

Volunteer Management in European Parks

Final Report

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Executive Summary

“Volunteer Management in European Parks” set out to increase the capacity of protected areas, including national and nature parks as well as biosphere reserves, to advance approaches to lifelong learning through volunteering.

Bringing together ten partner organisations in eight countries the project tapped into a diverse network to share experience in a series of activities, including training seminars, collaborative initiatives and learning exchanges. With the shared belief that education and learning should be available to everybody throughout their life, the learning and training opportunities provided rested on an open learning culture, the desire to promote a culture of active citizenship, and generating acceptance of informal lifelong learning in the field of conservation volunteering.

Three training events provided an invaluable opportunity for new and experienced volunteer coordinators to share experience, acquire knowledge, and assist each other in questions specific to the management of volunteers in parks and running volunteer schemes. A particular highlight was the ability of a colleague from Finland to train some 100 people in volunteering in Finnish parks as a result of a training event.

All project partners considered good practice in their own countries and reviewed literature about volunteer management in protected areas in the course of producing common guidelines for quality volunteer management in European parks. Similarly, a resource library has been developed to make available material on volunteering. The project’s research component analysed the impact and benefits of volunteering in protected areas in relation to volunteers and local communities. It also made a series of recommendations for sharing good practice.

Eighteen learning exchanges and tutoring visits enabled the mutual exchange of practice on volunteer management between park staff and served to develop professional development. All participants gained new perspectives for their own work.

It is worth noting that all the project partner organisations were affected to some extent by the economic crisis during the project, manifesting itself in personnel changes and in protected area staff having significantly less time to take part in study visits or training seminars. The project succeeded in overcoming these difficulties and through considered evaluation and responsiveness the partners were able to fulfil all the project’s goals.

Indeed, the integration of volunteering into protected area management has taken a great step forward and the idea of mainstreaming volunteering in Europe’s protected areas has become a reality. In addition, the policy goal of greater recognition for conservation volunteering has also succeeded.

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1. Project Objectives

The overarching objective of this project was to increase the capacity of protected areas to advance the existing approaches to lifelong learning through volunteering by providing a series of tools and learning opportunities for the partners involved and to spread this to the wider protected area network.

The project brought together individual protected areas, national and European networks and specialist in environmental volunteering and enhanced the recognition of the role of volunteering and lifelong learning in protected areas at a strategic level. Directors of protected areas are now taking the input and include creating possibilities for learning of volunteers seriously in their work.

The impact beyond the immediate partners and participants was very successful and it was awesome to hear one training participant reporting how she had delivered the training on volunteer management to more than hundred volunteer coordinators in her home country following their participation in the EU-project's train-the-trainer event. All the volunteer coordinators themselves have directly benefitted from methods and contents learnt in the train-the-trainer seminar – one of several products of the action. Stories like this show that the action really met the needs discovered in the previous EU-Project ("European volunteers in parks", 2008-10). The participating national parks, biosphere reserves and nature parks have benefitted from the EU-project by having had direct impact on nearly 200 volunteers, about 150 volunteer co-ordinators, more than 1.000 professionals, more than 300 decision makers and more than 8.000 key persons of the wider public.

The training events offered are at the project's core because through those, volunteer coordinators met personally and established and strengthened personal relationships. The first international training was designed for volunteer coordinators who have just started in volunteer management whereas the second and third training were aimed at highly experienced volunteer coordinators who will train some of their local volunteers in volunteer management. The training events have been an invaluable opportunity to volunteer coordinators

- to share experience,
- to acquire knowledge and
- to assist each other in park-specific questions.

In addition to training in volunteer management delivered by the local trained volunteer coordinator, learning opportunities such as mutual learning exchanges could be realized by this project. It has achieved enhanced communication within the hosting parks and between the sending and hosting protected areas. Moreover, protected areas can use this EU-programme to initiate international long-term partnerships, e.g. the German riverine biosphere reserve "Lower Saxonian Elbe river" had aimed at closer collaboration with an Eastern European biosphere reserve with a similar landscape and has therefore gained experience, fruitful personal contact and boosting learning exchanges by staff exchanges with the Latvian "North Vidzeme Biosphere Reserve", which also covers a stream landscape.

