



## LIFE Platform Meeting Volunteering for Nature Conservation

19-21 September 2018, Tartu, Estonia

### Summary for policy makers

Volunteering for nature conservation has been a part of LIFE programme, particularly of Nature/Biodiversity projects, for a long time. In terms of policy, only the recent **EU Action Plan for nature, people and the economy** (Action 15) explicitly mentions involvement of young people in nature protection at Natura 2000 sites (in ESC projects). Thus, the need for a more strategic approach was identified—to develop **national volunteering strategies** that recognise the key role of volunteering in nature management and moreover to integrate volunteering for nature conservation into nature/wildlife management strategies. Ideally, the approach should be **harmonized at the EU level** to simplify and encourage volunteering in different countries.

Following the plenary sessions, participants split into working group sessions (WSs) and addressed the following issues:

1. Legal tools and incentives for volunteering (WS1)
2. What motivates volunteers (WS2)
3. The citizen science approach in nature conservation (WS3)

Discussion on the above three topics was followed by the three sessions dedicated to experience on LIFE projects, namely:

1. Engaging volunteers in monitoring activities (WS4)
2. Engaging volunteers in practical conservation work (WS5)
3. Engaging young people as volunteers (WS6)

Participants identified the following practices that can either contribute to or hinder the deployment of volunteers:

- (Core) funding: regardless of the value that volunteers create, involving them in conservation activities requires resources (e.g. training, management).
- The volunteers managing volunteers approach: the approach that helps build responsibility among volunteers and that has been successfully used by Natuurpunt in Belgium.
- Fiscal incentives for companies can help: e.g. encouraging employees to participate in volunteering activities.
- Project-based, “overly structured” volunteer programmes discourage the participation of those who would like to try volunteering without longer-term commitment.

The Royal Society for the Protection for Birds (RSPB), an NGO with one of the longest traditions of involving volunteers in their activities in Europe, estimates that 12,000 of their volunteers contributed 973,000 hours per year to their activities; this is worth over 10 million euros per year.

The experience of the UK and France, countries with a long volunteering history, shows that a certain level of legal regulation has been important in promoting volunteering in society. On the other hand, at least one country, Estonia, has been successful in engaging volunteers in nature conservation

activities even without the enabling legal framework that exists in the UK. This can be partly explained by the volunteers' expressed motives, which go beyond just gaining experience and increasing one's knowledge and skills that may lead to employment.

It became apparent that in some countries more clarity would be needed on the legal position of volunteers: what their rights are, what the benefits are, and what the possible insurance arrangements are. While in the UK and Italy there is a choice of insurance providers, Portugal has only one provider, and no insurance for volunteers is available in Estonia. There are differences among EU countries and gaps that need to be addressed in order to engage volunteers more effectively in conservation activities.

Conflicting policies were identified even in countries with a long tradition of volunteering, such as the UK, where regulations for unemployed job-seekers make volunteering hard and can even impact the benefit payments.

### **What motivates volunteers?**

Overall, it was concluded that there is a lot of enthusiasm for volunteering for nature conservation among across different age groups and different types of voluntary work. Most commonly, the volunteers express a **wish to do something good for nature**, to **be outdoors** and to **socialise** with like-minded people. Again, the good example of the UK showed how organisations can engage professionals in their work so that lawyers, for example, help with their expertise rather than carry out physical volunteering work. This approach is still fairly under-represented in other countries in Europe.

**Community involvement**, the **personal approach** and **ownership** were emphasised as key aspects in long-term volunteer engagement, as well as showing **appreciation** for the work that volunteers do. A **positive feedback loop** and 'thank you' events where their work is acknowledged, also with a prize, are very important in keeping volunteers motivated. No less importantly, **volunteering should be fun!**

A number of specific suggestions on the LIFE programme were made during the workshop discussions, some of which included **lowering own-financing rates** for small NGOs that involve volunteers, using **in-kind contributions**, and giving credit in the evaluation procedure to projects that engage volunteers. To attract young people, as experience from ESC projects shows, **appropriate communication channels** should be used, such as WhatsApp Messenger and Instagram.

### **The way forward**

The participants expressed interest in international **cooperation** but felt there was a **lack of a platform** where contacts could be found. An international database of volunteers that is not limited to young people would be useful. The idea of bringing back a passport for volunteers was raised again; a concept already introduced by the Conservation Volunteer Alliance. For LIFE projects, there could be a mechanism to find best practices and search for projects involving volunteers in the LIFE database.

During the event, **bilateral cooperation** opportunities were discussed between Estonia and Latvia, and between Hungary and the UK. While the Estonian Fund for Nature has all the equipment needed for organising voluntary work, this is currently not the case for the Latvian Fund for Nature; therefore, cooperation to hold camps in Latvia was established. A British participant suggested that in order to attract large groups of volunteers, it would be worth building relationships with some British universities that might be able to bring groups of undergraduate students for a week-long field trip to do volunteer activities in Nature.

Finally, the participants estimated that they represented approximately **100,000 volunteers** through their networks!