

## Abstract

*Volunteers form the backbone of most non-profit organizations and many public sector agencies. Understanding what motivates people to volunteer is critical to the success of any program that utilizes volunteers to carry out its mission. One area in which volunteers are involved extensively is that of environmental protection. Volunteer administrators need to know what motivates people to contribute their time to non-profit organizations that protect the environment in order to design an effective recruitment plan. This article summarizes the results of surveys conducted with volunteers from The Nature Conservancy—Ohio Chapter about why they volunteered for this organization. Their motivations were then categorized as either altruistic, egoistic, or social. The researchers discovered that TNC volunteers had multiple reasons for volunteering, but that the primary motivator was altruistic, i.e. "to protect the environment."*

# The Motivation of Volunteers in The Nature Conservancy—Ohio Chapter, A Non-Profit Environmental Organization

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Is The Nature Conservancy—Ohio Chapter satisfying the motivations of its volunteers? What further study of volunteers in environmental organizations needs to be done? This article attempts to answer these questions.

## INTRODUCTION

Volunteerism has played a significant role in the American drama for over three centuries. From traditional images of community barn-raising to contemporary photographs of activists lobbying for cleaner water, volunteers have been involved in a wide range of activities that assist the needy and strengthen the cultural fabric of our country. Since the end of the 19th century, Americans have expressed their charitable impulses by acting as volunteers in a vast array of non-profit organizations.<sup>1</sup> Approximately 8.8 million Americans act as volunteers for the estimated 1.03 million private non-profit organizations in the United States (Hodgkinson, Weitzman, Abrahams,

Crutchfield, and Stevenson, 1997).

Volunteers have been defined in various ways, but most definitions contain common elements. First, volunteers contribute their time and effort to benefit their communities and the people within them (Isley, 1990). They believe that the work they perform is meaningful and ultimately contributes to the betterment of society. Second, volunteers give freely of their time without expectation of financial or personal gain (Van Til, 1988; MacLeod, 1993). Volunteers often consider intangible rewards, such as sharing individual good fortune with less fortunate members of society, to be sufficient compensation for their contribution of time. For the purpose of this article, volunteers will be defined as those individuals who donate their time to further an organizational cause without concern for monetary compensation.

Understanding what motivates people to volunteer is key to the success of any organization that utilizes voluntary labor

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to accomplish its goals. Motivation can be considered that internal force "which inspires one to action" and refers to "the choice people make as to what experiences or goals they will approach or avoid and the degree of effort they will exert in that respect" (Isley, 1990). Well-motivated volunteers are productive, dependable, and work well with others; poorly-motivated ones do not carry out their assignments, are frequently absent, and resign from their positions after short periods of service. Leaders of non-profit organizations who understand what motivates people to volunteer and implement activities which acknowledge these motives, will be rewarded with volunteers who are committed, responsible, and effective.

Numerous studies have speculated on what motivates people in general (for example, Maslow, 1970, and McClelland, 1975) and what motivates people in corporate settings (Herzberg, Mausner, and Snyderman, 1959). Researchers in the realm of altruism and voluntary action have proposed various theories to explain why people participate in voluntary activities (Allen, 1982; Batson and Coke, 1981; Carter, 1975; Phillips, 1982; White, 1981).

Motivations for volunteering can be divided into three categories (Fitch, 1987). *Altruistic* motives are defined as those with the goal of increasing the welfare of others. *Social* motives are those through which people seek out social affiliations and activities. *Egoistic* motives have the goal of increasing the skills, knowledge, or self-esteem of the individual volunteer.

What motivates people to volunteer with non-profit social service organizations has been extensively studied (Frisch and Gerrard, 1981; Rubin and Thorelli, 1984; Gillespie and King, 1985; Cnaan and Goldberg-Glen, 1991). No studies, however, have addressed the motivations of people who volunteer for environmental organizations.<sup>2</sup> This article attempts to correct this gap in knowledge. It seeks to understand why people volunteer for non-profit environmental protection orga-

nizations. First, the researchers analyzed the findings from 86 surveys administered to volunteers with The Nature Conservancy—Ohio Chapter regarding volunteer motivation. The results suggest how volunteer managers can utilize these findings to develop strategies for recruiting and retaining volunteers that incorporate an understanding of the importance of motivation.

## ENVIRONMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS

Hodgkinson et al. define environmental organizations as those "whose activities focus primarily on the preservation and protection of the planetary human environment and enhancement of environmental quality" (1997). Examples of these organizations are groups that concern themselves with the conservation/preservation of wilderness, reduction and/or elimination of various forms of pollution, recycling and solid waste disposal, and animal habitat protection (MacLeod, 1993). The majority of these organizations, for example Sierra Club and The Nature Conservancy, utilize volunteers to perform the same services as do many social service organizations: fund-raising, planning, and advocacy. However, the clients of non-profit environmental organizations are different: sometimes another species altogether or planet Earth itself. There were approximately 2,463 such organizations in 1992 (Hodgkinson et al., 1997).

## CASE STUDY: THE NATURE CONSERVANCY—OHIO CHAPTER

Much has been written about the evolution of the environmental movement in the United States. Dunlap and Mertig trace its beginnings to the conservation movement that emerged in the late 19th century as a reaction to the exploitation of America's natural resources for industrial and manufacturing purposes (1992). In the early part of the 20th century, a group called the Ecological Society was formed by citizens concerned about the loss of American land and the increase in pollu-

tion from fossil fuels. In 1917, the Committee for the Preservation of Natural Conditions was created within the Ecological Society. Frustrated by certain policies promoted by the Ecological Society, the committee split off from the parent group in 1946 to form the Ecologist's Union. In 1951, using the name of a group in Great Britain, the Ecologist's Union became The Nature Conservancy (Grove, 1992). The American version of The Nature Conservancy is "dedicated to the preservation of the plants, animals, and natural communities that represent the diversity of life on Earth by protecting the lands and water they need to survive" (Endicott, 1993).

The Nature Conservancy was incorporated in 1951 as a 501(c)(3) tax-deductible charitable organization. Initially, the group accepted any land and purchased whatever natural areas it could. However, in the 1970s, some TNC leaders began to think that a more purposeful purchasing and donation policy should be adopted. Out of this concern emerged the current organizational policy which is to buy or accept lands that will help save species and entire biotic communities (Grove, 1992). Overall, TNC has come to be known as one of the most successful environmental groups and is "the largest private, non-profit owner of nature preserves in the world" (Fitzgerald, 1992). Since its founding, the organization has been able to preserve more than 9.3 million acres of land in the United States (Sawhill, 1966). It mobilizes the services of 25,000 volunteers nationwide who contribute more than 300,000 hours annually (Gaetz, 1997).

In 1951, TNC national leaders decided to establish state offices to oversee acquired lands. There are now 55 chapters throughout the United States. The Ohio chapter office was established in 1958 (Meeder, 1989). The chapter currently has 140 active volunteers who contribute more than 2,700 hours of stewardship annually (Hillman, 1997). They perform a variety of services such as clearing brush

and pulling weeds from nature preserves, cleaning up riverbanks, planting trees for streambed stabilization, conducting species and nesting bird studies, talking to interested community groups about TNC, and helping with clerical chores in the chapter office.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The data for this article are from a 1996 study of the motivation, management, and general characteristics of people who volunteer for The Nature Conservancy—Ohio Chapter. A four-page self-administered survey instrument was designed to explore these three areas of interest and was distributed to the 125 volunteers who were then active with the chapter. Accompanying the survey was a cover letter from the Ohio volunteer stewardship coordinator legitimizing the study and encouraging members to participate. A total of 86 volunteers returned completed surveys for an overall response rate of 68.8%.

A series of 14 open- and closed-ended questions were devised to elicit information about the perceptions of volunteers with The Nature Conservancy—Ohio Chapter. The first question on the survey presented 12 motives for volunteering from which respondents could select as many as they wished. Four of the options represented altruistic motives for volunteering, four were egoistic reasons, and the final four were social motives. The choice of motivations was developed by compiling options from several studies including those by Fitch, Cnaan and Goldberg-Glen, and Grunig. An additional question was posed that required the respondent to choose the motive that most strongly represented why he or she volunteered originally.

