

Barriers and opportunities to volunteering for nature – what we’ve heard from the community

August 2023

Background

The two-year Regional Environmental Volunteering Coordination Trial (2022-2023) explores how DEECA can help sustain, expand, understand, and value environmental volunteers and volunteering.

The trial contributes to the *Victorians Volunteering for Nature: Environmental Volunteering Plan 2018* through the mapping and analysis of barriers, motivators and opportunities to Victorians engaging in volunteering for nature. This is being informed by consultation with groups, local government authorities, environmental volunteer managers and volunteers.

The analysis also took into consideration recent engagement with young people undertaken in partnership by the Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action (DEECA) and Youth Affairs Council Victoria (YACVic). Themes that emerged through targeted engagement with environmental volunteer stakeholders are detailed below.

These themes can help inform volunteer manager’s approach to supporting environmental volunteers moving forward.

Themes

1. Empowering young Victorians

Young people have the most to gain and the greatest to lose in policy and planning for the future. We know conventional environmental volunteering offerings are not attractive enough to young people and Victorians aged 16-25 years are unlikely to ‘slot’ into traditional models. More considered and targeted approaches to engaging young people is required¹.

Existing barriers	Opportunities for consideration
Young people have many demands on their time	Promote and actively connect young people to event-based, online and flexible opportunities that can fit around existing commitments and lifestyles.
	Complement, don’t compete for time e.g., have fun with friends while volunteering outdoors, get course credit.
Conventional volunteer offerings not meeting needs or interests of young Victorians, or opportunities not getting in front of young people	Rethink our collective approach to language, communication and emphasis (e.g., less ‘working bee’, more ‘have fun while doing good’) and how groups advertise roles
	Support youth-lead and inclusive projects

¹ YEAG Roundtable report D3.pdf (environment.vic.gov.au)

	Learn from and partner with those engaging young people well and share learnings with the sector (e.g., YACVic)
	Utilise non-conventional ways of promoting volunteer opportunities and utilising social media used by young people
Transport to volunteer events	Factor transport support into project planning

2. Connection within government and among stakeholders

There is a lot of activity occurring regionally across the environmental volunteering sector which could be better coordinated. In some cases, groups are being contacted by multiple parts of government, often with similar requests. Improving sector connectedness and collaboration will help address this barrier.

Existing barriers	Opportunities for consideration
Limited networks connecting the sector	Facilitate the sharing of information and learnings across regional stakeholders through formal and informal platforms (e.g., Community of practice, email distribution lists)
On occasion, difficult relationships between volunteer group and government departments	Broker partnerships and find common ground between government agencies and community groups
Uncoordinated requests for information from government, largely due to similar projects being led by different parts of government	Deliberate effort to improve coordination and streamlining of data requests

3. Valuing and celebrating efforts

Environmental volunteers feeling recognised and valued is an important component of retaining a happy and motivated volunteer. Celebrating environmental volunteering in all its manifestations helps build a social norm around caring for nature.

Existing barriers	Opportunities for consideration
Uncoordinated approach to celebrating volunteer efforts	Better promote the impacts on Victoria's natural environment because of environmental volunteer efforts
Reaching audiences not engaged	Develop a cross-government communications approach to celebrate volunteer efforts and reach new audiences
	Highlight the well-recognised individual and wider social benefits of volunteering (e.g., social connection, mental health, skill development)
	Ensure communication collateral reflects diversity
	Link campaigns to existing inter/national days e.g., World Environment Day, Youth Month
	Partner to reach less represented audiences e.g., YACVic, Victorian Pride Centre

4. Volunteer infrastructure

Improving access to technology has the potential to drastically reduce the burdensome administrative requirements. This would enable organisations to be more effective using resources and would free up volunteer managers to invest more time in building relationships and curating meaningful experiences with volunteers.

The databases that volunteer opportunities are advertised on, (Park Connect, Better Impact, Seek, Go Volunteer, Basecamp) and volunteers register their details on, are varied. This not only makes it less clear where to look for opportunities to volunteer, but it also adds to the administration burden if an individual wishes to engage with multiple groups or projects. Platforms that support recruitment and management of volunteers have the potential to provide efficiencies for volunteers and environmental groups alike.

