

Volunteers vs. invasives

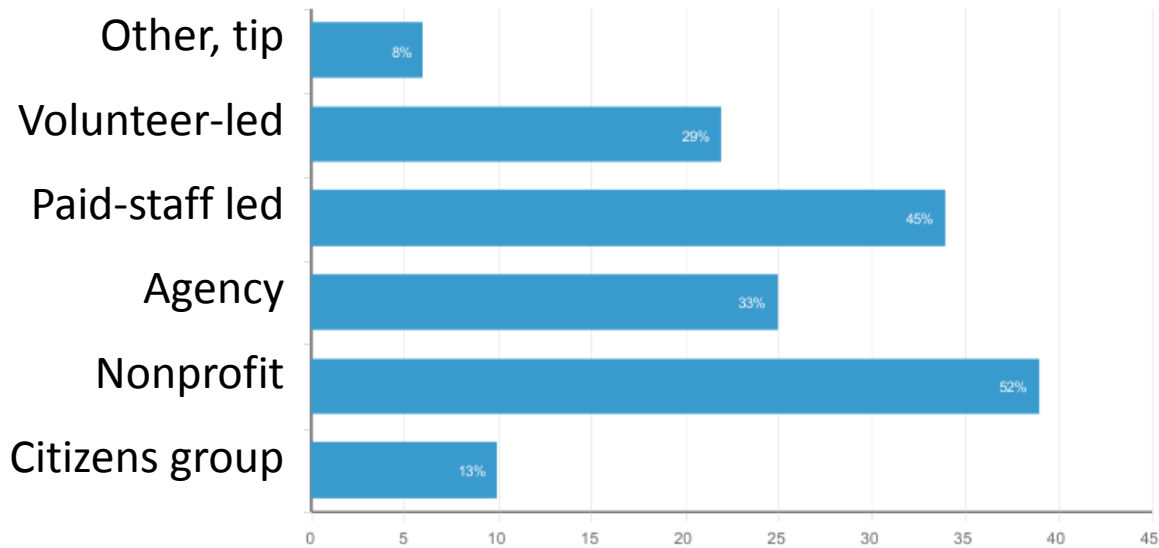
- September 2014 survey of leaders of volunteers
- For discussion group at California Invasive Plant Council October 2014 meeting.
- Survey link emailed to > 150 California individuals or organizations and to Cal-IPC list. All asked to pass it on.
- 75 responses -- not necessarily representative.
- Answers such as “favorite tool” or “ideal group size” depend on task.
- Interesting? Useful? A start toward more exchange?

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This report on line at <http://www.fivecreeks.org/info/VolunteerSurvey.pdf>.

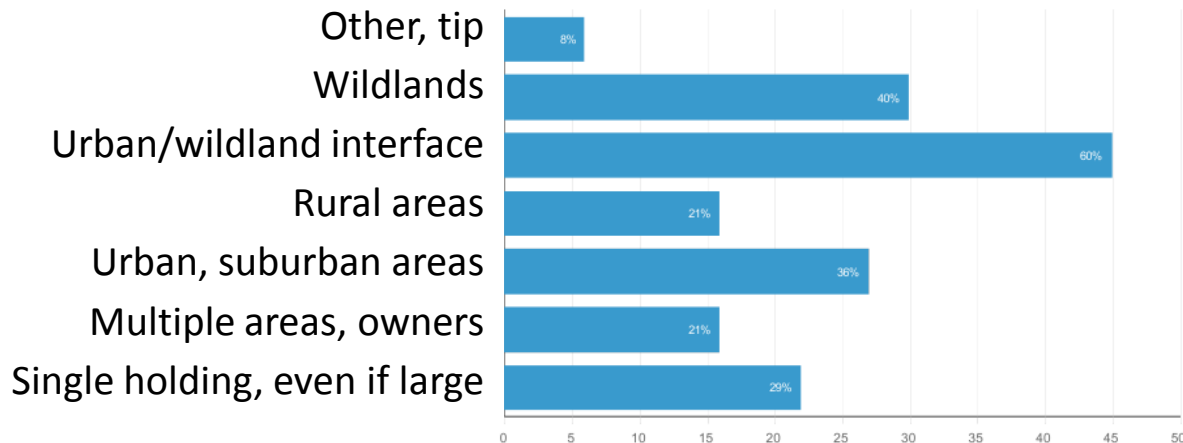
Please check all that describe your organization.

Answered: 75 Skipped: 0



Our volunteers work in (check all that apply)

Answered: 75 Skipped: 0



Who responded?

- Nonprofits, paid leaders were largest groupings.
- Agencies, volunteer leaders close to a third each.
- Urban/wildland interface most common location
- More stayed within single ownership than ranged over multiple holdings and owners.

