

# Building a Successful Volunteer Program

Volunteers can be recruited in sufficient numbers if all available channels for getting the word out are utilized. Many people are frustrated about the escalating environmental degradation they read about and are eager to do something “real” to help. You must find ways to reach them. Newspapers, radio and TV stations will list your events, usually at no charge. Send them a press release listing all the particulars of your event. If you have an ongoing project, you may need to send it in regularly as they will often drop your listing if you don't. Volunteer exchanges are excellent sources. Contacting high schools, colleges, corporations and philanthropic groups can get you a whole group of volunteers. And have patience. It takes time for a volunteer program to build momentum.

The single most important hurdle in tackling seemingly insurmountable projects with hand work is not so much the reality of the task. It is each new volunteer's sense of being overwhelmed at the scale of the task that you are actually up against. People almost universally underestimate what they will accomplish in a day, let alone in a year! New volunteers often look a bit overwhelmed when first viewing a project, but then they see that the “old hands” are starting right in, not a bit impressed with it at all. At the end of the day, they're amazed - and thoroughly charged - by how much they've gotten done! I think this is a pivotal factor in turning first-timers into believers. When people are empowered by a sense of accomplishment that exceeds their expectations, they will be back.

One way to minimize the problem of perceived “do-ability” is to pick a project that can be finished with the teampower you have that day. If this can't be done, clearly define an identifiable goal that can be realized that day. People will stay with it if they sense completion within their reach, even if that means putting in a little “overtime,” as long as the goal you've set is attainable. If the goal is achieved early, I let them know I'm impressed. Early achievement of a goal can be empowering! It can even inspire a team to keep going on their own initiative. More than once I have found myself at the end of the day telling a still hard-working team that it's time to start heading back. Now, *that* is satisfying!

People need to know how much time they'll be asked to commit each day, but be ready to adjust this if conditions dictate. If people want to stay longer, be accommodating, if you can. (I'm a know pushover on this one!) If it's a miserable day for any reason, be willing to call a halt early - really early, if you need to. The important issue here is not the completion of the day's project, but that *people remember each day positively*. If they do, they'll be back, and it's the ones who keep coming back that are the life force of a program. Also, a high ratio of people who keep coming back is the best indication that you're doing something right!

As a project leader, I think it's of great value not to ask your volunteers to do anything you're not doing yourself. If need be, see if you can find someone to supervise field work who can stay shoulder to shoulder with them out there. I'm often told that this has been a significant factor in keeping people in our program.

Delegating responsibility to experienced team members is an effective way to show your “core” people just how valuable they are. This will really cement their bond to the program, and relieve you of some of the load at the same time! We hold a regular monthly potluck which is an excellent way of building this feeling of belonging for all. It's also a great way for the team to get to know each other in greater depth than occurs in the field. Sometimes, after a really good day, I'll treat everybody to a long, cool one, and maybe something to eat. It's another good way of letting your team know they're special to you.

It is also important to provide inspiration in the form of stimulating discussion in which all are encouraged to participate on the value of nature, restoration, and, most importantly, what *this project* will mean to *this* ecosystem. We normally do this at lunch, but I will often call a temporary stop to the day's work to point out something which presents itself at that moment and show them how nature will heal itself because of their efforts. This will make them feel personally connected to the land and to the value of their work. Encourage them to come back to the site in the future to witness the miracle of renewal each of them has helped to bring about.

In addition to accomplishing your restoration objectives, a volunteer program will help to increase public awareness not just of the problem of invasive exotics, but of other ecological issues, and provide the personal satisfaction that comes with hands-on helping. In the long run, I believe this will be our most effective tool to achieve our goal of restoring healthy, functioning ecosystems and simultaneously help people to understand their own role in ensuring our planet's continued vitality.

AS I write this, we are deep in broom season, racing the clock to prevent seed set, with no time to think about other projects. But at lunch last Saturday, I asked everybody what their favorite projects were. About two thirds replied, “Pampasgrass.” This, in spite of the fact that nearly everyone who has ever worked with me, including this group, agrees that Pampasgrass eradication is the hardest thing we do. Might be a lesson here; sometimes adversity *can* work to your advantage.