

15. Volunteering – Where would we be without volunteers, and can we keep them?

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Abstract

This paper sets out to explore the role and contribution of volunteers in Malleefowl conservation and challenges some of the expected wisdom associated with the contribution that volunteers make to environmental causes.

There is a whole spectrum of volunteer structures offering different types of volunteering for frustrated gardeners to highly motivated scientific enthusiasts. All of these volunteers make a significant contribution to advancing environmental projects, but how successful are their efforts?

The context in which volunteers work is significantly influenced and determined by Government and government agencies, and a real tension exists between most volunteer groups and these agencies. Issues such as ownership of projects, attitudes to expert knowledge and valuing the contribution of “local knowledge” contribute to this tension. A question that needs to be addressed is the power of volunteers and whether volunteers have any power.

Through addressing this question, it may be possible to determine why people volunteer, and provide strategies to address ways to attract volunteers to become effective agents of change and influence. Volunteer groups always face fragility of financial pressure and forward planning in a setting where they are not always in control of the agenda or outcomes associated with their environmental issues.

If volunteer groups have real purpose and good organisation, and the trust and respect of land managers and government, then they can be significant leaders in environmental change to address climate change and threatened species extinction. If not, then why volunteer?

This presentation does not seek to give a lecture on volunteering. There are many people who know far more about volunteering than I do, and have studied and written about it.

Rather it tries, to use Julia Gillard’s words, “to begin a conversation” about volunteering, to raise ideas rather than to tell you what should be done.

Clearly our interest here is volunteering as environmental volunteers. Most of you who are environmental volunteers have been volunteers in lots and lots of contexts in all of your lives. You have been volunteering for a long time and so have I. In fact one of my earlier memories was getting in trouble when I was a pre-school child helping my grandmother with the flowers in the church and deciding to baptise the altar and that was one of my earliest volunteering experiences.

I will get a bit away from conservation volunteering and talk about volunteering in a general way. I will take another volunteer organisation that I have had a lot to do with over the years, and it is very different to environmental organisations. I wondered if its success might be able to give us a few ideas as to the things we could do.

Now this organisation is Australia wide, it has got thousands of volunteers, it is extremely well supported by Federal, State and Local Governments, it is quite powerful in how it lobbies, and interestingly and differently to lots of volunteer concerns that I see and hear, its spike of members is between 17 and 35, so it has lots of young people. What I am referring to here, if people are trying to add it all up, is Surf Life Saving in Australia.

It is very different; it is big enough to have paid staff, but nevertheless it is 96% volunteers, and it has been going a long time, and it attracts a massive amount of funding - it gets corporate funding, it gets philanthropic funding. How come the Victorian Malleefowl Recovery Group doesn't?

I suppose that was my opening question. What's the difference as it were, I think Surf Life Saving has some things that we can use. First of all it has thoroughly flogged its brand. It is everywhere. It is stuck on cereal packets, stuck on tourist things. If the Koala huggers can do it why can't we? Why can't we flog Malleefowl like that, so whenever tourists start thinking - Wow Malleefowl.

Another thing that Surf Life Saving does, and does very effectively, is that it grabs its volunteers very young. It starts them at eight when they are on the beach in the holidays when kids are bored silly and mum and dad have run out of ideas to entertain them, and it provides free baby sitters, and it is called the Nippers Program. It is very carefully well thought through (I am being cynical here. I have run Nippers programs). It's a ploy. It is a way of getting the kids when they are little, and when next year they come back they all get their free packs, their free T-shirts, and all this sort of stuff and they are so excited. By the time they are twelve when they are finished the Nippers Program they are ready to do their Surf Live Saving Certificate and once they have done that they do their Bronze and then they are on the beach patrolling. That's the way Surf Life Saving replenishes its members. Quite a powerful recruiting tool, in my opinion.

Another thing that I think Life Saving manages to do, and lots of organisations are successful at too, is that they hold their members, sometimes for a life time, simply because they have a range of different things for people to do as they progress. As I read through the literature associated with volunteering, it does seem that people volunteer in different ways when they are in different age groups. The sort of mad running around with surf type stuff, which is fine for adolescents and 20 year olds, doesn't really work as well as people get older, and people want to do other things, so then people volunteer to care for the young ones, to teach as it were, to pass on skills.

You might well have seen in your lives too that sort of volunteering happening. You go through stages where you volunteer to wash the Under 8 football jumpers for a few years. You do kids things, volunteer for the children's school and work like that in your community when your children are young, and then you do things to get your children through, and then you do other kinds of volunteering.

I have kept suggesting things that might be helpful in recruiting young people in being able to keep our volunteers going by having a range of tasks and tasks suitable for persons of different sorts of ages and abilities as not everybody wants to do the same thing.

In a slightly more formal way I had a look at the things volunteers had to say in the various pieces of literature about what it was they wanted or valued in their volunteering. They said that what they wanted was recognition. Now I can hear something of the despair from in the Malleefowl Preservation Group and the North Central Malleefowl Preservation Group in Western Australia where they are not recognised. They are not valued by their agencies. It is very difficult to battle on when that happens.

So the message needs to be out there to the agency people. How do you recognise your volunteers? How do you involve them in other things in your decision making, particularly when older people with life time experiences come along to volunteer and are not necessarily impressed at being treated like children?

I have had a famous run in at one stage with one rather overweight young man who told a rather skinny me that he was here to develop (grow) my capacity. And I was rather rude, and you have to understand your Shakespeare to get this one... The nurse said to Juliet "Women grow by men", which is what I said to him, and he didn't get it either. Obviously I had a capacity in literature and he didn't.

So people who like to get involved don't argue about decisions, they are not children. They bring a life time of experience. It may not be immediately obvious what it is they bring, but they certainly bring it and being part of decision making is something that keeps people going.

Volunteers apparently value learning opportunities. Certainly one of the things that I have valued working with Malleefowl people is that I know nothing, I am not a scientist, I knew nothing about most of the stuff when I began. So that is something which is coming out of the literature.

Volunteers are bothered by the relationship between paid and unpaid people. Again this is a general statement for things like fire people, all sorts of volunteers, and these are the things that are bothering them. The organisations on the other hand are bothered about how to get volunteers involved. What else can they do to get people involved? What's wrong? How do we manage volunteers? These are top down stuff. Volunteers are coming from the bottom up.

I have always thought, and I have spoken about this model before, the most powerful model we have is to base ourselves extensively on the principles of engineering and to work on the model of an equilateral triangle. It is the most powerful structure you can make, so if on one arm of the equilateral triangle is equilateral – equal – are the scientists, these are the people who drive the ideas. One arm are the organisers, your administrators, managers whatever word, and the third arm are the volunteers, and if you can have that equal then you have got something extremely powerful. Hard to do I know.

I have been in a position as manager in schools working with volunteer parents. It is not always easy to balance the power relationship when you are a paid person, and also if you have to answer to others further up the line if you are not getting it right. If you can get it right, I believe it is a very powerful thing.

So, branding, getting kids, getting young people involved, finding diverse ways to keep it working, and in the end, I suppose, having lots and lots of fun, enjoying it. Nobody ever does things if it's not for some reward, even horrible things like changing dirty nappies, which happens to be my bete noire anyway.

So I am going to end with a bit of writing which seems to me to sum up my enthusiasm. It says: "With intelligence, with persistence, above all with enthusiasm, with these things you can work miracles".....and that's true because I have seen it happen.

References

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