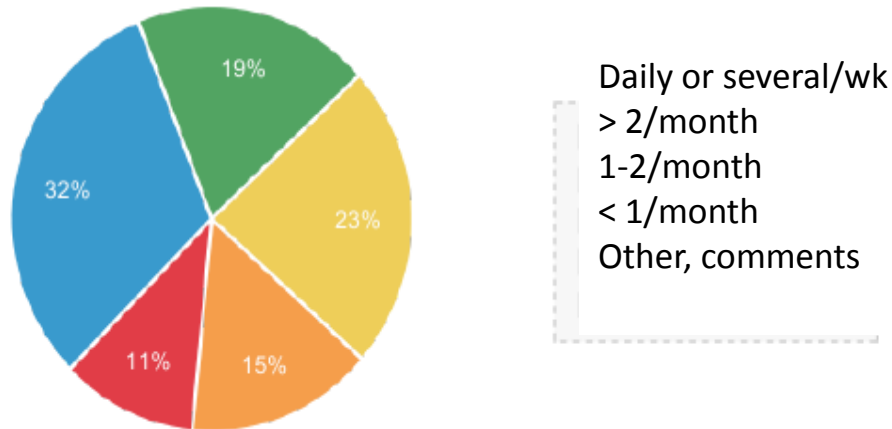
Subgroup responses (not graphed):

In wildlands or rural areas, no responses indicated “citizens groups” or volunteer leaders.

Among nonprofits, about 3:2 paid vs. volunteer leaders. (Some use both.)

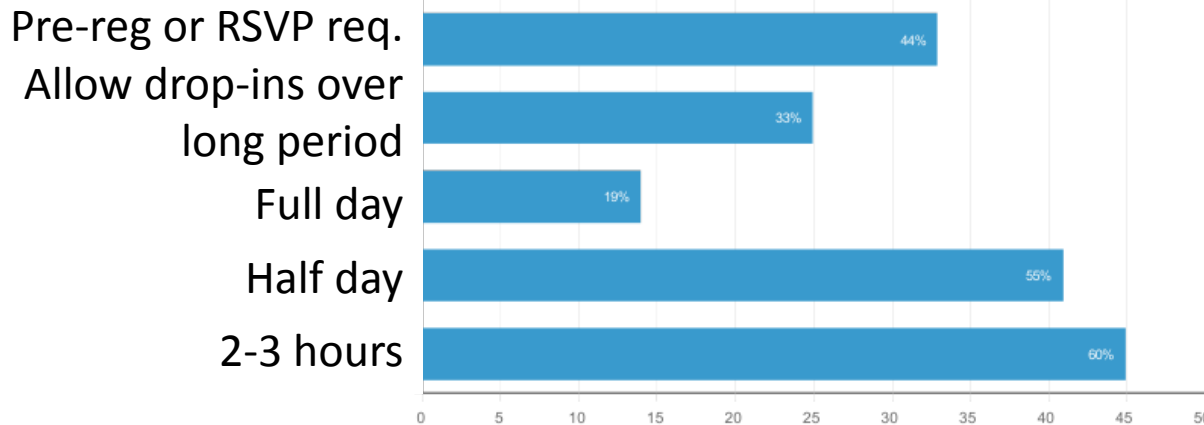
About how often does your organization host volunteer events? PLEASE PICK ONE.

Answered: 73 Skipped: 2



How long are your volunteer events, and are RSVPs needed? Check all that apply.

Answered: 75 Skipped: 0



Cont. next slide

Event frequency, length, RSVP (*slide 2; graph & chart previous slide*)

- Surprising number – close to a third – had events several times a week.
- Events were most often 2-3 hours, followed closely by half-day.
- More than 40% required advance signup.

Subgroup responses (not graphed)

- *Agencies* were more likely to host events either often (daily or several times a week) or less than monthly, with fewer in between.
- *Nonprofits* virtually all held events more than monthly. They were the most likely to require advance signup.
- *Volunteer-led events* were less likely to be either often (daily or several times a week) or less than monthly. That is, they clustered in the middle. They also were less likely to require RSVPs and more likely to be 2-3 hours.
- In *urban and suburban areas*, more events were 2-3 hours and held more often: 68% “daily, or several times a week” or more than twice/month.
- Not surprisingly, events in *wildlands* tended to be less frequent, but longer.

Comments, tips:

“We ask for RSVPs, but don’t usually get them.”