So, the project has combined promotion of the culture of active citizenship and acceptance of informal lifelong learning in the field of conservation volunteering, which still is lacking in some societies.

2. Project Approach

The project was based on the precept that education and learning should be available to everybody throughout their life. It also rested on the tenets of liberal adult education. These presumptions led to a project approach that aimed at enabling the main target groups (volunteer coordinators, volunteers, decision makers) to set their own challenges and to tailor their personal learning experiences and development within the project's activities, events and materials. In summary, the project needed and relied on highly motivated project partners and individuals.

As most of the project partners had successfully worked together in the previous GRUNDTVIG Learning Partnership "European Volunteers in Parks", the project partners' motivation had already been proven. The individuals (volunteer coordinators participating in the training events and volunteers, volunteer coordinators or park staff participating in the learning exchanges) experienced high-level learning opportunities for professional and personal development based on constructive learning approaches and methods.

The project fulfilled this learning culture in two ways: Individuals encountered open learning opportunities in the training events and in the learning exchanges, which they helped to define. The individuals trained would then deliver training mainly using this learning culture to other new volunteers in their park. The online practice resources, together with the guidelines produced by the project partners, will assist and enhance individuals to meet their individual learning wishes and needs. This approach builds on face-to-face communication, individual learning and the delivery of good-practice through the training (a bottom-up approach). National seminars on lifelong learning and green volunteering delivered to local, regional, national and international decision makers discussed strategies that support the lifelong learning of conservation volunteers. All project partners considered good practice in their own countries and reviewed available literature about volunteer management in protected areas in order to produce common guidelines for quality volunteer management in European parks. These were disseminated to practitioners and decision makers, to enable reflection, further development and adoption of regional and national structures for volunteering and informal learning in protected areas (top-down approach), effectively mainstreaming them in parks' work.

Parallel to motivating and stimulating these internal communication processes, the impact of volunteering in protected areas on volunteers and on local communities was analysed. This was achieved through external qualitative research which investigated presumptions about volunteering in protected areas and individual lifelong learning as well as its impact on local communities. Methods used included:

- the analysis of academic literature about the impact of volunteering in general and in the environmental sector in particular,

- interviews with volunteers, park staff and representatives of local communities (administration, NGOs) focusing on a number of key questions, and
- elaborating codes of practice from the insights gained by comparing results with the assumptions made.

The research process was carried out in close contact with the project partners who monitored and evaluated the researcher's work.

From a political point of view, the project aimed at filling a gap in the volunteering world: The sector conservation volunteering had hardly been represented in the context of the "European Year of Volunteering 2011". Generally, conservation volunteers and volunteers in parks can be considered 'hidden heroes' in the volunteering sector with very little voice politically or in society. Collaboration with the newly founded 'Conservation Volunteer Alliance' (CVA) added even more value to the project partners' approaches to raising awareness amongst the public and professionals for conservation volunteers across Europe. In 2011, the CVA and "Volunteer Management in European Parks" successfully collaborated in preparing the 'Big Green Weekend 2011' which reached more than 4,000 volunteers Europe wide.

The project's tools for self-evaluation contained different items to demonstrate the effectiveness and quality of each product and outcome of the project. This allowed all project partners to mirror and measure the communications carried out. In addition, several project partners participated at a number of international conferences within the European network of protected areas; this ongoing presentation and discussion of the project's progress and development within its wider network of professionals assured products and outcomes which were judged as really needed, relevant and reliable by genuine stakeholders and decision makers. Evaluation and monitoring during the project also enabled the project partners to make changes of emphasis to aspects of the project to ensure success, for example in the adaptation of tutoring to learning exchanges.

