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## Community Volunteers, Thank You for Your Time – and Following Rules

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## Community Volunteers, Thank You for Your Time – and Following Rules

**By Linda Walters**  
UCF Forum columnist  
Wednesday, June 19, 2013

Saturday was perfect. It combined seeing old friends, meeting new and interesting people, eating good food, and being outside on the coast of Florida, all while saving the world!

What was going on? My biology research involves creating scientifically based ways for restoring oyster reefs and stabilizing shorelines, and part of that includes organizing community volunteers. Saturday there were 85 of us stabilizing a seriously eroding shoreline in front of the Eldora State House in Canaveral National Seashore. This magnificent building dates back to the 1800s and has a long and interesting history as a private home, schoolhouse, hotel and brothel. Now, it is a museum that lost a lot of shoreline when Super Storm Sandy brought much rain and wind to the east coast of Florida last fall.

With everyone working at full throttle, we planted hundreds of mangroves and marshgrass plants and deployed stabilized oyster shell along more than 100 yards of shoreline in five hours. All three groups of organisms reduce erosion while providing habitat for hundreds of lagoon animals. It was spectacular to watch this transformation from barren to living shoreline.

What makes for a good community volunteer event? From the volunteer's perspective, it must be a worthy cause, the event must be well-organized both before and during, and most important, volunteers must feel like they are genuinely contributing to the success of the project. A variety of tasks is also a plus, especially if there is a lot of hard labor involved. If there is only heavy lifting or shoveling to do, the event should be advertised as such.

For outdoor events, it is essential that the organizers remember to always have safety on their minds and have a good stock of sunscreen, insect repellent, bandages, and the necessary emergency contact and liability forms. Also, bathroom access is nice or at least knowledge ahead of time if there are no bathroom facilities available nearby.

A few perks are nice, too. I'm a fan of T-shirts or goodie bags as well as a free lunch and lots of ice-cold beverages in the hot summer months. Grant funds often do not cover any of these extras. Funds for these usually come from donations by private companies and organizations such as the Coastal Conservation Association. If donations were not possible, then assume that any perks come from the pockets of the organizers. (Never complain about the perks!)

And turning the tables: What makes a good community volunteer? Foremost is interest in the project, be it removing invasive species or assisting in a soup kitchen.

Second, is reading and actually following the volunteer instructions. These include showing up on time, wearing appropriate clothing, and providing whatever you were asked to bring, such as a refillable water bottle. We have developed a rule that we leave from the boat dock on time. Through the years, too many people have called and asked us to wait as they were "almost there." For some, "almost there" actually meant they had not quite gotten out of bed to make the 45-minute drive. With 10 other volunteers already on the boat, that is a lot of palpable frustration.

Third, is an excellent sense of humor and adventure. No plans are ever foolproof (boat engine issues, high water, etc.) and the weather can be very fickle.

Complaining or unfit volunteers, while memorable, don't actually get the job done. Often, one person may be keen to participate but drags along unwilling friends or family. Please only bring people who want to be there. You will meet new, like-minded friends at the event.

For our oyster-reef restoration, one of my most noticeable participants – and not in a favorable way – was the woman with a dislocated shoulder who did not trust her boyfriend, so she took up limited seating in our boats. She sat on the boat all day in obvious pain scowling at anyone who talked to her man. We all gave that relationship about 48 more hours.

Then there was the banana guy who didn't wear the correct footwear. He, too, spent a day on our boat, consuming about 10 bananas in five hours. I actually think he was afraid of water, but we will never know.

We also remember a family whose parents decided their children were too lazy and self-absorbed, so the perfect anecdote was to be a day helping on another one of our projects. First, the two kids (12 and 14) wouldn't leave the restrooms in the park where we work. After 10 minutes of our scheduled five hours of volunteer work, they were complaining they were bored, hungry and tired. The kids started splashing around in the water, which is fine. But what wasn't fine was that their whining got louder and louder as time went on. The mortified parents pretended they didn't know them. For some reason, we ended early that day.

Likewise, a group of Boy Scout dads signed up with their sons to help. However, when the time came, no dads were available on the day they signed up, so the moms had to step in. This was not where the moms wanted to be, so they worked in complete silence the entire day.

In spite of these few, however, I have had the privilege to spend time with many thousands of wonderful volunteers through the years.

If both volunteers and project leaders adhere to the suggestions above, there will be many perfect community events like the one my lab organized last weekend – and planet Earth will smile and say “thank you” for caring and sharing your time.

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