Several required signups only for large groups, or special or lengthy events

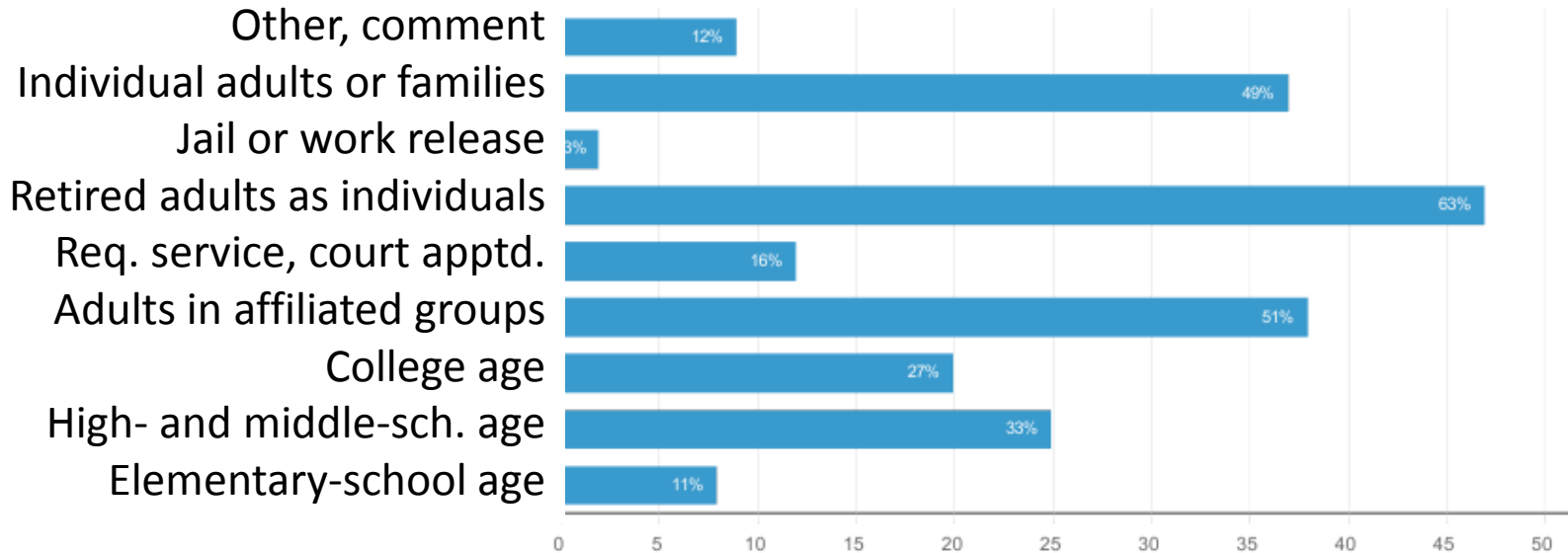
More than 2-3 hours “too long for the hard work we do.”

Some seasonal variation, e.g. “8 times a month summer, 4 times a month winter.”

Two separated restoration/weed events and (less frequent) citizen-science events.

Where does your organization get most of its volunteers? PICK UP TO THREE.

