

Wild Things Workshop for Stewards and Monitors
February 7, 2010
 Notes By Karen Tharp

Session VII:

Working with People (officials, neighbors, experts, volunteers, land owners)

Resource Experts:

Pat Hayes, Steward, Orland Grassland

Kent Fuller, Steward, Miami Woods and Glenview Naval Air Station Prairie

Don Parker, Leader of Habitat 2030 restoration group

What are the best ways to recruit for workdays and manage groups of volunteers, especially large groups?

Recruit some experienced volunteers to be crew leaders for large groups of people. Definition of a large group—over 20 people.

Create a public presence and help define the image of who you are in the community. Conservation is basically a local issue. Reach out to the surrounding community. Invite people to come to their backyard...the Forest Preserve District may own it, but it is for the people. Engage the local newspapers—they want to hear from you and are always looking for ways to fill up their pages about people and places in the community. Make sure to post your workdays in the reoccurring calendar and advertise your events and other special outings. Work with them to write up a special feature about your site and the people that take care of it. If you can, make sure to check the dates and information they are printing...sometimes it is not always accurate. Host an event or a wildflower walk now and then to provide another opportunity to engage those who may not want to join a workday and to create awareness. Send a press release to the local media.

When recruiting, connect with local papers and existing organizations that already have a networking structure in place such as service organizations, corporations, faith based organizations, churches, and schools. Word of mouth is one of the best recruiting strategies. Advertise within local church and library newsletters. Connect with your local chamber of commerce.

Groups such as North Branch work with all three ages of kids: grade school, high school, and college. They take the time to make sure the activity matches the skill level, i.e. 4th graders would help gather seed and pull garlic mustard. For large groups especially, insist on a high parent or teacher/child ratio. You can also team up older volunteers with younger ones...make it a team effort, i.e. someone uses the loppers and cuts and the other gathers. Make sure everyone has a job. Spread out the responsibility within your group and assign specific tasks to certain people. For instance some groups have a volunteer who only handles the website, another for sending our emails before workdays, etc. You don't want to bug people, find the right balance...but consistent communication is important.

Reusing old political signs, post some information a week or two before an event, especially if it is along a trail that is well used. People are already finding time to visit this place (to hike, etc) and value it at some level. Give them an opportunity to learn about how they can become more involved.

For projects and groups that are new and don't have the time and capacity to host an event, there was a suggestion to tie in and use the energy of other kinds of events that are happening, i.e. earth day, national public lands day, bird migration season, etc. and schedule an activity within that time period. Contact the local newspapers and find out what their deadline is to post the event. Connect with church groups and scout groups and give them "an opportunity to work with nature on earth day." DuPage County Forest Preserve District mails a postcard to their neighbors, personally inviting them.

Also important to standardize a workday schedule and/or publicize it well in advance. For example, Bluff Spring Fen's workdays are always on the first and third Saturday of each month. Bluff Spring Fen has also found it useful to combine their tours and workdays, by having the workday in the morning and the tour in the afternoon. Make sure the workday is somewhere along the tour route. Standardizing a workday schedule shows stability and gives credibility. It demonstrates to the community that the group is deeply connected at these sites and is dedicated to the work on the ground.

How do you get a volunteer to return?

Be very clear on what you are trying to accomplish that day in simple terms and make it a pleasant experience. Keep the talk in the beginning short and create opportunities for one-on-one conversations. Some groups have an official greeter that makes sure the day is running smoothly and has a book that everyone signs into that day. The official greeter also makes note of new volunteers and something memorable about them. (i.e. they just became a grandparent, they enjoy working with wood and carpentry, etc.). At the Morton Arboretum the staff and volunteers personally thank every person who is leaving the workday...means a lot! Let them know the work that they are doing is important and show them what has been accomplished because of it and how it will contribute to more success down the road.

