

'All woolly hats and wellies' – what non volunteers can teach us about environmental volunteering

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Introduction

Much research into volunteering has tended to focus on the experience of people currently engaged in volunteering. We can learn a great deal from their opinions and experiences, and numerous studies have contributed to the development of better policy and practice in the support and involvement of volunteers. We can, however, learn perhaps even more from those people who chose not to volunteer. There is comparatively little research into environmental volunteering, and even less that explores peoples' reasons for not engaging in this form of participation.

This paper draws on recent research by the Institute for Volunteering Research (IVR) into environmental volunteering that was carried out on behalf of the non departmental government body Natural England. The research, carried out in the North East in 2008 (Ockenden, 2008) and in the South West a year later (Russell, 2009), set out to provide a picture of the characteristics of environmental volunteering in both regions, and highlight the issues and challenges the sector was facing. Through online surveys of current, past and non volunteers, telephone surveys of volunteer-involving organisations and focus groups, the studies sought the opinions of a wide cross section of environmental organisations, current volunteers, and non volunteers.

This paper draws particularly on the research conducted with those not taking part in environmental volunteering. Five focus groups were held, two in the North East and three in the South West, in which 39 members of the public shared their views. Participants were recruited randomly from the public by a market research company. This in-depth analysis was supplemented by an online survey of 50 respondents who did not volunteer in the North East. This paper does not suggest that the results of this research are representative of the wider public in these two regions or the country as a whole. It does, however, propose that environmental organisations can take away ideas about how to attract new, and more diverse, groups of volunteers.

A health check for the sector

Both studies observed a strong and healthy environmental volunteering sector, home to a large number of highly committed, passionate and active volunteers. The majority volunteered for multiple organisations and contributed large amounts of time (approximately eleven hours per month in each region). Furthermore, numerous volunteers had been involved for considerable amounts of time, alongside a healthy in-flux of new volunteers.

In turn, volunteers tended to be highly satisfied with the support they received in their role and enjoyed their experience.

While the current body of environmental volunteers in both regions appeared to be largely happy and contributing a great deal, important challenges around attracting sufficient numbers, and types, of volunteers were evident. Many organisations reported that they wanted additional volunteers to become involved and more than half of those spoken to had experienced difficulties surrounding the recruitment of volunteers. This appeared to be a particular challenge with regard to attracting volunteers from a wide range of social and cultural backgrounds. Perhaps of greatest concern, therefore, was the fact that volunteers responding to the research tended to be overwhelmingly drawn from older, white and able-bodied groups of people. Other studies have also identified limited diversity amongst environmental volunteers (see, for example, VDS, 2006a and 2006b; O'Brien, Townsend and Ebden, 2008; LANTRA, 2008; BEN, 2002).

As many of these challenges are focused on the difficulty of attracting new audiences, it is therefore sensible to explore the views and opinions of those people whom organisations may wish to attract – the general public.

The level of interest in environmental volunteering

It was common for individuals, particularly in the North East of England, to express some degree of interest in taking part in environmental volunteering. Approximately half of the focus group attendees and the online survey respondents in this region said that they would be interested if there were suitable activities and existing barriers were removed or alleviated. This is perhaps indicative of the presence of a potential new audience for environmental volunteering.

This initially encouraging picture is less promising in light of very few of the same individuals saying that they actually planned to start volunteering in the future. This may demonstrate a possible divide between their aspirations and the reality, or may call into question the genuineness of their interest. Furthermore, apathy and lack of interest, both in volunteering and in the environment itself, remained high amongst non volunteers. This was commonly observed amongst the focus group respondents in the South West, typical comments including:

'...everything's gone wrong – there's nothing we can do now to stop it, no way.'

'I do like the idea of volunteering but I just can't see me doing it.'

In some cases, respondents were actually interested in volunteering, simply not in the environment. Individuals said that they would rather volunteer to help people rather than the environment, which they considered a more 'meaningful' form of engagement. A lack of interest in the environment could also be focused around being able to engage in and enjoy nature through other means; this commonly included having and maintaining their own

garden or land, or being able to access parks, green spaces or the countryside. Such responses, including the more apathetic individuals, represent a body of people to whom volunteering in the environment may never be an attractive prospect.

