at retail stores and expo events. Most of the faces were new to me. So many names, you can't remember them all. The good news, all of them were very friendly and offers of help came from all. After a few minutes of formal introductions, the trailer was set up and the time to relax is upon me. But there is still the barbed wire. I asked several questions about the chore that waited for all of us the following morning. Almost everyone in camp had done this before, and they all said "don't worry, it will be fun. You will enjoy it, its not like work at all".

Many of the campers offered samples of their camp cooking, grilled salmon and halibut to steak on the grill. A circle of chairs and tales of past hunting and fishing trips and talk of family and friends and where you work. As darkness fell, we shared a couple of cold drinks, and welcomed a few more late arrivals to camp. All were happy to see them, but there was still that barbed wire.

I was told we would leave camp at 0800 hours to meet with folks from the Forrest Service and game and fish near where we were to remove the fence. We left camp in a mini caravan with most choosing to carpool out to the worksite. We could not have ordered a better day for any project. The weather was perfect, a slight breeze and near twenty people to attack that barbed wire fence. After a short meeting to organize and talk about why we were there and what benefits from this kind of project. We started to attack the fence by about 0900 and I was amazed by how quickly progress was made. My task was to pull fence posts as those ahead of me removed the ties holding the wire to posts and stringers. Only a few of the posts put up a fight, but I soon realized this was not work at all, this was fun!

The organizations that organized this work project were the Arizona Wildlife Federation and Arizona Antelope Foundation. Two great organizations, that work hard for the benefit of habitat and the animals that live there. These groups have also made investments in equipment that made the work go easy. Post pullers and more types of pliers and wire cutters than most of us have ever seen. My favorite however is the wire roller. This machine will roll a mile of barbed wire in just mere minutes. By 1 pm we were done and back at the trucks for cold drinks and a sandwich. The rancher who also had a few hands helping thanked us all for efforts and drove off with two truck loads of fence posts and wire to be recycled at another location on the ranch. For those who wanted, there was a tour of past project sites to see the successes of efforts just like this one today. Others chose to head back to camp for a quick nap, or enjoy just sitting under the tall cool pines.

The folks from AAF headed back to start preparing the reward of the day for all who participated. A rib-eye steak dinner complete with corn-on-the-cob, beans, and potato salad. All prepared right there in camp. This goes back to the investments these groups have made in equipment to allow this type of treatment in the wild. Large gas grills and stoves, pots and pans, and the volunteers to make it all happen. I can't remember having a better steak anywhere, and the company was second to none. No one complained, no one bragged, and every one of us had fun.

Soon the conversation turned to hunting stories, past projects, family and friends. I must admit, the thought of all that barbed wire was very intimidating, but after all is said and done, it was fun and something I plan to do again. I found it very rewarding and felt energized when everyone started to talk about the next project scheduled. I plan to be there. As I lay in my sleeping bag that night, I wondered why I had never participated in a work project like this before. After all, I attend banquets, donate money buying raffle tickets, and belong to several conservation organizations. I think maybe I always thought it would be too much like work, so I stayed away. The truth is, this was not work, this was fun. I met several new people, made new hunting contacts, and took home new memories that are every bit as good as those you take home from any hunting trip.

If you're like me, out hunting and fishing as many days as possible each year, or just out sightseeing looking for whatever critter you can find to watch. You've taken plenty from the land over the years, and like me, maybe it's time to give a little back. Don't be like me and wait too long to start giving a bit back. Get involved, volunteer and go have some fun.