

# Volunteering Naturally



UNDERSTANDING VICTORIA'S  
ENVIRONMENTAL VOLUNTEERS 2019



Environment,  
Land, Water  
and Planning



## Aboriginal acknowledgement

We acknowledge and respect Victorian Traditional Owners as the original custodians of Victoria's land and waters, their unique ability to care for Country and deep spiritual connection to it. We honour Elders past and present whose knowledge and wisdom has ensured the continuation of culture and traditional practices.

We are committed to genuinely partner, and meaningfully engage, with Victoria's Traditional Owners and Aboriginal communities to support the protection of Country, the maintenance of spiritual and cultural practices and their broader aspirations in the 21st century and beyond.

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PHOTO ERRINUNDRA NATIONAL PARK, STEPHEN COLQUITT  
FRONT COVER HELMETED HONEYEATER RELEASED BY VOLUNTEERS. COURTESY ZOOS VICTORIA. FRIENDS OF THE PROM WEEDING SEA SPURGE. COURTESY RACHEL DAWKINS, DELWP FOREST FIRE & REGIONS

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PHOTO LANDCARE AUSTRALIA LIMITED

# Environmental Volunteering

Victoria has a strong history of environmental volunteering, with volunteers contributing enormously to improving our environment, our local communities and our economy.

Launched in October 2018, Victorians Volunteering for Nature, the Victorian Environmental Volunteering Plan, provides the opportunity to strengthen environmental volunteering through an overarching, coordinated and revitalised approach. It sets a new direction for the sector based on actions in four key focus areas – Sustain, Expand, Value and Understand.



Sustain



Value



Expand



Understand

## What is it?

Environmental volunteering encompasses a diverse range of environmental and sustainability activities carried out by individuals and community groups. Today, environmental volunteering expands beyond traditional activities such as planting, weeding and land management to advocacy on climate change and sustainable living and activities such as virtual volunteering and citizen science.

Environmental volunteering can centre around a geographic location, emerging issues such as plastic pollution, a species focus or through nature-based recreation activities, noting that these categories are not mutually exclusive. Put simply it is volunteering in and for our natural environment.

## Background

In 2005, the Victorian Department of Sustainability and Environment conducted a review of natural resource management volunteer programs. Entitled *Volunteering Naturally*, the review concluded that there were an estimated 100,000 Victorians volunteering their time to support natural resource management.

In 2019, more than a decade on, we know that the volunteering landscape is changing. Complementing traditional styles of environmental volunteering, many Victorians now seek to contribute in different ways, beyond natural resource management, based on their diverse skill sets, passion for specific causes and time available to them.

Building on the initial review in 2005, *Volunteering Naturally 2019* is seeking to capture these emerging trends and themes within the sector through the first comprehensive stocktake of active volunteer numbers and types of environmental volunteering occurring across the state. *Volunteering Naturally 2019* is the first of what we envisage to be an annual stocktake that will provide the evidence base to inform how program managers can better support the needs of environmental volunteers today and into the future. It also provides the opportunity to communicate and celebrate the collective effort of all Victorian environmental volunteers.

# About Volunteering Naturally 2019

Volunteering Naturally 2019 is a collection and collation of data about active environmental volunteer groups in Victoria. This includes their geographic location, and where possible, the number of volunteers and/or volunteer hours contributed captured through financial year reporting data. Given this is the first time that this has been undertaken the stocktake is purposefully simple in approach and has a narrow focus on the types of information requested. The data collection was undertaken between April and June 2019.

Essentially, knowing whether a group is currently active, along with numbers of volunteers and hours contributed is at the centre of this snapshot. A conservative approach to estimating actual volunteer effort has also been adopted.

Data was collected via the following methods:

- Extensive desktop research.
- Ground truthing via direct communication with environmental volunteer groups, NGOs and volunteer program managers across state and local government.

Apart from a better understanding of where environmental volunteering is occurring, having an estimate of numbers of individuals and hours contributed assists in attributing the economic benefit that environmental volunteering provides to the state.

At the time of publication, there was a 77% response rate from more than 2100 groups on numbers of active volunteers. Data on hours volunteered is captured for 60% of groups.

