HOUSTON GIVES

Ed Ponikvar: Maintaining trails in Sam Houston forest is all in a day's work for this trailblazer

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Nov 22, 2017
Updated Nov 22, 2017 4:00 p.m.



Sam Houston Trails Coalition president Ed Ponikvar coordinates volunteers to keep the Sam Houston National Forest a sanctuary for the native species and a safe beautiful space for the members of the public who enjoy nature. Monday, Feb. 6, 2017, in Houston. (Marie D. De Jesus / Houston Chronicle) Marie D. De Jesus/Staff

Ed Ponikvar is hefting his crosscut saw, a hulking, 80-year-old metal thing as tall as he is, with snaggle teeth like a sea monster's. Its name is Rachel.

If you're going to be out in the woods with someone, pick the guy who named his saw.

Ponikvar is the vice president of the all-volunteer Sam Houston Trails Coalition, a nonprofit that works with governmental entities on the Sisyphean task of maintaining the 275 miles of trails in the 163,037-acre forest 50 miles north of Houston.

Ponikvar works as a safety representative for a company that contracts with public schools for suicide prevention. He has been a volunteer with the trails coalition, which was founded in 2010, since 2011. The organization brings together the forest's biggest "user groups" - hikers, equestrians, motorized-vehicle users, cyclists and paddlers - to work on maintaining the area, which includes the 128-mile Lone Star hiking trail, the longest in Texas. He reckons the forest saw 14,000 hours of volunteer time in the most recent fiscal year.

It's one of only two such coalitions in the U.S., the other is dedicated to working on the Pacific Crest Trail in California.

Ponikvar works on projects with the U.S. Forest Service, but the labor is endless. "What we don't do is we don't wait," Ponikvar said.

He is passionate in his admiration for the volunteers. "We have grandsons of volunteers out here, multiple generations," he said, who are willing to do the unglamorous work of cutting brush, moving fallen trees, picking up garbage or broken glass and painting and keeping up signs. (Signs and even restrooms often show bullet holes.)

Rain, fire, drought and erosion can close trails, and the volunteers labor to open them up. Some areas won't allow vehicles or chainsaws (hence Rachel). Sometimes volunteers have to schlep a 60-pound paver by hand.

But Ponikvar, whose career has been in educational services, himself has made a big difference in the volunteer effort. District Ranger Warren Oja remembers that after the May 2016 rainfall, which brought 30 inches of rain to the forest, he needed an assessment of damage to the 85-mile multiuse trail. The first effort failed, so Oja turned to Ponikvar.

He deployed volunteers all along the trail. Within a day, Oja said, Ponikvar had a computer map of the trail, with red and green triangles marking damage/no damage and photos of the destruction. "We couldn't come close to that," Oja said.

Ponikvar grew up in the woods, in rural Pennsylvania in the Appalachians, an hour and a half from the nearest four-lane road.

"I came out of the woods, and I'm still in the woods," he said. "I've always been that kid."

He and his wife moved to Montgomery in 2005 to be close to the Sam Houston National Forest.

To spend time with Ponikvar is to realize how much work it takes to make nature accessible to humans. He has certain mantras he uses often. "Get the sand in the forest and the water off the

trail" is one.

"I do/we do/you do" is another, meaning: He will set the example, get others involved and then step back.

The coalition works on a shoestring, dependent on donations and grants. Ponikvar has flown out to California on his own dime to learn how to run a coalition. (By the same token, representatives from other states have come to Texas to observe SHTC's practices.)

"We have a lot more grants and a lot more membership," said 30-year volunteer Girard Lall. In prior years, the coalition meetings had attracted about 30 attendees. The last meeting, Lall said, drew 130. Ponikvar's strengths, he said, are "inspiring and organizing. If he sees you out on the trail, he'll approach you."

Oja praises Ponikvar for putting in place a cellphone check in/check out tally of volunteer hours. Because many grants require either money or sweat equity, the accounting on volunteer hours has provided the equivalent of thousands of dollars.

Jane Prentis, a 35-year volunteer who is in the hiker user group, was a coalition skeptic. "I didn't buy into the concept of a coalition," she said. "I didn't see how we would work together."

But gradually she came to see that the former competing group had literal common ground. "Ed is a hands-on, get-in-the-mud kind of guy," she said. "You could see him work through the resistance."

Now, she said, they're united. "Our goal is to preserve the forest for recreational activities for the future," she said.

