

# BC Parks Volunteer Strategy Provincial Public Engagement Report

---

BC Parks is currently developing a province-wide volunteer strategy to improve the volunteer experience and to create a foundation for a consistent and sustainable volunteer program. As part of the process to develop the strategy, BC Parks engaged the public through community workshops and an online survey throughout February and March 2012.

The purpose of these workshops was to enable past, current and future volunteers to provide constructive feedback to BC Parks regarding volunteer activities. The objectives of the public engagement process were:

1. To engage past, present and future volunteers in providing comments that will be incorporated into a BC Parks volunteer strategy.
2. To identify successes of past and current volunteer experiences.
3. To explore new ideas and possibilities for volunteering in BC Parks.
4. To understand challenges faced by past and current volunteers.
5. To identify solutions to overcome these challenges and enable volunteers.
6. To identify ways to improve communication about volunteering in BC Parks.

Workshops were held in the following 11 communities: Victoria, Vancouver, Campbell River, Penticton, Kamloops, Cranbrook, Nelson, Prince George, Smithers, Williams Lake, and Haida Gwaii (Tlell). Over 200 people participated from across the province in the workshops and over 500 individuals participated in the online survey.

The input from the public engagement process is summarized in this report and will be incorporated into a draft volunteer strategy that will be available for public comment in late spring 2012.

For questions about the Volunteer Strategy or the public engagement process, please contact [Bece.Hoskins@gov.bc.ca](mailto:Bece.Hoskins@gov.bc.ca), 250-387-5036.



## Theme 1 – Successes

Organizations and individuals volunteer for BC Parks in a wide variety of projects – from trail maintenance to educational programming, from ecological monitoring to campground hosting. For the vast majority of volunteers, it is their passion for parks that drives them to generously contribute their time and energy. Volunteer projects provide volunteers with a tangible way to connect with their personal passion and to meaningfully contribute to their community and the park system that they value. BC Parks volunteers bring to BC Parks enthusiasm, dedication, and extensive training, expertise and experience.

Below is a list of common themes from the public engagement process that highlight successes in the BC Parks volunteer program.

### Communication

- The BC Parks Volunteer Manual is a useful tool that should be updated as part of the Volunteer Strategy.
- Positive working relationships between BC Parks field staff and volunteers is essential; face-to-face time with staff is essential.
- Effective volunteer projects are built on flexibility and mutual trust and respect.
- Volunteers appreciate when projects are treated as a collaboration with mutual benefits.
- Annual project planning with volunteer groups is an effective way to establish effective relationships between BC Parks staff and volunteers. Groups' Annual General Meetings are a good opportunity to do that.
- Stewardship Agreements and Memorandums of Understanding are sometimes (but inconsistently) used to guide volunteer partnerships and ensure effective communication between BC Parks staff and volunteers.
- Volunteers appreciate opportunities to be heard by BC Parks (for example, at the workshops).

### Ecological Reserve Wardens

- The Ecological Reserve Warden program is a good model for an effective volunteer program that gives volunteers autonomy, while contributing to BC Parks' priorities.
- Ecological Reserve Wardens appreciate the recognition events that have been held for them as they enjoy having the opportunity to network with each other and feel like their contributions are appreciated.

### Events

- Community events in parks provide an opportunity for diverse groups to come together with a common interest to generate community excitement and engage multiple user groups and diverse ages.
- Parks 100 provided a model that communities can build on where BC Parks and local community groups collaborate on fun-filled events.
- Volunteer appreciation events are valuable and enable volunteer groups to collaborate and network among themselves.
- Public work parties or 'Trail Days' accomplish a lot and engage new volunteers.

### **‘Eyes and Ears’**

- Volunteers and recreational park users contribute significantly to the parks system by simply being the ‘eyes and ears’ in areas where BC Parks staff are not able to visit regularly.
- Volunteers often report to staff about access road conditions, trail maintenance concerns, or other noteworthy observations.

### **Seed Funding**

- A small amount of seed funding is greatly appreciated by volunteers and goes a long way because it enables groups to leverage other funding in support of parks.
- Reimbursing volunteers for small expenses is greatly appreciated (e.g. fuel).
- The Community Legacy Project in 2011 is a good example of how seed funding engaged a diverse range of volunteers on valuable project in parks. A continuation of this project, or something like it, is encouraged.
- BC Parks can support volunteer projects by providing materials and other services in-kind.

