

The citizen volunteer

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Abstract.-This presentation will be a “reflective story” of a personal transformation that began at a dinner discussion in Antigua, Guatemala, with a BLM wildlife biologist, while on vacation. Classic literature cited in this evening conversations included Cadillac Desert and A Sand County *Almanac*. This introduction provided the door of awareness and opportunity for one person to become a “regular” volunteer with the BLM, USFS, and the New Mexico Department of Fish and Game.

Citizen organizations and their volunteers provide substantial resources to land management agencies which include volunteer time, effort and money. Through their assistance, habitat improvement projects are completed. Volunteers, likewise, benefit from the experience. A sense of “stewardship” evolves through this process.

The mutual benefits to both agencies and volunteers will be outlined in an effort to further promote the recruitment and retention of citizen volunteers.

Today, as we participate in this symposium, we bring with us a wide range of education, experiences and expectations. Some of us have lived through several decades of social change and changing public policy. We are looking to the next century, just a few years away. Whether we look to the future with certainty or doubt, be assured, it is on its way.

To me, as a citizen volunteer, I see in the present and in the future, the necessity of partnerships between land management agencies and volunteer citizen organizations.

Many agencies and volunteer groups recognize their mutually beneficial relationship and tend to measure the benefits in terms of dollars saved in the cost of projects by acquiring donated labor from involved citizenry.

While this is certainly true, I come today to add to this perception some additional thoughts about citizenship and volunteering.

How do we come to see ourselves as “citizen?”

Who, what and how do we define “citizenship?”

Can we say that this “social identity” is *conferred* upon us at birth, as in:

“You are a citizen of the U S of A by birth.”

Yet this social designation has to be assumed or *taken* on by being involved in our social arenas, i.e., our families, our employment, our worship, our communities.

How often have we been led to believe that voting in public elections is the highest expression of our acting on our citizenship? While participation in elections is vital to the survival of our democracy, far too many people do not vote and of those who do, precious few get further involved in areas where volunteering public participation is needed.

As we move into the next century, can all of us promote the notion that *citizenship* and *stewardship* are connected concepts? Do we, as a Nation, and as a citizenry, really understand governance?

VOLUNTEERING

To be a volunteer is to be a person who offers himself or herself for a service or undertaking of his own free will with no promise of compensation; to give of one's time or resources for charitable, educational or other worthwhile activities, especially one's community.

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Take a moment to reflect on your own experiences of being a “volunteer”:

- serving on a PTA at school for your child;
- giving someone a ride in an emergency;
- collecting Toys for Tots;
- writing a letter for a friend.

A favorite bumper sticker of mine refers to RANDOM ACTS OF KINDNESS. No doubt you have helped others and others have helped you when you needed it.

In the last few years I have been learning how people-projects enhance our wildlife resources. My own experience in volunteering, especially on wildlife-related habitat projects, through the ABQ Wildlife Federation, has been a true learning experience.

For nonwildlife trained citizens, spending time “in the field” has become part of the “university of life experiences.” For these experiences I am truly thankful.

I have observed open discussions between natural resource agency personnel in the USFS, BLM and citizen volunteers. These dialogues have provided insights into the complexities of issues and decisions facing these agencies.

These experiences have heightened my awareness of the debates over major public policy considerations, land management practices, formulation of endangered species recovery plans, definitions of wetlands, sources of nonpoint pollution, and new understanding about CRP (Conservation Reserve Program), North American Waterfowl Management Plans, CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species).

Many of us “citizen volunteers” were not trained to “Think Like a Mountain,” in our university or graduate school curriculum.

We have been introduced to a new mix of words:

- Ecosystem;
- Stake holders
- Riparian
- High water events
- Habitat

Many of us had never heard of Aldo Leopold’s *A Sand County Almanac*, Marc Reisner’s *Cadillac Desert*, or Edward Abbey’s *Desert Solitaire*, until we met some of you. You have become partners in our

post graduate field instruction of evolving citizen volunteers.

On a personal note, I quite accidentally first learned of *Cadillac Desert* while enjoying a dinner in Antigua, Guatemala with a BLM wildlife biologist on vacation. Coming from the Southwest, I found myself embarrassed at not knowing about this publication. I finally found a used copy of the book, and I was most amazed to learn the history of water developments in the West. I have since talked to many folks who, like me, had never read this classic, nor *Sand County Almanac*.

So, why am I giving you a presentation on the Citizen Volunteer? Why am I encouraging you to solicit volunteers in your agency programs and work projects? Here are some of my reasons:

1. I have heard agency personnel give facts and figures as to the amount in dollar terms, and that volunteers contribute to the success of an agency in meeting its goals and objectives. Volunteer labor was needed because no funds were available to pay for the work to be done. As a volunteer I am pleased to know that my contribution did make a difference. My own personal *reward*, however, was in *being a part @it*; part of the planning, execution, monitoring and understanding the potential long term benefit for “all those critters out there!”
2. Through volunteer activities, citizen volunteers and agency personnel can help each other understand the issues, how decisions are made or not made, and what the limitations are.
3. These interactional opportunities enable citizen volunteers to respect public servants in land management agencies who have devoted their careers to enhancing our forests, rivers, prairies and cultural heritage.
4. Finally, citizen volunteers are able too more thoroughly educate others as to the “good” that government agencies and their personnel do while “talking shop,” having a beer at a bar-b-que, or riding on an airplane reading Aldo Leopold’s *Essay*, “Thinking Like a Mountain.”

In a culture that promotes conflict and adversarial relationships, citizens need opportunities to experience team work and collaborative relationships which you provide in any number of ways.

KEEP UP THE GOOD WORK!