

## Environmental volunteering: motivations, benefits and barriers

Environmental volunteering can involve a range of people from a wide variety of socio-economic backgrounds. This research explored what motivates people to get involved in practical volunteer work outdoors, what benefits they gain and whether there are any barriers that could prevent or deter people from volunteering. The research, undertaken in 2007/2008, found a number of motivations for getting involved and a wide range of benefits from participation in environmental volunteering. The findings of the research can provide insights for organisations on how to recruit, manage and maintain volunteers. The work is timely as there is increased interest in volunteering in general, and the government is providing funding for a range of volunteering initiatives. This research provides the environment sector with evidence of the importance of environmental volunteering for physical, social and mental well-being.



*“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, if you take control yourself, you feel like you’ve achieved something.”*

Male volunteer, Durham Bird Club

### Background

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’. Volunteering has been high on the government’s policy agenda for a number of years and millions of pounds have been provided for a range of initiatives to increase the numbers of people volunteering. Accordingly, issues relating to volunteering are very important, and building sustained involvement through environmental volunteering is seen as a way of contributing to a range of priorities such as fostering social justice, developing biodiversity, building cohesive communities and improving health.

### Objectives

This research aimed to:

- identify the motivations of those who volunteer in the environment
- identify the benefits people perceive from their volunteering activities
- identify the barriers preventing or discouraging people from volunteering in the environment
- identify key issues for organisations that manage and develop volunteers

### Methods

- Qualitative interviews were conducted with volunteer groups in northern England and southern Scotland as they undertook their volunteer activities.
- Quantitative data were collected from volunteers using an emotional state scale (before and after their activities) and a personal well-being index questionnaire.
- In-depth interviews were conducted with representatives of organisations that manage and develop volunteers at national and local levels.
- Interviews were carried out with 88 volunteers, 11 national representatives and 15 local representatives from 12 different organisations, such as the Forestry Commission, Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, The National Trust and the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers.

## Findings

There were a number of motivating factors that led people to get involved in environmental volunteering. The primary overarching motivation was an appreciation of being outdoors and an awareness of the environment. Other motivations included gaining training and skills; this was particularly the case for young people. The need for activity and for a structure to the week was especially important for those who had retired and those who were not working because of ill health or unemployment. Personal contact and encouragement to get involved in environmental volunteering was also a motivating factor in people's decisions to participate.

The wide range of benefits included being outdoors, and gaining meaning and satisfaction from practical environmental activities. Increased well-being (physical, social and mental) and learning through getting involved

in voluntary activities and environmental improvements were also considered important benefits.

Barriers to volunteering included finding out about the opportunities available, the costs of getting involved, transport to get to a site and a lack of confidence to get involved. There were also potential barriers once people were involved, including not being able to voice issues and concerns, carrying out mundane tasks and not getting any feedback.

This research shows that volunteering can be a means of re-integrating marginalised people into society. Environmental volunteering can contribute to social capital and community development, and can enhance people's values for the environment. It can also improve self-esteem, giving people meaning and a sense of identity.

## Recommendations

At a national level it is recommended that:

- development of strategic partnerships should continue to take place. Fora such as the Forum for Environmental Volunteering Activity in Scotland highlight the way forward, where partnerships are formed to share best practice, volunteers and expertise
- training and recognition for staff who manage volunteers is developed, reflecting the fact that managing volunteers is a specialist skill

At a local level it is recommended to:

- provide taster sessions for those who are not familiar with volunteering, giving them the opportunity to see if it interests them
- involve volunteers in decision-making as a way to improve and strengthen motivation. Involvement in decision-making could also empower volunteers and draw on their skills
- link in with specific organisations, for example local community groups may welcome the opportunity to participate in a day's volunteering activity

### Partners

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### Reports and publications

Carter, C. and O'Brien, L. (2008). Identity building in the woods: re-connecting with nature for health and well-being. *ECOS*, 29, 33-41.

O'Brien, L., Townsend, M. and Ebdon, M. (2008). *'I'd like to think that 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, 128 pp. Downloadable from [www.forestresearch.gov.uk/fr/INFD-7GDHD3](http://www.forestresearch.gov.uk/fr/INFD-7GDHD3)