

Care and Feeding of Volunteers

*By Mark Flint for Equine Land Conservation Resource
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Many hands make light work, and if you have a project that could benefit from many hands, a well-run volunteer program can provide a low-cost solution that has the added benefit of building community among groups of people who might not otherwise interact.

A 35-mile trail construction project for the Arizona National Scenic Trail in Pima County garnered nearly \$2.5 million (at the federal rate of \$24.69/hour) in donated labor from 2004 to 2011. Donated materials and sponsorship contributions brought in another \$200,000.



Getting organized

Are you considering starting an advocacy or action group? What will your first steps be?

- Begin with a small planning group, or steering committee
- Try to include people who have experience in marketing, fund-raising and event planning.
- Emphasize that they will need to spend a few hours a week in the initial planning and must be able to commit time and effort.
- This group will develop a marketing plan, look for business and organizations that are likely to come on board, and develop strategies and tactics for launching and seeing the project through completion.

Recruitment - Getting the word out

How do you find the right people to start and move your organization forward?

- Cast a wide net. If your project is a trail, for example, don't limit outreach to the "usual suspects" – trail users and user groups.
- Reach out to the community – volunteer coordinating organizations, service clubs, schools, churches and Boy/Girl Scouts are among potential volunteer sources.
- Many businesses encourage employees to take part in community service. Use existing contacts or make cold calls to let them know of your opportunity – and be sure to frame it as an opportunity to make your community better.
- The message should appeal to the benefits the project will provide. Trails, for example, contribute to the physical, emotional and spiritual wellbeing of the

community. They also can provide economic benefits, including tourism and quality of life amenities that may help motivate business to relocate to your area.

Marketing

Marketing is an important component of pulling in volunteers and getting your organization's message out.

- This can be done at little to no expense, but it's important to develop a cohesive marketing plan to raise awareness within the community, recruit labor and encourage financial support.
- Your marketing plan must have a timeline for execution, including who is responsible for each component.
- Use of the internet is pretty much mandatory. In addition to a web page (hopefully donated by a partner that already has a site) you can use apps such as Doodle for scheduling. But be sure not to abandon more traditional media for those who don't embrace technology.
- Reach out to local media. This is best done if you already have relationships with the reporters whose beat includes your activity. If they get to know you as a "go-to" source, an expert who can answer their questions, they will trust you whenever an issue comes up. Develop these relationships and let them get to know you. Be sure to return reporters' calls and emails promptly; as they may be working on a deadline. Knowing they can count on you strengthens the relationship.



After-work lunches, provided by sponsors, were very popular in the Arizona Trail Project. They helped strengthen relationships among volunteers and expressed appreciation in a tangible way.

Event Organization

Smooth running and relevant events are a good way to recruit and reward your volunteers. But how do you create a great event?

- It's critical that volunteer events be planned carefully and carried out efficiently. The quickest way to lose volunteers is to make them stand around waiting while you get your act together.
- Have a written plan. At the start of the event, make the necessary announcements and introductions, but keep it as brief as possible. They didn't come to hear a speech.

Training Your Volunteers

There are several elements involved in training your volunteer force. These are the critical ones:

- **Safety.** Safety must be the highest priority. The Arizona National Scenic Trail construction project in southern Arizona utilized more than 100,000 volunteer hours *without a single injury needing medical intervention*. Leaders emphasized safety and monitored carefully, taking quick action to address unsafe practices.
 - Consider breaking the "tailgate safety talk" into two pieces. Cover environmental safety hazards and hike-in safety, including spacing and the proper way to carry tools, at the trailhead. Crew leaders on site can cover work safety practices. This reduces information overload, and helps volunteers retain the information and stay aware of safety practices.
 - Safety practices for equine packing and methods for efficient carry must also be reviewed by experienced packers.
- **Leadership.** In addition to the event organizer, crew leaders are needed to manage small (6-8, for trail work) groups.
 - These leaders need to be selected carefully. In addition to having good people skills and knowledge of how to get the work done, they must be willing to monitor the work, watch for safety issues and encourage the volunteers.
 - Though some people are capable of being crew leaders, they may prefer doing the work instead of managing others. Make sure that you understand their personal preferences while encouraging them toward leadership.

- **Give thanks.** Show volunteers you appreciate their gift of time and labor. Thank them at the beginning and end of the event, and individually throughout the event. Make sure crew leader training includes thanking the volunteers.



"I Helped Build the Arizona Trail" T-shirts, with sponsor logos on the back, were prized by volunteers, and helped spread awareness of the project. These youth volunteers gained a sense of comradery and belonging.

- **Make it fun.** Make sure volunteers are enjoying their experience.
 - Rotate people in and out of the tougher jobs, and make sure they are doing work that doesn't overtax them. Encourage them occasionally to take breaks and enjoy the scenery, or just go see how other crews are doing.
 - Half-day work events are best. People are more likely to give up a quarter of their weekend than half of it.
 - If the work is physical, odds are that your volunteers aren't used to labor, so longer days will lead to burnout and fatigue, which can create safety issues. Leave them wanting to come back for more!

Reward Your Volunteers

Volunteers need to feel appreciated. You can accomplish that in many ways.

- Provide a good lunch at the end of the work event. This facilitates bonding as well as a positive last memory of the experience. Event sponsorships can help with costs.
- Give praise to volunteers throughout the project when work is well-done.
- For larger, ongoing projects, consider premiums, such as T-shirts and water bottles. These can be imprinted with sponsor logos for businesses and organizations that contribute at higher levels, and also serve to promote your project.
- Hold a volunteer appreciation event. This is an excellent opportunity to show your appreciation to hard working volunteers, let them know you want them to continue volunteering, encourage group bonding and give actual recognition awards and gifts.



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Mark has a good feel for all around trail use and users. He rode horses from the time he could walk and worked as a cowboy before opting for a more secure career choice. He has been an avid mountain biker, hiker and backpacker, focusing at last on his first transportation of choice, horses.

Mark is a chief regional steward for the Arizona Trail Association and is author of “Desert Trails: Designing and Building Trails in a Harsh and Demanding Environment.”

Mark provides ELCR with expert information for webinars, articles and our website library.

