

Volunteering Naturally

Understanding Victoria's Environmental Volunteers 2020



Cover photo:
Volunteers with Jan Juc Coast Action.

Accessibility

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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.

Photo Credit:
National Tree Planting Day



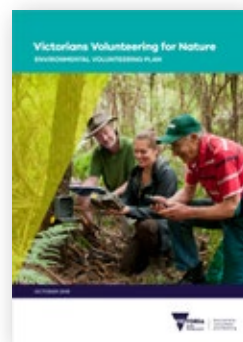


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Environmental Volunteering

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 across the state. It sets a new direction for the sector through an overarching, coordinated and revitalised approach, based on actions in four key focus areas – Sustain, Expand, Value and Understand.

What is it?

Environmental volunteering encompasses a diverse range of environmental and sustainability activities carried out by individuals and community groups.

Environmental volunteering is volunteering in and for our natural environment. It can centre around a geographic location, emerging issues such as plastic pollution, a species focus or through nature-based recreation activities.

Today, environmental volunteering expands beyond traditional activities such as planting, weeding and land management to advocacy on climate change, community renewable energy and sustainable living and activities such as virtual volunteering and citizen science.

Background

In 2005, the then 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.

We are focused on providing the means for Victorians who want to contribute to nature and get involved, based on their diverse skill sets, passion for specific causes or at a time that suits them. More than a decade on, the volunteering landscape has changed and there's a need to consider alternatives in the way that we engage new environmental volunteers.

This second annual snapshot provides an evidence base to continue informing how environmental volunteering 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 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 and activities associated with ecosystem maintenance and improvement such as planting, weeding and landscape restoration. These activities can occur in parks, coastal areas, private and public land. Key groups working in this space include Friends of groups, Landcare, Coastcare, Parks Victoria volunteers, committees of management, community nurseries and environment groups.



Sustainable living

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



Citizen science

Monitoring activities that actively collect data to contribute to knowledge on a species or environmental condition. Key groups undertaking these activities include Waterwatch and Estuarywatch, Frog Census, Victorian Biodiversity Atlas users, 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 and individuals 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, grassroots, environmental advocacy groups. Included are ACF, Environment Victoria and Environmental Justice Australia.



Networks and other

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

Bellarine Catchment Network delivering marine education to volunteers at Swan Bay.



CASE STUDY 1

Citizen Scientists Monitoring Pesticides to Improve Waterways

Matt Daniels (Waterwatch volunteer), Dr Kavitha Chinathamby (RMIT) and Wendy Noble (EstuaryWatch volunteer) preparing sediment samples for analysis.

Photo Credit: **Corangamite Catchment Management Authority**



Waterwatch Victoria is a community based program connecting local communities with river health, sustainable water issues and management. It's sister program EstuaryWatch focusses on estuaries.

Both programs support citizen scientists to be actively involved in local waterway monitoring, determining estuary health and on-ground activities.

Today, there are 18 estuaries monitored by EstuaryWatch groups in Victoria. In each of these regions, volunteer data has been used to inform better estuary management.

This year, Waterwatch and EstuaryWatch citizen scientists in the Corangamite region joined Dr Kavitha Chinathamby, an aquatic scientist at RMIT, to find out more about pesticides in local waterways. Sediment and water samples were collected at 11 Waterwatch sites including Lake Colac, Barongarook Creek, Deans Creek, Pirron Yallock Creek, Boundary Creek and Dewing Creek.

Of the 79 samples collected across Australia in this round of testing, only eight sites showed the presence of pesticides, of which two were in Victoria. This important data is now available on the [Pesticide Detectives](#) website to help improve awareness and management of pesticides in local areas.

Citizen scientists involved in the 2019-2020 Waterwatch and EstuaryWatch programs contributed a total of 232,580 hours to care for our waterways - equivalent to 31,011 volunteer days.

If you're interested in getting involved in [Waterwatch](#) or [Estuarywatch](#), please click on the names for more information.

CASE STUDY 2

Volunteers Rescuing and Rehabilitating our Native Animals



Volunteer wildlife rescuers and carers make a huge contribution to helping native animals in distress each year.

In the 2019-2020 financial year, Wildlife Victoria's Wildlife Emergency Response Service answered 45,458 calls for assistance. During busy periods they receive up to 300 calls a day. They have helped over 48,000 animals during these 12 months including nearly 7,000 Eastern Grey Kangaroos and over 6,000 Ringtail possums.

