

● PROFILE

PULLING TOGETHER IN THE WENATCHEE NATIONAL FOREST

They call their work “Pulling Together” because that’s what they do. Bent over, crawling on hands and knees, or hanging from cliffs, this group of volunteers from schools, mountaineering societies, homeowners’ associations, environmental groups, as well as inmates from the county jail scour roadsides, public parks and parking lots to uproot knapweed by hand. “I started with nothing,” says the group’s organizer, Pat Rasmussen. “And now I have bags and bags of information.”

Alarmed in 1997 by plans of the



Lucy Vinis is an NCAP member in Eugene, Oregon.

Leavenworth Ranger District of the Wenatchee National Forest (in central Washington) to treat roadsides with the herbicide Roundup, Rasmussen spearheaded the formation of the Icicle Canyon Knapweed Handpulling Project. “They were proposing to keep the roadside clear of weeds on a road along a salmon river,” she explains. “This is an area that gets 800,000 visitors a year, and is an entry into the Alpine Lakes Wilderness Area. You have to get a permit even to enter that area—it’s beautiful. They were planning to just kill everything.”

Located across the Cascades east of Seattle, the Wenatchee National Forest encompasses 2.2 million acres, 40 percent of which are wilderness areas



A diffuse knapweed flower head.

Washington Weed Control Board

accessible only on foot. The remaining 60 percent of the land is managed by the Forest Service for multiple uses, including both timbering and recreation.

Knapweed is one visitor that came to stay.

An imported pest from Europe, diffuse knapweed has thrived in the disturbed and dry areas that predominate at the lower elevations of the Wenatchee National Forest. “If you have an intact forest, it’s not a problem because there’s shade,” says Rasmussen. “It likes disturbance and dry, sandy land.” Under those conditions, knapweed spreads rapidly both because it produces a huge number of seeds and because it releases a chemical that retards the growth of other plants.

Lack of funding and manpower had created a sense of desperation about the prospects for controlling this weed, leading the Forest Service to propose a broad-spectrum herbicide.

Rasmussen and her coalition made an offer the Forest Service couldn’t refuse. Under the Forest Service’s vegetation management policies, managers are required to try cost-effective, less toxic alternatives before resorting to chemical controls. Rasmussen’s group, Leavenworth Adopt-A-Forest, proposed a demonstration project along three stretches of road to test the effectiveness of handpulling. “They had to accept our proposal because it was free!” she laughs.

Leavenworth Adopt-A-Forest



Pat Rasmussen (left) with a crew of knapweed pullers.

Oregon Dept. of Agriculture



A flowering diffuse knapweed plant.

The first year, 150 volunteers worked three stretches of road in half-mile sectors. “We had busloads of kids come out from the Discovery School and horticulture classes,” recalls Rasmussen. “Before we began, we hadn’t really noticed the knapweed well enough. Once we got going, people noticed there was knapweed everywhere.”

Using a strategy she calls “stronghold,” the volunteers focused on gaining control of the weed in specific areas, and then connecting those areas. “It is important to look at the weeds not as everywhere or impossible, but to look at what we can do, focus on an area, get that under control and expand from there,” Rasmussen explains. “Attitude is a lot of it.”

As the momentum built, the volunteers formed a group called the Chelan-Douglas Citizens’ Knapweed Coalition, holding monthly 7:00 A.M. meetings to learn more about knapweed and weed control methods, and to plan their own strategy. Press coverage of mountaineering clubs scaling cliffs and student crews arriving in busloads expanded public awareness.

The need for volunteer labor opened some unexpected opportuni-

ties. In the project’s second year, inmates from the Chelan County jail started to help for a few hours at a time on weekday evenings, after they’d finished up with other projects during the day. This proved such a positive experience for everyone involved, that last year Rasmussen fulfilled the qualifications to supervise a jail crew during the day. For 11 days last summer, she collected six inmates at 6:30 in the morning and put them to work pulling knapweed. Local chefs prepared meals for the crew at midday, and Rasmussen returned them to jail in the late afternoon. “It was an incredible experience,” she says. “They have this great time—pulling weeds is fun. Once they do this, they want to get out and stay out. We were able to clean up huge areas.”

Their success is visible. “Now I can do a half mile stretch in an hour and a half by myself when originally I needed busloads of volunteers to clear the same area,” says Rasmussen. The Forest Service has now also joined the effort, using the inmate crew during the week, while Rasmussen works with them on the weekends. “They’ve learned that it’s really better to do the handpulling

because you get a better result,” she explains.

In 1997, NCAP honored the Icicle Canyon Knapweed Handpulling Project for its initiative in demonstrating the effectiveness of alternatives to herbicides. Today, NCAP’s executive director, Norma Grier, ponders the Knapweed Coalition’s success. “Somehow, Pat keeps an upbeat energy going despite these huge barriers, and she involves a phenomenal range of folks.”

And she’s not finished. Proposing to expand and institutionalize the handpulling program, Rasmussen is seeking funding to support the Coalition’s work to control knapweed throughout both Chelan and Douglas counties and to designate the Wenatchee Valley as a “Weed Management Area.” She hopes to expand the role of jail inmates, add a “weed squad” of college students, and build more support within county government. “Left unchecked, knapweed will take over any niches we leave it,” Rasmussen writes in her grant proposal for future work. “At this point, only a coordinated program will bring it under control.”

—Lucy Vinis



Two members of the pulling crew at work.

Leavenworth Adopt-A-Forest