

'I like to think when I'm gone I will have left this a better place'

Environmental volunteering: motivations, barriers and benefits

Summary Report



Liz O'Brien, Forest Research
Mardie Townsend and
Matthew Ebden, Deakin University, Australia

July 2008

Report to the Scottish Forestry Trust and Forestry Commission



Volunteering has been defined by the Home Office as *'an activity that involves spending time, unpaid, doing something that aims to benefit the environment or individuals or groups other than (or in addition to) close relatives'*. As well as fulfilling this criterion environmental volunteering has additional aspects which support the conservation and enjoyment of green spaces and the countryside. This research aimed to provide a better understanding of the motivations for, barriers to, and benefits of practical outdoor volunteering for both volunteers and organisations. Field work and data collection took place between August and October 2007. Eighty-eight volunteers were interviewed outdoors as they undertook their practical volunteer activities. Interviews were also undertaken with eleven national organisation representatives and fifteen local organisation representatives involved in managing and developing volunteers. The key findings show that a small number of factors motivated people to get involved in volunteering but the range of benefits people described from their activities were wide-ranging and often reinforced their motivation for continuing their involvement. These benefits were gained by the individuals who volunteered and the organisations that managed volunteers. There were also environmental benefits such as the creation or restoration of habitats and community benefits in terms of improved and cared for green spaces. This research was undertaken with funding from the Scottish Forestry Trust and Forestry Commission, with in kind support provided by Deakin University in Melbourne, Australia and Forest Research.

INTRODUCTION

According to the Institute for Volunteering Research *'the context for volunteering is changing rapidly through globalisation, technological and demographic change, and the political drive to promote voluntary action as central to civic responsibility and democratic regeneration'* (Gaskin, 2004). Linking civic responsibility and social inclusion in this view of volunteering highlights its potential for engaging people who are currently disengaged (Church, 2007; British Trust for Conservation Volunteers, 2008; Countryside Recreation Network, 2008). Volunteering has been high on the government's policy agenda for a number of years. Over the past five years millions of pounds have been provided for a range of initiatives to increase the numbers of volunteers, and encourage a more diverse range of people to volunteer (Russell Commission, 2005; Cabinet Office, 2008). Ministers see volunteering as a means of building sustained involvement and thus addressing a range of priorities such as fostering social justice, developing biodiversity, building cohesive communities and improving health.

The Commission on the Future of Volunteering in its 2008 report set out a vision where *'volunteering becomes part of the DNA of society – it becomes integral to the way we think of ourselves and live our lives, and we are inspired to contribute in this way'* (The Commission for Future of Volunteering 2008). However the Commission (2008 a and b) emphasises that volunteering faces a number of challenges such as: declining trust in institutions; risk averse attitudes; cash rich, time poor society; and a lack of neighbourliness and community. Despite this, the Commission believes that many of the obstacles to volunteering can be mitigated or removed to enable a broader range of people to get involved.

Various groups and individuals can and do get involved in environmental volunteering either through their own initiative or through encouragement from others, or due to specific projects being set up. Individuals and groups can include civic environmentalists, corporate volunteers, schools and universities, offenders, specific groups e.g. mental health groups, asylum seekers, community woodland volunteers and 'friends of' groups (O'Brien *et al.*, 2008). Environmental volunteers can get involved in a wide range of activities from office and administrative work, education and awareness raising, campaigns, practical activities, biological recording, ranger or warden activity to governance and participatory activities; these can take place both indoors and outdoors.

THE STUDY

The overall aim of the research was to explore the motivations, benefits and barriers to outdoor environmental volunteering. There were four levels to the research including:

- 1) A review of literature on volunteering with particular reference to environmental volunteering and the policy context for volunteering in Britain.
- 2) Interviews with representatives at a national level of organisations that recruit and manage volunteers.
- 3) Interviews with local representatives of organisations that manage volunteers (e.g. the person leading the volunteer group).
- 4) Interviews with volunteers while they undertook their voluntary activities (Table 1).

