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**Eye on the Environment
Celebrate the Swan Race puts the Fun back
in Funding!**

By Mike Childs, Swan Ecosystem Center

On the eve of the 9th annual Celebrate the Swan Race, the event's organizers thought it worthwhile to relate how our activity benefits the local environment.

Simply put, we help maintain local hiking trails and campsites!

Here's how - proceeds from the competition on June 25th go to the recreational trails program to support funding rangers who clear trails, clean campsites and visit with the public to help keep wilderness access safe and enjoyable.

A feature of the Swan Valley since 1984, the wilderness ranger program was the brainchild of local forester Cal Tassinari. As the first Wilderness Ranger in the Mission Mountains Wilderness, Cal wanted to keep wilderness wild, however, with U.S. Forest Service budget constraints he realized the backcountry would be better served by independent contractors who would adhere to U.S. Forest Service rules yet cost the government less to employ. He and other U.S. Forest Service employees developed a contract solicitation plan and the wilderness ranger program was born!

Kari Gunderson and Joe Flood received the first contract and the Mission Mountains became the nation's first wilderness where stewardship of the land was conducted by local, private individuals. In a recent interview, Kari remembered that she and Joe cleared 50 miles of trail with a crosscut saw and double-bitted axe. They rehabilitated overused camping areas and cleaned garbage, litter, fish guts, etc. from 200 campsites. And during their long days on the trail, they visited with thousands of wilderness hikers and horse people, always encouraging them to leave no trace of their passing and to be careful with fire.

Apparently the job hasn't changed much over the past 27 years. Kari still performs the trail work as well as cleaning outhouses at the trailheads and collecting data from the visitor sign-in boxes. Subcontractor Luke Lamar now assists with the heavy lifting and routine chores too, but the trees still fall across the trail and folks accidentally leave litter around their camps.

"What has improved since '84," says Gunderson, "is that visitors are way better at picking up after themselves—they pack it in and out too! Horse users put up high lines which save trees and prevent erosion. New fishing regulations from FWP have almost eliminated meat fishers from our area. And now we receive calls letting us know about downed trees and other trouble. I want to thank everyone for their support!"

Quite possibly these positives have resulted from Kari and Luke's own efforts. Anne Dahl, president of the Swan Ecosystem Center, calls Gunderson "the most well-educated wilderness ranger in the country!" Over the years, Kari added a PhD in Recreation and Wilderness Management to her Master's

degree in Environmental Education. And Luke Lamar has a degree in Wildlife Management from the University of Montana.

Back in 1996, the Flathead National Forest seriously contemplated discontinuing the ranger program due to financial uncertainty. People in the Swan Valley felt this would be a poor option and formed "Friends of the Mission Mountains" to coordinate the fundraising efforts to raise a part of the \$24,000 annual cost of the program. Led by Mike McGrew, this group raised \$12,000 through auctions, bake sales, and chili feeds. The U.S. Forest Service matched these funds and the program survived!

Then in 1997, the newly created Swan Ecosystem Center (SEC) began a formal agreement with the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) to provide ranger services in the Missions and along the Swan Front. SEC President Dahl says, "We believed then and we still believe that the economic benefits to the Swan Valley and the well being and pleasure of locals and visitors depend on well-maintained trails and campsites!" Since 1997, SEC has put its money where its mouth is. The non-profit supplies 2/3 of the cost of the ranger services and relies on private donations, grants, volunteerism, plus activities such as auctions, raffles, and the Celebrate the Swan Race to do so.

Speaking to the Swan Valley AARP chapter two years ago, current Swan Front ranger Mike Childs said, "One thing you'll notice about trail maintenance on the Swan Front is that I can carry a chain saw. Together with rain gear, a lunch, water and emergency equipment, the pack weighs about 30-35 pounds and is quite a load in the spring of the year, but it enables me to do the work solo unlike the crew on the Mission side. I probably have to pitch more rocks off the trail due to more horse

traffic going into the Bob Marshall Wilderness, and that is the major difference work wise between the two sides of the valley.

Steve Lamar, Swan Front ranger during the 1990's recalled some to the ups and downs of trail work during his tenure. "The summer of 1993 it rained or snowed 72 out of the 77 days I worked on trails. One night my tent became so wet I holed up in an old cabin. Needed to kill ten mice before they quit running around and would let me sleep! But the best part of the job had to be the people that told me their stories. One day I ran into an older fellow, maybe 70 or so, who'd manned a lookout in the Libby area. He had an old USFS canvas-backed pack board and on it he carried an ancient USFS issue sleeping bag, an aluminum pot, a spoon, and a jar to drink out of. That was it. He'd hiked to Upper Holland Lake with his niece who had modern gear, but he'd stuck with the old equipment. He told me that if he spotted a fire from the lookout he'd take off after it alone and if it was nighttime he'd carry a paloozer, the candle-powered flashlight of yesteryear!"

Mike Childs agrees with Steve that interaction with people is a highlight of his day. "99.9% of the folks out on the trail have smiles on their faces. They are thrilled to be out and most of them appreciate the work the rangers do. So I'd like to join Anne, Kari and Luke in expressing my thanks for the people - the visitors, the volunteers who help us, and those who donate money to the program too!"

Sometime in 2002, Childs suggested that a long-distance race program might be a positive way to raise funds for the ranger program and showcase the Swan Valley too. Robin Hamilton, whose Shack Race was a Missoula favorite for 17 years helped SEC organize our race and we were off and running!

Now in the 9th year of existence, the Celebrate the Swan Race features a challenging 5K, 10K, half marathon and one mile run on a country road through the forests and along the streams of the Swan Valley. Dozens of local residents help make the racers experience as much fun as a grueling competition can yield. There are games for kids and Bob Egan make gorgeous cups for age group winners. Local establishments provide door prizes, and sponsor money directly benefits the trails program.

So, if you can, on Saturday, June 25th, please come join us and run or walk the course. Remember, all the profits go directly to the ranger program and thus to an environment we can all enjoy. The SEC staff and volunteers promise to do our best to make the funding fun!