Existing barriers	Opportunities for consideration
Multiple platforms can make it harder for prospective volunteers to find opportunities, and for groups to recruit new volunteers	Encourage groups to post their opportunities on common regional sites e.g., volunteer resource centres and to connect with identified networks where applicable Create central virtual space for environmental volunteer engagement and information sharing
Data stored on different databases that don't speak to one another	Environmental volunteer programs collaborate in the use of databases, enabling volunteers to engage across projects with minimal admin
Limited accessible and affordable tech infrastructure	Offer training in tech for project management and administration (e.g., managing mail lists, storing key documents central place) Connect groups with libraries e.g., Neighbourhood Houses that provide computer literacy programs, tech recycling schemes Support groups to recruit short-term skilled volunteers (tech, finance, risk) to help establish systems

5. Leadership and culture

Many challenges in the volunteering space arise from group dynamics and relationship management. Government can help address these barriers through supporting group strategic planning, facilitating peer mentoring, and connecting groups and projects with resources to develop skills.

Existing barriers	Opportunities for consideration
Undefined or unclear group objectives and goals	Support groups to develop a clear purpose, objectives, and vision via training, resources and facilitation support
Governance and management skills Emphasis on committee involvement, difficulty in managing un/paid staff, reluctance to adapt group model	Connect groups with governance and management training Showcase different group models, operation structures including local stories of success
Legacy issues resulting in difficult relationships, including unenjoyable behaviour	Engage in concerted mediation efforts

6. Recruitment and retention

Recruitment and retention of volunteers is a big challenge. Many groups have reported struggling to find volunteer numbers required to deliver on projects and fill committee roles. They also report spending a lot of time on attracting and onboarding new volunteers. In some cases, environmental groups struggle to meet the needs or

expectations of volunteers. This has implications for volunteer retention. Efforts to overcome barriers outlined in other themes (e.g., group dynamics, valuing volunteers) will go some way to addressing this issue.

Existing barriers	Opportunities for consideration
Accessing prospective volunteers	<p>Broker partnerships between volunteer bodies and local organisations e.g., culturally diverse peak bodies, primary health networks</p> <p>Focus recruitment efforts on individuals with more time e.g., retirees</p> <p>Explore potential application of behavioural economics to the volunteer sector, including building a social norm for acting for nature</p>
Group/project capacity to appropriately recruit, onboard, and retain volunteers. This includes succession planning	<p>Connect groups/projects/volunteer managers with best practice resources on retaining volunteers (e.g., managing volunteer wellbeing, building a sense of belonging, celebrating achievements)</p> <p>Connect groups/projects/volunteer managers with best practice resources on recruiting volunteers</p>
Difficulty for government, especially local government, to resource multiple small groups	Explore opportunities for groups to work more collaboratively with one another.

7. Fostering skills

High quality, regular and accessible training is not readily available, particularly those not connected to a Landcare Facilitator. This is especially true for unpaid environmental volunteer managers and individuals located in rural and remote communities. While DEECA recognises that knowledge resources do not offer the same level of depth and dynamism of in-person training, the development of the recently launched [Environmental Volunteer Resources Hub](#) has been well-received. Connecting volunteers and groups to training offered by Neighbourhood Houses, Volunteer Resource Centres and peak bodies (e.g., YACVic, Landcare Victoria Inc, Justice Connect) are other immediate ways the Department can support the development of a skilled sector.

Existing barriers	Opportunities for consideration
Minimal training available, especially in remote and rural areas	<p>Promote on-line and on-demand training opportunities.</p> <p>Provide of training to address gaps identified by volunteers e.g., using tech to work smarter, communications (social media, building a campaign), partnership development, youth engagement.</p> <p>Create opportunities for more peer-to-peer learning</p>
Groups often unaware of learning opportunities outside of the environmental sector	Connect groups with training from outside of the environmental sector (e.g., Groupwork, Justice Connect)
Tendency to focus on 'practical' skill building as opposed to 'soft' skill building	
Training advertised in places not widely viewed	Central place to share training opportunities

8. Project administration

Project administration can detract from time spent on project delivery and reduces how attractive these opportunities are (especially young people). In some cases, groups navigate multiple different land tenures and corresponding administrative processes. Having a central place to register and enter in various capability checks

could streamline many processes that fall on environmental volunteer managers and groups. This is a large piece of work that will require significant engagement, cost and coordination by government agencies.

