

# Become an Activist!

How longtime hiking advocates began working for trails—and how you can too

It doesn't take long after hiking the trails of Washington to fall in love with this state's amazing backcountry. Whether you like to hike up Mount Townsend in the Olympics, or enjoy extended backpacking in the Enchantments, Washington offers so many extraordinary places.

As a result, many hikers who've connected with these wild places feel a need to give back. This may take many forms. Some folks sign up for a WTA trail work party. Others chose to submit a trip report to our website or send in photos to our photo contest.

And others decide it's time to become hiker activists. What does this mean? It can be as simple as writing an e-mail to your state legislator. Or it may mean attending WTA's annual Hiker Lobby Day in Olympia. Perhaps you'll want to file a report on ORV damage to trails.

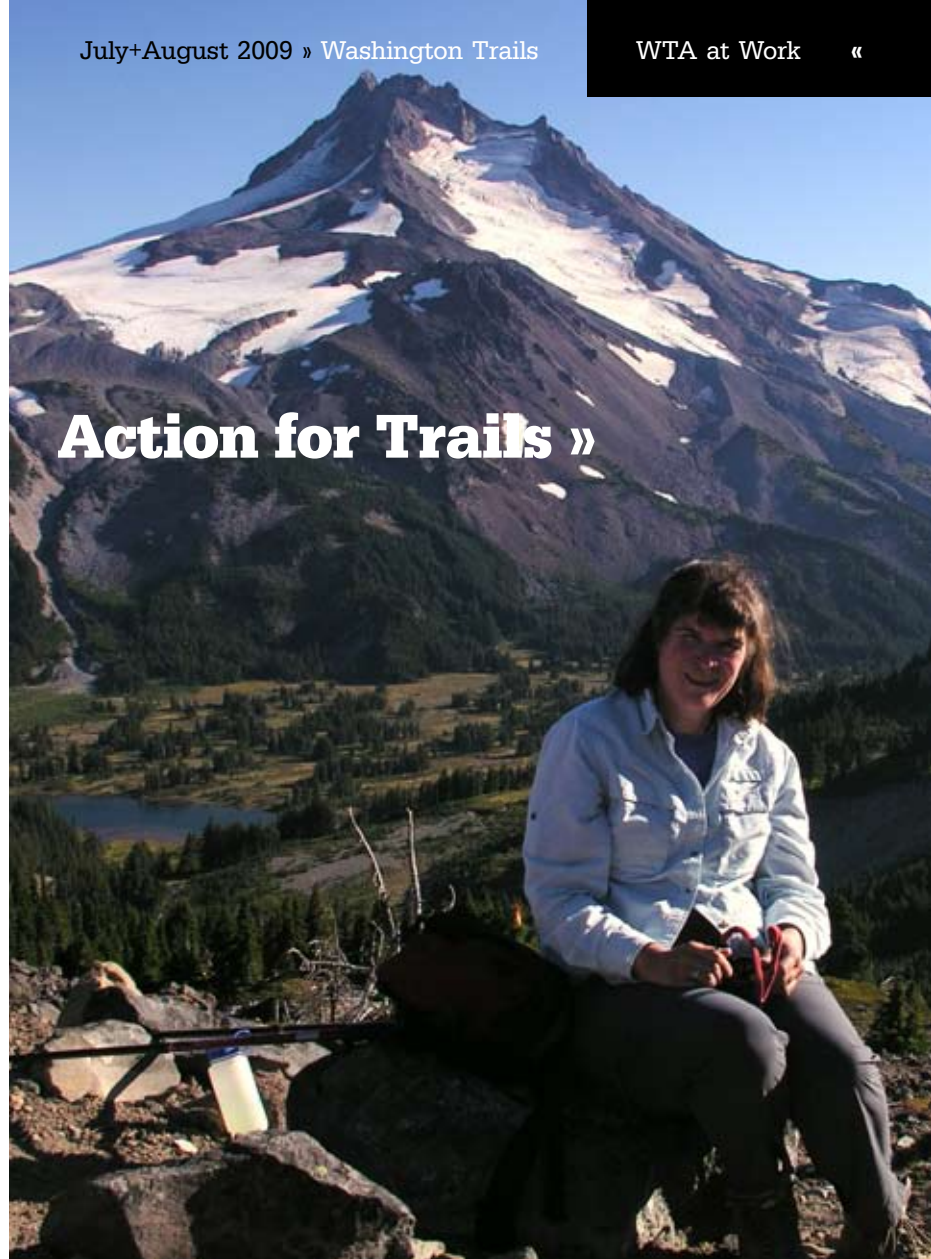
There are many ways to get involved. A good place to start is to sign up for WTA's Trail Action Network, an e-mail list that provides updates on action opportunities. Visit [www.wta.org/full\\_signup](http://www.wta.org/full_signup) or click on "Advocacy" on our home page. Or, join us this summer for a series of Activist Hikes designed to educate hikers about important issues and show you how you can truly make a difference (see p. 17).