Subsequently, no extrapolation of numbers to groups without data has been applied. Therefore, there is a strong likelihood that information on volunteer numbers and hours provided in this snapshot are underestimated.

This exercise offers the possibility for environmental volunteer program managers to collaborate and find commonality in simplifying data and reporting collection standards to better understand and support a thriving environmental volunteering sector.

This stocktake focuses on groups but acknowledges that:

- There are many individual volunteers e.g. citizen scientists and wildlife rescuers and rehabilitators that have not been counted through this exercise.
- There is a need to find appropriate mechanisms to include data from individual volunteers in future years.
- It is difficult to determine whether individuals are contributing to more than one environmental group
- Comprehensive data for all groups was not able to be collected in the time frame available.

PHOTO PLOGGING AT WARBURTON TRAIL FEST  
COURTESY THE PLASTIC RUNNER



# About environmental volunteering groups

Although it is common for groups to undertake a breadth of activities, for the purpose of this snapshot each environmental volunteer group is categorised according to one primary activity type from the list below.

## Caring for landscapes

Physical work in the field, including in parks, coastal, private and public land. Eg. Friends of groups, Landcare, Coastcare, Parks Victoria volunteers, Committees of Management, community nurseries and environment groups whose activities are associated with ecosystem maintenance and improvement.

## Sustainable living

Activities that promote environmental sustainability aligned with consumption including clean-ups, repairs, waste minimisation, climate change, community energy and community gardens.

## Citizen science

Monitoring activities that actively collect data to contribute to knowledge on a species or environmental condition, including Waterwatch and Estuarywatch, Frog Census, Victorian Biodiversity Atlas, bird and next box monitoring and observer groups.

## Wildlife rescue and rehabilitation

Supporting positive welfare outcomes for our native fauna. A small but incredibly active number of groups of environmental volunteers participate in wildlife rescue, contributing a higher proportion than average of hours volunteered per individual volunteer.

## Recreation/nature experiences

Volunteers supporting connection, education and appreciation of nature. E.g. Field Naturalists, Zoos and Botanical gardens. Emerging in this space are volunteers through 4WD clubs, fishers and bike groups.

## Advocacy

Groups that advocate for and on behalf of improved environmental outcomes. A small group of larger organisations and a number of community-based environmental advocacy groups. Included are ACF, Environment Victoria and Environmental Justice Victoria.

## Networks and other

Remaining groups and Networks with divided focus across activities. E.g. Conservation Management Networks, NGOs and Landcare Networks.

PHOTO VOLUNTEER SHERPAS IN DANDENONG NATIONAL PARK, PARKS VICTORIA



# Volunteering Naturally 2019

## AN ANNUAL SNAPSHOT OF VICTORIA'S ENVIRONMENTAL VOLUNTEER GROUPS

Environmental volunteering encompasses a broad range of environmental and sustainability activities. Put simply, it is volunteering in and for our natural environment. It's in our nature.



134,244

VOLUNTEERS



2,100+

GROUPS



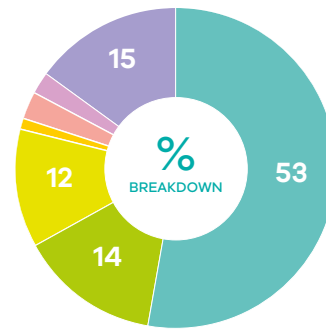
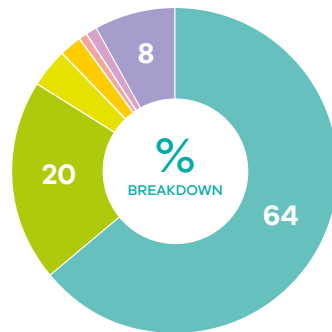
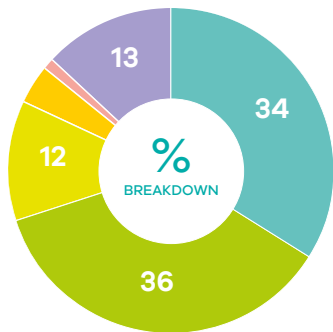
1,506,617\*

HOURS REPORTED



\$50.7m

ECONOMIC CONTRIBUTION



ABS 2016 DATA AT \$33.71/HOUR VOLUNTEER CONTRIBUTION

BASED ON AVAILABLE DATA FROM MOST RECENT FINANCIAL YEAR OR PREVIOUS 12 MONTHS

\*60% OF GROUPS CAPTURED AND REPORTED HOURS. FUTURE SNAPSHOTS WILL FOCUS ON IMPROVING DATA COLLECTION AND STANDARDISATION.

