



LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

STANDING COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT, CLIMATE CHANGE AND BIODIVERSITY
Dr Marisa Paterson MLA (Chair), Ms Jo Clay MLA (Deputy Chair), Ms Leanne Castley MLA

Submission Cover Sheet

Inquiry into Environmental Volunteerism in the ACT

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**CONSERVATION
COUNCIL** ACT REGION

Submission to the Standing Committee on Environment, Climate Change and Biodiversity: Inquiry into Environmental Volunteerism

May 2022

The Conservation Council ACT Region is the peak non-government environment organisation for the Canberra region. Since 1981, we have spoken up for a healthy environment and a sustainable future for our region. We harness the collective energy, expertise and experience of our more than 40 member groups to promote sound policy and action on the environment.

We campaign for a safe climate, to protect biodiversity in our urban and natural areas, to protect and enhance our waterways, reduce waste, and promote sustainable transport and planning for our city. Working in the ACT and region to influence governments and build widespread support within the community and business, we put forward evidence-based solutions and innovative ideas for how we can live sustainably.

At a time when we need to reimagine a better future, we understand that the changes we need will only happen with the collective support of our community.

For further information please contact:

Helen Oakey, Executive Director, [REDACTED]

Introduction

The Conservation Council ACT Region welcomes the opportunity to provide input into the Inquiry into Environmental Volunteerism.

Community engagement across the ACT on issues associated with environmental protection and conservation is both broad and diverse. Environmental volunteers work across a host of issues, from biodiversity conservation to climate change, waste and sustainability, and engage in many different types of activities, from hosting community events and workshops, weeding and planting activities, through to environmental activism and advocacy. Many volunteers participate across this spectrum, replicating the interconnection between the issues in their chosen activities.

The contribution that volunteers make to environmental outcomes today, and the outcomes they will impact into the future, are significant. While there have been some attempts to quantify environmental volunteerism, those numbers probably don't fully encapsulate the time and effort put in by volunteers, as they often only capture those engaged in on-ground enhancement and protection activities. The contribution of environmental volunteers likely extends far beyond this - to those who are engaged supporting environmental organisations with specialist skills (such as accounting), to those who undertake policy development and are themselves engaged in community engagement and mobilisation work on issues of importance, such as climate change.

While the willingness of community members to participate across this full spectrum of activities is welcome, there are ongoing challenges faced with providing volunteers with enriching and supportive environments. In part this is due to those who are charged with engaging volunteers often being volunteers themselves - and often time poor and possibly lacking the skills or experience to nurture and grow and support their own volunteer base.

The Conservation Council surveyed its member groups to gather information for this submission for the Inquiry. We understand that many of our member groups have also made individual submissions, however others that we heard back from did not. Our submission is high level compared to many that have been submitted by individual groups, and will be broader in its scope.

Volunteerism in the environment sector in the ACT

Scope of activities

Environmental community groups in the ACT participate in a range of activities that include:

On-ground conservation activities:

- On-ground conservation activities such as planting, or weed/pest removal
- Other on-ground maintenance work such as paths, buildings
- Citizen science activities such as species monitoring

Community engagement activities:

- Hosting events aimed at community engagement, such as workshops, festivals.

- Community engagement activities such as walks and talks
- Attending other organised community events, such as festivals / open days, to promote their group and its activities
- Preparing and selling products such as plant/food sales
- Producing educational materials for the community, either online or in print

Advocacy and administrative activities:

- Organisational administration / governance
- Advocacy such as writing submissions and lobbying politicians
- Online communications such as managing websites and social media
- Networking with national and international organisations

Groups whose main focus is on ground conservation activities identified significant hours of volunteer contribution, some upward of 100 hours per week, others at 20-50 hours per week. Some of the Council's member groups, such as Friends of Grasslands and the National Parks Association, might have more than one activity occurring on any given day across the city, whereas smaller localised organisations, might coordinate weekly activities. However, their contributions are significant. As an example, Friends of Aranda Bushland identified that they have 30-50 volunteers that undertake between 20-50 hours of on-ground conservation activity per week

As well as undertaking on ground conservation activities, nearly all groups that responded to our survey indicated that they also participate in community education and engagement activities, such as hosting events (such as community walks or presentations), attending other events to communicate with the public about their issues, and hosting online media platforms.

