Eagle at 12, eco-hero at 14: Why N.J. teen isn't your average scout!

14-year-old Eagle Scout Sherveer Singh Pannu, far right, organized groups of volunteers to help remove invasive species from a Camden County Park over the summer to achieve the highly prized Hornaday Award. (Photo provided)

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LINDENWOLD — Sherveer Pannu was just 10 years old when his Boy Scout leader Mike McCormick realized he wasn't your average scout.
In addition to removing invasive species, 14-year-old Eagle Scout Sherveer Pannu also replaced trail markers at signs at Lake Worth Park in Camden County over the summer. (Photo provided)

In answering a simple question from McCormick about his favorite activity with the scouts so far, Sherveer cited a 13-mile hike the troop had completed in Gettysburg two years prior, when Sherveer was just 8 and tagged along with his older brother.

"I knew he would be an interesting one," said McCormick.

Just 2 years later, Sherveer became one of the youngest scouts in the state to reach its highest rank, Eagle, at the ripe age of 12. While McCormick called that feat "extremely unusual," as even driven scouts don't normally attempt the project until age 16 or 17, Sherveer hasn't stopped there.

The now 14-year-old Eastern High School freshman recently spearheaded efforts to eradicate invasive species from a county park, as he attempts to secure another high-ranking award.

"He's a pretty driven young man, and he's pretty mature in some ways for his big-picture thinking," said Mike Gallagher, a former scout leader who works in forestry and advised Sherveer during his park project.

It began when Sherveer set out to earn the Hornaday Award — which is touted on the Boy Scout website as a “Olympic medal bestowed by the Earth” for its environmental focus and rarity — and heard from his scoutmaster that Lake Worth Park in Lindenwold wasn't in the best shape.

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In an effort to fix up the park, a 50-acre pocket of Pine Barrens that hosts a diverse range of species and exceptionally clean water, Sherveer reached out to the county and the South Jersey Land and Water Trust’s Mike Hogan, who told him about invasive species that can threaten native biodiversity.

So he got to work.
In conjunction with the county park service, he organized eight separate clean ups over the summer with 40 volunteers to carefully remove more than 4,000 Japanese Knotweed, Japanese Honeysuckle and Autumn Olive plants from the park and set monitoring plans in place to make sure they don't return.

Not only did he work to remove the invasive species, which can hog resources and choke out native and sometimes rare species, he replaced five dilapidated trail signs as well as cleaned up and demarcated trails that wind around the lake and removed trash.

"By doing this the park is going to be better for the people who visit it," said Sherveer, who also focused on community education surrounding the park's biodiversity, as part of his work. "Now it's going to look better with the more natural appearance."

Beyond the hard work on the ground, Gallagher said much of Sherveer's tenacity was in the constant paperwork he had to complete as well as emailing, calling and meeting with officials to get the project off of the ground.

"A lot of adults just can't handle that, at his age it was really impressive," said Gallagher, who added Sherveer's successes extend beyond the park's border, as he also linked together multiple organizations with a stake in the park's state to maintain his progress.

"His work was foundational in enabling them to have other groups come in and continue to build on his work. There's a momentum there, so it'll be easier for citizen conservationist to sort of take it and keep going with it," said Gallagher.

Sherveer is in the midst on writing up his application for the award, which will be submitted to a national committee, but already has two more clean ups planned for next summer in the park for reasons that he said are simple.

"I want to make an impact on the community around me, so other kids are inspired as well to be able to do these things," he said.

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