

**Volunteering Australia**  
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**Volunteering ~ evolution, devolution or revolution?**  
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**LONG TERM IMPACTS OF SHORT TERM  
VOLUNTEERING**

**Eleanor Loudon, Volunteer Program Manager, Earthwatch  
Australia**

Our lives are busy. Many people find that while they may be aware of issues such as climate change, species extinction, and cultural homogeneity, they feel powerless to be of any real help. Short term volunteering can be the catalyst that shifts that view, with impacts that change people lives and change the world.

Founded in the US in 1971, Earthwatch Institute involves volunteers on two-week conservation research field projects around the world. Earthwatch currently supports 140 field research projects in 50 countries. In 2003, Earthwatch support totalled close to \$A4m in direct field grants and over 3,500 people contributed 200 years in volunteer time, to conservation researchers worldwide.

In this two-week field experience volunteers actively participate in and are a critical part of all aspects of the research, working as a close team that collects data and shares results. Coming together from the far reaches of the globe, each team contributes to the understanding of conservation issues. The experience takes the volunteers out of their daily routine and teaches them new skills. They work together in often adverse conditions, and for many, it is time out to reflect on their lives. Most return motivated, empowered and alive with passion and this translates into personal long-term impacts.

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, Australia, with a population of over 19 million people, 4.4 million volunteered their time in 2000<sup>1</sup>. How many more potential volunteers are out there, not knowing where to begin? Short term volunteering offers a taste of the volunteering experience, a starting point, while, at the same time, contributing significant benefit to projects in need, around the world.

I recently interviewed a cross section of volunteers who had returned from their Earthwatch field projects two years ago or more and common themes arose. Many volunteers had not actively been engaged in volunteering or conservation prior to this experience. Many described the leading research scientist, or what Earthwatch calls the Principal Investigator, as being essential to their positive experience. They all said that being part of a team that was making a difference had a profound impact on them. This experience often led to results in volunteers' personal lives upon their return, including a greater sense of empowerment, new found knowledge and understanding of

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<sup>1</sup> ABS 2001

environmental issues and a desire to continue to be actively involved on some level. In the longer term this translated to a deeper awareness of their own impacts as part of the natural system, feeling part of a worldwide environmental community and a stronger sense of self-respect.

Lasting behavioural change is cumulative yet certain contributing factors have been recognised within the social sciences as playing a strong role in developing this long term affect. Short term volunteering offers many of the essential elements that trigger such change in individuals.

Doug McKenzie-Mohr<sup>2</sup> in his book “Fostering Sustainable Behaviour” mentions a variety of factors required for long term behavioural change. Critical elements including

- the commitment being voluntary,
- the behaviour being accepted by the community / social network,
- the activity being the catalyst to changing one’s perception of self
- the importance of respected peers in leading by example,

were identified in interviews with returned Earthwatch volunteers.

#### *Short term volunteering – a chance to get active*

Short term volunteering offers a way to get involved without the ‘long term commitment’, perceived necessary. It offers people an immediate and accessible volunteering experience - a taste of volunteering.

Some volunteers joining Earthwatch projects are already passionate and engaged in conservation issues, but anecdotal evidence points to the majority as interested, educated but not necessarily directly involved. In our full lives, we find time swallowed up by work, family, social engagements.... The list goes on and where amongst these pressures, do we find time to “save the world”?

Many of the past volunteers interviewed said they felt they would like to do more, but under pressure from other aspects of their life, could not imagine fitting in another commitment. They described a sense of powerlessness and a lack of motivation, even though they were concerned about the state of the environment and particularly species extinction. They needed to think about volunteering as a part of their current lives, not an extra thing to do. The short term volunteering option enabled them to take the first active step, to feel what it is like to be involved. The decision to get involved was made easier because they did not have to their change their lives to become a volunteer. They could test if this was right for them.

