



Subject Guide

RURAL AND REMOTE VOLUNTEERING: A GREAT WAY TO STRENGTHEN COMMUNITIES

For volunteers, organisations, managers, and trainers who would like to learn more about involving volunteers to strengthen rural and remote communities.



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Rural and remote volunteering: a great way to strengthen communities can be used in conjunction with the online Subject Guide – Rural and remote volunteering on Volunteering Australia's website. The Subject Guide lists free resources that can be accessed on the internet and is divided into four sections:

1. *Fast facts* to help you gain an understanding of issues related to rural and remote volunteers and volunteering.

2. *Strategies for organisations*, providing a more in-depth look into this subject so that organisations can involve volunteers more effectively.

3. *Research findings, reports and journal articles* to extend your understanding of this subject.

4. *Rural and remote volunteering: a great way to strengthen communities* in PDF format forms the final section of the online Subject Guide.

The online Subject Guide is accessible at <http://www.volunteeringaustralia.org>

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We also thank all organisations and authors who have given us permission to include their resources free of charge in this subject guide.

For the purposes of the Subject Guide – 'Rural and remote' is a term that can encompass a wide range of localities, from small towns and villages to large regional centres. For the purposes of this subject guide the term will refer to any area that is not classified as a city.



RURAL AND REMOTE AUSTRALIA

Australia is a big country. Even though the land mass is large, most people live in capital cities and along its coastline. Only 34% of people live in regional, rural and remote areas.

Indigenous Australians make up 2.4% of the overall population and most live in rural and remote areas, with 45% of this proportion living in 'Very Remote areas' (Australian Institute of Health & Welfare [AIHW] 2006, p.240).

Regardless of the actual size of the population that lives in rural and remote areas, one could argue that the Australian ethos has a strong affinity with country life. Take a look at the images used to describe Australia and you will find depictions of rural and coastal vistas. These representations concentrate on wide expanses and often idealise rural life.

The attractions of country life

People are attracted by life in rural Australia as there is:

- Room for new enterprise. The majority of people in rural Australia derive their income from industries other than agriculture (AIHW 2006).

- Housing costs are cheaper than in major cities.

- Good environment to bring up children.

- People are attracted to the greater 'sense of community'.

- More active involvement at a grass roots level. There are more volunteers in areas outside capital cities (ABS 2007).

'Volunteering is a fabulous way to become a valuable contributor, and get to meet lots of people and find areas of common interests.

Next to playing sport [volunteering] would be the most important thing to do to become a part of the community and be readily accepted. (But don't come in as a 'know-all', do it gently).' (Interview comment)

'Volunteering makes me feel involved,

- Helps me have some control over the future of our community;
- As a volunteer I am able to influence change;
- It stretches and increases my skills and knowledge, and
- I spend time with like minded people whom I may otherwise not get to know very well;
- Volunteering gives me a sense of achievement.' (Interview comment)



Photo courtesy of Joel Rainford

The challenges of life in rural and remote areas

While country life is attractive the reality is that people living in rural and remote areas are challenged by environmental, economic and cultural issues. A small sample of issues which impact on volunteering in rural and remote areas includes:

- Ongoing drought which has devastated some communities.

- Costs of volunteering such as petrol increase in relation to the remoteness of the area:
'Being able to contact volunteers who do not have phone contact is also problematic as access to public phones is limited. The cost of fuel is prohibitive for those who live significant distances from their town – most organisations cannot afford to reimburse this cost.' (Interview comment)

- Greater economic and social disadvantage than in major cities which may be in part due to the high number of Indigenous people living in remote areas who are generally more disadvantaged than the white population (AIHW 2006, p.242);

- The more remote the area, the harder it is to access essential services:
'We don't always have a good spread, or enough of skills needed – funding is frequently an issue – fighting to retain or establish essential services and facilities (stuff that urban areas take for granted and that government provides).' (Interview comment)

- Fewer transport options (AIHW 2006):
'Unique to volunteering in rural and remote towns is the availability and cost of transport. Very little public transport exists, which makes volunteering difficult in certain areas and fields. If volunteers don't have their own vehicle or do not drive they are very limited.' (Interview comment)

- Younger people are more likely to seek tertiary education and employment in capital cities;

- The population of Australia is ageing and is more apparent in rural areas. In and of itself this is not necessarily a problem. However, when too much, too often is expected volunteer burnout does become a problem, especially where people have volunteered with an organisation for a very long time and the organisation relies on the corporate knowledge of that volunteer:
'Never seems to be enough of us...we get spread too thinly and suffer burn out from time to time.' (Interview comment)

Not every rural or remote area is the same. There are different issues, different problems and different opportunities – 'one size does not fit all'.