EUROPARC Federation, as the project's strongest partner in communication and dissemination, reached countries which were not represented directly in the project. Information about training events and other activities met also their needs as volunteer coordinators in other countries requested the training. For example, another EUROPARC body, the EUROPARC Nordic-Baltic Section (covering Scandinavia and the Baltic States), became a so-called "silent partner" (partner that participates actively but doesn't receive EU-funds) in the project as it had discovered the project's significant potential for benefiting its parks and park management.

The approaches described were split among all the project partners and among all the work packages (sub-projects). Moreover, there were linkages between the activities of all work packages which were aimed at encouraging awareness raising processes at regional, national and European levels, thereby enhancing the value attached to lifelong learning.

3. Project Outcomes & Results

Aiming at a vital international and professional network of highly skilled volunteer coordinators, who can deliver effective learning and volunteering opportunities for local people to volunteer in their protected area, the project has succeeded in motivating, professionalizing and upgrading the work of volunteer coordinators on a strategic level – some citations of participants of the training events show the results:

- “I consider new management aspects before I make an action or announcement.”
- “Beyond of the changes in my day to day work, I have got very valuable tools and knowledge to improve my skills as a volunteer coordinator. I can apply them in the planning of new volunteer projects.”
- „This exchange was a good step towards closer cooperation between the biosphere reserves in Germany and Latvia.“
- „Another very important achievement was new knowledge on the alternative model in providing volunteer activities in PAs, i.e., when PA is cooperating strongly with an NGO and sharing responsibilities.“
- „The results were very positive, due to the exchange of knowledge and experience on the management and conservation of these protected natural areas and volunteer work.“
- „The main achievement of the placement was the possibility to use expert supervision in drawing up rough scheme and main practical points for the first coordinated project on organizing volunteer activities in several Latvian protected areas.“

The training events delivered to volunteer coordinators initiated personal relationships, professional knowledge and access to wide-ranging experience. As the training is delivered by experienced trainers of ‘The Conservation Volunteers’ (TCV - former BTCV - a British NGO for conservation volunteering with more than 50 years’ experience), a special culture of learning is enabled within this network. This learning culture builds on motivated and self-dependent individuals who create the questions they need and who collaborate freely within the structures they find. This competence is not only necessary in the training sessions but also in the future collaboration within the international network during the life-time of the GRUNDTVIG project and beyond.

Experience gained by investing one week’s working time is a lot for a volunteer coordinator as a member of the park management’s team, and often it proves to be impossible to attend a training seminar even if it is paid for. These circumstances have resulted in training events with only half as many participants as planned. The project partners will try to meet the obvious needs of potential participants by improving and further developing possibilities for online-learning tools. Therefore, the existing learning platform of TCV will be developed further and connected with the project’s website in order to develop tools such as online learning courses in volunteer management in protected areas and in order to link learning opportunities with mutual collaboration tools.

This online-learning-platform will be also used for publishing the compilation of innovative learning material about volunteer management in protected areas of all participating countries. The former plan to deliver a printed guidebook has been

dropped in favour of a digital compilation of actual literature as a printed guidebook is static and only up to date for a short time when printed. It was also felt it would be limited to the print run and in one language. The digital solution embeds easy access for the end-users and the possibilities to keep it updated and to link it to other developed instruments (like the guidelines or the research on impact of volunteering) within the project. Moreover, an online-learning tool will deliver learning opportunities to a much wider range of individuals. Even so, the impact and importance of physical meetings cannot be compensated by an online-tool, but it can be used actively in order to create and sustain good support structures for volunteers and volunteer coordinators in protected areas (individual support, knowledge, recognition). The guidelines of quality management in European parks mirror best practice management experience and lessons learnt throughout Europe. Currently, they are reflected and commented on by all project partners in advance of national and international stakeholders and decision-makers in the field of volunteer management in protected areas discussing them at the EUROPARC Federation conference in October 2012.

The finalised guidelines are exploited by disseminating them to appropriate decision-makers and end-users through the EUROPARC Federation and the project partners' networks, who also act as multipliers. They are moreover a very important tool for volunteer coordinators which already use them as a management tool. These communication processes enhances recognition of conservation volunteering in parks by stakeholders and decision-makers and enable a higher quality and acceptance of informal and lifelong learning through volunteering and professional volunteer management as a means of lifelong learning.