Some reasons for not volunteering

While perhaps the most obvious reason for not choosing to volunteer is a lack of interest, non volunteers identified a series of additional barriers which prevented them from taking part; indeed, the lack of interest was often closely bound up with other reasons. While these barriers could be real, it was frequently those that were perceived that exerted a greater influence on non volunteers. Similarly, in their study of volunteering and social exclusion, Davis Smith et al (2004) found that psychological barriers were of greater importance to individuals than practical barriers. What follows is a discussion of the three most pertinent reasons for choosing not to volunteer to emerge out of the research in the North East and South West of England: lack of time; limited information; and the presence of stereotypes.

(a) Time

In both studies, non volunteers cited lack of time as the main reason for not volunteering. This has also been given as the key reason for not volunteering amongst wider groups of people (Low et al, 2007). Many individuals genuinely felt that their lives were sufficiently active, perhaps through looking after families or work demands, that they simply did not have the time to get involved in volunteering. This can be seen to represent a real, or actual, lack of time. Comments from focus group participants included:

'People are too busy in-between and overstretched...they're preoccupied with life.'

'...I work all day, I want to come home, have something to eat and go to the pub or go for a ride on my bike. I don't want to go out and pick up rubbish.'

More prevalent, however, was a *perceived* lack of time in which to volunteer. Respondents frequently felt that volunteering would require a major, and crucially, a regular commitment. A comment from a respondent included:

'I don't think people want to be scared off by making a regular commitment.'

Participants of focus groups often felt that they would not want to let an organisation down by not being able to turn up one week, which meant that they felt they could not commit to a regular environmental volunteering activity and would rather not take part at all. As one focus group participants said:

'...it wouldn't be fair to drop in as and when, as they wouldn't know how many people they could expect.'

Fear of commitment has also been identified as a psychological barrier amongst other groups of volunteers. Davis Smith et al (2004) observed a '*consensus that volunteering automatically meant a regular commitment each and every week*' (p.28) Furthermore, the authors found that individuals were concerned about being put under pressure to maintain such a commitment.

(b) Information and awareness

The vast majority of respondents to the online survey in the North East said that they had *not* been asked to volunteer in the environment in the past five years. Furthermore, respondents had generally not seen opportunities for environmental volunteering advertised in their area. Consequently, they had little idea about where to go, or who to go to, in order to find out about what was on offer. Similarly, individuals had generally not directly observed much or any environmental volunteering taking place. They subsequently found it challenging to name even one or two organisations who could involve environmental volunteers. Comments from focus groups included:

'It's just not advertised enough – you never, ever hear about it.'

'If you don't know you can't do it.'

Some non volunteers had, however, heard about environmental volunteering. Rather than following up on these opportunities, they frequently raised concerns about the type of information that was made available. Respondents often felt that environmental volunteering as a concept could be challenging to understand. In some cases it was seen to be overly general, with people not fully understanding the type of activities or areas that were involved; it was not felt to be a well-defined 'package' which people could easily access. Similarly, respondents felt that if they were asked to volunteer, they may be inclined to say no, but if they were asked to take part in a specific activity, such as dry-stone walling, then they would be more likely to agree.

Respondents frequently felt that promotion of environmental volunteering was crucial, one respondent stating that '*the British need to be asked*'. At the same time, it was felt that the organisations were not generally asking, and that promotion of volunteering was often not a top priority of organisations that had many other commitments:

'A lot of organisations are so busy delivering on the ground they don't have time to market what they do.'

Similarly, wider research has identified lack of information as a barrier to people's participation; nearly four in ten non volunteers reported that they didn't know how to find out about getting involved as a reason for not volunteering (Low et al, 2007).

(c) Perceptions and stereotypes

Non volunteers often perceived environmental volunteering to be something that they did not aspire to. This could be because it was seen to involve unattractive tasks such as litter-picking, that it could concentrate on more

'traditional' and narrowly-focused activities such as habitat management, or that it might require specific skills, such as surveying, that they did not possess. Moreover, the image of the environment as a whole could act as a more substantial barrier to non volunteers. Respondents felt that the movement tended to concentrate on negative stories about *'doom and gloom'*, which served only to put them off rather than encourage them to become involved; it was frequently seen to be a 'worthy' cause.

