

# Volunteers: Eager and Active in Australia

Margaret Helman

## INTRODUCTION

Recently I was given the opportunity to present a paper on "Strategies for Keeping Volunteers" at a seminar for park and wildlife rangers arranged by the Royal Australian Institute of Parks and Recreation. As I reflected on the topic, Community Involvement for Resource Management, I became increasingly mindful of the fact that Australia possibly has a unique position in the world in terms of volunteers and their involvement in resource management in relation to our wonderful landscape.

## HISTORY

For well over one hundred years our ocean beaches have been supported by volunteers as life savers who have given us an opportunity to enjoy and participate in the natural landscape. Further back into the interior, the lifestyle of many Australians and the natural environment is being protected by clusters of brave volunteers who generously and unstintingly give of their time as fire fighters in volunteer fire brigades.

Though by far the largest majority of Australian people live in urban areas on the coastline, it is interesting to note the traditional importance of volunteer activity in rural areas. For example, the Country Women's Association is a very large and politically influential organisation whose initial foundation was to improve

the lives of isolated rural women and children and help them overcome the isolation they faced. In 1922 they adopted the motto:

Honour to God,  
Loyalty to the Throne,  
Service to the Country,  
Through Country Women,  
For Country Women,  
By Country Women.

They continue to be successful in getting the attention of city bureaucrats and politicians on the needs of isolated rural women.

The Australian way of life is, to a significant extent, underpinned and nourished by a huge and sustained commitment of voluntary time, energy and expertise from people in all walks of life and various points in the socio-economic scale.

In Australia, the term "volunteering" has certain historical, sociological and class connotations that can militate against volunteer organisations in their efforts to recruit members and be taken seriously. There are historical reasons for this. In the First and Second World Wars "volunteering" for military service meant increasing your chances of being killed. Despite numerous examples of heroic volunteering both within and outside of military service, there is in the usage of Australian English an overt or implicit disparagement of "volunteering."

---

*Margaret Helman* is a communications consultant, trainer, writer, facilitator and researcher servicing non-profit organisations in Australia. She established her Sydney-based company in 1988, and has worked with non-profit organisations in Australia for over 20 years. She has extensive experience embracing complex communications problems in arts, community service and welfare organisations and working with government departments delivering services to the community. Ms. Helman is an arts/communications graduate from Sydney University of Technology, has a diploma in advertising and marketing, and post-graduate training in adult education. She was awarded a Churchill Fellowship in 1984 to enable her to develop her community education/communication skills from research and work experience in Canada, U.S.A. and the United Kingdom.

By contrast, expressions such as "community involvement," "lending a hand," "helping out" or "putting something back" have worthy connotations and are entering the every-day parlance of Australian English. Recent economic changes in Australian society have made an enormous impact on attitudes towards volunteering. The economic recession, coupled with continuing high employment, is giving volunteering a new appeal.

### VOLUNTEERING TODAY

Although there is little research or literature to help us understand volunteer activity in Australia, it is safe to say there is a huge amount of volunteer activity. Recent figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics estimate that some 27% (or one in four) of the State of New South Wales population is involved in volunteer activity. It is reasonable to assume that this percentage is matched in the rest of Australia. It is also reasonable to assume that most Australians have a stereotype of volun-

teers as being female, mature-age, middle class and therefore in a position to be able to live comfortably outside the paid workforce, have time on their hands, need some fulfillment, and, because of the nature of their morality they believe they can contribute by doing "good works" for the poor in the community. This 'lady bountiful' image is invalid, a myth in Australia in the 1990s.

In 1991 several State Volunteer Centres combined their statistics to provide some up-to-date figures on just who in Australia is volunteering. The figures show some astonishing changes in the nature of Australia's volunteering workforce over the past year. The statistics show that about twice as many women as men approach State Volunteer Centres seeking volunteer work. The 19- to 35-year age groups produce far more volunteers than the older age groups and, around 50% of people who are volunteers in 1992 are unemployed, with many more students volunteering than ever before. The overall

**Table I**  
**Volunteer Organisations in Australia**

<b>Culture</b>	<b>Environment &amp; Heritage</b>	<b>Social Policy</b>	<b>Education/ Personal Development</b>	<b>New Issues in 1990s</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- art galleries</li> <li>- museums</li> <li>- celebrations: Bicentenary</li> <li>- Olympic Games</li> <li>- fun runs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- National Trust</li> <li>- historic houses</li> <li>- bush fire brigades</li> <li>- national parks</li> <li>- surf life savers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- child care: management of centres</li> <li>- health organisations               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• diabetes</li> <li>• heart</li> <li>• cancer</li> </ul> </li> <li>- Legacy</li> <li>- disability support</li> <li>- Red Cross</li> <li>- Salvation Army</li> <li>- St. Johns Ambulance (first aid)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- uniformed groups</li> <li>- volunteer Army</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- AIDS: support for sufferers</li> <li>- bush regeneration</li> <li>- saving beached whales</li> <li>- native animal resuscitation</li> <li>- clean beaches and waterways</li> <li>- health &amp; healing groups</li> <li>- new age</li> <li>- gay support organisations</li> </ul>

number of people seeking volunteer work has also increased dramatically. By comparison, a survey carried out in 1986 indicated that there were slightly more women volunteering than men and the greatest number of volunteers came from the 36–45 year age group.

