

Exploring the Role of Volunteers in Environmental Communication at Scientific Institutions in the US and Japan: A Case Study Approach

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1. Research background and objectives

Volunteerism is the commitment of time and resources to the well-being of an individual, a community or society at large, done freely and without the expectation of financial gain. Volunteering promotes health and confidence in individuals who practice it, encourages community cohesion, and creates social networks. In organizations, it helps reduce costs and promote higher community engagement, and in scientific and environmental institutions, in particular, volunteers are often the bridge between the organization and the community, and one of the main channels of environmental communication. By focusing on a case study of Mote Marine Laboratory and Aquarium in the U.S., this thesis investigates the role of volunteers in environmental communication, and the management of volunteer programs at scientific and environmental research institutions. The research expanded to include an investigation of volunteer programs at scientific institutions in Japan in order to provide a point of comparison of volunteer program management practices in both countries.

2. Research methodology

Face-to-face and online surveys were administered to 115 volunteers from different areas at Mote Marine Laboratory and Aquarium. The surveys' goal was to obtain information to build a profile of the volunteers and their activities, and to learn more about the management of the volunteer program. The information obtained from these surveys was supplemented with interviews to staff. A survey was also conducted among 22 Japanese scientific institutions that had a similar profile to Mote in order to find out whether they engaged volunteers in their operations and to learn about their volunteer management practices.

3. Results and conclusions

The results showed a high participation of older adults (aged 65+) in the volunteer program at Mote and in Japanese institutions. Volunteer's motivations for working at Mote were related to scientific interest, a love of the marine environment, and altruism. Volunteers showed high levels of satisfaction with their work at Mote, however the surveys showed aspects of the program that require improvement: unstable program leadership and management, lack of continuous volunteer training and evaluation, and lack of opportunities for staff/volunteer interaction. Japan surveys and site visits provided information on several volunteer management practices that are applicable and may be useful for Mote, especially some related to higher volunteer ownership and participation in the development and implementation of educational activities for guests, continuous training and evaluation of volunteers, and coordinated staff/volunteer participation in day-to-day activities.