Also, the international exchange of staff contributed to the overall aim. It is honest to say that this has been one of the core aspects of the entire project: Moving 18 professionals in volunteer management in protected areas, expert rangers and volunteer coordinators, and producing more than 90 days of learning exchange experience, an enormous amount of knowledge in volunteers' management has been acquired.

Last, but not least, more than 400 experts and decision makers attended eight national seminars about lifelong learning and green volunteering. The seminars were very diverse in their forms and target groups, ranging from panel discussions for volunteer coordinators to international events, trainings of staff members of PAs, etc. depending on evaluation of needs in each partner country – but all of them aiming at reaching a national common understanding of volunteer management in European parks at a national level. People say:

“... the seminar was followed by the first meeting of green volunteer coordinators in protected areas in Spain (...)it allowed to begin with productive exchange of experiences, which EUROPARC-Spain wants to strengthen in the coming years”

“Large participation to the event. According to the newest data on volunteering there is a growth of 25% in 2011 in Italy registered!”

“Members of staff declared that at last they understand what exactly volunteering means and have started to see its application in their work.”

“The event has been a good opportunity to promote to the European Commission the crucial role played by volunteering in nature management, the need for further support of green volunteering and to highlight the positive effect on lifelong learning processes.”

“Volunteers are an essential asset for Nature conservation in Europe (...). There are EU funding instruments such as the Grundtvig programme which we usually do not think of but can also support NATURE conservation activities, i.e. which should be better 'tapped'” – participant (representative of European Commission) of international event organized in Brussels

“The seminar was helpful - it started an internal discussion in the organization about the possibilities for acting as volunteer coordinators in protected areas, and therefore, to look for training options for our staff in that area; new motivation to continue with volunteer work in a new field (not only social programmes but environmental), realization of the importance of volunteers' training; reminder of the complexity of volunteer management and also the importance of having long term strategic planning; inspiration of the different ways of establishment of synergies between land stewardship and protected areas; application of the gained knowledge in other projects, by organizing several workshops and chats with the volunteers regarding the activities, the main characteristics of the place where they take place, about the organization” – participants of the national event in Spain

4. Partnerships

The consortium consisted of ten different organizations in the fields of lifelong learning, protected areas, umbrella organisations of protected areas on national and European level, and other NGOs with a strong focus on volunteering in nature conservation.

Participating countries have been Germany, Iceland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Spain and the United Kingdom. Some of the organisations are national sections of the EUROPARC Federation network – the European umbrella organisation of national parks, nature parks and biosphere reserves that covers 36 countries.

The consortium had already gained experience in working together in a previous European project. Within the GRUNDTVIG learning partnership “European volunteers in parks” (2008-2010), eight of the actual project partners had already collaborated successfully by delivering workshops to volunteer coordinators regarding international exchange of volunteers between protected areas, and producing common publication including checklists about short term international volunteering in protected areas.

In this context, this Grundtvig multilateral project has been a priceless opportunity to strengthen this European partnership. During the project the partners have had the opportunity to work together, and therefore, learn from, organizations and countries all over Europe. This has been valued by the partners as a great opportunity (see the general open evaluation in the Final Evaluation Report), and one of the main strengths of the project, as most common financial instruments are regional and do not promote this kind of integration and cooperation.

The timing of the project was slightly unfortunate as it started just when the economies of Europe went into severe decline. Most protected areas are directly or indirectly funded by the state and, in this context, their budgets have been considerably reduced and their staffs have been directly affected. Even though the project funded the activities, the reality was that some partners had to overcome serious difficulties to engage protected areas staff to participate in the project. Politically all eyes were focused on economy and, sadly, learning and volunteering have been not seen as a priority. Despite 2011 was the European Year of Volunteering, there were big differences regarding the budget and political support given by the countries to this subject (some had very little support while others were very supportive). This situation is now slightly changing as many governments are concerned about the issues of youth unemployment and see volunteering as a mechanism for keeping young people active. This is probably not the best motivation but it does raise the profile of volunteering.