The second and third questions were general inquiries into the respondent's tenure and type of activity as a volunteer. Questions four and five returned to the issue of motivation by asking individual volunteers if the motivations they had identified earlier had been fulfilled.

Further, they were asked if their motives had changed over time and, if so, in what way. The last part of the questionnaire contained general demographic questions related to sex, age, employment and/or retirement status, and income and educational attainment levels.

**FINDINGS**

As a group, The Nature Conservancy—Ohio Chapter volunteers who completed the survey were primarily male, middle-aged, employed full-time, relatively affluent, and well-educated. About two-thirds (63.5%) were male and only one-third (36.5%) female. Their average age was 42.8 years. More than three-quarters (76.6%) were employed full-time, 6.4% part-time, 5.1% unemployed but not retired, and 11.9% retired. Their annual income levels were as follows: less than \$20,000 (18.1%), \$20,000-\$40,000 (30.1%), \$40,001-\$60,000 (21.7%), \$60,001-\$80,000 (15.7%), \$80,001-\$100,000 (4.8%), and over \$100,000 (9.6%). In the sample, 2.4% had completed high school, 8.2% had some post high school training/education, 3.5% had completed an associate’s degree, 31.8% had completed a bachelor’s degree, 14.1% had done some graduate work, and 40% had completed a graduate degree.

Results of the questions asking the respondents’ reasons for becoming chapter volunteers appear in Table I. Nearly all the volunteers said they wanted “to do something for nature” as one of their motivations. Respondents were permitted to mark as many motives as applied to them. Almost half marked “to allow the organization to provide more goods/services for less money” as another of their motivations. Both are altruistic motives.

Roughly 40% of respondents were motivated “to learn new skills,” “to stay active,” and “to help create a better society,” egoistic, social, and altruistic motives, respectively. The remainder of the rankings can be seen in Table I.

When asked to identify which motive *most strongly* represented why they volunteered with The Nature Conservancy—Ohio Chapter, 62.7% of the respondents indicated they wanted “to do something for nature.” This was followed by a desire “to explore career options” (10.2%), “to create a better society” (8.5%), and “to allow the organization to provide more goods/services for less money” (6.8%). As in the previous question, the preponderance of responses indicated altruistic motives. The rest of the rankings appear in Table II. Although suggestive, these

**TABLE I**

**Reasons and Motives for Becoming a The Nature Conservancy—Ohio Chapter Volunteer**

Reason	Motive	Number of respondents out of 86 who marked this response.*
To do something for nature	Altruistic	82
To allow the organization to provide more goods/services for less money	Altruistic	40
To learn new skills	Egoistic	36
To stay active	Social	35
To help create a better society	Altruistic	34
Makes me feel better about myself	Egoistic	32
To develop social contacts	Social	30
To feel useful	Egoistic	30
To make friends	Social	26
To explore career options	Egoistic	22
To change social injustices	Altruistic	12
Because of the prestige of the organization	Egoistic	9

\*Each reason (motive) could have a possible value of 86 because respondents were permitted to mark multiple reasons for volunteering.

**TABLE II****Reasons and Motives that Most Strongly Represent Why Respondents Volunteer for The Nature Conservancy—Ohio Chapter**

Reason	Motive	Number of respondents who marked this response*	Percentage
To do something for nature	Altruistic	37	62.7
To explore career options	Egoistic	6	10.2
To help create a better society	Altruistic	5	8.5
To allow the organization to provide more goods/services for less money	Altruistic	4	6.8
To feel useful	Egoistic	3	5.1
Makes me feel better about myself	Egoistic	2	3.3
To make friends	Social	1	1.7
To learn new skills	Egoistic	1	1.7
Total		59	100

\*Respondents were permitted to identify only one reason (motive) in this question.

findings are inconclusive because 27 individuals (31%) did not answer this question. The researchers believe the wording in the survey asking which motive most strongly represented why they volunteer caused respondents to overlook the question.