The sampling approach was a purposeful one: the organisations invited to be involved in the research were chosen to cover a range of organisations in size and scope, to include urban and rural volunteering, to cover volunteers from a range of ages, different socio-economic backgrounds and to include a range of practical voluntary activities. The researchers spent the day with volunteer groups mainly in northern England and southern Scotland and interviewed them as they undertook their practical activities. In addition to interviews, the researchers also gathered quantitative data from participants through an Emotional State Scale (ESS) questionnaire used before and after the environmental activities took place. The ESS was adapted from the Osgood Semantic Differential Scale (Tyerman and Humphrey, 1984). The scale indicates changes in emotional state across twelve parameters such as happy/unhappy, bored/interested, worthless/worthy. The scale is sensitive to emotional change experienced during a short period of time. The volunteers were also asked to complete a questionnaire asking them for demographic details, and about the length of time they have been volunteering for the organisation, how many hours they volunteer a month, and whether they volunteered for any other organisation. The last part of the questionnaire was about the volunteers' satisfaction with their quality of life as measured by a Personal Well-being Index. Eighty-eight volunteers were interviewed volunteering for ten different organisations. Eleven national representatives and fifteen local representatives from twelve different organisations were also interviewed.

Table 1: Organisations and volunteer groups interviewed at a local and national level

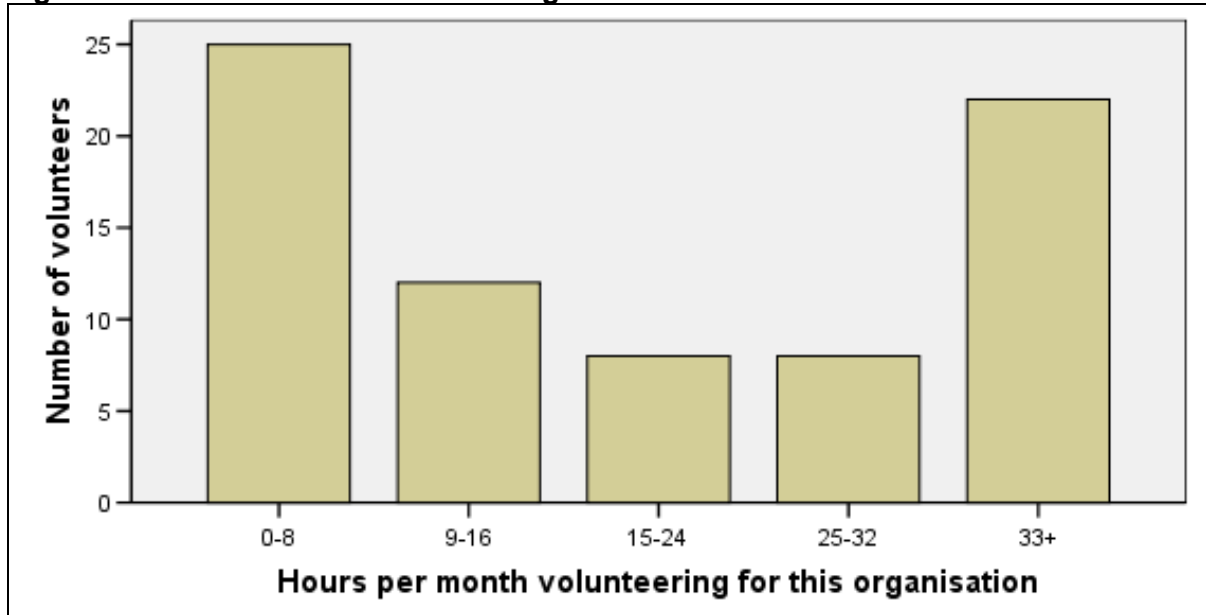
Organisation	Local representative	National/Regional Representative	Interviews with volunteers
The Wildlife Trusts	Yes Hampshire Wildlife Trust	Yes	4 volunteers
Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB)	Yes Baron's Haugh nature reserve, Motherwell	Yes	6 volunteers 1 teacher (volunteer)
British Trust for Conservation Volunteers (BTCV)	Yes Glasgow	Yes and FEVA rep ¹	8 volunteers
Forestry Commission Scotland (FCS)	Yes – four FCS staff members working on Project Scotland Galloway Forest	Yes	14 young men 3 older men
National Trust	Yes Northumberland	Yes	11 volunteers
Forestry Commission England	No	Yes	No group studied
The National Trust for Scotland	Yes	Yes	8 volunteers
Borders Forest Trust	Volunteers with Carrifran Wildwood Group (CWW), Moffat	Yes Borders Forest Trust	5 volunteers
Scottish Natural Heritage	No	Yes	No group studied
Natural England	No	Yes	No group studied
Durham Bird Club	No	N/A	5 volunteers
Friends of the Lake District	Yes	N/A	4 Friends of Lake District volunteers 10 Environment Agency corporate volunteers 2 Lake District National Park volunteers 2 carers of 3 residents from a community care home
Gateshead Council	Yes – three staff members	N/A	5 volunteers