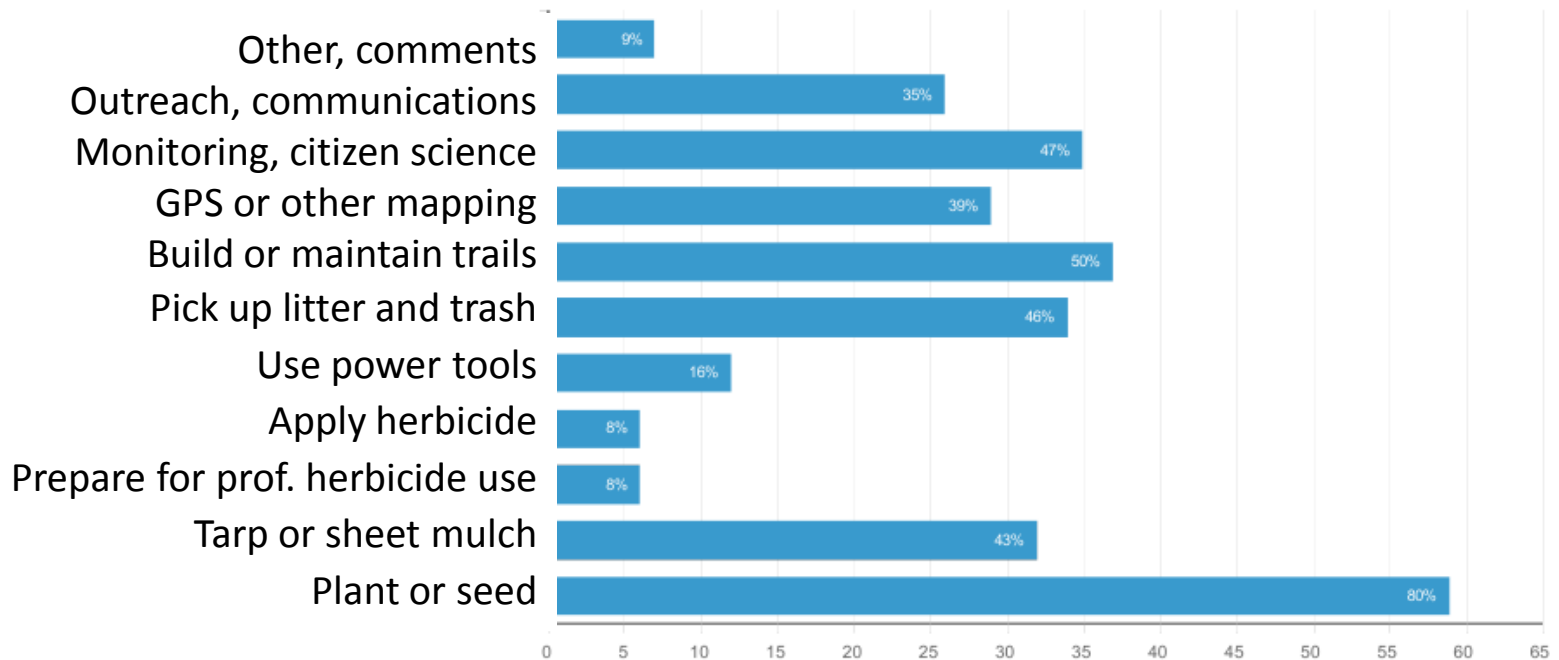
Answered: 75 Skipped: 0



- Most organizations draw from several age groups.
- **Retired adults named most often.**
- **Adults more than youth** -- about equally from affiliated groups or as individuals or families.
- Service required by school or court does not seem major.
- *Volunteer-led*: Compared to others, fewer elementary-school, adult affiliated groups, required service, or jail; more retired, individual adults/families, and college-age.

Apart from removal with hand tools, what other invasives-related work do your volunteers do? Check all that apply.

Answered: 74 Skipped: 1



Volunteers do many things! Most common by far besides weeds – planting and seeding. From comments: removing invasive turtles, creek and meadow restoration, watering, operating salt-water “irrigation” system to control weeds.

- *Volunteer-led* did more trail building.
- “Vegetation monitoring is a great project for college interns.”
- “Herbicide used only by licensed staff.” “City does not allow volunteers to use power tools, and no herbicide.”

What is your ideal group size? (open ended, 66 responses)

More than a third of those answering liked groups of 10-20, with the most popular sizes 10-15.

- “10 hard workers, therefore about 15. Send those out for light duty into trashy areas.”
- “Small enough to have leader visit each worker or team twice during work time.”
- “Easier to manage and speak with and generally get as much done as larger groups.”

About a quarter liked smaller sizes – 5, 6-8, 8-10, etc.

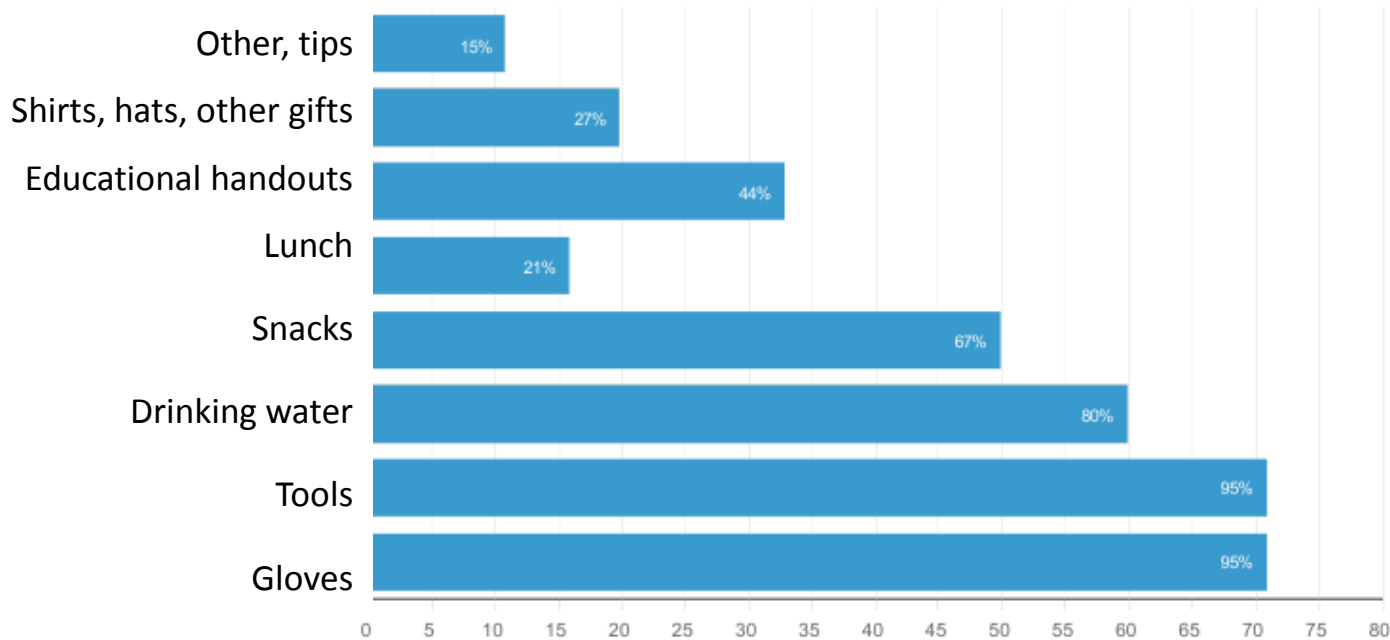
- “Good size for balancing disturbance with work done.”
- “You can accomplish a lot, all work in the same general area, and carry on conversation that includes everyone.”
- “It’s critical to give people individual feedback so they do great and feel great! Nobody wants to be part of an aimless group that is only sort of effective.”
- But: “Groups under 5 require more staff work than is beneficial. Avoid allowing (them)”

Almost 20% liked larger groups, most 20-35, but also 50, 50-75, 40-80, “up to 100 for special events.”

