

Tips for Successful Volunteer Workdays

These tips on how to manage volunteers helping to build trails are so useful, that we had to pass them on to you. Volunteer projects are a wonderful and effective way to get trails built at the same time as creating a strong level of community support for your trail. But if the project isn't well organized, you will see few or even negative results. Here are the tips, originally published in the International Mountain Bicycling Association's Trail News newsletter with the help of Mark Flint, and passed on to us by Connections, the Newsletter of the Massachusetts Greenways and Trails Program, (with a few edits to save space).

1. Be Prepared: If you are running a ramshackle show, you won't get much done. Worse yet, you'll run the risk of losing volunteers. Make sure you have your tasks assigned, your tools ready, your leaders trained, and your work day planned. People will only volunteer their time if they feel their effort makes an impact.

2. Emphasize Fun: Trail work can be tough, but should also be fun. Don't take it too seriously. Use a little humor and include a fun element in the middle or afterwards - such as a BBQ, a group hike or ride, or a get-together at a local restaurant.

3. Provide Trained Leaders: Volunteers need inspiration, encouragement, and direction in order to complete the project efficiently. Leaders should know their tasks, give clear instructions, demonstrate tool use and techniques, and explain the goals so that volunteers and crew leaders are on the same page.

4. Be Safe: You want to build a trail, not the admissions list at the local hospital. Create an emergency plan prior to your trail work day. Start off with a volunteer meeting that addresses tool safety and what to do in a crisis. Make sure leaders are aware of their responsibilities in an emergency.

5. Don't Waste Time: People volunteer because they want to do something. Strive to minimize "standing-around time" and maximize a sense of accomplishment. Start on time, make sure your project is ready to go, and plan for tangible results. Then every once in a while, step back and encourage your volunteers to take a look at what they've achieved.

6. Feed the Troops: Start with coffee and treats in the morning, and keep the chow flowing all day. Recruit a local business to sponsor lunch and don't forget a variety of cold drinks. Encourage pit stops to refuel and socialize.

7. Keep the Workday Short: Remember, these are volunteers, not contestants on "Survivor." Don't schedule projects during the hottest months. Don't work for more than four or five hours. And do take breaks.

8. Avoid Leaving a Job Half Finished: Tackle a reasonable project that can be fully completed with the volunteers and tools available. The quality of your finished work is more important than the quantity. The satisfaction of a job well done will bring people back for more.

9. Thanks and Reward Everyone: Volunteers need to know their work is valued. Thank them at arrival, thank them during the day, and thank them, when they leave. List volunteers in newsletters or put photos on your website. Hand out T-shirts or prizes. Consider an awards program. Or throw an annual party at the end of the season to recognize volunteers.

10. Record Your Success: Tally the number of volunteers, total hours logged, and time put into planning. Invite the local press to cover your event. Assign a photographer to capture "before and after" photos. This information will help in outreach and future project planning.

11. Stay in Touch: Collect names, addresses, phone numbers and emails, so you can keep volunteers involved. This is particularly important for first-timers. New volunteers are likely to return if they feel both welcomed and appreciated.