Demographic and Emotional State Scale results

Of the 88 volunteers, 25 (28%) were female and 63 (72%) were male. The average age of the volunteers was 43 years, and they ranged from 16 to 76 years. Of the 77 volunteers who provided their employment status, 25 (32.5%) stated that they worked full-time, 20 (26%) were retired, 15 (19.5%) were unemployed, 7 were employed part-time, 5 were studying full-time, 4 were not working due to illness or disability, and one was a parent or carer. The ESS indicated that volunteers, in general, felt emotionally positive prior to volunteering showing a mean score of 81% across the twelve emotional parameters. At the completion of the activities volunteers recorded a mean of 85% indicating that they felt more positive. The mean difference of 4.4 indicates that in general volunteers experienced a statistically significant positive emotional shift during the period of volunteering (T test=3.81; Df=75; p<0.001). However there was one parameter, pain, which gained a mean negative score at the end of the activities. Through the interviews it became clear that some people had muscle ache or twinges from their activities, and although this was recorded as negative through the ESS the volunteers themselves described feeling satisfied when they went home tired after their physical activities. Of the 88 volunteers, 34 were also volunteering for other bodies such as local community groups, other environmental organisations and church groups. Figure 1 shows the number of hours per month the participants were volunteering for the specific organisation (such as the National Trust) on the day the researchers interviewed them, highlighting a substantial commitment from some people. Those volunteering thirty three hours or more a month were primarily made up of the young people at Project Scotland and those volunteering for the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers in Glasgow as part of their further education programme.

¹ Forum for Environmental Volunteering Activity in Scotland representative, employed by BTCV

Figure 1: Number of hours volunteering



MOTIVATIONS FOR ENVIRONMENTAL VOLUNTEERING

Appreciation of being outdoors and environmental awareness

For the volunteers themselves a common over-arching factor in the motivations for becoming engaged in environmental volunteering was an enjoyment of nature and the outdoors, and an awareness of the need for environmental restoration (Figure 2). For some volunteers, this was aesthetically based; for others it was related to philosophical approaches to life. This has clear links to the ways in which people value nature and the environment. The value of nature was articulated clearly by a member of the Durham Bird Club (DBC):