Food and drink brings people together. Coming together over a meal is one of our most cherished traditions. Many groups add food into the mix with a workday potluck or have special occasions where they send out an email inviting everyone to a workday and "we will enjoy some homemade soup at the end of our day." Consider buying local and organically grown produce as food for the workdays and events...make that connection with the local growers and consumers. They are already advocates for sustainability and care for the environment. Be aware, however, of foragers or those who have no regard for sustainable wild harvesting of plants, forbs, and mushrooms. Plus they need to know that herbicides are sometimes used in these places to control invasive species and that the areas are unfit for foraging (in addition to this being illegal in the forest preserves).

Don mentioned the 20-30s group where they are working to get a younger generation involved. The approach is grassroots oriented, mostly word-of-mouth. They are essentially creating a culture that doesn't exist. When recruiting, many of us begin with our friends, colleagues and acquaintances. Also, it is important to learn about all the new ways that people are now using to communicate, such as twitter, facebook, etc. For example, any group can create a facebook page...but how do you start? A session on how to use these social networking sites is needed maybe at the next Wild Things conference.

Corporations are another good source of volunteers. They can sometimes promise big crowds, i.e. 200 people and you have to plan for that large amount, but typically you will get fewer people than this. For these large groups it is best to all meet in one big place and then divide up into groups. You will then be able to adjust the group sizes if your turnout is much lower to ensure a good experience for everyone.

For general workdays and events, RSVP should not have to be required. You want to make these opportunities open and flexible, especially today when schedules are already so busy. Prepare well in advance of your workday, especially for large groups, i.e. flag the invasive shrubs you want cut, etc. If you can, get information in their hands beforehand or something to take home to reinforce the work that

was accomplished that day. Pat has a “Dress for Success” handout that she gives to school groups before they come out and it is available to download at their website at www.orlandgrassland.org.

Whenever you have to deal with situations or people, think safety first. Divide and conquer. Make sure the ratio of leaders to participants is high. As a general rule, no more than 15 people per leader and age makes a difference, the ratio may go to 5 people for younger kids. Always assess how things are going during the workday. If there is a problem person, it is best to stick yourself to them and assign someone else to monitor the day and the rest of the participants. It is equally important to evaluate the work leaders and make sure their temperament fits,— i.e. don’t assign a timid person to be a work leader with a more demanding group of volunteers such as high school students.

How do stewards and volunteer coordinators maintain momentum and enthusiasm within the volunteer community (as well as for the stewards and coordinators themselves), and how do we use this momentum to develop committed, long-term volunteers?

It is important for stewards to gather and find time to relax and reflect upon their work and thank themselves for their efforts. Many groups have some sort of annual gathering, i.e. stewards luncheon in the winter, summer picnic, a morning breakfast to watch the sunrise, a potluck after the annual seeding event. Bluff Spring Fen has a barbeque at the home of one of the stewards that is working on garden plant propagation...where there is a mix of good food, company, and learning something new. In addition to their potluck during the seeding season, Orland Grassland will be hosting a sunrise breakfast especially inviting the local community. Spring Creek has an “Ignite the Night” celebration during the first week in October. The Forest Preserve District of Cook County helps with the organization and promotion of this event. They have raffles, light bonfires, invite people to bring out animals and birds of the night for a close up, and they have horse buggy rides where they take people on tours and talk about what is happening at the site.

Realize that there are different kinds of volunteers and don’t get discouraged. When recruiting, don’t have such high expectations. The most common response rate is typically one person for 100 people. Keep getting your message out there...people are usually not going to respond to you in one message or one invitation. Pat shared a personal story of how it took her four times of seeing the Orland Grassland article in the newspaper before she finally made the time to get involved. There is no magic bullet for recruiting.

Talk to people in simple terms, but also describe what you are going to do. “We are controlling weeds that are killing the wildflowers”. Start at the basics...“the loss of the wildflowers, hurts the insects, butterflies, and ultimately the animals that live in this area”. Teach the wisdom that everything is connected...and humans are part of that connection.