- Most recommended **division** into teams and/or **multiple leaders** at ratios of 1:4 to 1:20, often with a “floating” main leader. Examples: “I like a ratio of 10 adult volunteers or 8 youth volunteers to one staff person.” “Have one volunteer be the team leader. I hop from group to group to check in for 5 minutes at a time.”
- “For school groups, 30 is a good size – bring the parents in and assign them tasks.”
- “Large groups can work if the **task is simple** (e.g. a dense patch), or the group is self motivated.”
- “Habitat restoration can go quite large if you are **prepared** (enough work, space, tools, snacks, staff support).” “(Large groups) need a **work plan that is easily communicable.**” “Make sure you have **enough work to do.**” “**Varied activities for different ability levels.**”

We supply volunteers with (check all that apply):

Answered: 75 Skipped: 0



What material do volunteers get?

Most supply tools, gloves, water, and snacks (in descending order).

Fewer than half provide educational handouts. About a quarter give gifts.

Subgroups (not graphed)

Half, full, or multi-day programs more likely to offer lunch or gifts.

Compared to totals, *agency* events more likely to provide gifts, but less likely to offer lunch. *Nonprofits* more likely to provide lunch. *Volunteer-led* less likely to provide swag.

Wildland events more likely to provide swag, less likely to provide handouts.

Comments next slide

Comments, tips on materials provided for volunteers: (chart previous slide)

- Large water coolers -- No bottled water
- “For workshops and special workdays such as Earth Day we always start with coffee, rolls before the event. The food will be out throughout the day, and is often the place for a wrap-up.”
- Favorite tool: Caffeine and sugar.
- Popsicles or snow cones when it’s hot.
- “Cookies and fruit any time and at the end. Watermelon when it’s hot. Cheap, and a nice wrap-up.”
- “Our workdays run 9-12. We provide water, juice, breakfast bars, fruit, yogurt, cookies, rollup sandwiches from Costco.”
- Surprise gifts– “Free little gifts always put a smile on their faces.”
- Gifts for repeat volunteers: “An array of gear, depending on how long they volunteer. Most just get patch and year bar.” “Shirts/hats are given as awards for volunteer hour benchmarks.”
- Sunblock!
- Tecnu!

Programs overwhelmingly include social time -- during, ending, or apart from events. But **not many use structured exercises** such as icebreakers, team-building exercises, or reflections.

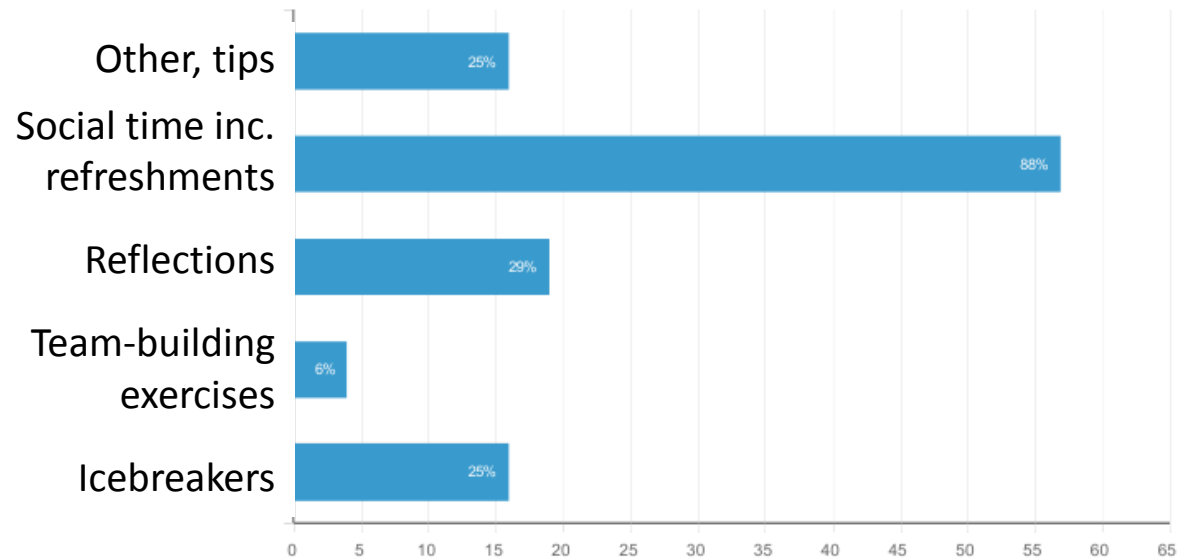
From comments:

Food with wrap-up most common.

