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Emerging Models in Environmental Volunteerism: The domestic volunteer vacation

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Title: “Emerging Models in Environmental Volunteerism: The domestic volunteer vacation”

Abstract:

For well over two decades, land management agencies in the U.S. have experienced trends of flat if not otherwise declining budgets with which to fulfill their respective missions.

Consequently, public land management agencies at various levels have sought creative strategies such as using volunteers to deliver quality services without incurring added expense.

Motives and experiences related to volunteerism in a variety of settings have been well researched. Despite this, there is limited research in the extant literature on the dimensions of volunteerism in parks and recreation, conservation, and other outdoor-based settings.

Moreover, an increasingly popular form of multi-day volunteer engagements, often referred to as a ‘volunteer vacation’, is nearly absent when it comes to domestic project settings as opposed to international and often exotic locales.

In response to this gap within the literature, a qualitative research study was conducted in the summer of 2013 on volunteers participating in weeklong trail maintenance projects on National Forest land in Montana and Idaho. Two non-profit organizations (The Bob Marshall Wilderness Foundation and The Selway-Bitterroot Frank Church Wilderness Foundation) allowed researcher’s to conduct semi-structured interviews with 25 volunteers on their motives, experiences, preferences, and other aspects related to their overall volunteerism.

Preliminary results suggest that respondents are motivated to participate in these volunteer projects for many reasons. Among the more noteworthy motives are: manifesting a conservation or civic engagement ethic, meeting like-minded people, challenging themselves physically and staying healthy, constructing desirable aspects for one’s biography, e.g. time spent in a wilderness setting, developing skills for personal and career advancement, and participating in a low-cost, facilitated backcountry experience that offers a level of security and organization exceeding that of a self-supported trip. Understanding these motivations can assist managers and other nonprofits with marketing, recruitment, and retention of volunteers along with other capacity building objectives.

Other findings indicate volunteers acknowledge a high degree of self-interest with respect to the project tasks, scheduling, and desired set of experiences before committing to service. This finding supports theories in the volunteerism literature suggesting that volunteering is trending towards the reflexive, denoted by a preference for volunteer commitments that are concentrated and short-term (“episodic”) over those that are dispersed and long-term (“traditional”).

The findings presented on this emergent and beneficial form of voluntary service will offer greater understanding on the volunteer participants. This increased understanding will foster effective engagement and retention of volunteers, advancing the goal of accomplishing valuable work on public lands. Additionally, the volunteerism, tourism, and natural resources management discourses will be expanded through the results of this study as most previous research on the volunteer vacation model involved international travel.

Audience: Conservation and stewardship non-profit organizations, land managers who oversee volunteers or volunteer partnerships, volunteer coordinators, qualitative researchers, and academics may find this presentation appealing.

Learning Objectives: 1) An explanation of the environmental volunteer vacation model including agency partnerships, 2) Insight into the range of motives and desired experiences of

participants, and

3) Demonstration of qualitative research methods

Audio and Visual Needs: Digital slide projector for PowerPoint presentation, microphone

Presenters Experience: Presenter is a member of Toastmasters International and steadily working to become an excellent public speaker. Presenter has facilitated college courses as well as delivered numerous presentations through graduate school courses and while working for a web design agency.

Bio: John Stegmaier is in the final stage of completing an MS in Recreation Resource Management at the University of Montana. His personal interest in voluntary stewardship of public lands led him to return to school in pursuit of an advanced degree. For his thesis project, John spent a summer dropping in on volunteer trail crews in the Bob Marshall Wilderness, MT and Selway-Bitterroot Frank Church Wilderness, MT and ID in hopes of furthering understanding of the volunteer vacation model. Upon graduation, John aspires to work in conservation and public land management somewhere in the beautiful northern Rocky Mountain region.