

Ancestral Lands Conservation Corps Continues to Improve Trails at El Morro National Monument

“Watch your fingers.” “Here let me get this side.” “Everyone get ready.” It is an early autumn afternoon in New Mexico. Voices of Navajo and Zuni youth ring out over El Morro’s Headland Trail Honeymoon Cave section as they work together with NPS preservation staff on the rehabilitation of this historic trail. Since 2018, several youth groups employed by the Ancestral Lands Conservation Corps (ALCC) have removed and replaced crumbling stone steps, washed-out stone trail borders, and about one mile of old asphalt. Heritage Preservation staff have conducted intense masonry mentorship and conservation training for all adult and youth ALCC and Southwest Conservation Corps (SCC) crews for the entire Headlands trail project.



El Morro National Monument Historic Preservation and facility staff cut and split large stone slabs and smaller stone pieces. Trail crew members worked together with the smaller pieces to create trail curbing and erosion barriers. It is like putting a puzzle together. First-season trail crew member David Reeves says, “I really like shaping stone. I’m trying to perfect my work by turning it into art that everyone can see and enjoy.”

The 2-mile loop leads visitors past a natural spring pool, hundreds of Spanish and Anglo inscriptions, petroglyphs, and up to the top of the bluff where the Ancestral Puebloan site of Atsinna overlooks the Zuni Mountains, volcanic craters of El Malpais National Monument, and the El Morro valley.

Getting in touch with ancestral roots is one of the reasons crew members enjoy this work. Using hand tools and learning how to cut stone and lay rock is what helps connect veteran Crew Leader Kyle Romancito to his history. "I'm pretty sure my ancestors are still here and they hear me. These roots and ties make my work more meaningful to me."

Begun as a Civilian Works Administration project in the 1930's, the trail was completed in 1940. In 1955, asphalt was applied to trail surfaces and has since eroded to unsafe conditions. Rehabilitation of the trail is necessary for resource and visitor safety. The work is hard and done by hand. Using wheelbarrows, crews load new surface material and stones, haul them up the steep trail, unload them, and go back for more. There is still approximately one mile of trail work to be accomplished over the next couple of years.

Funding for the project comes from Challenge Cost Share and The Fund for People in Parks. Work could not be completed without the help from the Conservation Legacy which includes the SCC and ALCC crews.



ALCC is rooted in the culture and heritage of local tribal communities. The power and impact of ALCC derives from community investment and support for each program tribally and locally, combined with the network of operational support from the nonprofit Conservation Legacy. The program strives to cultivate a new generation of local land stewards, partnering with tribal communities and land managers to accomplish impactful and lasting conservation service projects. Underlying the mission and crew lifestyle for every ALCC project is the integration of traditional culture, language, and values along with an emphasis on the health and well-being of its crew members.