- “Opening circle” “Games”
- “Safety circles before work are great!”
- Icebreakers, team-building, reflections: “youth service orgs (not community).”
- Our regular volunteers come to this program to avoid icebreakers and other “fluffy stuff.”
- Several comments mentioned education: “In-field educational talks,” “High-level field training and demonstrations,” “focused education (e.g. age specific, plant identification, wildlife, ecology, ethnobotany, watershed science, intro to invasive plants).”
- Several comments mentioned gatherings outside of events: Pot lucks, thank-you dinners; invitations to participate in planning meetings -- though “most would rather show up, work, and go home.”

We regularly use (check all that apply):

Answered: 65 Skipped: 10



What is your favorite tool for volunteers, and why? (59 answers, open ended)

Obviously, depends on task. But many answers embody the KISS principle.

Weed wrench (12): big results, empowering, most efficient tool for broom removal. A 'feel-good' tool, because it's a little bit technical, but anybody can use it and anybody can pull a massive French broom plant with one. Can Cal-IPC help us get more?

Hands & gloves, hand picks/mattock/cultivators: (8 each): “Most of the work easily done by hands.” “Good gloves make all the difference.” Hand tools: easy for all ages, simple explanation, versatile. Geological pick “breaks up the soil well. “

Soil knives or hori hori (3), small digging tools (3): Soil knife “AM Leonard orange-handled. Versatile, durable, easy to transport, kids like it; tell them firmly that it’s not a toy.” Weeder-digge”r simple, cheap, and safe for periwinkle removal. “Repurposed household gear - chopsticks and forks for planting, for example, makes people feel at home and comfortable with their abilities.” “Small digging tools require less energy and keep volunteers from tiring.”

Shovels (5): “The good old shovel. It doesn't intimidate volunteers, it's effective.” Also: 4-5" trenching shovel “light weight, gets main tap root, less dirt.” Sharpened shovel “to sheer roots of bull thistle, it’s the only thing that works, and you don't have to bend down repetitively or touch a spiky plant much.”

Pulaski, MacLeod, pickaxe, fire/council rake (1-2 each): Rake: safe, indestructible, little instruction necessary, broad range of applicability. Pulaski “all purpose and it’s bomb proof.” McLeod “It's a rake... it's a brush cutter...works well for habitat and trail crews.”

Ratchet loppers (2), long-handled shears, loppers (1), short or long hoe (1). Fiscar ratchet loppers “lightweight but powerful” for blackberry, cutting up tree branches.

What kinds of outreach do you find most effective? (59 responses, open ended)

Most often mentioned: **Email and e-newsletters** (appx. 25)

Next and about equal, with 14-15 each:

- **Listing on own web site**
- **Online calendars**, with 5 citing Volunteer Match, 3 Craigslist, 1 Meetup

About 8 each for:

- **Social media**, with 6 mentioning Facebook, 1 Twitter
- **Flyers, handbills** : “We have very little outreach, a sign explains our work with slips to take if they wish to join.” Two groups said they mail flyers or newsletters; one said they mail postcards. Others post at trailheads or schools, or hand them to passers-by during volunteer events.
- **Contacting or partnering with other groups** – also 8. Examples: contacting other NGOs, college professors and programs (including fraternities), local volunteer and scouting organizations, or creating volunteer events specifically for local school, business, or community groups.

Word of mouth: 6. “The best available technology is someone telling someone what they did.”

Old media are not dead:

- Three mentioned **local newspapers** (articles, PSAs, or calendar listings).
- Two make **phone calls** – e.g. to regular volunteers.
- One mentioned **tabling**.
- Three (from larger organizations) mentioned ranger programs, park guides, and forest-level volunteer meetings.

And three said they do **very little**: “I don't do that.” “Nothing active, but if people google volunteer activities in the area they'll find us. Therefore we get only people who are interested.” “We currently just accommodate volunteers that come to us, we don't advertise.” *From their other answers, these seemed to be finding enough volunteers.*

Tips on getting volunteers (individuals or groups) to return (58 responses, open ended) *Slide 1*

Many cited a combination: “Balanced mix of socializing; great snacks; meaningful, appropriate and worthwhile projects; and an easy-going attitude. Also, show your appreciation.” “Warm welcome, clear direction, education that connects work to a bigger cause and provides motivation – more important than short-term productivity.”

Most often cited: Prompt thanks and follow-up -- Emails (individualized if practical), especially with photos. Updates, e-newsletters, invitations to return., information about new opportunities , including “adopting” a site. A few mentioned phone calls., thank-you cards, appreciation parties.

Many cited aspects of leadership:

Personal interaction: Many stressed personal interaction with each volunteer, having a one-on-one conversation , learning names if possible. “Make sure that group leaders walk around and engage with all volunteers. Everyone wants to be recognized for their efforts, even if it is only heartfelt thanks and time spent working with them. “ “Personal interaction with each volunteer goes a long way.” “Try to learn their names and something about them.”

