

Introduction to environmental volunteering

Volunteering is a fantastic way to contribute to environmental and conservation efforts, making a tangible difference in the world. It involves dedicating your time and energy to support various causes, from wildlife protection to habitat restoration.

This guide will introduce you to the concept of volunteering in the context of environmental and conservation issues, providing examples from both history and today to inspire your involvement.

What is environmental volunteering?

Environmental volunteering involves working on projects and initiatives that aim to protect and restore natural environments, conserve wildlife and promote sustainability. It can include activities such as:

- 🌿 **Habitat restoration:** Planting trees, cleaning up polluted areas and restoring natural habitats.
- 🌿 **Wildlife protection:** Assisting with wildlife surveys, rescue operations and habitat monitoring.
- 🌿 **Education and advocacy:** Promoting environmental awareness through workshops, events and community outreach.



Historical examples of environmental volunteering

Formation of the RSPB (1889, UK)

- **What happened:** The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) was founded in 1889 by a group of women who wanted to stop the hunting of birds for feathers, which were used in hats. They began campaigning to protect birds and their habitats, and over time, the organisation grew into one of the UK's largest conservation charities.
- **Impact:** Today, the RSPB manages over 200 nature reserves and works with volunteers to protect birds and other wildlife across the UK. They also run educational events, like the Big Garden Birdwatch, which encourages people to count the birds in their gardens and report what they see.
- **Why it matters:** The RSPB has shown how a small group can make a big difference, inspiring people to care about birds and nature. Their Big Garden Birdwatch event helps track bird populations and raises awareness about the importance of protecting wildlife.

Formation of the Wildlife Trusts (1912, UK)

- **What happened:** The first of what would become the Wildlife Trusts was established in the UK in 1912, beginning with the creation of the Society for the Promotion of Nature Reserves (SPNR). Over time, more local trusts were formed, working together to protect wildlife and natural habitats across the country. Eventually, they united under the name “The Wildlife Trusts.”
- **Impact:** The Wildlife Trusts now manage over 2,300 nature reserves and work with volunteers to protect local wildlife, restore habitats, and educate communities about conservation.
- **Why it matters:** The Wildlife Trusts inspire people to volunteer and take action for nature, creating a powerful network that works together to protect the UK’s natural heritage and biodiversity for future generations.

The Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) (1930s-1940s)

- **What happened:** During the Great Depression, the U.S. government established the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) as part of President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal program. The CCC employed young men to work on conservation projects across the country.
- **Impact:** The CCC was instrumental in developing national parks, planting trees and building infrastructure such as trails and roads. It significantly contributed to the preservation and enhancement of America’s natural landscapes.
- **Why it matters:** The CCC demonstrated how organised volunteer efforts can have a lasting impact on conservation and provide valuable skills and employment opportunities.

TreePeople (1973-Present)

- **What happened:** Founded in Los Angeles by and 18 year old Andy Lipkis, TreePeople is an organisation that focuses on urban forestry and environmental education. Volunteers participate in tree planting, maintenance and community outreach programmes.
- **Impact:** TreePeople has planted over 2 million trees in Southern California and has educated thousands of people about environmental stewardship. Volunteers play a key role in these initiatives, helping to enhance urban green spaces and promote sustainability.
- **Why It Matters:** TreePeople's work demonstrates the impact of local volunteer efforts in improving urban environments and fostering community engagement in conservation.

Contemporary examples of environmental volunteering

The Great British Beach Clean (1994-Present)

- **What happened:** Organised by the Marine Conservation Society (MCS), the Great British Beach Clean is an annual event where volunteers clean beaches across the UK. The event also includes data collection on marine litter.
- **Impact:** The beach clean-up events help remove significant amounts of litter from coastlines and provide valuable data to understand the sources and impacts of marine pollution. Volunteers contribute to cleaner beaches and greater awareness of marine conservation issues.
- **Why it matters:** This campaign highlights the importance of community involvement in addressing marine pollution and the role volunteers play in environmental monitoring and advocacy.

Volunteering at Chester Zoo (2009–Present)

- **What happened:** Chester Zoo started offering a range of volunteering opportunities for people passionate about wildlife and conservation. Volunteers can help with activities such as guiding visitors, assisting with educational programmes, supporting events and even helping the zoo's gardening team. Young people can also do their volunteering section of their Duke of Edinburgh award at the zoo.
- **Impact:** By volunteering, people contribute to the zoo's mission of preventing extinction by educating the public about wildlife. Volunteers play a key role in creating a welcoming experience for visitors, helping spread awareness about conservation.
- **Why it matters:** Volunteering at Chester Zoo allows people to be directly involved in conservation efforts, gain new skills and inspire others to care for animals and the environment. It's a hands-on way to make a difference and support global wildlife protection efforts.

The Ocean Cleanup Project (2013–Present)

- **What happened:** The Ocean Cleanup project, founded by Boyan Slat, aims to remove plastic waste from the world's oceans. The project relies on volunteers for various tasks, including participating in beach clean-ups, assisting with research and spreading awareness.
- **Impact:** Volunteers have helped with the development and testing of innovative technologies to tackle ocean plastic pollution. The project has gained global support and has successfully collected significant amounts of plastic waste from the ocean.
- **Why it matters:** The Ocean Cleanup project highlights how modern volunteering efforts can contribute to innovative solutions for pressing environmental problems.

How you can get involved

- 1. Find local opportunities:** Look for local conservation groups, wildlife organisations or environmental charities that need volunteers. Check websites or social media pages for volunteer opportunities. This is also a really useful website to look for opportunities where you are - **Environment job volunteer opportunities**
- 2. Participate in events:** Join community clean-ups, tree-planting events or wildlife surveys. These activities often welcome volunteers of all ages and skill levels.
- 3. Advocate and educate:** Volunteer to educate others about environmental issues through school projects, community workshops or social media.
- 4. Find online citizen science opportunities:** There are ways you can volunteer from the comfort of your own home. **Zooniverse** is a great way to find opportunities to contribute to people-powered research to help conservation.
- 5. Do some extra research:** There's lots of information online that can help you to help you make a decision about whether volunteering is for you. **Prospects guide to volunteering-** includes a section on conservation volunteering with links to various organisations

Volunteering offers a hands-on way to support environmental and conservation efforts. By participating in volunteer initiatives, you can see how individual contributions can lead to significant positive changes. Whether you're planting trees, cleaning up beaches or supporting wildlife protection, your efforts will play a crucial role in creating a more sustainable and healthier planet.