

Followers of my research have been asking me questions about my findings, now that they know my field work is complete, and I am in the process of writing for book and other projects. Below are questions I have been asked. Please contact me at thomas.bryer@ucf.edu if you would like to learn more about volunteers in the National Park System. Keep in mind there is much more I can communicate with respect to each of these questions, so please keep an eye out for my book announcements or follow up with me to dive deeper on anything written on this page. If you use any of this information, please provide a citation to this website.

1. Have you been able to collect any data on what percent of a park's employees are volunteers or can you comment on how parks rely on their volunteers? It seems to me that in some parks and certain departments specifically they are largely made up of volunteers.

Based on Fiscal Year 2024 data, approximately 70% of the NPS workforce are volunteers. This only includes “position-based volunteers” who had active volunteer agreements that included a general or specific commitment to perform certain tasks or be present at certain times.

In terms of hours, approximately 11% of hours worked across the volunteer and paid staff workforce were from volunteers. This includes both position-based volunteers and event volunteers who appear for a single, non-recurring event, such as a litter cleanup, invasive species removal, or infrastructure rehabilitation (e.g., fence restoration or painting).

These data are NPS-wide, and every unit of the National Park System will be different, some with a larger volunteer workforce and some with a smaller. There is also likely variation across the calendar year, as seasonal rangers depart but volunteers remain.

Across interpretation and education and visitor services divisions and functions, many NPS units will have a larger volunteer workforce, but paid rangers contribute more hours individually and collectively. Thus, the observation that “certain departments . . . are largely made up of volunteers” is true, but most NPS units are not *dependent on* volunteers. They cannot be, as a volunteer can choose to stop showing up without notice, even if they have a signed commitment (that said, none of the 130 volunteers I interviewed would, without just cause, simply stop showing up, and many would give more time if asked).

Overall, parks do rely on volunteers. Rangers commonly observed that they could not do what they must if it were not for the volunteers. The reason is volunteers free up time for rangers to perform other functions, spend more time with visitors, develop new programs, or deal with the administrative responsibilities of their job. Volunteers also *help parks do more* by, for instance, keeping a presence at a historic site to answer visitor questions or provide formal or informal tours. In some parks, volunteers are the only resources to perform certain functions that enrich the visitor experience, such as maintaining gardens. Without volunteers, these enriching but not strictly essential tasks would not be performed.

2. What are some ways that volunteers have shaped the parks that you have worked at overtime? What variety of jobs have they completed?

Volunteers work across park divisions. Most are in interpretation and education (42%), but they also work in facilities management (19%), natural resources (13%), as campground hosts (9%), in protection/law enforcement (7%), in administration (4%), and in cultural resources (4%).

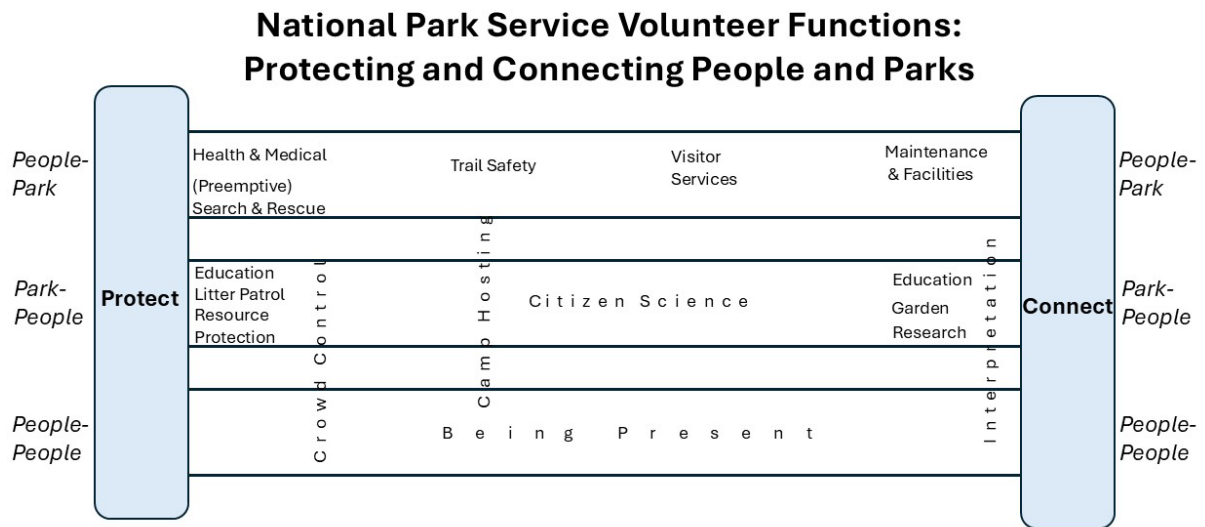
One of the most significant ways in which volunteers have shaped the parks where I have worked and visited is through their visibility. For many visitors and some park locations, they are more likely to see or have a deep interaction with a volunteer compared to a ranger, particularly if the visitor chooses not to enter the official visitor center. Even if they do go to a visitor center, volunteers are sometimes the frontline greeters who can call on rangers for support if necessary.