Other aspects of leaders or leadership:

- “A good MC that provides a sense of leadership, gratitude, and context. “
- “Have cheerful, informative young people (we use our interns) work with them.”
- “Leader works alongside volunteers.”
- “Have repeat field leaders – around for more than one season. Hard when we are soft funded each year!
- “Keep an upbeat attitude!”
- “Successful programs often seem to be built by people who believe strongly and put in the work, almost regardless of other characteristics.”

(Continued next slide)

Tips on getting volunteers (individuals or groups) to return (58 responses, open ended) Slide 2

Education or context: “I show them as many natural items as I can find.” “Teach them about what they are doing and WHY.” “Help them understand the importance of their contribution.” “A sense of purpose and context.”

Projects and organization:

A few recommended variety -- of tasks, projects, and sites. Many more stressed **aspects of organization :**

- “Give them meaningful work which can be accomplished in a short session.” “Have an achievable project.”
- “Be well organized, so people feel you respect their effort. Provide good tools.”
- “Have the next step planned and they will be motivated to continue. “
- “Never give busy work; always plan for a huge group so you never waste time figuring out what to do next.”
- “Have a solid answer for why their task is (a) the best way to do the job and (b) extremely important.”
- “Use volunteers’ ideas on how to get the job done.” “Listen to their motivation and tailor event to that.”
- “Professionally designed and maintained projects to validate participants' work.”
- For a program for classrooms: “Ongoing support and training for our teachers . Also, we are free to participants.”
- To attract groups: Have a clear description of where, when, what of the workday, plus comforts: Bathroom? Lunch? Tools/safety equipment provided? Coffee/water?

Rewards:

- Many talked about **food, often along with social experience:** “Serve beer with the food.” “Good snacks and good company” “Provide lunch. “ Ice cream or popsicles on hot days.
- Fewer mentioned **gifts, and almost always in a larger context:** “Make the experience fun and reward them with trinkets and/or refreshments.” “Remember their name, have social breaks and great snacks, give them a t-shirt after three visits.”
- A few mentioned **public recognition:** “Write-up in a newsletter, including pictures showing their valuable work.” “When we can get a photo in the local paper, those shown seem to feel more obligation or interest in helping again.”

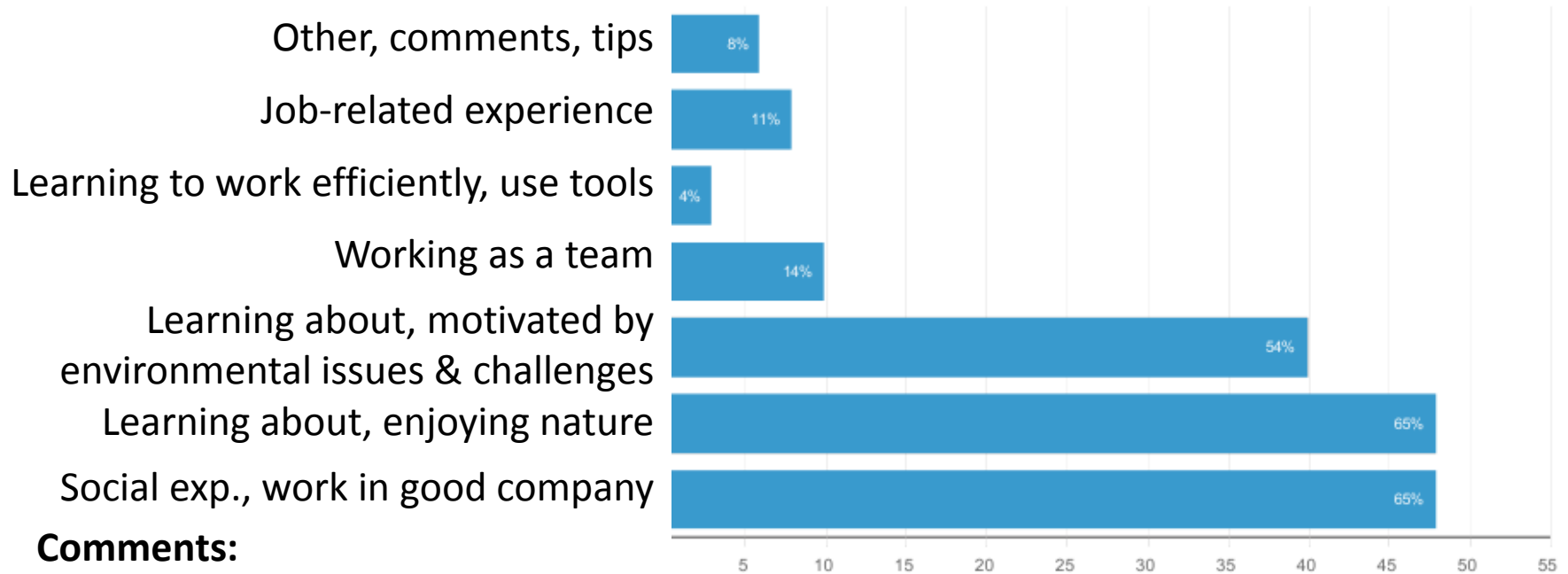
Do not bring them to large patches of poison oak!