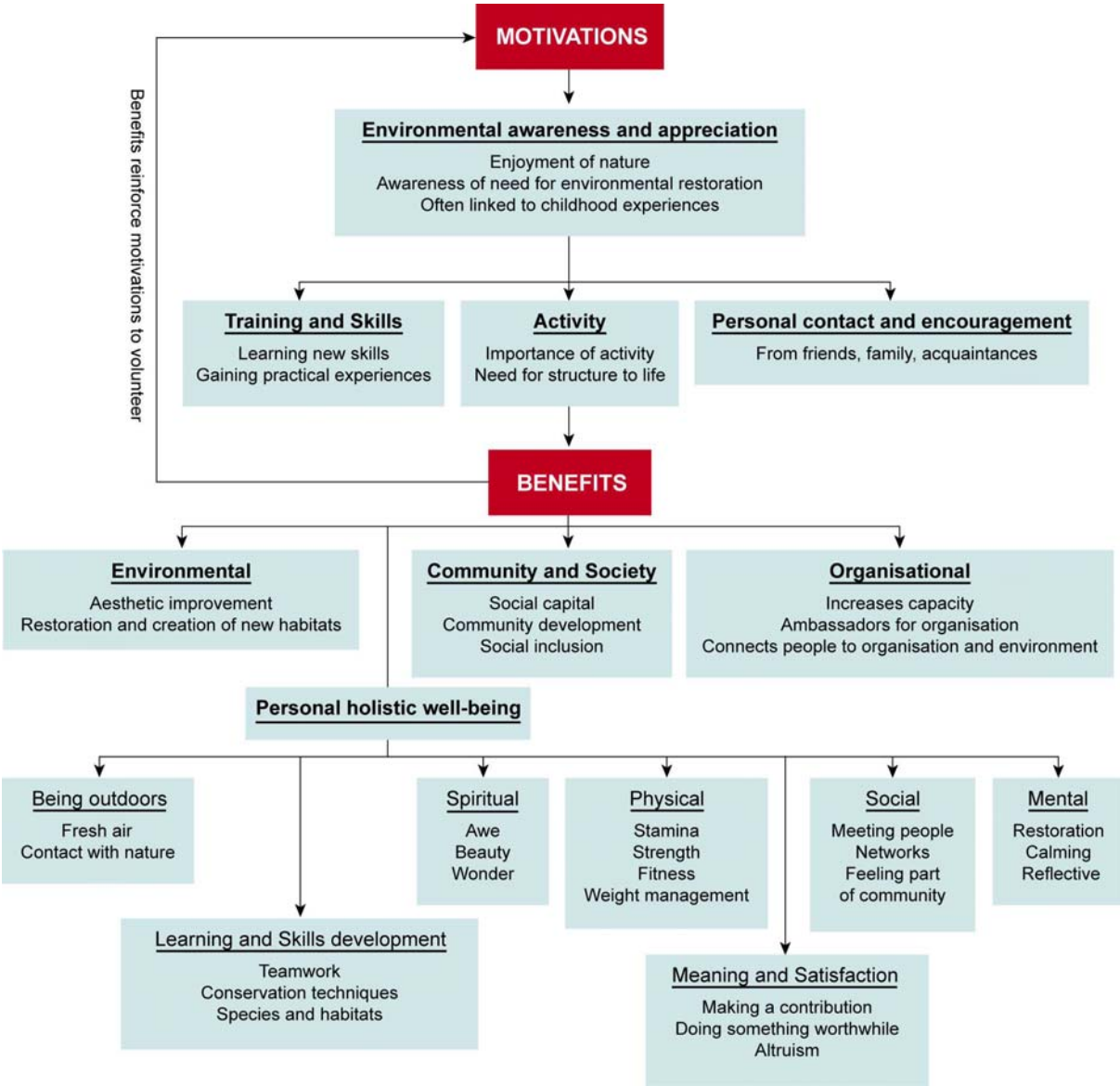
'When something's priceless it's magic, it's wonderful and it has that magic about it and you say it's priceless. But once you start with the money and you put a price on it, it's got a value; it becomes cheap, it becomes tacky, you've destroyed the beauty of what ever it was, the magic is gone, because you fixed a price on it, so if you've got sufficient money you can have that. As soon as money comes in, values go out the window'.

Training and skills

Two of the groups involved mainly young people. Here training, learning new skills and gaining practical experience were seen as particularly important. One of these groups was Forestry Commission Scotland's (FCS) Project Scotland volunteers (PS) – PS classes itself as a new type of volunteering for 16-25 year olds. Full time placements (30 hours a week minimum) are available lasting from three months to a year. A range of opportunities are available and FCS is working with PS² to provide opportunities to volunteer in Galloway Forest. The young men in PS were mainly in their late teens. They were attracted to FCS because they wanted to work outdoors and wanted to undertake the training offered. One young man stated 'you'll get a good reference out of it as well and that will look good'.

² Young people can choose to volunteer to work for a range of organisations if these are linked with the Project Scotland programme (Project Scotland, 2008).

Figure 2: Conceptual framework of individual motivations for environmental volunteering and benefits to the individual, wider society, environment and organisations of volunteering



Need for activity and structure

Thirty nine of the volunteers were retired, unemployed or had stopped work due to health problems. They were often looking for something to provide structure to their lives. This was particularly the case for three of the men in the Hampshire Wildlife Trust group, for four of the men in the Carrifran Wildwood (CWW) group, and for one of the men in the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) group. However, opportunity for regular and meaningful activity was also a motivating force for some of the volunteers who worked full or part time.