## **Theme 2 – Challenges & Stumbling Blocks**

During the public engagement process many stumbling blocks were identified. There were local challenges in each location, but provincially the following themes emerged.

### **Agreements**

- BC Parks is lacking consistent agreements and safety procedures for managing volunteer projects.
- When Park Use Permits are used for volunteer projects, the volunteer groups would prefer an agreement tailored to volunteers and their unique needs (rather than for-profit businesses).
- There is a lack of clarity about minimum and maximum age for volunteers under the individual agreements.
- Need to be able to sign agreement forms for multiple years and multiple activities.
- Agreements need to have provincial consistency, but regional autonomy.

### **Communication**

- Communication about the BC Parks Volunteer Program is inconsistent across the province.
- Some volunteers find it challenging to identify what BC Parks’ priorities are and how to contribute to them.
- Communication methods about volunteering opportunities in BC Parks must be suited for young and older audiences.
- BC Parks needs to improve how it acknowledges and appreciates volunteers; recognition must be suited to the individual volunteer.
- It is unclear what defines a ‘volunteer’.
- The majority of BC Parks volunteers are older; need to communicate to younger population about volunteer opportunities.
- BC Parks rarely publically acknowledges volunteer contributions (e.g. local papers or trailhead signs).

- The BC Parks planning process should be communicated and open to volunteer groups; they want to be involved early in the process.

### **Coordination**

- Currently the BC Parks Volunteer Program is not coordinated; guidelines for volunteers are unclear and inconsistent across the province.
- BC Parks does not currently collaborate with other provincial agencies such as Recreation Sites and Trails; this leads to confusion, particularly for volunteers who work on trails that cross both jurisdictions.
- Some volunteers find it challenging to reach BC Parks staff about volunteer opportunities; volunteers would like there to be a single point of contact in their regions for volunteer inquiries.
- Volunteers want limited paperwork and a streamlined process for project approval.
- Volunteers want and need clear roles and responsibilities that align with BC Parks' priorities.
- When field staff changes, there is not a system to ensure that volunteer projects continue to get support and guidance from BC Parks.
- Park Facility Operators must be supportive of volunteers and part of the coordinated Volunteer Program.
- There is not currently a system in place to track and record volunteer hours.
- For Ecological Reserve Wardens, need to ensure coordination between Friends of Ecological Reserves, BC Parks and the Wardens so that they are not asked for the same material multiple times.

### **Funding & Staffing**

- Reductions in the BC Parks budget have resulted in insufficient staff to support volunteers on the ground.
- Volunteers want to make sure that their efforts don't replace the need for more BC Parks field staff.
- Political support for BC Parks and the volunteer strategy is needed.
- BC Parks currently does not have dedicated funding to support the Volunteer Program.

### **Insurance & Liability**

- BC Parks does not cover general liability insurance for groups, only for individuals – this is inconsistent with Recreation Sites and Trails and the Forest Recreation Insurance Program.
- Liability insurance for volunteer groups is expensive.
- Society Directors are not covered by BC Parks insurance which puts them at risk.
- BC Parks lacks clear guidelines on the use of power tools by volunteers; volunteers need clear safety guidelines and procedures.
- For volunteer groups hosting events in BC Parks, there are no clear guidelines on insurance requirements. Event insurance is expensive for groups to purchase.
- Volunteers want to be able to supervise safety within their own groups rather than being required to rely on BC Parks staff supervision.
- BC Parks needs to accept some level of acceptable risk; trust volunteers' common sense.

- Volunteers need assurance that they won't be held liable for work they do under a volunteer agreement.
- Volunteers operating a building that BC Parks owns need clarification about liability & property insurance.

### **Standards**

- BC Parks trail standards need to be communicated better to volunteers.
- Some of BC Parks' trail standards for trails are out of date and sometimes too stringent for volunteers to contribute effectively.
- BC Parks needs to clearly outline roles and responsibilities regarding trail standards.

### **Training**

- BC Parks does not currently provide volunteers with training opportunities; volunteers would benefit from training in: public outreach, chainsaws, trail maintenance, etc.
- Certain training courses should be acknowledged by BC Parks to meet safety standards (e.g. for chainsaws).

