



Volunteers boosting in European Protected Areas

Why do people volunteer?

Is it because they see it as a duty, a social responsibility or just because it seems the right thing for their community engagement? An internet blogger nicely put the answer which resonates for many of those who are giving their time and energy to parks and protected areas: “Volunteers do not necessarily have the time; they just have the heart.”



Beyond a felt social responsibility there is that “heart” thing that makes us volunteer - and after all *passion*. Passion is an emotion that is powerful and persistent and people do wonderful things because they are passionate about them. Volunteers who work in parks feel passion when it comes to nature protection and conservation, to the diverse species of flora and fauna and the urge to protect them, and - last but not least - enable others to enjoy protected areas by providing services, installations, trails etc.

Volunteers’ passion is what citizens along with rangers, workers in parks, and all kinds of visitors are invited to share on this year’s **European Day of Parks** – an event day on and around the 24th of May who animates people to express their passion about nature in an artistic way under the motto “My park. My passion. My story”.



So - *Why do people volunteer in a park?* Aren’t there other, maybe more urgent areas of work which volunteer support? In times of the economic and financial crisis all over Europe, volunteers are seen as a major resource for conservation work. And volunteering gives people a “good feeling” and can even raise their self esteem; apart from spending healthy hours out in the fresh air! Protected areas as landscapes protecting rich biodiversity are depending on the interest, willingness and enthusiasm of local communities and law makers to protect them.

Volunteers therefore play an important role to raise their fellows' awareness about nature and conservation, and motivate other stakeholders to participate in the planning process how human interaction can be fruitful and healthy for all those involved in protected areas.

The "[Volunteer management in European parks](#)" programme (an **EU Lifelong Learning** funded project) of **EUROPARC** is helping protected areas' organization coordinators to gain the needed skills to manage volunteers properly and effectively by engaging them in ways that are for the benefit of both, the volunteer and the park. This programme is offering trainings for coordinators, and recently new guidelines were published to support them in their efforts to work with volunteers.

The project aims also at connecting parks and building a vital network of skilled volunteer coordinators across Europe. While focusing on awareness raising about the values of protected areas it also looks at the role of volunteers contributing to the protection and maintenance of those areas.

"[Volunteer management in European parks](#)" run until mid 2013 and already now shows great results. Its partners from various European countries frequently gather online and in person to update their information and exchange about related activities. While their focus lies on training and skills transfer in volunteer management, partner organizations also support the exchange of short-term volunteers.

Partners in this project are:

[Rodna Mountains National Park Administration \(RO\)](#), [The Conservation Volunteers \(UK\)](#), [EUROPARC Atlantic Isles](#), [The Environment Agency of Iceland](#), [The EUROPARC Federation](#), [FUNGUBE/ EUROPARC Spain](#), [Nature Conservation Agency of Latvia](#), [Federparchi-EUROPARC Italy](#), [The Association of Lithuanian State Parks and Reserves](#), and [EUROPARC Atlantic Isles](#) as "silent partner".



How does volunteering look like in praxis?

As an example of successful volunteering management let's have a look at **Metsähallitus Natural Heritage Services** in Finland. The park service started to develop its volunteer management programme in 2011, the EU **Year of Volunteering**. Applying a set of strategies and actions, the park has now some 2000 volunteers registered who work approximately 30.000 hours for the park per year!

The park service tries to engage volunteers in different ways to ensure that everybody keeps motivated and works in her/his preferred task and according to their skills. To support the programme last year 11 workshops were organized with 10 to 20 participants, i.e. a total of 170 persons were trained – in just one year! The real success of the workshops is proven by the reaction of participants who really enjoyed the trainings: “This gave me great new ideas”, “The workshop was very useful”.

After the workshops, they expressed enthusiasm to work and help volunteers gain unforgettable experiences when they see the importance of their own work.



Photo: www.outdoors.fi/WhatsNew/VolunteerWork/Pages/Default.aspx

“It is every time a delight to see the motivation of participants when it comes to getting out and start a new project” says Eveliina Nygren, volunteering coordinator of Metsähallitus Natural Heritage Services: “I am excited to plan and coordinate these trainings as people gain so much from them!”

Eveliina’s passion is shared by an ever growing number of people volunteering for the protection and conservation of nature – sharing the EUROPARC Federation’s mission. So, *Why do people volunteer?* It’s all about passion and responsibility for planet earth.

To join the volunteering journey read more about the respective programmes online at www.volunteers-in-parks.eu and contact us for any questions (office (at) europarc.org).