Personal contact and encouragement

The importance of word of mouth as a means of engaging people in environmental volunteering was evident through many of the interviews. Approximately a third of people had been persuaded or encouraged by others to get involved. A small number of the volunteers had been referred by their social workers; this was the case for a young man at FCS and a

young woman at the RSPB. Another young man at FCS had been encouraged by his career advisor and stated *'it's one of the best decisions of my life so far'*.

BENEFITS OF ENVIRONMENTAL VOLUNTEERING

The benefits gained by participants and outlined below further motivated them to continue their engagement in volunteering (Figure 2). The benefits described were not necessarily hierarchical i.e. the benefits people talked about were related to the context in which they volunteered and to their own previous experiences. Therefore the importance of individual benefits might change over the period of time that people volunteered, for example a person might join a volunteer group if they had just moved to an area in order to get to know people. Once they developed a social network, the learning benefits of their conservation work might become more important. The volunteers generally talked about the benefits they gained in a holistic way rather than stating that one benefit was more important than another.

Being outdoors

All of the volunteers talked about the importance of being outside; some of the volunteers were volunteering in very scenic countryside, while three groups were clearing up spaces in urban areas. Some of the volunteers stated that they had not been aware of the sites before they started their voluntary activities. Two of the groups primarily worked on one site, but the others went to a small number of different places depending on the requirements of the organisation managing the volunteers. Both options could provide benefits. For example, those who worked on one site could become very familiar with it and observe quite small changes that took place, while others who went to a range of sites could appreciate the different qualities of these sites. For those participating in conservation holidays it could often be a chance to visit a part of the country they had not seen before.

Meaning and satisfaction

Volunteers talked about putting something back, and gaining satisfaction and a sense of achievement from getting involved. This category seemed to be specifically about what might be termed the more altruistic side of volunteering and the need to make a contribution. A DBC volunteer commented:

'You feel you're doing something positive, you're giving something back to the environment, you're actually doing something physically yourself where you feel you're achieving something. I guess there are too many people in the world talking about doing things and not actually doing it, and putting legislation into place and whatever, but at the end of the day, a lot of the time it doesn't actually work, whereas if you take control yourself, you feel like you've achieved something, you know what I mean?'

Volunteers also noted that 'putting something back' made them feel good in themselves and this can potentially be important in building people's confidence, especially those with low self-esteem.

Physical well-being

All the volunteers talked about the physical benefits of their activities; and this applied across all the age groups, from the young men at FCS who talked about getting a better nights sleep and not having to go to the gym as frequently, to those who were retired and talked about feeling stiff the next day. However this was seen as positive, i.e. they had worked hard and felt good about that. One of the young men at FCS wanted to lose weight; he had been off sick for a long time and wanted to become active again.

Mental well-being

The volunteers talked of their experiences that led to an impact on mental well-being. One volunteer with DBC talked about the relaxed nature of the activity, one man with the Friends

of the Lake District described how he found it therapeutic. For some of the young people it was a chance to 'chill out', take stock and look around them. While one of the CWW volunteers described mental stimulation, this was primarily due to the opportunities to converse and learn from the others in the group and because the long term vision of the project to re-wood a valley was something that the group readily found stimulating.

'Just even, like peace of mind as well. There's something about being outdoors that I think just gives you a calmness'. (Female, British Trust for Conservation Volunteers)

Social well-being

Meeting new people and social contact was a benefit frequently mentioned by the majority of the volunteers as particularly important. Once people have retired, are bereaved, or are not working then a major source of socialising, through work or with a partner, is no longer available to them and they need to find activities and occupations that allow them to meet others. However the young people also stressed the importance of socialising and the enjoyment of working as a team.

'I enjoy it. You have a good crack with the lads you know, it's good fun'. (Male, DBC)

The range of backgrounds of the volunteers was considerable in both age and socio-economic terms. A number of the volunteers also had health problems: physical and mental or emotional. Some of the groups were very mixed and volunteers were likely to meet a range of different people, and this was something that was appreciated. As one young RSPB female volunteer stated *'I like being with young and old people at the same time'*.

