

**Volunteering in the natural outdoors in
the UK and Ireland: a literature review
Executive Summary**

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June 2007

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Background

The Tomorrow Project (www.tomorrowproject.net) is undertaking a research project on behalf of the Countryside Recreation Network (CRN) to explore volunteering within the natural outdoors throughout the UK and Ireland. The purpose of the project is to understand how volunteering fits with current and developing trends in the countryside and how opportunities for volunteering can be enhanced and encouraged. The Institute for Volunteering Research (IVR) was asked by CRN to complete a literature review as part of this project.

Definitions

Volunteering can be defined as “*an activity that involves spending time, unpaid, doing something that aims to benefit the environment or individuals or groups other than (in addition to) close relatives*” (Volunteering Compact Code of Good Practice, Home Office, 2005). For the purposes of this research, the natural outdoors is taken to cover the public open and outdoor environment, including flora and fauna, biodiversity, wildlife habitats, countryside, and urban parks and green spaces. Volunteering in the natural outdoors therefore includes any activity taking place in relation to these spaces that meets the Compact’s criteria.

Breadth and type of volunteering

Volunteering in the natural outdoors has considerable breadth. It includes those activities of a practical and direct character, such as habitat conservation, working *within* the natural outdoors. It also includes activities of a more indirect character, such as volunteering in offices and in administration roles in conservation organisations, working *for* the natural outdoors.

The range of activities can be structured using Davis Smith’s (2000) typology of volunteering:

(a) Mutual aid or self-help: this form of volunteering involves people with shared problems, challenges or conditions working together to address them. This can include volunteering within community gardens or community-based agriculture, including some forms of allotment gardening, where health and nutrition may be the key objectives.

(b) Philanthropy or service to others: this typically concerns volunteering through a voluntary or community organisation to provide some form of service to one or more third parties or beneficiary. This often includes many of the practical and physical activities associated with environmental and wildlife conservation, such as managing and improving habitats, improving access, construction, gardening for wildlife or surveying wildlife sites.

(c) Participation: this includes the involvement of individuals in the political, governance or decision-making process at any level, having an emphasis on ‘user involvement’. This can include many of the forms of participation that relate

to sustainable development and Local Agenda 21 initiatives; volunteers may sit on committees, or take part in forums or decision-making panels.

(d) Advocacy or campaigning: this type of volunteering concerns collective action in formal or informal groups, or as individuals, to secure or prevent change. This can include many of the activities of organisations such as Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth, or Earth First! and their protests against road building throughout the 1990s.

The development of volunteering

In response to apparent growing disinterest in participation in formal political processes such as voting, the public have demanded further opportunities to engage. The government has been receptive to this increase in demand, with participation being increasingly recognised in policy-making as a direct result. This appears to be particularly true of the environmental sector. Authors have noted how the development of Local Agenda 21 policies throughout the 1990s gave communities more power as decision-makers, with the involvement of individuals being seen as crucial to the success of many environmental and conservation policies. At the same time, awareness of environmental problems has increased amongst the public, resulting in individuals demonstrating increased interest in becoming involved as part of the solution to many of the problems.

These developments have been framed by continued and developing support for volunteering from the UK government. Volunteering has never received as much support from a government as it has since the Labour government was elected in 1997. In such a context, the conservation and environmental sectors have become increasingly receptive to the concept of involving people in the management of nature and the provision of opportunities for volunteers. People are increasingly playing a central role in the management of environmental and conservation problems, providing a solid foundation for the involvement of volunteers in the natural outdoors.

Extent of volunteering

Figures from national surveys suggest that large numbers of people are volunteering. In England and Wales, for example, 44% of people volunteered through a group, club or organisation at least once in the twelve months before the survey (Kitchen et al, 2005). While these surveys do not refer to 'the natural outdoors', they often categorise volunteering within 'the environment'. Figures suggest relatively low numbers of people volunteering in this sector, however: the 1997 National Survey of Volunteering found that 5% of current volunteers in the UK volunteered with organisations whose main purpose was 'the environment' (Davis Smith, 1998). When individual organisations that work with the natural outdoors are examined, high numbers of volunteers are evident. BTCV involves over 130,000 volunteers (BTCV, 2005), the Wildlife Trusts over 32,000 (IVR, 2006), and the National Trust more than 43,000 (National Trust, 2005).