Beside the EUROPARC Federation as a project partner with strong impact on communication and networking across Europe (as mentioned above, EUROPARC Federation currently represents some 400 members, which include protected areas, governmental departments, NGO's and businesses in 36 countries), The Conservation Volunteers (TCV, formerly BTCV), United Kingdom, was chosen as a partner in this GRUNDTVIG-Multilateral project.

This alliance of network of network-organizations has fostered the results of the project. In this regard, the project's products and outputs are already observed and

requested by non-participating countries within the EUROPARC Federation network. Meanwhile, the EUROPARC Nordic-Baltic Section (covering Scandinavia, Baltic States, Iceland and more) has become a so-called silent partner, which means that even internal project's experiences results can be used by the Section's members and they could participate in activities during the project's lifetime.

Regarding possible cooperation between a single project partner and any external organisation or network, we felt that the project increased power and professional standing in networking both on national and international level. Collaboration with the Conservation Volunteer Alliance (CVA) and contributing to international meetings has become even more fruitful. Contacts established during the project between the partners, volunteer coordinators and protected areas during the different activities had as a result a strengthened partnership, which may result in cooperation in new projects and initiatives (for instance, 78% the participants in the learning exchanges declare as one of the main outcomes of the activity, the new ideas and project proposals for future cooperation between the entities that have come up during the exchange, see the Final Evaluation Report).

5. Plans for the Future

During the various project activities (preparation of project materials, partner discussions, trainings, tutoring exchanges, etc.) a range of topics was identified as requiring further development and it really illustrates the scale of diversity between different countries and their volunteer management practices. Without denying the amount of “homework” to be done by each country on national level, these topics could still provide good room for future exchange of experiences, learning from one another and gaining new knowledge together:

- Recognition on decision-making level (leadership of protected areas respective ministries or other funding institutions) of volunteering as both: an effective tool for society involvement and education on nature related matters as well as boosting organizational capacity in management of protected areas, is still needed. Ultimately, volunteering should be an integral part of any protected area management.
- “Guidelines of Quality Volunteer Management in European protected areas” (one of the main products of the current project), though evaluated by a number of experts within the course of their creation during the current project, should be tested thoroughly in protected areas of different geographical, national, political, managerial and financial situations to increase the credibility and practicality of this document and make it adaptable to the needs of almost any protected area in Europe.
- People working in nature conservation in many cases are very special personalities with their motivation often based on values a bit outside contemporary main-stream tendencies. In many cases, they tend to underestimate their skills and expertise, including in volunteer management. Yet, they fully recognize the importance and appreciate the chance of keeping their skills up-to-date and developing them further. Thus, instead of forcing them into the role of “experts”, other means of knowledge transfer should be promoted. One of the most effective ways could be experience exchange trips to partner countries where volunteer coordinators have a possibility to take part in practical volunteering activities (being a “simple volunteer”), thus both – getting new, practical, “insider” knowledge on volunteer management practices in other countries/protected areas and having a possibility to share knowledge in a very informal work atmosphere.
- In some cases, capacity issues at the very basic level pose problems, e.g., lack of tools and equipment for volunteering activities etc.

So, during the final project meeting in Latvia, brainstorming was done on ideas for potential future projects to meet those topics. It was concluded that future activities should be developed in the following possible ways:

- Further development of guidelines produced in the current project by testing them in “laboratories” – protected areas possibly teamed up in pairs (one more, the other less experienced) and implementing the guidelines in different circumstances together; and also more involving other stakeholders – local

communities, NGOs, etc. thus promoting volunteering as an effective tool for involvement and life-long learning.

