Student Leaders Clean Up Swell

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Maybe an intense afternoon of hefting logs, painting picnic tables and cleaning up after visitors in the San Rafael Swell area had its moments of tedium, but the work done recently by 300 college and university student leaders was 100 percent energizing for its organizers, Utah State University Eastern and the Bureau of Land Management.

As one relatively new BLM employee put it: “this has been the best day of my job so far.”

The student leaders were part of the state’s annual Utah Leadership Academy that is held each year at different colleges throughout the state. Part of the three-day conference always includes an afternoon service project. Typically such projects are conducted either on the campuses hosting the event or in the community.

The culmination of months of preparation boiled down to an intense five hours of work in which the 300 students were divided into seven groups spread across different parts of the Swell. Despite working in different areas, they all basically did the same thing: cleaned up messes, painted picnic tables, fixed trails and restored trampled landscapes. They did this at sites ranging from Buckhorn Wash to Cedar Mountain Recreation area.

Terry Johnson, SUN (Serving Utah Network) Center program coordinator, had something else in mind. Why not have this small army of 300 focus its efforts on helping to clean up and restore some of the spectacular landscapes surrounding the Price area?

He hoped, that in the process, it would help the relatively small team of BLM employees in their work to maintain millions of acres of public land and leave a positive and lasting impression on the minds of the student volunteers.

The plan seemed to work.

“It was amazing to see all these leaders together,” said Jane Prefumo, a SUN Center involvement leader. “There was lots of unity and team spirit.”

She said at first the volunteers seemed to doubt a service project that involved cleaning up public lands.

“I told them it would be a different way to serve,” she said. “We would be serving the environment and helping others that way. Once they got out there and saw the views, they understood. Being able to do something in a place like this made them feel really good.”

And it made the BLM feel pretty good, too. Tasked with managing nearly 22.9 million acres of public lands in Utah, representing about 42 percent of the state, the agency can use all the extra help it can get, said AnnDee Mead, project coordinator with the BLM.

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“It was a great experience,” said Elway Thomas, student body president for USU Eastern Blanding. He liked how the projects were divided up with students from around the state mixing together, forcing them to get to know each other and coalesce as project teams.

And, being the Millennials they are, they left their own digital marks while cleaning up the physical traces left by tens of thousands of visitors to the San Rafael area each year. They mostly did this in the form of tweets and Instagrams.

A Utah Valley University student posted a picture of a plastic bag full of garbage he had collected: “Liter by the lake! Diapers, clothes, beer cans and bottles,” he posted. “Come on people.” And then a little later: “stay on the roads and trails peeps!”

Another UVU leader tweeted: “Watch out, World! We gon change you!”

And change they did. At least a little bit in a few highly frequented areas of the Swell. Improvements that will hopefully help to preserve this much-loved area for years to come. And if it helped to make the students more sensitive to what it takes to protect fragile environments, that is a change that could make lasting impacts for many years to come when they return to places like these and bring friends and family with them, Mead said.

And most certainly, the experience changed the perception of at least one student who had never been to Price before.

“I never knew you lived in such a beautiful place,” a student from Salt Lake City told Prefumo. “I want to come back now, and bring my family. You are lucky to be so close to so many recreational areas.”