Together with volunteering, a sense of community was identified as a main factor that led to people having positive feelings when working for the common good.

In 2001 The Regional Women's Advisory Council published a report *The Success Factors – managing change in regional and rural Australia*. The report sought to answer the question "What is it that makes some regional, rural and remote communities 'work' while other communities struggle?" (RWAC, 2001, p.5). The major finding of this report was that how people felt about their community was pivotal in how they rated their community's success at managing change. Positive feelings and trust were found to make the largest contribution to high ratings of success, while negative feelings and a reluctance to get involved contributed to a lack of success (RWAC, 2001, p. 6-7).

Together with volunteering, a sense of community was identified as a main factor that led to people having positive feelings when working for the common good. Also mentioned were:

- Caring and cultivating or encouraging growth – providing educational activities and securing government funding.
- Ensuring things were good for everybody – including increasing job opportunities.
- Appreciation of the whole situation – improving lifestyle through the environment, recreation and the arts (RWAC 2001, p. 7).

SUCCESSION PLANNING

An issue that was brought up through our information gathering is succession planning. The population of Australia is ageing and is apparent in rural areas where some groups are fearful that there will be no one to take over the organisation of all the community work that is currently occurring in their area. Succession planning can be a real issue. It is potentially detrimental to both a volunteer's health and the future of their work if they feel that they must 'keep going' even when they would rather retire from volunteering, but continue as they are worried that there is no one else to take over. This is not simply a problem for the individual organisation or group. It is a problem for the whole community.

And if your group is worried that there is no one around to take over in 5 years, then air the dilemma and invite new ideas for the future growth of the organisation.

HOW SOME RURAL AND REMOTE COMMUNITIES ENHANCE THEIR COMMUNITIES

Positive attitudes and trust as mentioned in the RWAC 2001 report can be found in the following examples of community strength and resilience in rural and remote areas.

New South Wales

Bingara <http://www.bingara.nsw.gov.au/>

In 2005, the people of Bingara came together to create a future vision for Bingara to the year 2020. This involved the whole community. The ideas generated came entirely from within the community and the resulting 'Vision 20/20' can be viewed on Bingara's website. In essence, Vision 20/20 seeks to build on the strengths of the town and district, and to preserve and enhance those things the community values.

Victoria

Violet Town <http://www.violettown.org.au/>

Violet Town is a small community with a population of 950 which is proud of its community spirit. Community members have formed a volunteer Action Group which facilitates discussion and decision making for the future of the town and its district. Violet Town has recently held its second Community Opportunity Workshop and a list of more than 70 suggested improvements, ranging from environmental issues such as recycling and water conservation through improving Violet Town's streetscapes and general appearance to strategic planning and to increased market options. There was even a suggestion that a solar tram run down the main street!

Northern Territory

Kabulwanarmyo, western Arnhem Land is located in the 'stone country' of western Arnhem land this community, led by elder Lofty Bardayal Nadjamerrek. The community is the focus of the Western Arnhem Land Fire Management Agreement. Working with western scientists, the community – linked with other Aboriginal land management groups from Katherine to Maningrida – is utilising traditional fire management practises to ensure biodiversity and the prevention of wildfires throughout the region. As a result, there is now a 17 year deal between Wardekker (the language name of the project) and Phillips Conoco (operator of Darwin Gas) as a greenhouse gas abatement arrangement. The re-introduction of traditional fire regimes is leading to a substantial reduction in greenhouse production, which is thus being 'traded'. It is the first deal of its kind in the world.





Photo courtesy of Joel Rainford

Western Australia

Northampton Shire <http://www.northampton.wa.gov.au/>

Northampton Shire has an area of 12,499 square kilometres with a population of 3,500 with two major towns, Northampton and Kalbarri, two smaller coastal towns Horrocks and Port Gregory and a number of rural communities, Binu, Ajana, Ogilvie, Alma and Isseka that all have community groups operated by volunteers, ranging from townscape committees, tourist bureaus, service clubs and sporting clubs. Across the shire there are three townscape committees all with the role of improving facilities and advising/suggesting to the Council of future projects. There is a very active volunteer group, the Northampton Townscape Committee, who with capital funding from the Northampton Shire Council, progress with projects to upgrade the streetscape and amenities throughout the town. Such projects blend in with the historic nature of the town and consist of gardens, walkways and rest areas that the community and visitors enjoy. Visiting volunteers, those who are on the "Grey Nomad Trail" are always welcome to help at the Visitors Centre and the Northampton Historical Museum, Chiverton House.