Wildlife Victoria Operations Supervisor Emily Small and her mother Sharon, a registered nurse, run Goongerah Wombat Orphanage in Far East Gippsland.

Most of the orphans that come into their care have lost their mothers due to vehicle collisions. The shelter cares for orphaned, sick and injured wombats and aims for their complete and successful release back into the wild.

During the bushfires over the summer of 2019-2020, Emily and Sharon had to flee the orphanage. The orphanage and their wombats survived the fires, but the surrounding areas were destroyed.

The Smalls receive six to eight wombat joeys a year and care for around 20 wombats at any given time. Sharon notes that psychological assistance is incredibly important for people involved in emergency wildlife response. She has found help from a support service that is specifically for wildlife carers.

This year, over 1,500 volunteers have contributed approximately 380,000 hours caring for our native wildlife. In addition to registered wildlife shelter operators like the Smalls', this includes call centre workers, rescuers, transporters and wildlife foster carers.

If you'd like more information about how you could become involved, please visit [Wildlife Victoria](#).

About Volunteering Naturally 2020

Volunteering Naturally 2020 is a collection and collation of data about active environmental volunteer groups and organisations in Victoria. This includes their geographic location, and where possible, the number of volunteers and/or volunteer hours contributed, sourced through 2019-20 financial year reporting data. The stocktake is purposefully simple in approach and has a narrow focus on the types of information requested. The data collection was undertaken between June and August 2020.

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.

Volunteering Naturally recognises the variety of types and modes of environmental volunteering. This includes but is not limited to regular volunteering activity, large-scale annual volunteering events, community placed-based models of volunteering in nature along with more recent interest in living sustainably.

Data was collected via the following methods:

- A short survey instrument forwarded to majority of the sector
- Collation of reported data across a wide number of environmental volunteering programs
- Desktop research and ground truthing via program managers, groups, NGOS and others including local government

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

Data collection during 2020

Data used in this report reflects volunteer numbers during the 2019-2020 financial year. At the time of publication, there was just over a 50% response rate from more than 2100 groups on numbers of active volunteers and hours volunteered.

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 an underestimate.

Although primarily focused on group or program activity this snapshot also acknowledges that:

- Information about environmental volunteers is hard to find and not always up to date. Due to the impacts of COVID-19, 2020 was a challenging year for many Victorians including environmental volunteers.
- Although seeking to capture emerging trends and themes within the sector, this year's finding may be atypical and conceivably not replicated in future years.

- Capturing the number of individual volunteers who focus their efforts on either citizen science activities and/or wildlife rescue and rehabilitation is not easily counted in this exercise and is thus unrepresented.
- It is difficult to determine whether individuals are contributing to more than one environmental group or activity.

This report also showcases four environmental volunteering case studies all conducted before coronavirus (COVID-19) restrictions.

Please note that all the photos used, except for the one on page 9, were taken prior to March 2020.

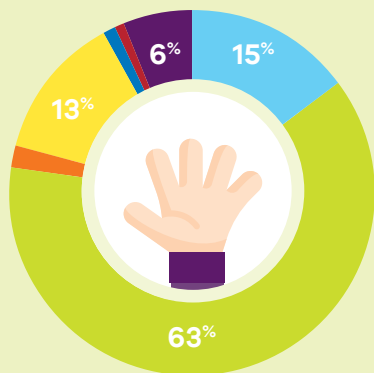
REASONS PEOPLE PARTICIPATE IN ENVIRONMENTAL VOLUNTEERING:

- ✓ **Local place focused**
- ✓ **Nature based recreation**
- ✓ **Issue driven**
- ✓ **Species focused**