Some groups also identified that they engaged in advocacy to the government, liaising with Government staff and preparing submissions for policy and planning processes. Importantly, many on-ground conservation groups also engage in citizen science projects and data collection, which contributes to building a deep understanding of local areas across the ACT, and facilitates informed engagement in advocacy work.

In the ACT, on-ground conservation work is strongly supported by LandcareACT and the three catchment bodies. These organisations play a crucial role in coordinating volunteers across the sector, and should be funded accordingly, giving consideration to the resources in the community they leverage and support for the benefit of the environment.

It's important to note that environmental volunteers extend beyond nature conservation groups. Community members in the ACT are volunteering on issues such as climate change, sustainable transport, waste and the circular economy. These groups have a stronger focus on community engagement and building knowledge and understanding of issues that people can take into their own lives, and participating in the advocacy process. Some community organisations include public protest in their advocacy efforts.

Finally, all environmental groups by their very nature, engage in administration activities that are likely to include secretariat functions, grant management, financial management and requirements to ensure they meet with any regulatory requirements for associations (if they are

an incorporated association). These activities are obviously crucial to the functioning of any organisation.

Skills

Volunteers in the environment space bring diverse skills. Many people bring professional skills to the table such as ecology, climate science and policy/advocacy. Others will engage with volunteering organisations bringing professional skills that are helpful in organisational management, such as communications, writing, or accounting. Others will learn “on the job”.

Many larger organisations can offer a range of support and training opportunities to volunteers. For example, Friends of Grasslands offer supervision and training during routine on-ground conservation management and restoration work on a number of high conservation value sites; Native and exotic flora (and fauna) ID training by FOG and other experts during FOG’s annual program of visits to public and private land sites; Education programs, including webinars, field and conference style workshops, annual mid-winter slide afternoon, and a high-quality bi-monthly newsletter; and educational materials e.g. FOG website with reference and educational resources, field guides e.g. Grassland Flora, Woodland Flora

Other groups facilitate on-ground training via the Parks and Conservation Service, undertake chemical certification training and receive financial support for First Aid training. Other groups reported undertaking very little volunteer training at all.

Attracting environmental volunteers in the ACT

Obstacles

Groups surveyed indicated that they targeted a general audience when running programs, although some specifically targeted certain sections of the population. It is likely that a lack of capacity, as well as the desire not to turn any volunteer away, means that volunteer recruitment is broadly targeted. However, this is likely to mean that the engagement of volunteers across a range of demographics might be limited. While some groups engage directly with, and support participation from, First Nations people, particularly in the land care space, the sector could likely benefit from a wider and deeper understanding of First Nations culture.

Some groups identified that attracting volunteers was at times difficult, particularly from those in the age bracket 30-60, due to other time commitments. Some groups indicated that attracting volunteers was not difficult, perhaps due to the nature of the commitment involved. For example, the Canberra Indian Myna Action Group, who have over 2500 volunteers engaged in a very specific activity, identified that they have no difficulty recruiting volunteers. Others indicated that it was difficult to engage people because of a lack of time and resources to support active recruitment, a lack of understanding about what their group might do, and how well ‘qualified’ volunteers might think they need to be to get engaged. A general lack of understanding about key environmental issues in the ACT might also contribute to a lack of engagement from community volunteers. If the community is unaware that invasive species or grasslands are an issue, then they are unlikely to seek out an organisation that works on these issues to volunteer for.

Valuing people's time in the volunteering space is important. This can obviously be done in a number of ways, from public recognition through to "rewards" of participation in particular activities to communicating to the general public the value of the volunteer contributions that are made.

A lack of specialist skills was raised as causing problems attracting volunteers. When skills are held tightly, or even are just specialised, by particular people in a community group, it can be difficult to share the workload with others, and proactive skill-sharing requires additional investment of time and effort. Another group identified that volunteer opportunities need to be varied so as to be accessible to a range of people with different time and skill capacity.

It was identified that there seems to be a shortage of volunteers who can fill specific roles, such as governance, fundraising and financial management. Indeed, while financial management is an obligatory function of many groups, none of the groups surveyed indicated that they engaged in direct fundraising activities, over and above asking for and receiving donations. It is likely that very few groups are able access professional fundraising or digital marketing skills that would support and enhance the work that they undertake. However, many groups would engage in grant writing, and access funds made available by ACT and Federal grant processes.