The number of people volunteering has fluctuated over the past two decades. During the 1990s, the percentage of people engaged in formal volunteering in the UK decreased slightly from 51% in 1991 to 48% in 1997 (Davis Smith, 1998). From 2001 the number of people volunteering has increased. Surveys by the government found that the percentage of the adult population in England and Wales who had volunteered had increased from 39% in 2001 to 44% in 2005 (Attwood et al, 2003; Kitchen et al, 2005). Such an increase also seems to be reflected in the natural outdoors. The National Trust saw a 30% increase in the number of people volunteering between 1993 and 2003 (Heritage Link, 2003), while the number of volunteers with the Wildlife Trusts increased from 23,000 to 32,300 between 2003 and 2005 (IVR, 2006).

Motivations of volunteers

A wide range of motivational factors operate to encourage people to volunteer in the natural outdoors.

(a) A love of nature: the natural environment is often described as something to which people are attracted, or something that they are fascinated by.

(b) Environmental awareness: people may often volunteer to help manage or look after the physical environment. This can often lead to their participation in practical conservation activities such as habitat management and landscape restoration. This can also be linked to an individual's wider appreciation of environmental issues and problems, and their 'green' lifestyle choices.

(c) Social and cultural factors: volunteers often value the opportunity to develop social contacts and networks through their activities. Such benefits can also be seen at the wider community-level. Forms of volunteering in the natural outdoors can help to address social exclusion and poverty, for example.

(d) Skills and employability: in many cases, volunteers recognise that the experience they gain through volunteering can improve their chances of securing paid employment. This can be particularly evident with younger volunteers. Despite this, it is possible that formal accreditation and recognition of these skills may be less important as a motivating factor to those that volunteer in the natural outdoors than within other sectors.

Value and impact

Volunteering in the natural outdoors demonstrates a wide diversity of impacts, including those benefiting both third parties and the volunteer themselves.

(a) Economic and financial: the 1997 National Survey of Volunteering estimated the value of those volunteering within the 'environment' to be £2 billion throughout the UK (Davis Smith, 1998). However, alternative figures, and those for individual organisations, suggest a smaller, but still significant, contribution.

Such variation in estimates can sometimes depend on whether figures for the average or minimum wage are used.

(b) Environmental: volunteering can often contribute to physical and practical improvements in the natural outdoors, such as restored wildlife habitats or improved access and paths. Such activities can also enhance the environmental awareness and knowledge of those that take part. Practically, much of the everyday functioning of the environmental and conservation organisations themselves can depend on the contribution made by volunteers. The National Trust, for example, estimates that 45% of the total work of the organisation is carried out by its volunteers (Heritage Link, 2003).

Many volunteers are involved in biological recording and monitoring, collecting information about plant and animal species, including distributional and frequency data. There is widespread support for the involvement of volunteers in such roles, many arguing that they make a vital contribution. However, some people have expressed concern, questioning their competence and the accuracy of the data they collect.

(c) Social and cultural: environmental projects can include a range of social benefits that include community development, social inclusion and the development of trust and reciprocity between cultures. Benefits can also be seen at the level of the individual. Enjoyment and satisfaction is frequently cited as a key impact for many volunteers. It is also possible that volunteering in the natural outdoors can have a notable impact on the mental and physical health of individual volunteers. BTCV's Green Gym programme has been the subject of numerous project evaluations that testify to this.

(d) Political: some forms of volunteering in the natural outdoors, especially that within advocacy and campaigning, may have helped to change the relationship between the state and individual. This includes the growth of formalised opportunities for participation in policy-making as well as the development of more informal decision-making opportunities through radical activism. Volunteering at the local level is also being increasingly recognised by local and regional government. While environmental targets are not statutory within Local Area Agreements, an increasing number of local authorities are including targets that relate to volunteering in nature conservation and the environment.

Challenges and issues facing volunteering

Volunteering in the natural outdoors can be affected by many of the same challenges that face other forms of volunteering, some of which may exert a greater influence than they would in other sectors.