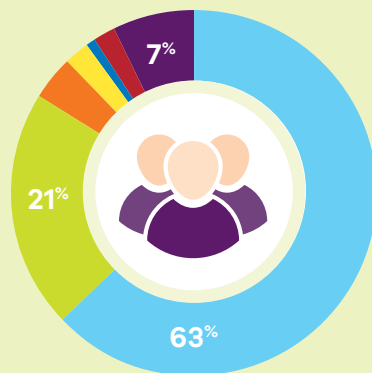


Volunteering Naturally 2020

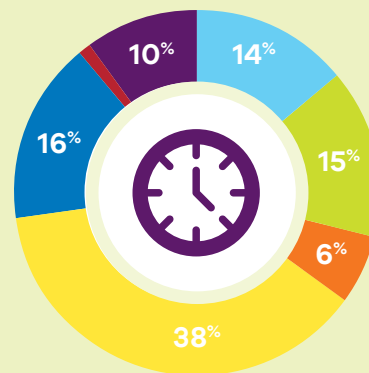
AN ANNUAL SNAPSHOT OF VICTORIA'S ENVIRONMENTAL VOLUNTEER GROUPS



186,508
volunteers



2166
groups



2,429,484*
hours reported



\$101.36* million
economic contribution

Making use of ABS 2017-2018 data, we have assigned \$41.72/hour value to volunteer contribution. This is based on available data from the most recent financial year or previous 12 months.

* 51% of known active groups captured and reported hours.

Environmental volunteering encompasses a broad range of environmental and sustainability activities. Put simply, it is volunteering in and for our natural environment. Environmental volunteering connects community to nature and to each other.



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 rehabilitation

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

Key observations

During 2020, Victorians have seen an unprecedented level of disruption to how we live, work, connect and volunteer. Whilst still processing the bushfires that occurred in late 2019 through to early 2020, our community was thrown into a global pandemic. These significant national and international events have put a sharp focus on the importance of nature in our lives which is reflected in this 2019-2020 stocktake of environmental volunteering.

Whilst group-based activity was limited due to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, the overall numbers of individuals who participated in environmental volunteering increased markedly. This increase can mostly be attributed to participation of individuals in citizen science activities associated with monitoring of birds, frogs and other species-related observations.

Timing for data collection had an impact

As the 2020 data collection was undertaken during the most stringent lockdown months with stage four operating across metropolitan Melbourne and stage three for regional Victoria, volunteering data was difficult to obtain. Despite repeated data collection attempts, 2020 data is at a lower reported rate of 51% for both volunteer numbers and hours compared to 80% for volunteer numbers and 60% for hours data reported in the 2019 snapshot.

Group vs individual activity

- Whilst more than half of all groups carry out *Caring for Landscapes* activities, the hours reflected in 2020 were much lower than in 2019. This in part can be attributed to an inability to be out in landscapes between March and June.

- Conversely, the hours recorded by citizen scientists (individualised environmental volunteering) sharply increased due to activities associated with collection of data on species or monitoring of nature. Bird-based programs reported significant increases of activity and interest during 2020.
- Multiple respondents to the survey confirmed that their activities had been curtailed due to coronavirus. Many commented that they had found new ways within their existing groups to plan, stay connected and informed using new technologies. Most volunteers were eagerly awaiting the opportunity to recommence their environmental volunteering once restrictions were eased.
- *Groups by Type*: There has been no marked change in group type between 2019 and 2020. Nearly two thirds of groups care for landscapes through the delivery of on-ground action as their primary activity. Following this, 21% of groups are focused on activities aligned with sustainable living while the remaining 16% accounted for all remaining groups.

- Although wildlife rescuers and rehabilitators are only a small proportion of the total of environmental volunteers (<1%) they contribute a significant number of volunteering hours (16% of the overall total reported)
- Activities in the sustainable living category continue to attract larger numbers of individuals participating in one-off periodic events such as localised clean-ups.

Passionate but not entirely predictable

- 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.
- Reporting of information about environmental volunteering shows much variation within and between programs. Regular reporting of either volunteer numbers or hours is not consistent across the sector.

- Volunteer numbers ebb and flow. 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.

Coronavirus (COVID-19) has impacted group-based activity and individuals in different ways

Volunteering is a social glue that helps hold our society together. While much of the focus of the pandemic has been on the economic impacts, there has been much less attention given to the impacts on unpaid activities, such as voluntary work. A recent study¹ determined that there had been a significant fall in volunteering activity, with almost two thirds (65.9%) of volunteers saying they had stopped volunteering during this time. This in turn, has had impacts on individuals' wellbeing and mental health.

Opportunities for environmental volunteering post pandemic

The love for the outdoors has been rekindled during the pandemic lockdown with a third of Australians (34%)² spending more time in nature and wanting this to continue.

