

Tips for Working with Stewardship Volunteers

Here are tips compiled from UNH Cooperative Extension, Nature Groupie, and other partners who have decades of experience working with conservation volunteers. We hope they help you plan fun, rewarding, and goal-accomplishing volunteer opportunities!

Tips for Planning your Project

- 1. Be Organized.** Working with volunteers, especially those who are new to your organization, requires good organization, leadership, and communication. Volunteers will sense disarray and chaos, they won't like it, and they won't come back. For help organizing, consult the *Stewardship Training Guide Workday 101*, and associated materials.
- 2. Recruit Volunteers.** Start with writing down a description of your project
 - For a one-day or multi-day workday in New England, use Nature Groupie's online calendar to help craft a website link for your event. Use the registration system to accept online volunteer registrations – you'll receive an email every time someone signs up. Encouraging pre-registration will help you plan for getting your project done. The system will also prompt you to consider such things as what volunteers should bring, where to meet, special instructions for youth, etc.
 - For larger projects or projects that will be repeated in the future, consider drafting a volunteer position description. See the handout, *Sample Volunteer Position Description*, for details.
 - Reach out to non-conservation audiences for volunteers. Many groups will volunteer in order to help their community, without necessarily being involved in conservation (yet!). Consider churches, school and college service clubs, girl and boy scouts, businesses, and community groups.
 - See the *Getting the Word Out* handout for more ideas on how and where to let people know about your event.

Tips for Executing Your Project

3. Fulfill Their Needs: Nature-oriented volunteers are motivated to volunteer for a variety of reasons. Unlike paid staff, their volunteer work is what they are doing in their free time. Make sure your project meets some of the needs of your volunteers. People might volunteer for the environment because they want to:

- Make a difference to the environment or their community
- Get outside
- Learn something new
- Work alongside environmental professionals
- Build job skills
- Have fun!

Why work with volunteers?

Working with volunteers on stewardship projects is rewarding and effective. Volunteers provide enthusiasm, skill, and energy for stewardship of lands, waters, and ecosystems, helping to tackle projects impossible for staff to accomplish on their own. Volunteer projects are also great tools for community outreach, by expanding the network of informed and knowledgeable citizens on stewardship topics such as invasive plants, shoreline erosion, habitat restoration, trails, and the need for conservation land.





As a result, you need to make sure:

- a. Every participant understands how the project will benefit the environment or the community – take a few minutes, even with late arrivals, to explain the purpose of the project
- b. Avoid lengthy indoor presentations, and train volunteers outside instead
- c. Volunteers learn something new as a result of their work. Have a handout or some kind of educational message (send a link to a website before or after, etc.)
- d. Staff engage with and share something about themselves with volunteers. Many volunteers are curious to know about your work.

4. Be a Leader. Make sure volunteers know who is in charge. Leaders should introduce themselves (this is often overlooked), describe their job, and orient people to the task (safety, bathrooms, end time, etc.). Volunteers need inspiration, encouragement and direction in order to complete the project efficiently. This doesn't mean you need to hold their hand, but make sure they have all the information and tools they need to accomplish the task.

5. Make it Fun. Don't take it too seriously. Remember your event represents your volunteers' free time, and they are choosing to spend their hard-earned leisure time working on your behalf. The least you can do is show them a good time! Use humor, don't drive people too hard, and include a social component if possible. Your goal is not just to get the project done, but to get volunteers to come back again. Invest in a relationship, not just a trail or a site or an inventory.

6. Keep it Short. The ideal length of a volunteer workday is 1.5-3 hours. If you want more done, schedule multiple shifts or multiple days. You might get a few people who enjoy a longer stint, but nobody is going to be frustrated if a workday ends early.

Food

Offering food and drink goes a long way to setting a good tone and a warm atmosphere.

If you don't have a budget for food, ask a local market or farm stand for a donation (a good use for your Volunteer Position Description/Flyer). They are used to being asked, and they usually say yes for a good cause. But they won't offer it if they aren't asked.





Stay in Touch

Use your project to build relationships with volunteers.

Collect names and emails (at minimum), so you can keep volunteers involved. This is particularly key for first-time volunteers who are likely to return if they had a good experience.

Encourage people to join Nature Groupie to receive e-bulletins of other nature-based volunteer opportunities and trainings. If it helps, rely on Nature Groupie to keep volunteers engaged until you plan another volunteer project.

You can print a copy of Nature Groupie e-newsletter sign-up sheet to have out at your workday. After your event, send the list of names and email addresses you collected to Nature Groupie (nature.groupie@unh.edu) and we'll thank people for attending and invite them to sign up for e-bulletins.