Become part of the local community. At Orland Grassland volunteers were invited to participate in the local “Orland Days”. Their booth is one of the most popular. They have educational games for kids and parents/grandparents. They have a sign up sheet where people can put their name, email and or phone and they follow up with them...IMPORTANT to follow up!

Finding the right fit for a potential volunteer is also important, and matching them up with their strength and interest is key. Ask them what they do, what they like to do, and have a list ready of what kinds of help you need and see where exactly they might fit. Email them, call them...this is one of the best ways to recruit volunteers. People need to be asked. Some groups have volunteers whose job is only to greet people (on workdays, at events, at their booth), and they also play the role of follow up person.

Be aware of all of the “Buzz” words that are out there, such as restoration, invasive species, biodiversity. Most people may not know what these mean...be simple. “How would you explain this to your mother?” One nice approach...”You are going to see plants and animals that you may have never seen before. You are going to see butterflies leading you down this path in the summer. You are going to see things that you may have experienced as a child and maybe your children have never seen.” Connect with people on an emotional and intellectual level.

How to handle people when you are working in the woods, cutting invasive trees (for instance) and they come up to you and are upset because it seems like you are destroying the area?

Be ready to provide them with a SIMPLE explanation and then a place where they can obtain more specific information as a follow up (i.e. your website). Some groups give out a business cards that has their website and contact information. Part of the explanation may be to show how this is not a personal decision you have made to do this work, but how it fits in with a long term plan that is approved by the landowner (i.e. Forest Preserve District) and other collaborative agencies and organizations that are supporting the restoration of this area. “Just like surgery, it may look bad now as I am taking out these invasive trees and brush out, but the long term health of the native plants, butterflies and species that live here depend upon this activity to be able to grow and prosper. “ Invite them back to see the results or for a longer conversation over coffee.

If you sense anger, the best way is to diffuse them and bridge them over. A method that has worked reminds us that people are angry for a legitimate reason, maybe they don't fully understand what is happening, and anger is a way for them to represent how they feel. If you dismiss that anger, it will insult them. You don't have to agree with them, but empathize with them. For example, start off by saying “I have heard that before and others have come up to me with a similar concern...” mention the organizations that support the work you are doing and some reasons why they shouldn't feel that way. Another approach is to ask them directly why they feel the way they do with the understanding that if you are taking the time to hear them, they should extend the same courtesy to hear you and answer those concerns directly. Always be friendly, not combative and don't take these criticisms personally. Let them know that you have received training and that your work is considered an established practice that is happening all over the Chicago region (actually all over the state!).

Note...if you have an individual or group that you know is strongly opposed to your work and is asking you questions only to try to use it out of context later against you, it is usually best to just NOT talk with them. You are not going to change their mind, especially when their motives are untrue. If the individual is extremely angry and your safety feels threatened, just walk away and come back later. If a volunteer seems threatening and is endangering others, then ask them to leave. Keep in mind...these circumstances are usually rare and extreme. Most people are just curious and it is an opportunity to expand their horizons and maybe will lead to your recruiting of another volunteer!

What are the most successful ways of keeping officials, neighbors and users updated on restoration and monitoring, to achieve the best support for conservation?

If you are a 501c3, be aware of the regulations that are in place that prohibit your organization to lobby.

It is sometimes good to have one person in particular that is known in the community as the main contact for a site. When problems or opportunities arise, people know who to go to. It is important for that person to get to know the community and build trust over time.

Keep a scrapbook of articles from the newspaper on your project and before and after photos of your site. This will help you to show the progress that has occurred and will be a nice visual tool when meeting with officials.

Kent brought a copy of the annual report that he puts together for his site, Miami Woods. This will be available at the North Branch website (<http://www.northbranchrestoration.org/>) and is another nice tool to show progress. He provides a copy to the county board members and others, especially those with influence.