South Australia

Naracoorte www.naracoortelucindale.sa.gov.au

Naracoorte is in the lower South East of SA, with a population of 6,000. Traditional volunteering roles have been carried out by the volunteers over the decades but during the past two years not for profit organisations have been faced with many new challenges. Increased employment opportunities have led to over 300 migrants arriving in our town. The majority, from countries such as China, Korea, Sudan, Laos and Vietnam did not speak or write English, did not have transport or even a driver's license, furniture or utensils of any description. Organisations such as the Salvation Army, St Vincent de Paul and others rallied together to provide many of the basics (including second-hand bicycles for transport) that we take for granted. Representatives from all sectors of the community formed a multicultural network, together with the Volunteer Resource Centre and Migrant Settlement Officer. English as a Second Language classes were introduced with support from TAFE SA and our local High School. Volunteers were sourced to provide home tutoring, English language practice opportunities, and basic help such as completing documents. Everyday living classes, friendship, cooking and craft groups were set up and after a slow beginning there are now valuable social occasions for the many cultures now represented in Naracoorte. This is just the start of the challenge as more migrants are expected in the near future (which will mean the need for more volunteers) and the work towards a migrant friendly community continues.

Tasmania

St Helens <http://www.tco.asn.au/oac/home.cgi?oacID=43>

St Helens sits on the east coast of Tasmania. In December 2006 a catastrophic bushfire burnt over 30,000 hectares, destroyed 20 houses, 3 businesses, numerous sheds and workshops. Intense fireballs generated by 100 kph winds burnt for 41 days. Volunteers fought for more than 21,500 hours to bring the fire under control. The St Helens' community is very proud of its 'firies' as it is of all the community's volunteers who ensure the viability of a rich diversity of services, such as the Community Volunteer Service whose vision is to help volunteers and groups form a stronger community. This Service trains volunteers to gain lasting and transferable skills; hosting information sessions, resume writing and helping groups with funding applications.

Undertake some in-house research with all the people who are involved – volunteers, paid workers, clients/consumers and find out what they think the organisation's strengths are and find out ideas for positive growth.

STRATEGIES TO ENCOURAGE VOLUNTEERING

As one of our interviewees commented, success occurs when people share 'responsibility for the future – people and politicians working together'. Here are some simple steps that might help to achieve this:

1. If you know there are barriers to people volunteering, acknowledge them and develop strategies to overcome them. If the project looks overwhelming divide it up into small steps. Each successful step will lead to another until it becomes self perpetuating.

2. Look at what is happening now in your town and identify how groups are overcoming barriers.

3. Don't underestimate the importance of positive attitude. If people have negative attitudes towards their communities they will be less likely to volunteer. If they have positive feelings and consider their community successful they will be more likely to volunteer.

4. Have a look at the guide *Do Your Volunteers Need Training?* (on the Volunteering Australia website), which goes through the process of how to identify the skills and knowledge your volunteers currently have and determine the gaps between what they know and what they or want to know, and work out the best ways in which you can support your volunteers to learn.

5. Go out into the community and undertake some local research.
 - a. Ask people what they think about your organisation – what do they think you do?

 - b. Ask what would entice people to volunteer with your organisation.

 - c. What are the barriers that stop people becoming involved?

 - d. Do people know what they have to offer, do they feel they have valuable skills?

6. Undertake some in-house research with all the people who are involved – volunteers, paid workers, clients/consumers and find out what they think are the organisation's strengths and ideas for positive growth.

7. Groups can join forces and use this network to promote their organisations together, using their combined numbers to:
 - a. Combine common training sessions. This way volunteers get to meet other volunteers and learn about other organisations. (the most successful method of volunteer recruitment is word of mouth – so the more people know about your organisation the greater the opportunity of that information being shared between people).

 - b. Look at your common needs and think about joining forces to attract funding for projects that will benefit all.

 - c. Share ideas and 'tools'. If you are experiencing a problem the chances are that others have 'already been there, done that' which puts you in the position of being able to learn from other's experiences.

 - d. Develop a collaborative brochure, flyer or website with updated information about your network of organisations and projects which can be disseminated through local councils, neighbourhood houses, and perhaps linked through each other's websites.

Not every rural or remote area is the same. There are different issues, different problems and different opportunities – ‘one size does not fit all’.

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