- Maintenance and further development of volunteer coordinator network in European countries, by implementing practical experience exchanges (volunteer coordinator becoming a volunteer), promoting the learning platform developed in the current project, etc.
- Strengthening capacities of volunteer management on grass-root level (more active involvement of protected areas staff in activities raising awareness on the role of volunteering, trainings, in some cases purchase of equipment necessary for volunteering activities, etc.) and thus contributing to integration of volunteering in protected areas management.
- Awareness raising activities on the role of volunteering in protected areas on decision- making level by providing practical examples of benefits.

Besides the above mentioned, the current project has already triggered new developments in volunteer management in European protected areas:

- A working group on volunteering issues has been formed within Nature Conservation Agency (Latvia) and a new project proposal has been handed in to apply for national funding to start coordinated volunteer activities in Latvian protected areas in 2014.
- Discussions underway between Latvia and Iceland on potential future cooperation on hosting international volunteers, possibly starting already in 2014.
- Realizing the importance of more active involvement of local communities in PA management and the role of volunteering in providing effective life-long learning possibilities, specific questions were included into the survey of local inhabitants in Ķemeri National Park (Latvia) and Gražute Regional Park (Lithuania; carried out within NORDPLUS programme project “Sustainable communities for sustainable development”) to find out what type of activities would be most favoured by local people. The results of the survey will contribute to creation of demand based offer of volunteering/learning possibilities in PAs.

6. Contribution to EU policies

The Communication on “EU Policies and Volunteering” published in 2011 by the European Commission, has been taken as a point of reference during the whole project development and its implementation phase. The Communication highlights seven potential obstacles that currently affect the development of volunteering in EU:

- Lack of a clear legal framework
- Lack of national strategies for promoting voluntary activities,
- Financial constraints
- Mismatch between supply and demand
- Lack of recognition
- Tax obstacles
- Insufficient data

Some of those difficulties and challenges have also been identified in the course of the previous Grundtvig project (mentioned above) of which the current one has been the evolution and follow up. In particular, the previous project – that has partially been managed by the same consortium - highlighted how the lack of national legal frameworks and strategies, the insufficient data and the lack of knowledge on the value of volunteering, were having a negative impact on the level of expertise in volunteer management across protected areas. The project also showed how relevant were the differences in this sector among countries.

The current project - Volunteer Management in European Parks - has therefore addressed most of those challenges and made a contribution to remove obstacles: finding common European principles and guidelines for volunteer management, supporting and facilitating EU cooperation and international learning exchanges, providing trainings for future trainers, making research and collecting data on the impact of volunteering, promoting active citizenship and lifelong learning experiences, and raising the awareness of wide public and policy makers at EU and local level.

The project has contributed to implement the priorities listed in the communication addressing both nature conservation and active citizenship, which are policy areas of high European relevance, and it contributed actively to the three European Years “European Year of Volunteering” (2011), “European Year of Active Ageing” (2012), and “European Year of Citizens” (2013).

The project addressed specifically environmental volunteering, which plays an important role to contribute to implement the EU Biodiversity Strategy at local level: through site management, monitoring of habitats and species, and dissemination of information to increase the awareness of environmental issues and the likelihood of carrying out environmentally friendly practices.

Providing informal and non-formal learning opportunities to volunteer coordinators from protected areas of Europe, the project has helped people to learn new skills in volunteer management and provided useful experiences to adapt to changes in the labour market.

With national and international workshops, seminars and conferences, and a wide European communication strategy, the project has highlighted the need for policy development in volunteering at national level and encouraged the development of overall strategic objectives, at European level. Specific events and initiatives have been implemented all over Europe in the course of the International Year of Volunteering, to raise the awareness of the wide public and PAs managers on the value of volunteering both for nature conservation and for lifelong learning.

Offering financial support for cross border mobility, encouraging intercultural learning exchanges among partner organisations and providing international trainings for volunteer coordinators, the project promoted informal and non-formal learning and active citizenship, supporting the creation of a European identity.

In the course of the project high visibility was given to the EU Lifelong Learning programme, together with the Youth in Action and the Europe Citizen programme, providing a better understanding of EU priorities and financial programs that can support the development and implementation of volunteering projects.