But not only the unemployed are flocking towards volunteer work. More than 2 million employed Australians spend an average of 4 hours a week as volunteers for community organisations. Examples are shown in Table I. People already in paid work volunteer not only because they want to do something new or of interest to them in their leisure time, but some volunteer activities have a high profile and status in the Australian community. Three examples are: The Surf Life Saving Movement of Australia, The Volunteer Bush Fire Brigade, and Legacy—a service for returned service men and women.

#### *Surf Life Saving Australia*

In the summer of its 84th year, 8,740 rescues from the sea were performed by volunteer life savers. The grand total of volunteer rescues to 1991 recorded by Surf Life Saving Australia was 353,418. Surfing beach life savers, after all these years, are popular and treasured icons in the Australian way of life. Their “image” as tall, blond, bronze-bodied men is painted on murals, represented from coast to coast on postcards and billboards. It represents a ‘clean, young and healthy’ image that many young men, and now women, aspire to join. The volunteer work involves skills, training, personal development and the opportunity to spend leisure time in an open, free environment.

The organisation has 66,000 volunteer members who participate in broad-ranging activities, including instruction for first aid and survival techniques, surf boat rescuing, helicopter ambulance piloting and rescuing, radio instruction and advanced resuscitation skills.

Young Australians are also attracted to

this organisation because of the perceived societal value of its work, its secure future, and the organisation has a history of awarding achievement. Annual surf carnivals, national and international, give volunteers a ‘sense of place’ and association with the Surf Life Saving movement’s wonderful record of aquatic safety which is enjoyed by the Australian community.

#### *Volunteer Bush Fire Brigade*

Although at least 70% of Australia’s 16 million population is clustered on the glorious coastline, the heartland of our finest primary industries is located in the interior. Most Australians are aware that many rural and urban areas are prone to bush fires throughout our long, hot, dry summers. Few people realise just who fights, prevents and manages bush fires in Australia. The continent is such a vast expanse and the monetary costs of managing a central authority for all bush fire control, plus the real need to respond quickly to fires, were the primary reasons for the birth of volunteer fire brigades. They are the main bush fire fighters and their areas of responsibility cover 90% of each State of Australia. In the eastern State of New South Wales, there are 2,500 bush fire brigades, with a total of 70,000 volunteers.

The first brigade was formed in 1896. Brigades hold regular meetings, training sessions and prevention activities such as control burning exercises, as well as trail or fire break construction and maintenance. They also hold regular public education exercises with schools and community groups, and give up their time for the benefit of the community.

Over the years, the role of bush fire brigades has expanded beyond just that of bush fire activity. Members are regularly called to attend road accidents and public building fires and they help police in search and rescue operations.

Bush Fire Brigade members come from all walks of life and are community minded, having the volunteer spirit of service, combined with a professional ap-

proach to their chosen service. Participation in this organisation gives people status and also provides wide-sweeping opportunities for them to extend their career and personal skills outside their traditional workplace.

### *Legacy*

The idea of Legacy began in Australia's smallest capital city—Hobart, situated on that small island south of the main island continent. In 1926, a group of World War I veterans recognised the need for an organisation to accept the legacy of caring for families of their comrades who did not survive the war. Through the years, Australian soldiers have been killed serving overseas in World Wars I and II, Korea, Malaysia, Vietnam, the Gulf War, and participating with peace-keeping forces.

The dedication and commitment that volunteers bring to Legacy to assist the organisation in its work is immense. On the occasion of its 66th Annual Report this year, the President noted that Legacy has "continued to evolve and keep pace with the times since its founders launched Legacy Club in the early years following the war." However, he also noted "an important fundamental change has taken place. . . . There has been a 47-year period since the last major conflict, consequently our widows are 47 years older, and just as importantly, so are the Legatees [returned service men] who look after them."

In other words, Legacy's "population" of potential volunteers is dwindling as we move towards the year 2000. At the same time the need for Legacy services grows: this year an average of five additional families enroll for service each working day. The viable future of this organisation hinges on a major overhaul of its "volunteer culture" and recruitment of a new breed of volunteers to maintain its service.

### *National Trust of Australia*

Legacy is not alone as an organisation which is undergoing cultural change in Australia. Recently the author was re-

cruited by the National Trust of Australia to a Task Force to consider the future involvement of their volunteers. (The organisation cares for properties and other historic resources which are part of the fabric of Australia's heritage.)

