

Healing through Service *with* Public Lands

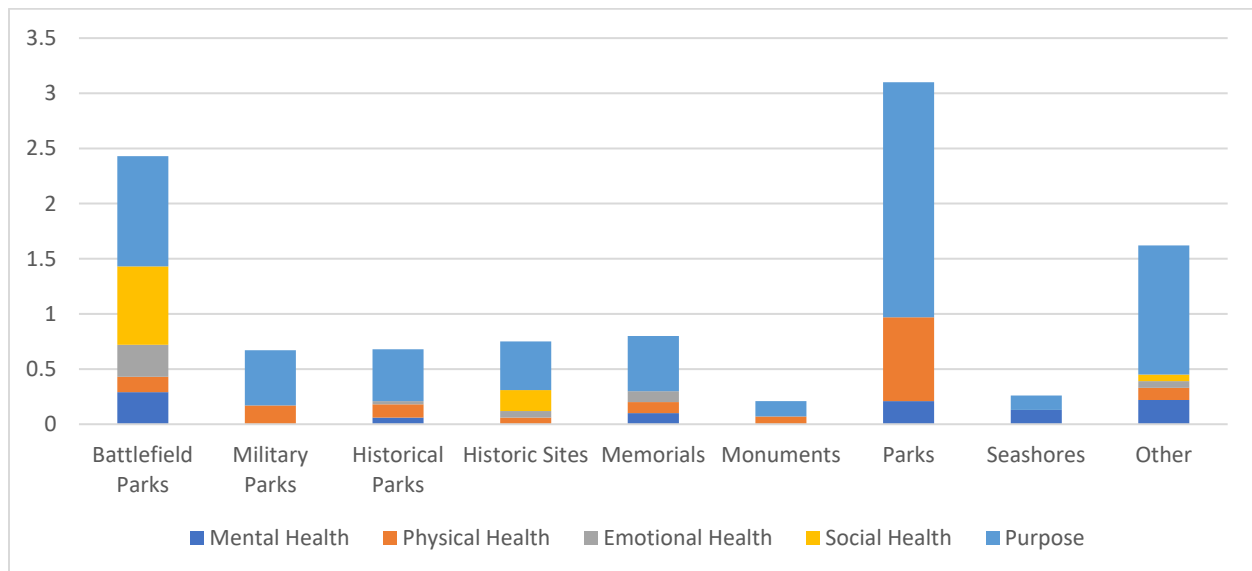
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Individuals who invest their time, energy, and passion in volunteering in places of natural, cultural, and/or historical significance benefit in multiple ways. These include ongoing or lifelong learning, developing and maintaining a sense of purpose in life, stronger relational bonds with places and people for more durable social health, emotional health, and mental health, and enhanced physical health. My research on volunteers with the National Park Service completed in 2024/2025 clearly show these benefits, and many others for public lands, wildlife, diverse ecosystems, and park visitors.

The figure below shows how NPS volunteers perceive impact for themselves across different park designations, excluding the impact of lifelong learning. Sense of purpose is the most prominent (after lifelong learning) and cuts across all park designations. Some parks use team-based volunteer projects more than others and thus more readily cultivate enhanced social and emotional health. Other parks offer more individual-based volunteer projects that enable enhanced physical health. Across the board, it is clear that individuals can find pathways to healing and a better quality of life when they interact *with* natural, historical, and/or cultural spaces through service.

Likelihood of VIP Statements across NPS Designations (sans lifelong learning)



Here are a few quotes from volunteers who have found purpose and improved health through service with public lands.

Lifelong Learning

My niece told me, because I'm the one in the family that's always providing or giving information, whether they wanted or not about the Civil War, and my niece said, "I guess you don't like going someplace where you're not the person who knows the most about the Civil War." I said, "Are you kidding me?" I said, "I love it. I get to go and talk to those folks and learn and maybe share a little bit with them." So, you know, that's just a plus. Yeah, and you get to share that information with visitors.

Sense of Purpose

I come from a very long line of people who are very involved in their community and you know things like my grandfather was in World War II, my uncle was in Vietnam, but I had ancestors who literally supplied blankets in Pennsylvania to soldiers who are fighting for the revolutionary cause so like for me there's a long line of people who have always tried to better where they are and I think I carry a little bit of that with me when I'm volunteering as I'm trying to just kind of better that little part of where I am.

Physical Health

[There is] the closest waterfall to [the main road], and it's just loaded with people and people actually walk further to the trailhead than it is from the trailhead to the waterfall but there's so many other falls in this park that are more beautiful, you know, less hectic, because you're walking at people, people are walking at you, and so it's like, I just, I don't, you know, it's just people don't know any better, right? Because they look at the brochure, they see a picture, and they guess that's where I am. That is one thing, but with social media, there are more and more, I'll say, pristine places that I used to go where I knew I would never see anybody else, and then all it takes is one Instagrammer, and show up and you've got the unicorn floaties in the water or the pink flamingo or whatever. So, right but you can still get away from people, don't get me wrong, I have to walk a little further to go to a little different spot, but I can take you in the park today and we can go fishing and we wouldn't see another person all day long.

Mental Health

I've been looking online for volunteer opportunities at the park for some time, probably a year. I think with my mom's passing I felt more like it would be better for my mental health. That I would be more proactive. And I saw that they were looking for a camp host that was associated with the visitor center. And so, I put in my application for that, and I didn't hear back, and I followed up by email and it turns out what I was applying for was different than what I had in my head. Because they wanted somebody to live here, but it worked out since I live local that I could just come into the visitor center and work, like, just four hours for one day a week.

Social Health

The other thing about the Thursday morning job is the camaraderie between the 15 of us. We all went to a safety program. We all watch after each other and we will make sure that somebody does not get hurt. And we are not shy of saying you're doing the wrong thing. You should wear

your hearing protection. And it's not just me, it's all of us looking after each other. And when somebody is sick, we worry about them. When somebody doesn't show up for a few weeks, we worry about them. So, there is that camaraderie that's also very important.

Emotional Health

When I'm here actually giving the tours, it's like being on vacation because I'm in the moment. Everything else that's going on, and things are fine, but I mean, but still, all the day-to-day stuff you've got to decide and everything else. When you're doing this, you're doing this, and nothing else. You realize, I mean, at the end of the day, I'm exhausted, but I'm also realizing I'm refreshed, and I've been somewhere different, and, you know, just living in a different place of my head than the day-to-day, what has to be fixed, who needs what, grocery shopping and all that other stuff. So, it's given me an anchor. I mean, it's given me a topic and a place to, it's given me a focus and given me a sense of expertise, which sort of surprises me, given where I started, but it doesn't surprise me.