In addition to being present, volunteers act as additional eyes and ears on park property. This is vitally important, as visitors might have questions, there might be natural hazards that need to be addressed (e.g. downed trees) to ensure visitor safety, there might be bear sightings that create potentially dangerous situations, and there might be visitors in need of medical support. If not for the volunteer being generally present, a visitor experiencing a heart attack to suffering a serious wound might not live.

In my year of embedded volunteerism, I personally performed a variety of functions, including as an interpretive guide of a cave, a cave tour assistant on the rear of a tour group, living history blacksmith, trail roving for litter pickup and visitor interaction, visitor center operations, cabin camp host, and camper/tent campground host. I was certified at Cumberland Gap National Historical Park for Heartsaver First Aid CPR AED, which enhanced my contribution of simply being present and wearing the NPS volunteer uniform.

There is so much more I can communicate about individual volunteers and the unique contributions they have made, and I will have a book out that is devoted to tell these stories of impact. If you are interested in stories of impact in a specific functional area or a specific type of park, I am happy to share.

Generally, see the image below that summarizes the unique contributions volunteers made in the parks, organized on the three continua of protection-connection: (1) protect people from/connect people to the park, (2) protect the park from/connect the park to people, and (3) protect people from/connect people to people.



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3. What are some of the reasons people have provided for why and how they have made time to volunteer with the NPS?

There are as many answer to this question are there are volunteers; no volunteer is exactly like any other in their motivation within or across parks and regions. It is thus important for volunteer coordinators in parks to know their volunteers, understand who they are and what they want to contribute, and understand how they want to be recognized. Some volunteers love potluck meals or picnics as acknowledgement, others yearn for enrichment activities such as visits to other NPS sites or special access tours within the parks where they serve, others enjoy the simple words of “thank you,” and all really like the branded shirts, hats, jackets, or water bottles. (The volunteer uniform, for me, really was a wonderful psychological boost; it communicated that I am part of something bigger than myself and that I am a valued member of the team).

Among the reasons volunteers gave for contributing were a desire to benefit themselves. Some sought community and social belonging. Others wanted to escape isolation and loneliness. Others recognized the physical, emotional, and mental health benefits of volunteering with the parks, and still others found their wives wanted them out of the house after retirement (it was always the husbands who were given the boot!). Of course, many volunteers truly enjoyed the work: educating visitors about a topic of interest, participating in a living history weapons demonstration, or cleaning the environment while out for regular hikes. Some volunteers also saw opportunity for career development, with volunteering as a foot in the door to future NPS employment (I certainly hope these volunteers remain passionate given the current environment).

Volunteers are also motivated by what they can give to others, particularly focused on youth enrichment and education. One of the most often cited examples of a favorite volunteer activity is administering the Jr. Ranger oath to young visitors!