Learning

The volunteers felt that they were learning a range of things from their voluntary activity; however this was not necessarily through any formalised training, as mentioned under the training and skills section (motivation). The informal learning people identified came about primarily through the person leading the activity or from other volunteers who had specific knowledge that they shared with each other.

Environmental benefits

The volunteers enjoyed seeing the changes and improvements that they had been involved in. A National Trust for Scotland female volunteer appreciated that her work was contributing to environmental improvements, but acknowledged that this was aided by the fact that she was working under the guidance of 'experts'. She said:

Well I'm helping to improve biodiversity, controlling invasive species and that sort of thing but I'm doing it under the guidance of people who know what they are doing and they are working to a specific programme.

BARRIERS TO ENVIRONMENTAL VOLUNTEERING

Volunteers and organisation representatives were asked about potential barriers to getting involved. A range of potential barriers were identified by participants and could be divided into barriers to getting involved in environmental volunteering in the first place and barriers to staying involved (Box 1). However, only a few of the volunteers interviewed in this research had actually experienced any of these barriers.

Box 1: Barriers

To getting involved

- Finding out about opportunities (not knowing where to look for information)
- Costs (of travelling to sites where the activities take place)
- Groups at capacity (organisations may not have the capacity to manage more people so they may turn volunteers away)
- Transport issues (without a car it can be difficult to participate and get to sites)
- Confidence (to make the first step and join a group)
- Not sure how to go about it or what is involved or what to expect

To staying involved

- Not having the right equipment for the job at hand (or having old or broken equipment)
- Not able to voice concerns or frustrations
- Lack of organisation of activities or planning before hand (this may mean that volunteers are waiting around before undertaking an activity)
- Group dynamics: some groups may be exclusive or may appear unwelcoming to new people
- Mundane tasks (litter picking may de-motivate volunteers)
- Not getting feedback on what has been achieved

DISCUSSION

This research clarifies the difficulties of drawing a clear boundary between what motivates people to get involved in environmental volunteering and the benefits that they receive. The motivations were similar to those identified by previous research such as Clary *et al.*, (1998) and a more detailed discussion on the key findings of the work is outlined in the full report (O'Brien, *et al.*, 2008). It was often the benefits people received that provided the motivation for them to continue with their activities. There appears to be a continuum from what could be termed the more altruistic aspects of volunteering through to volunteering that is focused on gaining new skills that will lead to future employment. This broad spectrum of volunteering can be viewed as both a potential strength and weakness. Its strength lies in the wide range of opportunities that are on offer to people with diverse abilities; however a weakness is that this variety is potentially difficult to manage and can be confusing to those who have not volunteered before. It also makes it harder to publicise and promote a coherent picture of what environmental volunteering is.

Volunteering as a means of re-integration into society

While the ethnicity of the volunteers in this study was not diverse, the range of abilities, socio-economic backgrounds and ages was. The results of this study have shown that outdoor environmental volunteering seems to be able to accommodate those with learning difficulties, emotional and behavioural problems and those with mental health problems. Approximately a quarter of the volunteers interviewed could be classed as marginalised through mental health problems, developmental delays, emotional and behavioural difficulties or unemployment. The work that these volunteers do alongside others of all ages potentially helps to re-integrate them into wider society.

IMPLICATIONS AND POTENTIAL WAYS FORWARD

This section provides some ideas for organisations of potential ways forward in environmental volunteering in terms of practice, policy and research. More issues are outlined in the full report on the research (O'Brien *et al.*, 2008).

Practice

- Taster sessions are an opportunity to provide those who are not familiar with volunteering a chance to see whether environmental volunteering interests them and what it involves.

- Work with volunteer centres so that the opportunities for environmental volunteering become more widely known. This is important for those organisations who want to increase the numbers of volunteers they get.
- Many of the organisations in this research produced some form of leaflet, web information or literature about volunteering opportunities. These could be targeted in specific places such as doctor's surgeries, local schools, and universities – depending on the groups organisations want to reach.
- Involving volunteers in decision-making could improve or strengthen motivation. Involvement in decision-making could also empower volunteers and draw on their skills.