#### *Re-defining perception of self*

Short term volunteering in a project far from home, can be immediately challenging and rewarding. People, from a variety of different jobs and backgrounds, come together from all parts of the globe to a far-flung location with the same goal – to get dirty and make a difference. They are able to discuss issues with the locals, team-mates and researchers. They realise they are “normal” and that it is “normal” to feel concerned and passionate and it is possible to make a difference. This validating of one’s views

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<sup>2</sup> Doug McKenzie-Mohr, Ph.D; Quick Reference: Community Based Social Marketing.

becomes integral to building a new perception of self. One volunteer remarked on “coming out;” as a greenie.

#### *Community provides support*

Volunteers living and working in these intensive situations find that a common vision unites the team in a way that is rarely experienced in our daily lives. Natural abilities shape teams, rather than pre-defined roles. They work together towards a common goal, facing challenging situations together, making discoveries together and through stamina and resolve, they become part of something much bigger. They become an active part of a larger movement towards the healthy future of the planet.

#### *Influence of respected leaders*

It is critical to the success of short term volunteering that the Principal Investigators (PI) or team leaders share their knowledge and share their passion. This is done by involving volunteers, but also working very closely with them.

Evaluations received by Earthwatch upon the volunteers’ return from the field, showed that 83% of volunteers responded extremely positively to the experience, giving a rating of 5 on a scale of 1 to 5. Of these positive responses, PI engagement was seen as a critical contributing factor to the success of the volunteer experience.

#### *Immediate personal results*

Upon returning to the “real world” of their everyday lives, volunteers reported feeling a new level of understanding of the natural world. Where they had joined a project out of educated curiosity, they returned brimming with knowledge and enthusiasm. Amongst their social networks they become ambassadors for the species, ecosystem or issue in which they had been so intimately involved. This knowledge was held deeply as their learning had been participatory.

These volunteers now know the language and can speak from experience. They felt that by actively committing themselves they had earned the right to speak and be heard.

The challenge for these volunteers however is to translate this flush of excitement into long term personal impacts. In many cases integrating this knowledge and passion back into their normal lives can be frustrating as they feel their day to day lives beginning to envelope them again. This is when it is important to remember that few short-term experiences can really bring about immediate change. More often than not, in retrospect, the short term volunteering experience can be identified as the catalyst for a process of long term change, but as Claire Ellis<sup>3</sup>, in her research with the University of Tasmania points out, most changes in behaviour are cumulative.

#### *In the long term...*

Volunteers who two years on from their initial short term experience, reflected on their lives since that time, described initial frustration followed by resolve to continue to be active on some level. Volunteering was no longer seen as another extra activity, but an

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<sup>3</sup> Ellis, 2004

important part of their own feelings of self worth. Once they had experienced the issues deeply and been part of the solutions, it was an important part of their lives.

Many experienced an altering of their self-perception. Years after returning volunteers reported their continuing passion, their ability to discuss issues at a deeper level, an increase in awareness of their impacts on the natural world and a heightened sensitivity to environmental issues.

The feeling of being part of a global network remained and had become an important part of their lasting experience, many remaining in regular contact with members of their team. The result of this connection meant they had a new “community” in which their passion and behaviour were normal. Some deepened their relationship with the project and the locals involved in that project. Others changed direction in their career; while others had their career choice confirmed and experienced greater dedication.

Researchers, with whom the volunteers spend their dedicated week or two, understand that this model of short term volunteering has substantial benefits to their research. It significantly increases their capacity for data collection and through careful training and attention to detail they are able to ensure that the data collected is reliable and consistent. As Dr Frank Paldino, Principal investigator on the Sea Turtles of Costa Rica project attests, “Without the assistance of the many volunteers, we would have never amassed 12 years of continuous demographic data on leatherbacks and convinced the Costa Rican government to protect this beach, create this park and reject the development permits for lands adjacent to the park.”

The researchers often find that the volunteers are able to contribute unexpected input to the logistics of their research projects. Volunteers from non-scientific backgrounds, offer a range of “other” experiences and skills that can bring fresh ideas, and practical solutions to the framework and methodologies of the research itself.

In the bigger picture, these short-term volunteering efforts have amounted to some tangible long-term impacts over the past 33 years, including:

- The discovery and cataloguing of thousands of new species.
- The formation of national parks and reserves in countries around the world.
- The establishment of museums.
- The production of over 2,000 scientific papers and books on critical conservation issues.
- Significant advances in science and conservation, ranging from legal protection for habitats and species to documenting traditional uses of medicinal plants.

