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## Conservation Volunteers' Connection to Nature — Source link

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# A Psychological Connection to Nature: An important motivator and outcome of conservation volunteer work

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NRE: Environmental Science Education Area of Expertise

**Abstract:** We used surveys and interviews of MN Master Naturalist volunteers to provide insight on conservation volunteers' connection to nature. Almost all volunteers felt a strong connection to nature. Their desire to learn about, benefit, and teach others about nature were important motivators in their decision to take part in this program. Their volunteer activities addressed these motivators, and provided other benefits, including stress reduction and exercise.

**The Minnesota Master Naturalist Program** educates adults about natural resources and provides nature-based volunteer opportunities.

## Training

- 40-hour natural and cultural history course

## Volunteer service

- 40 hours annually
  - Stewardship activities: direct conservation benefits (e.g. removing invasive species).
  - Interpretation: educational activities (e.g. creating a display or leading a nature walk)
  - Citizen science: collecting scientific data (e.g. participating in a butterfly count)
  - Program support: providing service to a conservation organization (e.g. maintaining a website)
- In 2008, volunteers contributed over 15,000 hours



## Methods

- Data collection activities addressed connection to nature and motivation to volunteer
- Modified Dillman technique for developing the questionnaire and interacting with respondents.
- Analyzed quantitative data with SPSS 15 software and qualitative data with Atlas.ti software using constant comparison method

## Survey

- Start of class and annual survey data from participants who graduated from 12/05 – 12/07
- 252 responses (88%) for start survey and 193 responses (69%) for annual survey.
- Survey Monkey (www.surveymonkey.com) and paper surveys for participants without internet access

## Interviews

- Stratified random sampling to select interviewees with varied residence (metro vs. non-metro), gender, and volunteer hours (low < 40, medium 40-99, and high ≥ 100 hours)
- Semi-structured phone and in-person interviews

## Results

### Demographics

- Age range 22-77 years, mean = 51 years
- 65% women
- Most had bachelor's (43%) or advanced degree (34%)
- 53% employed full-time, 23% retired, 16% worked part time, 9% not employed
- Variable household income levels (13% <\$30K; 23% \$30-\$50K; 24% \$50-\$75K; 21% \$75-\$100K; 19% ≥ \$100K)

Extent to which volunteers felt connected to nature (n = 158)

Not at all	0%
To a slight extent	2%
To a moderate extent	33%
To a great extent	65%

*"I need to stay connected to nature to stay physically, mentally and spiritually aligned. Otherwise, I risk losing my sense of self, my purpose, and my motivation."*



Motivations to volunteer (1=not important, 5=very important)

To learn more about nature	4.82 <sup>A</sup>
To be close to nature	4.71 <sup>AB</sup>
To be outside in a natural area	4.69 <sup>AB</sup>
To give something back to nature	4.59 <sup>AB</sup>
To have fun	4.49 <sup>ABC</sup>
To improve natural areas	4.48 <sup>ABC</sup>
To educate others about conservation	4.45 <sup>BC</sup>
To educate others about nature	4.45 <sup>BC</sup>
To help others develop a stewardship ethic	4.41 <sup>BC</sup>
To be with people who value nature	4.20 <sup>CD</sup>
To meet new people with similar interests	4.08 <sup>D</sup>
To get exercise	3.93 <sup>DE</sup>
To get away from the usual demands of life	3.92 <sup>DE</sup>
To network with others	3.68 <sup>E</sup>
To benefit career	2.67 <sup>F</sup>

Mean response shown, means followed by the same letter are statistically indistinguishable (Tukey HSD, p > 0.05)

## Outcomes: Activities addressed volunteers' motivations

Learning: *"I've learned something from everything I've done...every time I go out and listen to frogs after doing a frog count, I'm going to enjoy it a little bit more, because I got a little better idea of what's actually going on."*

Give back to nature: *"I will be able to look back and see a body of work that I've done that I can feel good about."*

*"I think it makes a difference; that's the greatest value."*

Educate others: *"It's rewarding for me to present something to people and see that moment of awareness, or 'ah-ha' moment... so I feel like I'm giving them something that they can relate to, enjoy and benefit from."*

To be outside: *"I'm giving something back but I'd say the biggest thing is to get me out."*

Get away from usual life demands: *"It's good for my stress level. ... It's physically good for me, and I know it matters to somebody... It's fun, fulfilling, and it's healthy."*

*"As a psychologist, trying to help people look at ways to manage stress, [I also]... have to look at what are the things that help me so that I can be healthy and present myself in a healthy way. And I think that my love of nature and my work in nature helps me with that... I'll [say] it grounds me."*



## Conservation volunteers in this study

- described aesthetic (appreciation of natural beauty), affective (stress reduction), intellectual (desire to learn) and spiritual (connection to something larger than self) benefits from their interactions with nature.
- felt that nature was important to self, others, and all living things.
- described self and nature as interconnected.
- were passionate about making a difference

Conservation volunteer work provided opportunities and motivation to spend time in contact with nature. Finding the time to spend outside may be difficult to prioritize for busy people, but a commitment to volunteer work may provide necessary impetus to connect with nature.