Policy

- Engage with Local Authorities as they have a national indicator to meet concerning participation in regular volunteering. This indicator reflects national government priorities.
- Link in with specific organisations. For example there may be local community or mental health groups that would welcome the chance to participate in a day's volunteering activity. By targeting groups in this way environmental organisations could increase the diversity of their volunteers.
- It seems that universities and employers increasingly use extra curricular interests and experience to differentiate between young applicants. This may explain why young people were found to be attracted to volunteering by opportunities for training and skills accreditation. Many organisations would like to involve more young people in environmental volunteering and they should consider what training opportunities they can provide. Publicising volunteering opportunities on websites such as 'YouTube' and 'Facebook' could reach a younger audience.
- Development of strategic partnerships is already taking place, for example the Forum for Environmental Volunteering Activity in Scotland³ and the Environmental Volunteer Partnership⁴ in England as well as the new North East Environmental Volunteering Initiative highlight the way forward as one in which partnerships are formed to share best practice, volunteers and expertise.
- Environment sector organisations could consider allowing their own staff to volunteer one day a year as part of their employment contract. This can be linked to corporate social responsibility.

Research

- Monitoring and evaluation should be undertaken to provide clear information about the numbers of volunteers and how they benefit, and how different organisations benefit from volunteer activity and input.
- Examine whether involving volunteers in decision-making concerning volunteering activities, the creation of new spaces and/or management of existing spaces, leads to longer-term commitment.
- Explore whether environmental volunteering of different types changes people's attitudes towards the environment and whether it leads to pro-environmental behaviour.

REFERENCES

- BRITISH TRUST FOR CONSERVATION VOLUNTEERS. (2008). *Inspiring people: Improving places*. British Trust for Conservation Volunteers, Doncaster.
- CABINET OFFICE: OFFICE OF THE THIRD SECTOR. (2008). *Volunteering for all programme*.
http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/third_sector/volunteering/volunteering_for_all.aspx
 accessed 7/7/08.

³ <http://www.feva-scotland.org/>

⁴ This includes a range of organisations such as Woodland Trust, National Trust, RSPB, The Wildlife Trust, Sustrans and others.

- CHURCH, C. (2007). *Changed places, changed lives: the social impacts of environmental action*. British Trust for Conservation Volunteers, Doncaster.
- CLARY, E. G. and SNYDER, M. (1999). The motivations to volunteer: Theoretical and practical considerations. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*. **8**, 156-159.
- COUNTRYSIDE RECREATION NETWORK. (2008). *Volunteering in the natural outdoors*. CRN, Sheffield.
- GASKIN, K. (2004). *Young people, volunteering and civic service: a review of the literature*. Institute for Volunteering Research, London.
- HOME OFFICE. (2005). *The volunteering compact code of good practice*. Home Office, London.
- O'BRIEN, L., TOWNSEND, M. and EBDEN, M. (2008). *'I like to think when I'm gone I will have left this a better place': Environmental volunteering – motivations, barriers and benefits*. Report to the Scottish Forestry Trust and Forestry Commission. <http://www.forestresearch.gov.uk/fr/INFD-7GDHD3>
- RUSSELL, I. (2005). *A national framework for youth action and engagement*. Russell Commission.
- THE COMMISSION ON THE FUTURE OF VOLUNTEERING. (2008a). *Report of the Commission on the future of volunteering and Manifesto for change*. The Commission on the Future of Volunteering, London.
- THE COMMISSION ON THE FUTURE OF VOLUNTEERING. (2008b). *Understanding how to engage people in volunteering*. The Commission on the Future of Volunteering, London.
- TYERMAN, A. and HUMPHREY, M. (1984). Changes in self concept following severe head injury. *International Journal of Rehabilitation Research*. **7**, 11-23.

For more information on the work contact:

Liz O'Brien

Social and Economic Research Group

Forest Research

Farnham

Surrey GU10 4LH

liz.obrien@forestry.gsi.gov.uk

See the full report: <http://www.forestresearch.gov.uk/fr/INFD-7GDHD3>