

Blazing the Trails of the Third Blessing

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All photos by C. Libon

Based on a recent conversation with Jennifer and Paul - two newer friends and active seniors - this article highlights a meaningful volunteer path they've embraced together: caring for local trails and forests.

The Japanese concept of Shinrin-yoku, or "forest bathing," has gained attention in recent years. Books on mindful meditation, nature connection, and the relationship between trees, health, and happiness all point to a simple truth: time spent immersed in nature can be deeply restorative.

For Jennifer, that connection runs deep. "My friendship with the mountains and forests began before I was born," she shared. "My parents met at the base of Mt. Washington in New Hampshire. They carried me up mountains in a backpack when I was a baby." Her lifelong love of the outdoors naturally led her toward conservation work.

Jennifer and Paul first met through a small neighborhood group that began as a book club during the summer of 2020. Formed in the midst of the pandemic, the group brought together people living nearby, and the friendships that grew from it have proven both supportive and enduring.



So when Jennifer became involved with the New York - New Jersey Trail Conference, an organization dedicated to protecting and maintaining public lands, Paul, curious and eager, joined her on a volunteer outing - and quickly became involved himself.

Reflecting on his experience, Paul described trail volunteering in deeply personal terms:

"Volunteering on the trails, you are enveloped with a sense of the third blessing. You are engaged in the actual work of the third blessing. Everything in this environment is real. There's nothing fake - no advertising, no artificial colors, no artificial anything. It's the most real experience you can have. And every time I come away feeling more complete."

Volunteers begin by attending a workshop where they learn to identify native and invasive plants, as well as common tree diseases. They can indicate how far they're willing to travel and the level of physical activity they prefer. From there, they are assigned to a location and a role.

The work varies widely. Some volunteers walk trails, observe conditions, and record data. Others take on more hands-on tasks such as removing invasive species, restoring paths by repositioning stones, or even helping to build new trails.

Each year brings a specific environmental focus. Recently, efforts have centered on Beech Tree Disease, which has spread widely across the region. Volunteers help identify potentially resistant trees, providing valuable data that scientists use for further analysis, including DNA research. Future projects may even include partnerships with trained K-9 units that can detect invasive species.



Jennifer and Paul have contributed their time at several local sites, including Apshawa Preserve in West Milford, Hilltop Reservation in Verona, and areas in Cedar Grove. A typical volunteer session may involve up to three hours of work, along with travel and hiking time to reach the designated area.

The work isn't without its challenges. "Volunteering during the heat wave last year was probably the toughest," they noted. Still, the rewards clearly outweigh the difficulties.

Together, they share a simple invitation: more people should get involved. "There are so many wonderful individuals doing this work," they said. "You don't need to be a professional. Just find a trail you love and offer your time. Go for it."

At the end of the season, volunteers gather for an informal celebration - complete with team trivia games, small prizes, and pizza. Last year's event brought together about 50 participants, offering a chance to relax, connect, and reflect on the impact of their efforts.

For more information: New York - New Jersey Trail Conference

www.nynjtc.org/position-surveyor-volunteer/

Upcoming workshops will be held at: 600 Ramapo Valley Road in Mahwah, New Jersey:

- Part 1: May 13 at 7:00 PM
- Part 2: May 27 at 7:00 PM



To learn more about volunteering opportunities, visit the New York - New Jersey Trail Conference website.

[www.google.com/maps/search/600+Ramapo+Valley+Road,+Mahwah,+NJ?entry=gmail and amp;source=g](https://www.google.com/maps/search/600+Ramapo+Valley+Road,+Mahwah,+NJ?entry=gmail&source=g)

Whether you're seeking fresh air, community, or a deeper connection to nature, trail volunteering offers all three - and perhaps something more: a sense of purpose grounded in the natural world.