(a) Diversity of volunteers: there appears to be a lack of diversity in the age of volunteers in the natural outdoors, with a tendency to involve older volunteers in some organisations. Many organisations have been highly successful in their

involvement of younger volunteers, however. There is a more notable lack of diversity among the ethnic background of volunteers within the natural outdoors. For example, 96% of the volunteers directly managed by BTCV were classed as white (BEN, 2002) while 98% of the Wildlife Trust's volunteers in 2002 were white (IVR, 2006). These figures compare unfavourably to statistics on the involvement of volunteers from a 'non white' background throughout all forms of volunteering. In England and Wales in 2001, 24% of the 'non-white' adult population was involved in some type of formal volunteering (HOCS, 2003).

It is possible that some examples of community-based conservation can be overly focused on 'elites', often to the detriment of empowerment and equality. This can be particularly true of much involvement of ethnic minorities in rural areas. The challenges they face can include feelings of exclusion as well as more open intimidation. A number of authors have noted that this can also mean that issues of race and racism within the countryside may not be recognised by policy-makers. More recently, however, increasing numbers of organisations and policy-makers are considering ethnicity in relation to the natural outdoors, in both rural and urban areas. Evaluations of innovative programmes and initiatives such as the Wildlife Trusts' '*Unlocking the Potential?*' programme and BTCV's '*Environments for All*' have demonstrated often significant success when working with new and more diverse audiences.

(b) Structure and formalisation: organisations and groups within the environment and natural outdoors sector often face issues associated with a lack of sustainable funding. Authors suggest that this can impact negatively on the longer-term development and sustainability of projects. Problems of volunteer management within organisations in the natural outdoors can often be seen, although there is little evidence to suggest a direct relationship to low levels of resources. Some of the problems identified include low levels of training for those managing volunteers, limited reimbursement of out-of-pocket expenses for volunteers, and a lack of written policies on volunteers. Despite this, many organisations are increasingly prioritising the standardisation and coordination of their volunteer practices and procedures, aiming to improve the quality and consistency of experience for the volunteer.

A great deal of volunteering in the environmental sector as a whole has grown in an organic, independent and sometimes fragmented manner. This has contributed to a lack of a central, coordinated infrastructure in many cases. Many organisations, especially those that are smaller, have experienced isolation as a result of a lack of support networks in their area.

(c) The relationship between people and nature: despite the long involvement of volunteers in conservation and nature, there is still some confusion and debate surrounding the relationship between people and nature. It has been argued that this has contributed to problems in the implementation of community-based conservation programmes. This debate can be seen in relation to the move of

several major UK conservation organisations to amend their mission statements to place people at the centre of what they do, steering away from a sole focus on nature and ecology.

Conclusion

Many authors have described a lack of focus for volunteering in the environmental sector, contributing to a lack of identity. This has been reflected in the numerous descriptions of volunteering within the sector, including environmental, biological, ecological, nature, and conservation. The sector is home to a group of highly committed individuals who have a common interest in improving and managing the natural environment. The use of the term 'the natural outdoors' may therefore be helpful in the creation of a sense of a much needed identity and cohesiveness throughout the sector, allowing it to respond to the challenges it faces and develop long into the future.

Areas for future research

While the term 'the natural outdoors' has not before been used to consider volunteering, there is a considerable amount of research that explores and evaluates examples of volunteering in the natural outdoors. The sector would benefit from further research into volunteering in the natural outdoors in the following areas:

- An overview of volunteering throughout the sector. This is with the notable exception of Scotland, where considerable amounts of such research have been completed;
- Examples of volunteering research and project evaluations in Ireland, where there currently appears to be a deficit of research;
- The impact of volunteering, including the way in which its contribution is valued by the different stakeholders;
- The characteristics and activities of smaller, volunteer-led groups working with the natural outdoors, and the motivations of their volunteers. The majority of research to date has been focused on larger volunteer-involving organisations;
- The extent to which volunteering within the natural outdoors is unique and distinct from volunteering in other sectors, and also what it has in common with these other forms of volunteering.

Further information

This executive summary, and the full literature review on which it is based, was written and researched by Nick Ockenden of the Institute for Volunteering Research (www.ivr.org.uk) in June 2007. The full literature review can be downloaded for free from the Countryside Recreation Network's website (www.countrysiderecreation.org.uk).

The work was completed on behalf of the Tomorrow Project (www.tomorrowproject.net).

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