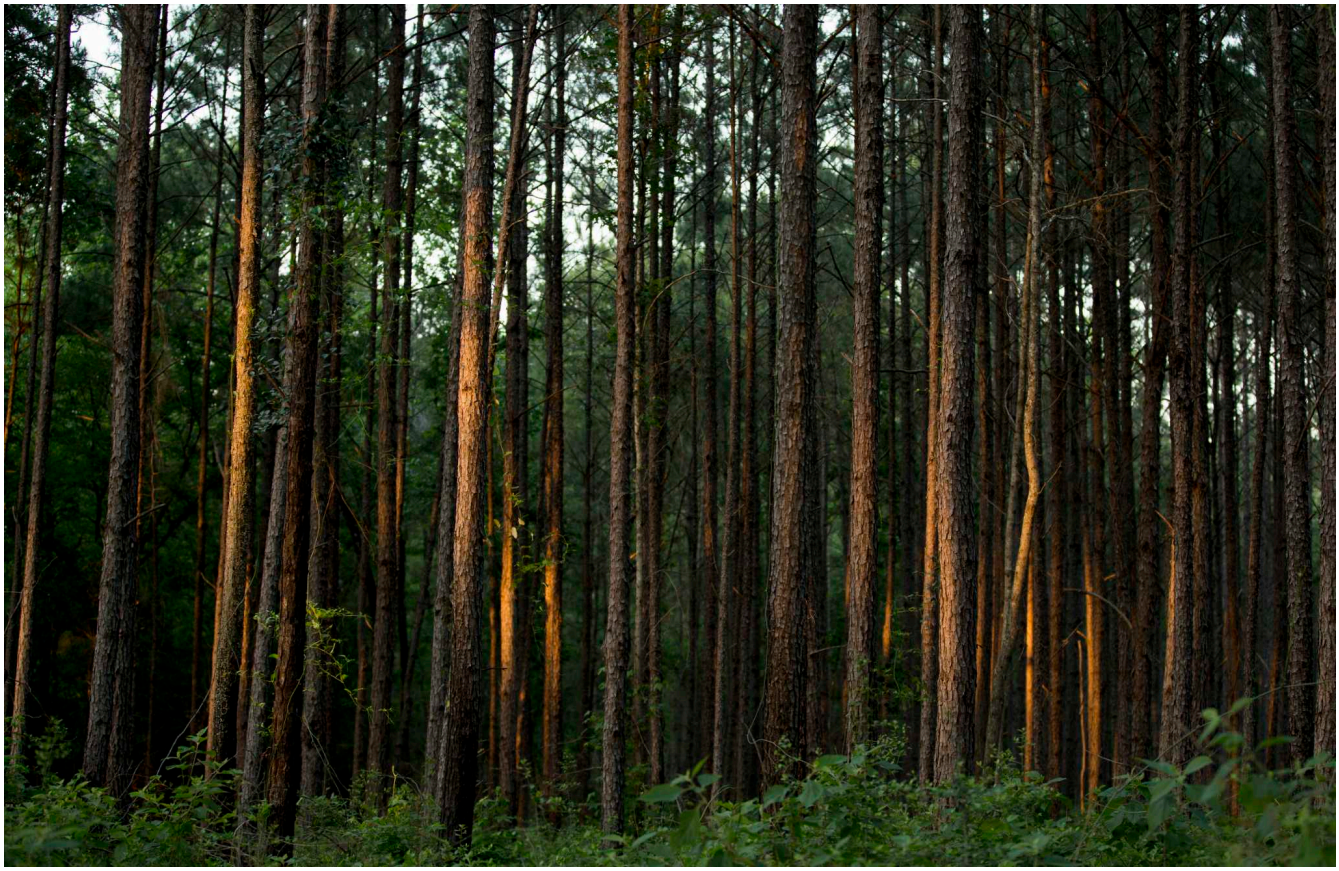
Spending time with Ponikvar also means realizing that maintaining "nature" involves a certain amount of manipulation. To encourage the growth of long-leaf pine trees, for example, means encouraging the yaupon and beautyberry bushes the long-leaf likes for company.

But the most important example is of the red-cockaded woodpecker, an endangered species that lives in holes in pine trees. Controlled burning of the underbrush helps the little bird survive. So, oddly, do trails. Ponikvar points to a map of the existing known trees where the woodpeckers live. Ten years ago, the forest had 144 family groups. Now it's 285, and the goal is 500. It's the largest population of the woodpecker west of the Mississippi. Almost all the inhabited trees are right along the trails.

"It's one of the measurements I'm most proud of," Ponikvar said.

Then there's the future. "In five years, I'd like this to be an educational experience as well as a recreational one," he said, "so that you leave the forest having learned something."

He also wants to tell the story. "I'd like to be out telling the stories of this community, as sustainable and self-sufficient."



The Sam Houston Trails Coalition, a nonprofit organization, maintains the 275 miles of trails in the 163,037-acre Sam Houston National Forest. The Sam Houston Trails Coalition, a nonprofit organization, maintains the 275 miles of trails in the 163,037-acre Sam Houston National Forest. Godofredo A. Vasquez/Staff

Archived by Knowledge Point Network on Nov 3, 2026 from http://www.houstonchronicle.com/about/houston-gives/article/EdPonikvarMaintaining-the-trails-in-the-Sam-12374713.php