Opportunities

A stronger promotion of the value of nature and the specifics of how our natural areas need ongoing care by the government might drive a stronger community awareness of the value of our local environment, and inspire community members to get engaged. There is an emerging conversation about the value of trees across the urban landscape, and there is strong appreciation by nature reserve users of the "services" that they provide, but this doesn't necessarily translate into a deeper understanding of the biodiversity values that are there, and that need protection and enhancement. One group articulated that promoting the concept of "environmental stewardship" might assist.

Further developing an online platform for attracting, engaging and directing environmental volunteers, potentially integrated with the VolunteeringACT site, could facilitate better recruitment of volunteers, even outside the Park Care space. The VolunteeringACT could be utilised better by environmental organisations to advertise for positions such as office bearers - secretaries, treasurers etc.

Many groups would recruit volunteers through their Facebook pages and organisational meetings. Indeed joining a group isn't necessarily even seen as "volunteering" in regards to some activities, but might just be seen as participation or membership.

Government support for environmental volunteers

Regulatory obstacles

Several groups mentioned that on-ground volunteers are impacted by rules that prevent them from using certain types of equipment. For example:

- No powered tools (whipper-snipper) - for both TCCS groups and PCS groups
- Restrictions on chemicals for weeds - only for TCCS groups

Friends of Grasslands identified that these rules are not necessarily the same across all land tenures. Differing risk management approaches by different government units, and restrictions on what volunteers may or may not do (even volunteers with current and documented training and experience) can lead to inconsistent and/or very restrictive rules which may be inefficient and frustrating in land-management efforts. For example, some types of power tools are allowed on NCA land which greatly assists the efficiency and effectiveness of our volunteering efforts but are not able to be used on ACT Government land on-ground projects. The National Parks Association also identified that WHS regulations and risk management practices can limit the flexibility of volunteers to commit to on-ground work with the ACT Parks Service.

In its work removing invasive species Indian Mynas, the Canberra Indian Myna Action Group noted that inadequate ACT Building and Pest Control Regulations, lack of contact with critical managers (e.g. school principals), and non-access to public facilities were regulatory obstacles..

Groups also identified that there were extensive delays on receiving the approvals or requests for additional information from TCCS and Heritage, and that processes seemed to be variable across staff members.

It was also raised that grant funding was not necessarily flexible, or scope of funding was narrow, which has the effect of limiting opportunities that could be offered to volunteers. In addition, grants could often cost more in volunteer administration and compliance time than the value of the grants.

Resource and training

Many responses indicated that it would be helpful to have more resources and training options for volunteers, as well as support for groups to facilitate volunteer engagement, such as managing issues like insurance, and providing support on governance issues, such as meeting procedures. In addition, it was identified that support on inclusion could be valuable to ensure that diversity is encouraged across the environmental volunteer sector.

Engagement with government

There is a desire for stronger, more regular engagement with the ACT Government, and clearer guidance about who to talk to, in which directorate. More regular meetings between key volunteers and ACT Government representatives was identified as being beneficial. Groups didn't always hear back from the government in response to inquiries in a timely or consistent manner.

Groups also indicated that a faster and clearer process for gaining approvals from the Government would be helpful. There was general feedback from groups that there was a lack of capacity for the ACT Government to support volunteers, however, no firm data was provided to support this.

One group identified that they had offered to support the government in the development of a management plan, but had not received a response.

Recommendations

1. Extend the recognition of environmental volunteerism to include those engaged in advocacy, governance and community engagement activities across a range of environment and sustainability issues.
2. Develop further the online recruitment of environmental volunteers, potentially in partnership with VolunteeringACT, to facilitate volunteer recruitment, in particular of organisational governance roles.
3. Consider cultural awareness training for groups to improve engagement with First Nations people.
4. Develop mechanisms by which to regularly formally acknowledge the role of environmental volunteers.
5. Increase regular engagement between government and on-ground volunteers groups and clarify and streamline approvals and communications processes.
6. Resources training options for groups to support volunteer engagement, including around insurance and governance..
7. Either reduce restrictions on volunteers for on-ground work or provide more resources for these activities to be undertaken by paid ACT Government staff.
8. Put forward a clear vision of nature conservation across the city to encourage volunteers to engage.