#### *Case Study – Anna Zonnevald*

Anna Zonnevald had long been a greenie at heart but felt frustrated, feeling that her small efforts meant little in the bigger scheme of things. She heard about the opportunity to volunteer through the Earthwatch partnership with Rio Tinto, and rather than apply for a funded place, chose to make her own financial contribution to join a team.

The two week project that followed saw her hiking through the back country of the Yukon in search of Grizzly bears, lugging heavy equipment, facing bitter cold evenings and the

ever present prospect of face-to-face bear contact. She described the overall experience as “the time of her life”.

Anna found she was not alone in her passion, that there were other ‘normal’ people who were compelled, as she was, to get involved. She trekked through the countryside with a nuclear scientist, a schoolteacher, a park ranger and the project scientists and to this day she is regularly in contact with the team. The project leaders have become an example of passion in action. She is expecting to return in 2005 to volunteer for two months to save the Grizzly.

She explained:

“I realised that I was normal to feel so concerned and I didn’t need to grow dreadlocks or become vegetarian to be involved in conservation volunteering.”

In her professional life, Anna is a Technical Officer responsible for helping the companies mining operations deal effectively with their impacts. Her current project researches methods for saving water within the mining process and she feels that her experience has enabled her to feel more confident and empowered within her role. She feels she is in the right place to be making a real difference and is translating the passion and self respect she found in her short term volunteering project to activate positive long term change within the mining industry.

During her 2 weeks of volunteering she found she was not alone and this strengthened her resolve to step up her small part and not be afraid to bring her passion for conservation wholeheartedly to all aspects of her life.

#### *Case Study – Betty Tromp*

Betty Tromp had a passion for wildlife but had never made the next step to involvement in the community or conservation issues. By chance she saw an Earthwatch TV ad late one night, with images of wildlife and people in the field, and was soon on the phone to the Melbourne office. In the coming year she joined two projects, River Otters of Chile and Conserving the Pantanal, in Brazil.

On her return home to Gippsland Victoria, she looked at her own community with fresh eyes and saw issues of human impact and ecosystem degradation right there. She now understood the importance of all aspects of an ecosystem and knew that she had both the capacity to get involved and the ability to make a difference.

In the two years since her return Betty has been integral to the identification of a local Gippsland sanctuary as habitat and potential site for reintroduction of the endangered Tiger Quoll in conjunction with Monash University. She has just finished reading the Code of Forest Management to be better informed about the Forestry industry, its language and legislation. She has been on a walking tour of the Tarkine wilderness in Tasmania and writes letters to government on logging practices. She has now joined “Friends of Leadbeaters Possum” to volunteer her time regularly and locally for the protection of their habitat.

She says that her short introduction to volunteering inspired her, giving her confidence and first hand knowledge, thus redefining her perception of herself. Her “midlife has taken a radical turn and she feels truly fulfilled.”

### *In conclusion*

Two weeks may seem like a short amount of time in our busy day to day lives. But when you are immersed in a project, living and breathing the experience, sharing the passion with experts, learning and growing alongside others as a team, two weeks can be the time it takes to begin the change in your own life for the benefit of generations to come.

Earthwatch volunteering offers an opportunity to experience the excitement and passion that comes from getting involved and getting hands-on, with like-minded team mates from around the world. This brief and intensive stint can often result in strong feelings of involvement and empowerment as volunteers become part of a global network and bring back new skills and knowledge to their daily lives. In some cases this experience causes immediate, radical shifts in direction. For many the effects are the beginning of a continuing process of personal evolution.

For long term conservation, decisions must be based on research findings. Earthwatch volunteers make valuable contributions, expected and unexpected to their research host projects. Without understanding, it is impossible to know how or even what needs to be conserved to ensure a healthy environment. The two weeks each volunteer spends in the field, amount to real and measurable long term impacts giving ecosystems and species all over the globe, a real chance for a healthy future.

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