So, just how can you make a difference and why should you get involved? To answer those questions, we asked some past and current WTA board members and a guidebook author why they became involved as hiker-activists, and we sought their advice to those interested in taking the next step. Here's what they had to say:

## **Susan Saul, WTA board member**

All I ever wanted to do is hike. When every trip to the backcountry in the late 1970s and early 1980s revealed hiking trails obliterated by new roads and clearcuts, however, I had to do something, or all the places I cherished would be gone—sometimes before I ever got to see them. One thing led to another and I'm still involved in wildlands advocacy thirty years later.

My advice to new advocates has always been to figure out what piece of the universe you are capable of fighting for: a single trail, a watershed, a roadless area, a mountain, a river, or



## Action for Trails »

**WTA board member Susan Saul near Mount Jefferson in Oregon. Thirty years ago, Susan began working to protect trails in Washington. For those interested in becoming hiking advocates, she recommends picking a place you love and working to defend it.**

whatever. Keep focused—it's too easy to want to get involved in every issue out there and burn out. Figure out what your talents are and use them to recruit others to your cause.

## **Joan Burton, author of Best Hikes with Kids: Western Washington & Cascades**

I became compelled to speak out for trails many years ago after watching Henry Jackson lead a hearing considering the creation of the North Cascades National Park and later after listening to Ira Spring testify to the Forest Service that old trails are a precious legacy which should not be lost to logging and development. Ira said that within his lifetime more than half the trails he had known as a boy had been lost.

I used to smile at Ira's frustration with off road vehicles on trails. Then once, when my Thursday Hikers were eating lunch on Juniper Ridge in the fragile meadows of the Dark Divide, I heard one coming, and I felt the same rage. I rushed out to take a picture of that motorcycle roaring along in the beautiful alpine setting. The driver probably thought I was crazy, but his tires were leaving deep gouges in the meadow.

I have found many ways to participate. I enjoy working on trail crews, because, although the work is hard, the people who come out to do trail maintenance are exceptional folks. I like going along with WTA on Hiker Lobby Day to speak to state legislators about protecting state lands. In the age of e-mail it is easy to send messages to congressional representatives about protecting threatened wildlands.



**Joan Burton**



**Kevin Hall**

lands we need the whole spectrum of advocacy, so just choose the kind you're comfortable doing, contribute to the cause and have fun doing it.

### **Kevin Hall, former WTA board member**

I became involved in hiker advocacy because I felt (and still do) that our natural legacy and heritage is one of our most important national assets. I was inspired by those who had come before me to enhance it. And it was meaningful to me to lend a hand to that legacy. For the new advocate, I would recommend that they introduce friends and family to the outdoors. Not only are you creating new hikers who might become supporters themselves, but importantly, you learn how somebody "new" perceives these special places and the issues sur-

rounding them. This focuses you on how to communicate your passion in an effective way that creates meaning and which is relevant to others.

### **Karl Forsgaard, WTA advisory board member and past president of WTA**

I became a hiking advocate because I saw that advocacy could make a difference on the ground. Hiking trails are important for keeping people connected to nature. If you are interested in getting involved in hiking advocacy, my advice to is to find a group that's doing the kind of trail advocacy that you would enjoy doing, and join their effort. Some will prefer hiking advocacy that's relatively non-controversial, such as seeking funds for maintaining existing trails. There's more controversy when we seek to limit the amount or type of trail use, or when we oppose developments that would degrade the wild ecosystem through

which a trail passes. Some will prefer a local club focused on a specific place, while others will prefer working in a regional, state-wide or national organization. To protect wild-



**Karl Forsgaard**

### **Tim Gould, WTA board member**

Disputes among user groups over state funding and timber cutting policy in national forests were the catalysts that fueled my involvement in hiker advocacy. I grew up being able to go out and play in the woods, so I've always had a fondness for hiking. The prospect of shrinking opportunities—from the dry lands east of the Cascade Crest to the dank, moss-covered forests of the Gifford Pinchot National Forest, compelled me to advocate for hikers and the functioning ecosystems that are too often placed at risk.

For would-be activists, the best evidence to support your cause is gathered through boots on the ground. One also shouldn't be afraid to dive into the intricacies of legislation and administrative rule-making. It's worth taking the time to understand these sometimes opaque processes so that you can change them for the better. Your own experience in these special wildlands—described with genuine heart—will make a difference. ♦



**Tim Gould**