

International Parks Volunteer Network

bringing together managers of park volunteer programs and attracting and retaining volunteers

The Parks Volunteer Network (PVN) is auspiced by Parks Forum. It brings together parks staff responsible for the management of volunteer programs and activities throughout the parks sector in Australia and New Zealand.

A dedicated Working Group meets by teleconference four times a year to progress the objectives and goals identified in its three year plan to support managers of volunteer programs.

A common issue discussed with the Parks Volunteer Network is how to attract a broad representation of the community to participate in volunteer programs, specifically, how to attract Indigenous, young and multicultural volunteers. There are some barriers including communication, motivation and lack of time that affect participation from these demographics.

To follow are some ideas on how to attract and retain volunteers.



Young volunteers

- Do I have enough time?
- I'm not sure how to help
- Do I really have anything to offer?

The challenge for organisations seeking volunteers is to present opportunities in an accessible way, using the right language and media, including social networks such as MySpace, Facebook and Twitter. Conservation Volunteers has invested in a new database to attract the interest of potential volunteers, with financial support from project partner Toyota. The system is called "Conservation Connect" and matches volunteers with selected interests, time availability and project locations. The second phase of the project will include online photo sharing and text messaging to volunteers.

It is recommended to reward volunteers with **social activities and recognition** such as awards and certificates. Incentives have been seen as another way to attract young volunteers, such as a free t-shirt on joining a program. However, feedback from young volunteers has been that this is not a strong motivating factor and in fact can put potential volunteers off if they believe not-for-profit organisations are misusing money.

While Conservation Volunteers' programs are not exclusively for young, Indigenous or multicultural volunteers, it is important that they see pictures and images they relate to www.conservationvolunteers.com.au.

Healthy Parks Healthy People volunteering

- Research demonstrates that volunteering leads to better physical and mental health
- Older volunteers are the most likely to receive physical and mental health benefits from their volunteer activities
- Spending time volunteering in nature connects people with both their community and environment



Multicultural volunteers

When you are planning to recruit volunteers of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, you need to investigate and consider the following about your potential volunteers:

- Different ways of understanding and describing 'volunteering'
- What will motivate them to volunteer
- What may prevent them from volunteering

The motivations and barriers to volunteering may vary with age, gender and with how long a community and its individual members have been established in Australia.

1. Plan to retain as well as recruit
2. Base your campaign on research
3. Build relationships with specific communities
4. Work out your key messages and how you will deliver them

Parks Victoria's Bilingual Park Guides program is a good example of attracting multicultural volunteers. The course aims to teach guiding and interpretive skills to bilingual people from diverse cultural and language backgrounds. Guides are trained to design, develop and guide small group tours of parks for newly arrived Australians and communities.

Nurcihan Ozturk, a volunteer Bilingual Park Guide, says:

"As a result of the skills I developed, I was able to organise a group of 20 Turkish women to go on a bush camp. This exciting weekend was to learn more about their local parks, including flora and fauna of the local area and to help reduce isolation. I have organised many other similar activities for the women. It's great to see how they are appreciating and valuing their local open spaces. I feel more connected to my community and with agencies which has opened up new opportunities for me. I also improved my English language skills as well as learnt about other cultures through interaction with other students during the course".



This poster and examples of volunteer programs run by Parks Volunteer Network members can be found at the Parks Forum website

www.parksforum.org/cms/pages/Parks-Volunteer-Network.html

The network is open to all park agencies. To become a member, contact Parks Forum: info@parksforum.org

References

- Indigenous Australians and Volunteering – Take a closer look – Subject Guide Volunteering Australia and the National Volunteer Skills Centre, 2007*
- Practical Guide: Involving volunteers from diverse cultural and language backgrounds in your organisation – Australian Multicultural Foundation and Volunteering Australia 2007*
- The Health Benefits of Volunteering, Corporation for National & Community Service, 2007*
- Healthy parks, healthy people The health benefits of contact with nature in a park context, March 2008*



Indigenous volunteers

Tips for recruiting volunteers from Indigenous backgrounds:

- Get to know your local Indigenous communities
- It is well established that word-of-mouth communication works best

- Be specific about what your organisation can offer
- Be aware that Indigenous volunteers may especially feel isolated if working in a more structured, formal environment
- Be flexible about days and times as people manage time differently between communities and cultures

People understand the concept of volunteering in different ways. It is important to describe (in plain language) what it means to be a volunteer, and what your organisation can offer.

As part of the Shoalhaven Youth Volunteering Initiative, NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service worked with students (years 10 – 12) from Shoalhaven High School to interpret the importance of Bomaderry Creek and Bomaderry Children's Home to the South Coast Aboriginal Community consisting of Dharawa/Dhurga Language groups. The project included consultation with Elders and the planning, design and construction of a 15 metre mosaic serpent telling the story of the local Aboriginal Community. The project is now part of the education program with local schools and the Aboriginal Community.