

Beacons of Change: Checking in with the South American Beacon Project

Contributed by The Editors

Last November, we profiled Alexandra Taran, founder of the South American Beacon Project, and organization that brings avalanche education and donated beacons to mountain workers in Chile. A year later, South American Beacon Project is thriving. We caught up with Taran three weeks after she returned from Chile on a day off from patrolling at Snowbird.

Tweet

Last November, we profiled Alexandra Taran, founder of the South American Beacon Project, and organization that brings avalanche education and donated beacons to mountain workers in Chile. A year later, South American Beacon Project is thriving. We caught up with Taran three weeks after she returned from Chile on a day off from patrolling at Snowbird.

For the original profile of Taran and the South American Beacon Project, check out the November 2011 issue, available [here](#).

Backcountry: How many beacons did you distribute this last season?

Alex Taran: Ninety. We got a couple bigger donations, one from MEC in Vancouver, and the other from Ortovox out of Germany with 30 beacons, 15 shovels and 15 probes. And then the Ketchum Fire Department gave us their old beacons because they were updating their fleet, and they also did a drive in Ketchum, which was awesome.

BCM: So that's been pretty cool then, to see your exposure go up into Vancouver and all the way to Germany.

AT: Yeah. It's huge. It's really exciting for us to expand. I mean, that's almost 10 times what we did the first year. I can't even count the classes [we taught]. We're in 14 communities and there were about 250 students.

BCM: Did you go back to any of the mountains you had previously been to?

AT: Yeah, definitely. We went back to La Parva. We went back to Nevados de Chillan. It's cool to see how the education is building there. Once we put this bug in their ear, people are just wanting more and more. The interest is not in some gringo coming in. It's them going and developing interest themselves in their free time—going to find more resources. In Nevados de Chillan, I was really excited to come back and see they started a snow study plot. That's not something I told them about, it's something they did because of their own interest.

BCM: And you did some work in Argentina, too?

AT: Yeah. We worked with a resort called La Hoya and in Bariloche and also in Rio Turbio. Argentina is definitely somewhere we're looking to expand.

The expansion we made throughout Chile was huge. We divided the country into four different sections—the Central Cordillera, Chile Sur, Lakes District and Patagonia Sur. The idea is that in each area we're having a local who organizes the classes and co-teaches them. Obviously we don't want this project to be like, "Oh, look. Some gringo is coming in and teaching you everything." We want to come in, give the information and bring something to the table that can eventually take control of itself and become something bigger.

BCM: So within two years, it's getting to a point where it's running on its own and you're just facilitating?

AT: It's great. It's helpful for me because...the beacon project is not my only focus. Having these other folks help and the beacon project take on a mind of its own not only helps me but helps the program reach out to so many more people.

BCM: Where there any standout moments that affirmed what you've done in the last two years?

AT: Utah Avalanche Center has a program called Know Before You Go. So we translated Know Before You Go into Chilean Spanish and we brought that video down. We did a basic presentation in Las Trancas—we had about 60 people show up to this talk, which is awesome. A lot of them were the local freeride kids who are starting to venture into the sidecountry.

After the presentation, this guy Alejandro comes up to me, and he said it meant a lot to him. Then he explained that 15 years ago, his brother had died in an avalanche at the resort. Eight years ago, his friend had died in an avalanche in the sidecountry. And then last year, a worker had died while clearing the road in a plow. There had been three deaths in 15 years in the area and nobody had ever done a public class like this. People were just being quiet about the problem.

People don't talk about it. People just don't really think there are avalanches 'til they see them or are affected by them. It was really cool to see this guy come up to us and thank us for making the community aware.

BCM: What are your future plans?

AT: We're moving on from just beacons to becoming an avalanche awareness organization in general. We're compiling an archive [of avalanche accidents in Chile and Argentina] right now. And this is the time of the year we're collecting beacons, so for folks out there who have a beacon they're upgrading or not using, donate now. People donating beacons is the only way we get them down there. It's basically the fuel to get tools to these rescue personnel.

To learn more about the South American Beacon Project, or to donate a beacon, visit southamericanbeaconproject.com.

Tweet