### Reasons

Why people participate in environmental volunteering



Local place focused



Nature based recreation



Issue driven



Species focused

- CARING FOR LANDSCAPES**  
Physical work in the field, including parks, coasts, private and public land. Eg. Friends of groups, Landcare and Coastcare.
- SUSTAINABLE LIVING**  
Promoting consumption reduction, pollution prevention and reduction. Eg. Boomerang Bags, Clean-up activities and Community Energy
- RECREATION/ NATURE EXPERIENCE**  
Volunteers supporting connection, education and appreciation of nature. Eg. Field naturalists, zoos and botanical gardens. Emerging in this space are volunteers through 4WD clubs, fishers and bike groups
- CITIZEN SCIENCE**  
Monitoring and data collection activities Eg. Waterwatch, frog census, bird and nest box data
- WILDLIFE RESCUE AND REHAB'N**  
Supporting positive welfare outcomes for native fauna
- ADVOCACY**  
Groups that advocate for and on behalf of improved environmental outcomes. Eg. ACF, Environment Victoria and Environmental Justice Victoria
- NETWORKS/OTHER**  
Remaining groups and Networks with divided focus across activities. Eg. Conservation Management Networks, NGOs and Landcare networks

Find out more including an interactive map of Victorian environmental volunteering groups  
[environment.vic.gov.au/volunteering](http://environment.vic.gov.au/volunteering)

# Key observations

## What's being reported by groups?

Reporting of information about environmental volunteering shows much variation. Regular reporting of either volunteer numbers or hours is not a standard. Group member numbers are often used as a proxy for volunteer numbers, although membership alone does not necessarily equate to active volunteering. Wherever possible, active volunteer numbers were captured. Larger volunteering programs such as Landcare and Beach Patrol also use a variety of reporting methods including reach through participation in one-off events or through social media channels. Groups that provide volunteers with details of their achievements in real time facilitate positive feedback loops. For example, Love Our Streets post quantities and types of rubbish collected at each event as it concludes, collecting valuable data for reporting.

## Environmental volunteer groups – by type

Approximately two thirds of groups care for landscapes through the delivery of on-ground action as their primary activity. Following this, 20% of groups are focused on activities aligned with sustainable living with the remaining 16% accounted for with all remaining groups.

## Hours volunteered

Although the number of individuals reflected against 'Caring for Landscapes' and 'Sustainable Living' activities are similar, the data suggest that people spend a greater number of volunteer hours contributing to on-ground work. Likewise, although there are smaller numbers of volunteers involved in wildlife rescue, the nature of this work means that they contribute significantly in terms of volunteer time.

## Number of individuals

The numbers of individuals associated with groups varied across the categories. There were large numbers associated with sustainable living activities such as Clean Up Australia Day, Beach Patrol and Love Our Street. Whilst the number of groups associated with caring for landscapes is larger, proportionally there are smaller numbers of individuals participating across these activities. Recreation and nature experience environmental volunteerism is an emerging area. For example, 4WD clubs state wide are working with Parks Victoria in contributing their time to maintenance and restoration of areas within parks and reserves.

PHOTO KARIN TRAEGER, COURTESY THE PLASTIC RUNNER





## **Environmental volunteers are passionate people driven by their values and specific issues**

People love to volunteer for the planet. Environmental volunteers are passionate about what they're doing, influenced by others taking action and motivated by a perceived level of societal 'inaction' around specific issues. Health, wellbeing and social benefits are also important as volunteering still needs to be fun, social, interesting and rewarding to keep people motivated. The enduring passion of environmental volunteers has been evidenced through a willingness to engage with Volunteering Naturally, through sharing stories, achievements and data to inform this snapshot.

