

Gifts of Time



How to run a volunteer program that helps you accomplish goals, raise funds and connect with new people.

By Rose Jenkins

Among some of the highest peaks in Appalachia, grassy meadows stretch across mountain ridges, open to the sky. The Appalachian Trail winds over this exposed landscape, where rhododendrons blossom in the summer and grassy balds look out over ridge after ridge of wild mountains. Here—in the Highlands of Roan, on the border of North Carolina and Tennessee—northern and southern species, grassland and forest species all find their niche, creating a biological community that is globally unique. Endangered and rare species call the Highlands of Roan their home.

But without ongoing stewardship, these highlands could grow up in bramble and trees, and the high meadow ecosystem would disappear. The balds were maintained over millennia by grazing animals, and the work that was once done by woolly mammoths, then elk and bison, is now kept up by volunteers with weedwackers.

The Southern Appalachian Highlands Conservancy (SAHC), which has helped to

protect two-thirds of the 25,000-acre highlands, organizes teams of volunteers to mow the balds. Without the steady work of volunteers, they could never keep up with the eager saplings and thickets of blackberries. “We couldn’t accomplish the goals that we have without volunteer support,” says Chris Coxen, field ecologist.

Last year, the conservancy worked with 132 volunteers, who put in 3,291 hours—

the equivalent of more than 80 work weeks. In addition to mowing the balds, volunteers removed invasive species, built trails, tabled at events, led hikes, updated a database, contributed photographs and more.

A lively volunteer program can also lead to increased fundraising success, since volunteer hours leverage financial contributions. And, it can help a land trust connect with new people, including some who become passionate supporters. So how do you run an effective, engaging volunteer program? Here’s what SAHC has learned from its experience.

Start where you are. You don’t need a big staff or budget to manage volunteers, says Kristy Urquhart, SAHC’s associate director. These days, four SAHC staff share responsibility for the volunteer program, which requires the equivalent of a half-time position—but they started organizing volunteers before they had any paid staff. Urquhart says that a good starting point can be to hold one annual event,

Opposite: AmeriCorps Project Conserve members, placed in nonprofits across Western North Carolina, assist SAHC with grassy bald habitat restoration on Round Bald within the Highlands of Roan.

SAHC

like the Grassy Ridge Mow-Off. As you build momentum, you can do more.

Set your objectives. First, identify how volunteers can help you accomplish your mission. From there, develop your program. When you design your program to serve clear objectives, you get more return on the effort you put in. And volunteers get a more satisfying experience because they want their work to contribute to something meaningful.

Recruit the volunteers you need.

Once you've set your objectives, you can identify what kind of volunteers you need. Do you need people with special skills, like photographers or naturalists? Do you need people who can do physical work outdoors? To build a network of volunteers, offer a sign-up form online and at events, and ask people to check off their skills and interests. You can also advertise events through local calendar listings, news media, social media, blogs and newsletters. When advertising, emphasize what volunteers will get out of the experience—for example, a chance to learn valuable skills, discover a special place or connect with new people.

Work with groups. Groups are easier than individuals to recruit and organize. And people in groups that share your interests may make especially motivated and committed volunteers. SAHC works with numerous groups, including the forestry department of a local college, children in an outdoor education school, Outward Bound students, AmeriCorps volunteers and crews from Highland Brewing Company—a corporate partner that names its seasonal beers after protected landmarks in the highlands.

Manage your risks. To protect yourselves from liability, have your volunteers sign waivers. Also, check with your insurance company to make sure your policy includes volunteer coverage. At each event, raise volunteers' awareness of staying safe. Before you start, talk about potential risks such as

tripping or poison ivy. Provide applicable safety equipment, such as helmets, goggles and gloves. And make sure that volunteers take on tasks that are appropriate to their skills and abilities.

Show volunteers they're making a difference. Introduce every event with a few words about your mission and how the day's activities will contribute. Conclude by pointing out what your volunteers accomplished—for example, by comparing the site before and after, or by summing up what they got done (so many bags of invasive plants hauled away or miles of trail maintained). Keep your expectations reasonable—don't expect professional work—and thank volunteers for their service.

Show your appreciation. At events, always thank your volunteers—when you talk to the group and when you talk to them one-on-one. After the event, give them a shout-out in your publications and social media. Publish a list of volunteers in your annual report, along with donors. And give awards to recognize outstanding volunteers.

Keep track of volunteer hours. Quantifying your volunteer hours can help you make your case to foundations and donors, by showing how far you can leverage their financial contributions. Often, volunteer hours will count as a matching contribution for a grant. Tallying volunteer hours also gives you another way to say thanks—by showing volunteers how their work adds up.

Tell your story. Take photos of your volunteers in action (and some of them just having fun) and publicize their work in your newsletters, blogs and social media. These stories make volunteers feel appreciated and they build engagement among your other supporters—so your program starts to build momentum.

Give volunteers a great experience. Volunteers who have a good time are more likely to give their time again and to be more active supporters. Some tips



SAHC

Asheville youth from the Green Opportunities training team learn about rare ecosystems on a chilly volunteer work day in the Roan Highlands.

for making volunteers happy: Offer work opportunities that they enjoy. Provide food and T-shirts (T-shirts also help you advertise). Always say thank you. And let them know why their work matters.

In the Highlands of Roan, beauty, community and purpose keep volunteers coming back. Tom Gatti, who has been involved with SAHC since 1976, says that the appeal of the annual Mow-Off comes from the amazing place and the fellowship—“meeting new like-minded people and seeing old friends.”

Some volunteers liked the Mow-Off so much that they started their own. Called the Roany Boyz, these volunteers have come out to the highlands every summer for 13 years, to camp, hike and mow. “It’s helping out in the outdoors,” says David Goforth, one of the original Roany Boyz. “We like the outdoors. And it’s a good way to be together every year in a unique natural setting.”

Return volunteers can take pleasure in the benefits of their labor. Gatti says that he now sees meadows extending through areas they used to call the “blackberry desert.” And it’s not just the beauty of the balds that’s coming back. Biodiversity is on the rise as well, with more small mammals and more birds. Golden-winged warblers, a declining species and a conservation priority, have been spotted in the restored habitats of the mountain meadows.

As Gatti says, “Volunteering for anything you believe in really feeds one’s soul.”

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More Tips

- Maintain a dedicated email address for volunteers to contact the land trust in case of staff turnover.
- Set up a carpool to make traveling to the work site easy.
- At the event, bring extra safety equipment, outerwear and water for the volunteers.
- To see sample forms from SAHC go to www.lta.org/savingland.