In terms of how volunteers make time, most position-based volunteers (43%) are age 55+ and retired or semi-retired. On the other hand, most event volunteers are under the age of 15 (16%) and likely associated with Scout or youth groups. Event volunteers come from all age groups.

In my experience as a volunteer working with my family, I have experienced the potential for whole-family volunteering, and this is an area where I would enjoy seeing NPS develop new capacities and opportunities. Based on the data, whole families (or at least a single parent and child) are actively volunteering for events, but there is an opportunity for more position-based volunteers. Available time is a barrier for adults with kids if parks do not have opportunities for families to volunteer together.

4. How do the people who serve as volunteers benefit from their service?

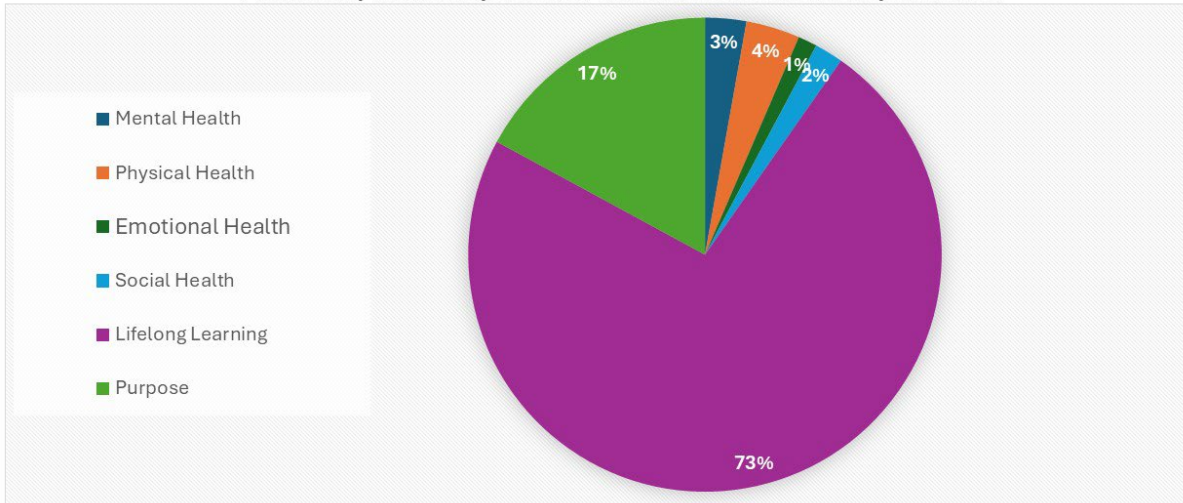
Based on my analysis of 122 interviews with volunteers across 9 NPS unit designations (i.e., National Park, National Historical Park, National Historic Site, National Monument, et cetera), I find broadly that volunteers define the impact on themselves across six dimensions: (1) mental health, (2) physical health, (3) emotional health, (4) social health, (5) lifelong learning, and (6) getting a sense of purpose. Across all park designations, lifelong learning and sense of purpose are the biggest impacts, but there are some designations that stand out. For example, volunteers at National Battlefield Park sites report a significant impact in social health, or the extent to which volunteers form social bonds with other volunteers. Perhaps not surprisingly, they also report greater impacts in mental health and emotional health. As another example, National Park volunteers report significant impact in physical health. These differences, after removing lifelong learning and sense of purpose, align with the nature of the parks and the kinds of activities volunteers perform at these park locations. See the charts below and keep an eye out for my book for a detailed discussion of these findings along with examples.

This first chart shows the number of statements made by volunteers (VIPs) across these categories of impact for self. They are shown in a pie chart and communicated as a percentage of total statements across each category.

The second chart shows that differences across NPS unit designations, which are described above. The bars basically show the likelihood one would find mention of each category of impact for self in a given interview with a volunteer at that type of park.

National Park System Volunteer Impact for Self: VIP Perceptions

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National Park System Volunteer Impact on Self: VIP Perceptions

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