## **Environmental volunteering comes in all shapes and sizes**

From one-off large-scale annual volunteering events such as Clean Up Australia Day and National tree Day, to regular monthly beach clean-ups, there are a multitude of ways that environmental volunteering is organised and delivered. There isn't one solution to the most effective and enduring model for environmental volunteering. Long-standing community (place-based) models such as Landcare continue to operate whilst new and emerging environmental volunteerism can transform into community social enterprises, such as community energy groups initiated through community advocacy and education.

## **Information about environmental volunteers is often hard to find and not up to date**

For a range of reasons, (time, costs, staff) environmental volunteers often do not publicly update contact information making it difficult to connect with them directly. Through Volunteering Naturally, a significant number of groups were identified who do not have any form of contact information and are only known through local government connections and interactions. It is unknown whether much of the information sourced on websites and through listings is current or outdated. Some groups are moving to social media (in particular Facebook) as the most convenient way to communicate and be 'close at hand' in the public domain.

## **Volunteers are achieving a lot, but it's often invisible**

The lack of standardised data collection and analysis results in the vast majority of outcomes often going 'under the radar'. Despite this, it is clear that environmental volunteers are achieving substantial ecological, social and economic outcomes for the communities in which they operate.

## **Emerging issues can spark environmental volunteerism**

The recent focus on the phase out of plastic bags, programs such as The War on Waste and increased community awareness of the impacts of plastic pollution are potential contributors to the rise of the Boomerang Bag expansion (170 groups) in Victoria. Simultaneously, there has been an increase in numbers of groups associated with 'clean-ups' and a number of towns going plastic free. Likewise, the increase in awareness of climate change, rising energy costs and communities wanting to play their part in living sustainably are all contributors to greater interest in renewable and community-owned energy and environmental volunteering generally.

## **Environmental volunteer groups and the numbers of individuals involved ebbs and flows**

It's clear that over time the number of groups and the people within them come and go. We recognise that people's capacity to contribute and levels of interest may change based on their lifestyle and competing commitments. This is useful to keep in mind when understanding how government and volunteer program managers can best support environmental volunteerism. Many groups have reflected the need to engage and attract more participation from younger and culturally diverse demographics as reflected by the communities in which they are located.

## Local governments firmly support environmental volunteerism

Most of Victoria's local governments provide support to environmental volunteers and often work with them to achieve local outcomes. This is expressed through provision of support staff, training, grants and materials. Levels of support provided are variable and resource-dependent although some local governments are providing significant levels of support to environmental volunteers. Local governments and environmental volunteers realise many reciprocal benefits when working together.

## Small towns and community members can wear many hats

Although Volunteering Naturally mainly considered formalised environmental volunteering around organised groups, there is an appreciation that many others within communities contribute their time directly or indirectly to environmental outcomes. These can include but are not limited to Scouts, Lions, Progress Associations, Schools, Rotary, Bike and 4WD clubs etc. Similarly, the same people may be volunteering for a range of groups within small communities.



PHOTO INTREPID  
LANDCARE RETREAT

# What's next?

## Volunteering Naturally 2020

### Annual survey for environmental volunteers and program managers

This will be simple in its approach, widely communicated and have ample lead time for completion. In the future, this survey may also provide an opportunity to periodically include other areas of interest including demographic profiles of environmental volunteers.

### Mapping of Volunteer Groups across the state

Providing a visual guide to locations of Environmental Volunteering groups with links to their websites and/or facebook pages. This will enable all Victorians to get involved with local environmental volunteering opportunities.

### Stand up and be counted

We look forward to communicating the results of Volunteering Naturally each year and encourage more groups to get in touch and be included in this annual snapshot to showcase what you do and encourage others to join your cause.

To achieve this and improve our ability to monitor trends over time, reporting will continue to focus on:

- Numbers of unique active volunteers
- Number of volunteer hours contributed
- Primary focus activities of groups and individuals
- Location of environmental volunteering opportunities

### Get in touch with our team

[environmental.volunteering@delwp.vic.gov.au](mailto:environmental.volunteering@delwp.vic.gov.au)



