

PROJECT BRIEF

Researching Rural Volunteers

The "Volunteers for Rural Watersheds" Project is a three-year pilot research project focused on developing resources that promote and improve locally-devised practices to encourage mobilization and participation of rural volunteers. The study is the first of its kind to examine volunteerism in rural community/watershed improvement organizations throughout Appalachia, Colorado, and New Mexico. Rural non-profit groups located in Appalachian and Western hardrock mining regions face more volunteerism barriers than organizations located in urban and suburban areas, such as:

- Less economic diversity than urban counterparts
- Mountainous terrain that can be a challenge to commuting volunteers
- Lack of reliable Internet and mobile phone coverage
- Out-migration and loss of human capital.

The knowledge and resources generated by this project will be useful to rural watershed groups facing these challenges and many more.

RESEARCH METHODS

The purpose of this project is to identify, test, and document successful volunteer recruitment and management strategies with 34 different watershed groups, and to synthesize this data into a toolkit of best practices to guide organizations in rural areas. Research was structured in three phases:

- Phase 1: Collected and analyzed survey data from volunteers of 16 organizations in both the East and West.
- Phase 2: Identified 25 volunteer management practices being done successfully by rural groups; transplanted and monitored trial practices; now compiling 48 case study accounts of trial practice transplant tests.
- Phase 3: Dissemination of findings as rural volunteer management toolkit.

KEY FINDINGS

In the first study phase, surveys were collected from 315 volunteers with 16 organizations in Appalachia and the Rocky Mountain West. Data was analyzed to:

- Form a general profile of rural volunteers
- Gain valuable insight into their opinions
- Identify who is most likely to volunteer
- Reveal gaps where new individuals and groups can be targeted for recruitment
- Discover potential partnerships that can benefit communities in new ways through volunteer involvement in other groups

Survey data also demonstrated that volunteers are very politically active:

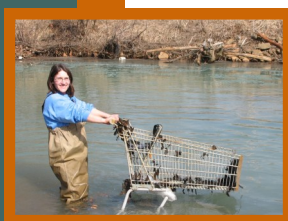
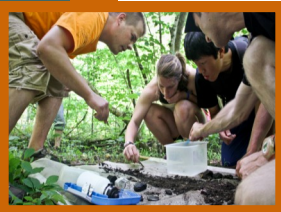
- 90% voted in 2008 presidential election
- 79% voted in 2008 primary election
- 82% voted in 2006 or 2007 local election
- 63% contacted a member of Congress or state legislature for any reason
- 51% contacted a local government official about a policy issue

The civic power of these volunteers is a large, often untapped resource for groups to use to spread awareness of issues and secure possible funding.

For the second research phase, 25 volunteer practices proven to be successful in recruiting, managing, or retaining volunteers were identified and tested for one year by one or two different rural organizations. Forty-eight case studies revealed successes, challenges, and ideas for other rural groups to utilize.

While each volunteer practice has its own specific characteristics and obstacles, several overarching trends emerged:

- The need for a lead person or committee to guide planning was a key factor in the success or failure of many trial practices and, in small rural communities, specificity was crucial. Broad appeals for help with tasks and events often went unheeded. Practices that employed targeted recruitment of individuals and groups with skills for specific tasks had the best results.



The OSM/VISTA Teams

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- For tasks requiring large groups or crews of volunteers, rural organizations often succeeded by bringing in outside groups, such as alternative spring break crews and faith-based mission teams.

Engaging in place-based research at 34 watershed sites, we have identified and now seek to share approaches to volunteer recruitment, training, and retention that are successful in rural settings.

RESEARCH IN ACTION

The Friends of Decker's Creek (FODC) in Dellslow, WV, is one example of a rural organization that implemented a trial practice and documented its successes and challenges. Regular volunteers are crucial to FODC's continuous monitoring and data gathering efforts, often in remote locations, for acid mine drainage pollution, human waste contamination, and streambank erosion. FODC also has a need for more of their Youth Advisory Board (YAB) members to attend meetings and activities on a regular basis in order to empower the next generation of watershed stewards.

Over the past year, FODC met these needs by organizing carpools or providing transportation for volunteers, a trial practice based on its success with the Woodland Community Land Trust in Clairfield, TN. Overall, carpooling or FODC-provided transportation was used at least 54 times and accounted for at least 310 volunteer hours. Of the 310 hours, at least 50 were from new volunteers who had never volunteered with FODC before and another 65 were from YAB members who otherwise would not have been able to participate. Mileage and fuel costs were covered by grant funding, but if those funds aren't available in the future, their continued use of this practice is uncertain.

NEXT STEPS

The end of the one-year trial practice period marks the beginning of the final project phase and the transformation of research into resources. We hope to create a training workbook and workshop package for rural volunteer-based organizations. The production and distribution of a workbook would enable rural volunteer managers to explore new methods of volunteer management through 48 case study accounts of trial practice transplant tests. These case studies will be supplemented by survey findings.

The workbook would also serve as the basis of rural volunteer management training workshops conducted by members of the OSM/VISTA Teams Support Offices. This research has been presented at 14 local, state, regional, and national conferences, with more upcoming. The need for these resources has been felt by the positive and eager response of those attending these presentations. Attendees are impatient for training on new ideas, where to start and what to expect.

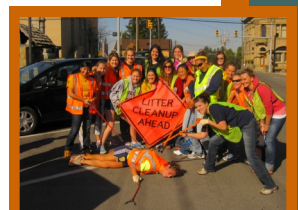
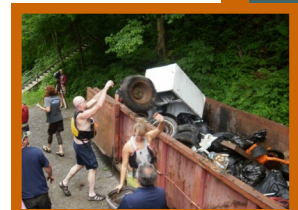
Access to this information enables organizations to learn from each other ways to clean up polluted freshwater ecosystems and initiate community revitalization projects. Volunteers are better equipped to both lead and join efforts that expand economic opportunity in their own communities to increase tourism, property values, and attract new businesses.

The research we have conducted on locally-devised solutions to rural volunteer management issues can be transformed into a training package to support leadership development and capacity building for our two regional networks of community organizations. By informing and training rural volunteer managers, the OSM/VISTA Teams are mobilizing volunteers to promote environmental stewardship and economic development in rural, under-resourced, environmentally degraded communities.

THE OSM/VISTA TEAMS

The OSM/VISTA Teams, in partnership with the Office of Surface Mining (OSM) and community-led nonprofit watershed restoration groups, place, coordinate, and train AmeriCorps VISTA Volunteers who live and work in host communities to promote economic redevelopment, community engagement, and environmental stewardship. The Appalachian Coal Country Team (ACCT) sponsors OSM/VISTA Volunteers in 7 states in the Appalachian coalfields, while the Western Hardrock Watershed Team (WHWT) sponsors Volunteers in the hardrock mining belt of Colorado and New Mexico.

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