While the Trust has been well supported by volunteers since its inception, there is a need to reassess the volunteer situation so that volunteers continue to be attracted to the Trust and its work.

### CULTURAL IMPACT

One clear outcome from the Task Force research so far is that images frequently attached to the word "volunteer" do not relate to the work of the people who choose to support the National Trust. Miguel Angel Martin, in a paper entitled "The Meaning of Volunteerism," notes that the word volunteer carries different meanings or images in different cultures. The language of volunteerism and the images that different words convey give us interesting insights into different cultures and ways that people in those cultures organise their nations and communities. The images associated with the language one speaks are powerful and should not be ignored. Like other aspects of 'culture' in society, images of organisations and their relevance are perceived differently by recent generations of people.

Miguel Martin reminds us that "culture must never be regarded as something static, determined chiefly by geography or, more correctly by geographical barriers." There are now many examples of "generational cultures" like hippies and greenies which do not respect borders. In Australia this author has always argued that there are also "borderless cultures" which are determined largely by the environment, the resources and the needs and desires of people in differing environments. These variables ultimately breed different "cultures" of people, for example, Anglo-Australian graziers in rural Australia and Turkish immigrant Australians in the inner cities.

In the same way that the social, political and physical environment can influence the extent to which volunteer organisations may develop, Martin argues that the idea of "volunteerism" has different meanings for different generations:

We again face a basic point that a particular term or concept that is embodied in the spirit of one cultural generation will inevitably die with the passing of its generation. The social solutions that are exclusively framed in a specific and temporary philosophy will not outlast the culture that created them. What was good for earlier times is not necessarily valid for today.

## IMPLICATIONS

The impact of all of these issues will need to be considered by many traditional volunteer organisations when designing future recruitment drives for volunteers. As volunteers are not presenting from the same "cultural background," their expectations and acceptance/rejection of organisations will differ. In the first instance I believe we should turn those very issues into the theme of the recruitment process:

1. Recognise and celebrate the differences and diversity of individuals who represent the organisation.
2. Elicit the needs and demands of new volunteers.
3. Motivate volunteers and clearly acknowledge their roles in the overall organisational chart of the organisation.
4. Present clear and consistent information about the organisation as a sub-culture which they are part of and present the rights and responsibilities for being participants in that "sub-culture."

Organisations undergoing 'cultural change' could benefit from considering the pool of unemployed people who are attracted to volunteer work to learn skills, to maintain their skills or to gain self-esteem and self-confidence. It could be valu-

able to target messages towards young people and pay consideration to those young people who are interested in participating in short-term volunteer projects which could potentially offer them bona fide work experience, the opportunity for a reference from a volunteer coordinator and, the chance to test out their ability in a workplace environment.

Successful volunteer programs set up to meet the needs of organisations and the needs of the volunteers could become part of the future social structure in Australia. The prospect of large numbers of unemployed people in the country as a sub-culture is a reality. Organisations with vision and effective leadership will make adaptations which in the short term will have benefits for them and in the long term be valuable for the overall good of Australian society.

Health benefits are among a number of social variables which could benefit from flexible reactions to volunteer recruitment. Studies have been conducted in Australia and in America, including a study conducted by Professor James House, Sociology Professor and Chairman of the University of Michigan. The study of 2,700 people over a decade found that volunteer work, more than any other activity, was responsible for a dramatic increase in life expectancy. Professor House found that men who did no volunteer work were two-and-a-half times more likely to die during the study period than those who did volunteer work at least once a week.

## SUMMARY

To motivate people means most of all to understand properly the spirit which moves any volunteer to participate. Volunteer programs should be dynamic, enthusiastic, energetic, social movements within organisations. They can be used creatively to build powerful communication bridges between individuals, organisations and the wider community in Australia.

---

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Macken, L. (16 August 1992). Jobs for the Joys. Sydney: *Sydney Morning Herald*.

Martin, M. A. (1988). The meaning of volunteerism. Paper for A.F.S. Center for the Study of Intercultural Learning, NY, NY.

Helman, M., and Associates (November 1991). Status Report to the Earth Exchange Museum. Unpublished.

Helman, M., and Walsh, D. (October 1988). International Volunteer Study: The Aus-

tralian Report. Report for A. F. S. Intercultural Programs, New York. U.S.A. and A.F.S. International Exchanges, Sydney, Australia for the International Volunteer Study, 1987-1988.

Volunteer Centre of N.S.W. (July 1991). *The Volunteer Issue*. Vol. 2, No. 2.

Waymire, J. V. (1990). Tough Choices: The Challenge of Leadership in the 90s. Paper presented at the 1990 International Conference on Volunteer Administration, U.S.A.