Existing barriers	Opportunities for consideration
Difficulty navigating land tenure requirements	Create resources to identify and communicate requirements depending on the land tenure
	Explore land leasing arrangements with groups that reduce the requirement for government staff to be onsite
Extensive 'paperwork' requirements for onboarding volunteers	Develop a standard process for onboarding volunteers, storing data and key documents

9. Resourcing

Resources available to the environmental volunteer sector are modest. The way in which the funding is usually delivered (once-off, short-term, competitive) is not widely conducive to long-term planning, fostering partnerships or streamlining administration. A top-down approach to funding often positions volunteer organisations as benefactors rather than collaborators. Rigid and prescriptive funding and grant agreements can also dissuade recipients from being innovative and agile, and short-term funding opportunities may inhibit strategic planning and growth of volunteer organisations².

Existing barriers	Opportunities for consideration
Short-term and competitive grant funding with strict eligibility and budgetary requirements	Multi-year grant funding
	Budget requirements to reflect operating realities e.g. including a higher percentage of project management/administrative overheads
Significant reporting requirements attached to government grant funding	Streamline data and acquittal requirements
	Only mandate essential data for reporting requirements
Environmental groups positioned as 'benefactors' rather than partners	Explore funding models that involve co-design principles

10. Volunteer fatigue

Volunteers are exposed to a number of stressors that can contribute to volunteer fatigue and burnout. While many of these factors are out of our collective control, there are several ways that government can make it easier for volunteers and reduce unnecessary burden. Examples include streamlining necessary procedures and sharing resources widely among groups. DEECA is also well-placed to spotlight and support discussions on volunteer wellbeing.

Existing barriers	Opportunities for consideration
Multiple demands on volunteer's time	Streamline processes associated with volunteer and grant management to reduce administration burden

² [National Strategy for Volunteering 2023 - 2033](#)

Collective fatigue	Offer wellbeing and psychological first aid training to volunteer managers
	Connect groups/projects/volunteer managers with best practice resources and training on retaining volunteers
Difficulty re-engaging volunteers following COVID-lockdowns	Focus on social and connection
	Explore potential joint projects with stakeholders with common ground e.g., public health services
	Focus volunteer recruitment campaigns to individuals with more time e.g., retirees

11. Demographic considerations

While there is minimal data available on environmental volunteer demographics, anecdotally we know the sector tends to be older and Caucasian. Where there are groups with notable diversity (whether age, sexual, cultural) it is usually by design and following concerted effort. All Victorians should have the opportunity to volunteer for nature and to do so while feeling culturally and psychologically safe. Barriers to participation have been researched and documented, including through this trial³. Genuine consideration of these barriers is necessary if the environmental volunteer movement is to begin to reflect Victoria's diversity more accurately.


Existing barriers	Opportunities for consideration
Limited engagement with peak bodies	Work with peak bodies to better understand how 'formal' environmental volunteer offerings could be more appealing for diverse audiences
Sector tendency to treat culturally diverse audiences as one homogenous group	Build sector capability in offering culturally and socially safe volunteer experiences
	Spotlight resources developed by the sector, for the sector e.g., Bellarine Catchment Network Inclusion Guide
	Showcase success stories and learnings across local networks/partners
Unstable employment, limited transport, lack of financial capital	Factor transport support, volunteer expenses and family-friendly elements into project planning

Next steps

Victoria has a strong history of environmental volunteering, with volunteers contributing enormously to improving our environment and economy. While 2022 saw a 'bounce back' in efforts to pre-pandemic levels, the proportion of Australians engaging in volunteer work has fallen substantially over the past three years⁴. Continued innovation from government is required to support the sector to continue to thrive. A key focus of the Regional Environmental Volunteer Coordination Trial is deepening DEECA's understanding of the sector, including mapping and analysing the barriers, motivators and opportunities. The department recognises that no two environmental groups are the same and is committed to ongoing conversations with Victoria's volunteer community. Common themes that emerged through sector engagement summarised in this paper will inform DEECA's approach to volunteer engagement looking forward.

³ [RMIT report on barriers to environmental volunteering for youth and CALD audiences](#)

⁴ [Volunteers – Australian Institute of Health and Welfare \(aihw.gov.au\)](#)



Thank you to the environmental groups and individual volunteers who were generous with their insights and reflections on the current state of the environmental volunteering sector and how to further strengthen it. Your contributions are what made this project, and so many others, possible.