

ERNOP Research Note

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Rethinking volunteering as a natural resource

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The article focusses on redefining the concept of volunteering as a natural resource. It proposes to break down this concept into three distinct volunteer resources, each with its own characteristics and dynamics. The paper aims to provide a more nuanced understanding of volunteering and its various forms and dynamics.

The key concept is that volunteering can be understood as a human-made, renewable resource that can be grown and recycled. The concept of volunteering is compared to a natural resource and suggests that as a result, better management of volunteering is required to manage this 'resource'.

One contribution of this conceptual article is that it extends and deepens the volunteering-as-a-natural-resource metaphor by identifying three basic volunteer resources: (a) traditional volunteer resources (wild salmon), (b) third-party volunteer resources (farmed fish), and (c) spontaneous volunteer resources (marine zooplankton).

[#Volunteering](#) [#Management](#) [#Resources](#) [#VolunteerPotential](#)

Background

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Context



- Volunteering has different forms, purposes and it is used differently by various stakeholders. It therefore requires a variety of management approaches. Over ten years ago, Brudney and Meijs (2009) thought of **volunteering as a natural resource**. They suggested that volunteering is like a man-made, renewable resource that can be grown and reused. The amount and continuity of this resource can be positively or negatively affected by people. This idea highlights the **increasing concerns about whether we can sustain volunteering for future needs**.
- The earlier model of volunteering as a natural resources is limited as it presents volunteering as an unchanging and singular resource, which oversimplifies the nature of volunteering. This does not align with the fact that **those who give their time, change their volunteering behavior over time and across organizations**.
- By conceptualizing the volunteer resource in distinct volunteer resources, the paper offers **several contributions to improve the usability of the methaphor**.
- **This article explains how to use and cultivate three different types of volunteer resources**, and how volunteer management differs between the resource categories. It acknowledges the need to develop a collective responsibility to sustain and the volunteer resources.

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Take aways & Learnings



- They propose **three basic resource categories** depicted as a marine species:
 1. **Wild salmon symbolizing traditional volunteering** - as it is a popular and widely recognised form of volunteering that is in decline.
 2. **Farmed fish seen as third party volunteering** - as it is relatively new and less popular due to fears about the quality.
 3. **Marine zooplankton reflecting spontaneous volunteering** - due to the similar nature of its importance to other volunteering systems, and the spontaneity of their population's presence.
- Each resource has its own benefits and management benefits/challenges (see Table 1).
- It is demonstrated that a **variety of volunteer resources** is crucial for supporting volunteering in general. This calls for organisations that involve volunteers to take a collective approach that will help each volunteer resource to prosper.
- **The metaphor helps to demonstrate the differences in volunteering**, therefore influencing their management, promotion and use. It also enables a more dynamic understanding of volunteering. In an ocean, various marine species coexist, interact, influence other populations, and are influenced by other conditions. All volunteer resources are **related, continuously in flux, and dynamic** over time

Table 1. Description of Three Volunteer Resources (Species) and Their Characteristics.

Volunteer resource	Wild salmon	Farmed fish	Marine zooplankton
	Traditional	Third party	Spontaneous
Most common types of volunteering	Regular volunteering; entails long-term volunteer commitment to an organization; recurring/habitual episodic volunteering within the same organization or event	Corporate volunteering; service-learning; workfare volunteering; family/singles volunteering; episodic volunteering during National Days of Service; episodic volunteering across different organizations or events	Disaster and crisis volunteering; activism; genuine episodic volunteering related to crises or one-time events
Purpose	Broad organization, operation, and support in all kinds of organizations	Instrumental use by third parties; creation of a culture of volunteering; additional support ("hands") for nonprofit organizations	Unorganized; solutions for emergent needs identified by volunteers; overcoming feelings of powerlessness or helplessness
Antecedents	Traditional individual antecedents	Highly specific target groups of third parties; potential to reach individuals with nontraditional volunteer antecedents	No specific individual antecedents; sparked by crises, disasters, or events; unpredictable
Management benefits	Economic and service-quality benefits due to prolonged commitment; opportunity to train volunteers; autonomous after being trained	Reducing recruitment costs (recruitability); diversity in volunteers; increasing volunteerability; separate hierarchy/leadership structure	High numbers of volunteers in times of crisis, large-scale events, or social movements; flexibility and adaptability; indigenous knowledge of local communities
Management challenges	Volunteer recruitment and retention	Shared management issues; unrealistic expectations; volunteers lacking required skills or training; level of commitment and motivation (mandated); more supervision needed	Inadequate planning; high need for coordination and communication; unrealistic expectations health, safety/liability issues
Harvesting	Active, through traditional recruitment and personal, friend, or family involvement	Active, through third parties or collaborations with third parties	Passive, possibly supported by media appeals; responding to or imitating others
Resource level	At risk; endangered species	Available only in certain areas; endemic species	In flux; characterized by a sudden upsurge and disappearance; Relatively safe, common species
Propagation	Learned social behavior (nurture); embeddedness; traditional promotion	Artificial production/reproduction linking volunteering to the goals of the third parties	Parthenogenesis (nature); emergent reaction to events in the community or society
Sustaining	Should be nourished and conserved as long as possible; must be grown	Must be reproduced artificially; dependent on third parties achieving instrumental goals	Emerges automatically and abundantly (even when inappropriate or not useful); should be controlled or planned to prevent waste

ERNOP Research Notes provide easy-to-read, practice-oriented summaries of academic articles on philanthropy and are written by practitioner experts. This ERNOP Research Note 2023/32 is published in December 2023 and has been written by Megan Burgoyne from The Centre for European Volunteering. More information can be found at www.ernop.eu.