Respondents to the focus groups, to varying degrees, all held stereotypical images of environmental volunteers. They generally felt that this was different, and even alien, to themselves, which served to put them off from getting involved. Opinion ranged from someone who was enthusiastic to those who were eccentric, or even obsessive. Comments from respondents included:

'Someone with a woolly hat and wellies.'

'Strange people walking around a field with a bin bag.'

Environmental volunteering was also frequently seen as socially and culturally inaccessible. A certain type of person was identified as being most likely to participate. This would often be someone who was time- and money-rich; who had sufficient time to undertake volunteering and who could afford to spend time undertaking unpaid activities. Consequently, a number of respondents felt that volunteering was largely undertaken by people who were well educated and 'cultured', creating an exclusive 'clique' of volunteers. A comment from one non volunteer reflected a fear of not being able to, or perhaps not wanting to, fit in:

'...it's a certain type of people. I wouldn't fit in as a volunteer there as I haven't got the culture and class. I'm from a working class background, and I haven't got a degree.'

Similarly, wider research has found that the image of volunteering can alienate people (Little, 2001) and that some non volunteers feel that volunteering is only for a 'certain group' of people (Davis Smith et al, 2004).

What environmental organisations can learn

Many organisations are already having considerable success in addressing the reasons that people do not volunteer. Others, however, could learn from the experiences of non volunteers. This paper suggests that there are three key areas that environmental organisations could address in order to attract and involve new audiences:

(a) Improve information provision

Many of the reasons given by people for not volunteering relate to a lack of a lack of understanding about environmental volunteering and limited information about the opportunities available, the people involved and their motivations. Existing opportunities could benefit from being marketed in a more accessible way; for example, the type of activity, what volunteers could expect, and comprehensive details of times, locations, refreshments and

facilities. Furthermore, if the activity rather than the volunteering is promoted first and foremost, organisations may have greater success with non volunteers.

It is also important for the sector to challenge some understandings that it may take for granted; not everyone, for example, sees the environment as attractive, and many people view environmental volunteers themselves in negative and often derogatory ways. The promotion of environmental volunteering should focus on positive messages about the difference that someone's involvement could make. The numerous benefits to getting involved, such as improving employment prospects or getting fit, should also be promoted. And 'real life' case studies of current volunteers could go a long way to help dispel some of the destructive stereotypes.

Improvements to the provision of information about volunteering have also been identified as a key step in attracting new groups in wider research. Davis Smith et al (2004), for example, highlight that without such a development '*it is hard to see how inaccurate stereotypes of volunteers and volunteering can be challenged*' (p.34). Similarly, having more information was the third most common factor reported by non volunteers (after more spare time and working less) as making it easier for them to get involved in any form of volunteering (Low et al, 2007).

(b) Improve the flexibility of activities

Better information provision is only useful if the content of that information, for example, the volunteering opportunities, is also addressed. Providing more one-off volunteering opportunities, which people can 'dip into', could help address some concerns regarding long-term commitments. This could be done in groups, allowing people to 'test out' volunteering together for the first time. Similarly, activities which allow whole families to volunteer together may help tackle child care issues while also providing cost-effective entertainment for children in school holidays. This is also likely to improve the experience of existing volunteers, providing greater diversity to the ways in which they are able to engage.

(c) Develop new forms of recruitment

While word-of-mouth remains a cost effective and popular form of recruitment in the environmental volunteering sector, it can also serve to attract new volunteers from the same social and cultural circles as existing volunteers. There would be value in promoting volunteering through a wider body of organisations, networks and 'gatekeepers', who would have greater ability to reach new, and often more diverse, audiences.

Conclusion

Volunteering is, by its very definition, an act of freewill; people cannot be compelled to participate. This core component needs to be protected, and recognising that some people will simply never want to volunteer is a crucial part of this. There are, however, many people who face numerous barriers which can prevent them from taking part. Some of these are real, but much can be done to make volunteering opportunities more accessible and easy to

participate in. Others can be perceived, and progress can be made in challenging negative and inaccurate stereotypes. The existing core of volunteers in the environmental sector should not, however, be forgotten. Rather, the potential benefit of involving a body of people who have until now felt that they could not, or did not want to, participate should be fully realised.

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