Likewise, Millennials and Gen Zs continue to be focussed on larger societal issues, both before and after the onset of the pandemic. The recent Global Millennial Survey 2020³ revealed that within the top three concerns for these cohorts they chose climate change/protecting the environment (28%) ahead of other issues illustrating the importance of the environment to these generations. This presents an opportunity for those seeking to expand environmental volunteerism to develop appropriate strategies and take advantage of these interests.

Waterbird habitat restoration, Warrong.



1 **The experience of volunteers during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic.**
ANU Centre for Social Research and Methods- Professor Nicholas Biddle and Professor Matthew Gray

2 **Recovering from Covid-19 The Australian experience, generational impacts and the future outlook.**
McCrindle Research June 2020.

3 **Deloitte Global Millennial Survey 2020.**

CASE STUDY 3

Collaborating to improve fish riverbank habitat

Buckland River tree planting with instream wood in background.
Photo Credit: **David Anderson**



Recreational fishers across Victoria have volunteered their time to repair riparian land for healthier waterways and fish populations as part of the Angler Riparian Partnerships Program (ARPP).

Riparian land is the land that runs along rivers, creeks, estuaries, lakes and wetlands. Healthy riparian land is critical for improving water quality, buffering water temperatures, filtering nutrients and sediments from catchment run-off, stabilising riverbanks, reducing erosion, and providing shade, food and shelter for fish.

The \$1 million, four-year program (2016-2020) funded collaborative projects in areas of local priority for recreational fishers. Over the program's life over 40 ARPP projects have been completed across regional Victoria involving hundreds of people from more than 120 angling clubs and community groups.

Last year, 62 angling clubs and community groups worked with regional catchment management authorities to repair land along 14 Victorian waterways. Over 420 people were involved and planted 7,600 native trees and shrubs, controlled 63 hectares of weeds, cleaned-up a truckload of rubbish, and fenced five kilometres of waterway.

The hard work by recreational fishers and partners will benefit many fish species, such as Murray cod, trout, estuary perch, Macquarie perch, river blackfish and golden perch.

Projects have occurred along 30 waterways including the Merri River, Wimmera River, Merebin Common, Lake Boga, Box-Pyramid Creek, Hughes Creek, Buckland River, Nariel Creek, Snowy River, Macalister River and Curdies River.

Into the future, recreational fishers are looking for new opportunities to continue working together to achieve waterway outcomes that improve fisheries.

For more information on the ARPP, please [click here](#).

CASE STUDY 4

Land for Wildlife members create vibrant places for people and habitat for our wildlife

Revegetation work inside the rabbit proof enclosure at the Nicholls' property.



Land for Wildlife is a voluntary program that supports landholders to protect and restore habitat on their own properties. This involves learning about native plants, animals and ecosystems on their property, and getting advice on managing threats such as weeds and pest animals.

Land for Wildlife properties encompass a variety of natural and cultural features with ecosystems ranging from forests and woodlands through to wetland environments.

Land for Wildlife was founded in Victoria in 1981 and will celebrate its 40th anniversary next year. Since the 1990s, Land for Wildlife has spread interstate and is now delivered in many locations across Australia.

In Victoria there are approximately 5,000 registered properties covering more than 530,000ha of private land across the state. One of these properties is owned by David and Jean Nicholls who live near Cottles Bridge, north east of Melbourne.

When the Nicholls' purchased the property in 1989, it had been subject to damaging agricultural practices. Voluntary wildlife habitat management actions on the property include

managing the lower storey, control of erosion, and exclusion of vehicles.

The Nicholls' work continues and during the past year they have undertaken weed control, revegetation, and building two rabbit exclusion zones to protect large areas of revegetation. This has seen local wildlife return to the area.

To find out more about the [Land for Wildlife](#) program, please visit their website.

What's next?

Volunteering Naturally 2021

Stand up and be counted

If you'd like to have your environmental volunteering included in the annual snapshot, to showcase what you do and encourage others to join your cause then please get in touch with our team.

We look forward to communicating the results of Volunteering Naturally each year. 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

Want to find an environmental volunteering group?

It's as easy as Zoom, Select, Connect. Go to our interactive map to see what environmental volunteering groups are in your area

<https://www.environment.vic.gov.au/volunteering>

Get in touch with our team

environmental.volunteering@delwp.vic.gov.au

“

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.

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Photo Credit:
**Tarrangower Cactus
Control Group**

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