

GUARDING THE FUTURE OF OUR SOCIETY:
CONCEIVING VOLUNTEERISM AS A NATURAL RESOURCE

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The field of volunteerism is undergoing transformation and with it modes and ways of working with volunteers. Many of these changes, such as the emergence of service learning, mandated, corporate, virtual, episodic, and international volunteering can be seen as new ways of ‘fishing for volunteers’. The development of these new ‘fishing methods’ can be seen as a reaction to practitioner stories of volunteering becoming a scarce resource. In other words, many of the policy and practitioner stories show remarkably resemblance with stories from the field of natural resources. To paraphrase Al Gore: “We are witnessing a collision between our civilization and volunteerism (the earth)”.

In this paper, we look at the future of volunteerism based upon the metaphor and literature of natural resources. We present a new paradigm for understanding volunteerism as a natural resource and propose new research questions that arise when volunteering is seen from this perspective. We show that volunteer energy can be compared to a man-made, renewable resource that can be grown and recycled, and whose continuation and volume of flow can be influenced by human beings positively as well as negatively. Based upon this comparison, we describe the major features of volunteer energy and explore three lines of research: a new paradigm, a new approach to governing the volunteer commons, and new principles of volunteer management. The emerging conception of volunteer energy as a natural resource can both generate provocative research on volunteering and suggest ways to sustain and grow volunteering.

Our analysis contrasts a traditional view of volunteer administration with a new, “renewable” paradigm. The traditional view tends to see volunteerism instrumentally, for the purposes of a single organization, which attempts to “use” volunteers efficiently for its present needs. The traditional paradigm is much less concerned about the effects of volunteering for the volunteer, the larger community, and the future. By contrast, our renewable paradigm conceives of volunteering as a resource that must be nurtured and grown. The idea is to sustain volunteerism as a resource so that it may meet the needs of many organizations and the larger community -- as well as those of the volunteers themselves -- both at present and into the future. Conceiving of volunteerism as a natural, renewable resource changes the way that researchers and practitioners can understand, and work effectively, in this field. Our article elaborates the new, renewable paradigm and explores its implications for research, practice, and volunteering. An important part of the article deals with the (new) implications this paradigm has for governmental policies concerning volunteering and volunteerism.

Sources

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