

## Volunteers Make a Difference

**Back Country Horsemen of America are hard at work for all equestrians.**

October 2, 2008

What could over 14,000 equine enthusiasts from the rugged mountainous Western states, Appalachian Trail region, Smokey Mountains and flat lands of Florida, all have in common? Whether leading a pack string across a mountain stream or riding along sandy beaches, they're all deeply concerned about the growing trend to eliminate recreational equestrian access to public lands, wilderness areas and national forests. And, they're all members of various chapters of Back Country Horsemen of America, (BCHA), a unique non-profit corporation made up of state organizations, affiliates, chapters and at-large-members that, for the past 35 years, has been dedicated to promoting and preserving recreational equestrian usage in the backcountry and on public lands.

Unlike other equestrian organizations, which focus on specific breeds, disciplines or events, BCHA is truly a service organization whose members voluntarily clear, build and maintain thousands of miles of trails on public lands. And, for many, when they aren't on the trail, they spend countless hours attending meetings with local, state and federal public land representatives from the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), Forest Service, National Parks, state land agencies and elected officials, as well as various other trail users, equine organizations and the media. Many members are as familiar with the halls of various state and federal buildings as they are with their local riding trails since having a working relationship with the legislators and their staff is extremely important.

Last year BCHA members nationwide spent 236,847 volunteer hours on various trail projects and meetings equaling an estimated dollar value of \$5,619,737.65. Over the past 13 years BCHA volunteer hours totaled 1,673,229. Currently there are BCH organizations in 25 states with about 174 chapters or units as well as affiliated units in British Columbia and Alberta, Canada. So if you enjoy riding on public lands, there's a good chance BCH members have been there before you, either by building and maintaining the trails or fighting at the state or national level for your right to use them.

The organization is also dedicated to encouraging and educating horsemen and the general public about the importance of using environmentally friendly practices while on public lands and promoting better communication and understanding between various trail users like hikers, and mountain bikers. Because of this stand on the "Leave No Trace" theory of stewardship, BCHA maintains a high standing with various environmental groups and often works with members of those groups on various projects.

BCHA is also actively involved in state and national equine-related legislative issues such as the "Right to Ride" legislation and Rails to Trails program. BCHA has a strong national presence on the "Hill" in Washington, D.C. as representatives from the BCHA Public Liaison Committee make several yearly trips there to maintain BCHA's visibility with the legislators. Aside from backcountry issues, BCH members are often among those standing up for horse-related issues concerning horse keeping situations in their own communities, from the closing of local stables to dust and manure control issues. BCH members participate in a variety of equine disciplines, not just packing and trail riding, so they are acquainted with various equine-related topics.

For more information on this unique equine organization, visit [www.backcountryhorse.com](http://www.backcountryhorse.com).