## **Theme 3 – Solutions/Possibilities**

During the workshops participants explored new ideas and future possibilities for the BC Parks Volunteer Strategy. Many of the possibilities offer solutions to the challenges identified in the previous section.

### **Coordination**

- BC Parks could develop a network of volunteer stewards across the province to help inform and support the volunteer program regionally.
- BC Parks could hire regional volunteer coordinators or, at least, a provincial coordinator for volunteers.
- Develop a system that matched volunteers with BC Parks priorities.

### **Collaborate with Others**

- Adopt similar volunteer management systems as Ministry of Forest, Lands and Natural Resource Operations' Forest Recreation Insurance Program for Recreation Sites and Trails
- Engage First Nations in the volunteer strategy.
- Link with shared resources that other agencies have access to as a way of supporting volunteer projects (i.e. training, materials, equipment, helicopter time).
- Use Metro Vancouver Parks as an example of good park volunteer management.
- BC Parks could bring back Park Advisory Board to engage volunteer groups in the planning process.

### **Education**

- Link volunteer opportunities with schools and classroom projects.
- Support volunteers (and students) to deliver interpretation in parks.
- Volunteers could provide community education in parks (e.g. speakers' series).

## Networking

- Create a directory of park users and/or volunteers.
- BC Parks could facilitate networking of groups through hosting annual meetings/events.
- BC Parks can help groups increase membership.

## Recognition

- Acknowledge volunteer groups on trail maps & signs.
- BC Parks could provide a small amount of seed funding to reimburse volunteer expenses.
- Develop a consistent BC Parks recognition strategy to ensure consistent recognition of volunteers (e.g. gift cards, hats, shirts, certificates, newspaper ads, links on website, annual report, etc.).
- Explore creative recognition for volunteers such as early campground reservations, etc.

## Recruitment

- BC Parks can help volunteer groups recruit members.
- Promote volunteering as a way for people to be active and healthy.
- Host community events that attract families and introduce volunteer opportunities, with a focus on fun.
- BC Parks could facilitate mentorship for succession planning with Ecological Reserve Wardens.
- Connect volunteer opportunities with new retirees; enable professional expertise to be shared.
- Find a way to encourage people who are going on a recreational trip to remote areas to voluntarily assist with small volunteer tasks.
- Host public volunteer trail work parties as a way to recruit new volunteers.

## Sponsorship

- Link corporate sponsors to volunteer projects.
- Encourage Park Use Permittees to give back to parks through support for volunteers.

## Training

- BC Parks could offer an annual pre-season volunteer training session.
- Volunteer groups can offer expertise to train BC Parks staff or other volunteers.
- By offering training opportunities, BC Parks could recruit younger volunteers.

# Theme 4 – Tools & Resources

## Acknowledgement

- Provide volunteers with a way to be identified in the park (e.g. hats, badges, etc.)
- Identify volunteer groups on website to facilitate connections/links.
- Tell the story of volunteers through social media, website and media.
- Enable volunteers to share pictures for BC Parks to post on website.

## Categorize Types of Volunteer work

- Clearly identify forms, safety guidelines and procedures for each type of volunteer work.

- Distinguish between individual volunteer opportunities and group opportunities.
- Ensure processes are clear for non-field volunteer work (e.g. archiving, management planning, etc.).

### **Communications & Resources**

- Need to ensure communication is not only via website (in parks too, where there is often no internet).
- BC Parks could provide volunteer groups who engage in community outreach with supporting material.
- Enable BC Parks volunteers to easily access the Jerry the Moose costume.
- Online events calendar (if possible, user generated).
- Training resources that could be used by organizations to orient new volunteers.
- BC Parks staff contact information.
- Provide volunteers with links to funding resources.
- Outline what volunteers are allowed to do with respect to raising funds to support their work in parks (e.g. t-shirt sales, fundraisers, etc.).
- Post relevant policies, forms and templates on website.

### **Volunteer Database**

- Enable volunteers to express interest in volunteering through BC Parks website.
- BC Parks could post volunteer opportunities on website.
- Database of volunteer groups and their activities.
- Database could expand into a mentorship program for new/returning volunteers.