In response to the general questions in the second section of the survey about tenure and frequency of volunteering, the average length of volunteer service with The Nature Conservancy—Ohio Chapter was 3.4 years. The majority (78%) of volunteers participated from 1 to 10 times per year. When asked, "Do you believe the work has satisfied the motivations which led you to volunteer with the organization initially," 95.2% said Yes and 4.8% said No. Furthermore, in response to the question, "Do you believe the motivations which led you to volunteer with the organization initially are different from the reasons you continue to volunteer with the group today?," 82.3% said No and 17.7% said Yes.

### CONCLUSION

The Ohio Chapter of The Nature Conservancy does appear to be satisfying the motivations expressed by its volunteers. This statement is supported by the finding that the reasons they gave for joining and for continuing to volunteer were virtually the same. In addition, the

fact that the average length of service for the volunteers responding to the survey was almost three and one-half years also seems to support this conclusion.

Clearly, the motives of The Nature Conservancy—Ohio Chapter volunteers surveyed for this study lie primarily in altruistic beliefs: they want to do something for nature and believe that volunteering for this organization is an appropriate way to put their beliefs into action. The other motives volunteers gave, however, are important to note since people rarely volunteer for one single reason. This is supported by the fact that few of the people who responded to the survey marked just one reason for volunteering. Most respondents checked social and egoistic as well as altruistic reasons.

One interesting outcome of this observation was the relationship between age and the other two motives for volunteering: While the incidence of social motives was similar across the age groups, the frequency of egoistic motives was much higher among those aged 20 to 40 years old than among older participants. This finding probably reflects the fact that younger volunteers are more focused on building their careers than are older ones.

For the volunteer manager, the implications of these multiple motivations are extremely important. A manager should not only examine each volunteer's moti-

vations for joining the organization, but should also determine which motive is the most important. This can be accomplished by preparing a standard questionnaire that all new volunteers complete containing possible motives for volunteering, such as the survey developed for this study.

For example, if a female volunteer indicated she joined The Nature Conservancy—Ohio Chapter to improve the environment, to make friends, and to build her resume (in that order of importance), the volunteer manager might assign her the responsibility of picking up trash with several others from a designated stretch of a riverbank each Saturday morning. The manager could then introduce the volunteer to other volunteers through social activities such as an organizational picnic on the same riverbank. Finally, the volunteer manager can offer a variety of experiences in the organization with ever-increasing responsibility and skill level that might benefit her if she explores paid employment opportunities in the field.

The Nature Conservancy is a moderate, non-lobbying, education- and science-based environmental protection organization. The relative importance of the motivations of volunteers with environmental organizations that carry out their missions through direct action (such as Greenpeace), or through policy reform (such as the National Wildlife Federation), may be somewhat different from those of the The Nature Conservancy—Ohio Chapter volunteers surveyed for this study. These differences would be reflected in how volunteers are recruited and trained, in what kind of activities they participate, and what they expect to accomplish through their involvement, and might be addressed in another study.

Another question researchers may wish to pursue is the demographic make-up of volunteers with environmental protection groups. Findings in this study suggest that environmental volunteers tend to be more male than female, middle-aged,

well-educated, and relatively affluent. Is this pattern typical of environmental volunteers? If so, why? Would there be an advantage to diversifying the volunteer pool? How could non-traditional volunteers be attracted to volunteering with an environmental protection organization?

Although only a small segment of the non-profit world, environmental protection organizations are recognized as making significant contributions to the well-being of current and future generations through their educational, advocacy, and conservation programs. Volunteers who support these activities have a variety of reasons for doing so. If The Nature Conservancy—Ohio Chapter volunteers are typical, however, their primary motive is altruistic, "to do something for nature."

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#### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>The term "non-profit" is somewhat of a misnomer because tax laws allow non-profit organizations to generate surplus income provided they reinvest in the organization, not distribute it to shareholders.

<sup>2</sup>Although Bartell (1974) and Grunig (1989) examined the attitudes of environmental volunteers, they did not explore the question of why they volunteered in the first place.

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