Pheromones

Still a bit of a mystery to me!

Apart from the satisfaction of achievement, what are the most important things you think volunteers get from your events? Pick UP TO TWO.

Answered: 74 Skipped: 1



Comments:

- “Feeling connected to site, sense of ownership.”
- “The satisfaction of giving back to the community by restoring a park for all to enjoy.”
- “Some volunteers seek community, while other seek prestige, power or accomplishment.”
- “Some of our volunteers don't even like plants or service, they just want to be outside with people.” “Some just want a free campsite.”
- “The most important thing may be awareness of climate change and need for action.”
- “Class credit.”

Cont. next slide

Apart from the satisfaction of achievement, what are the most important things you think volunteers get from your events? Pick UP TO TWO (slide 2, response patterns)

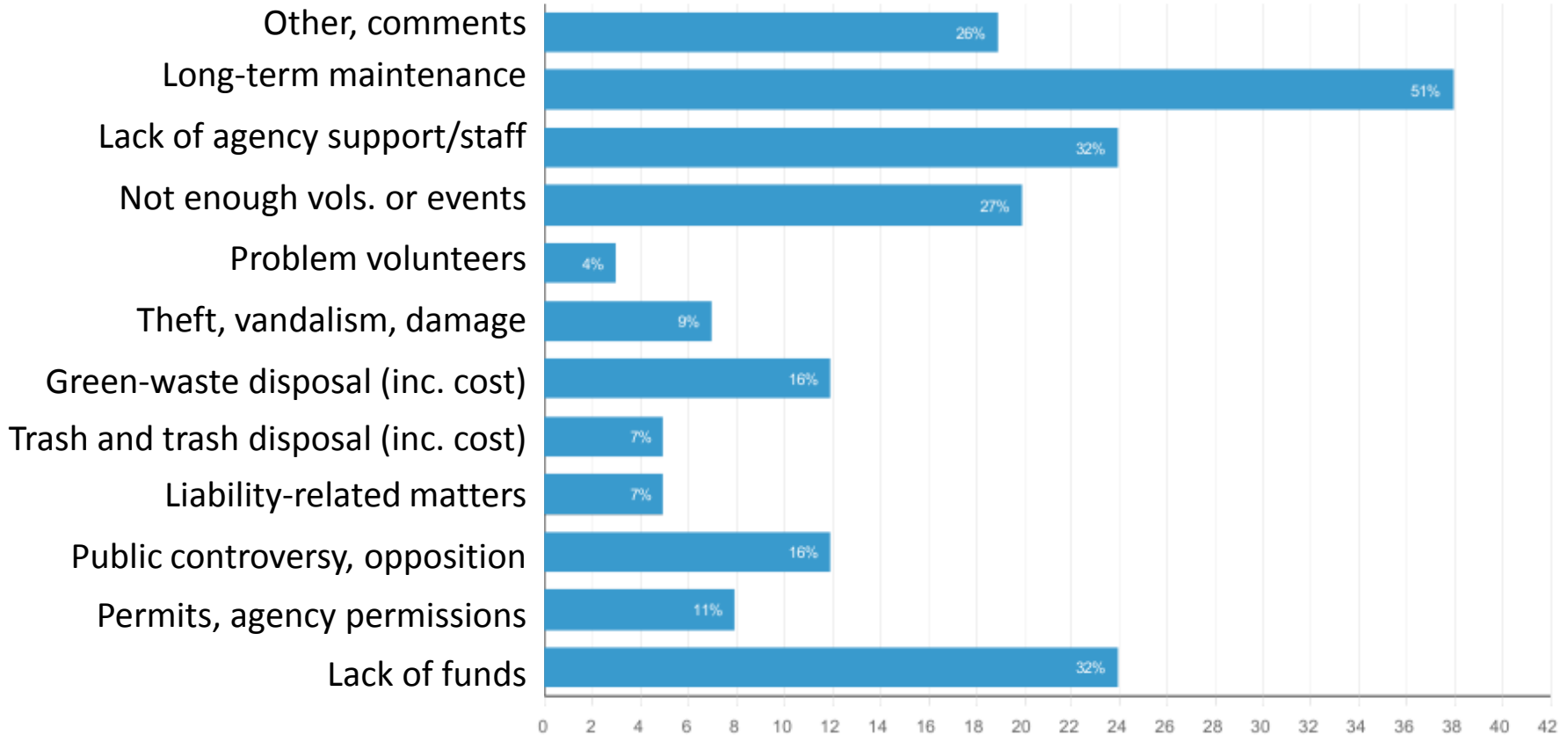


Some differences in how respondents saw rewards or satisfactions of volunteering:

- Agencies and wildland groups cited job-related experience more.
- Volunteer-led cited “nature” more; agencies and urban groups mentioned “environmental issues”
- Nonprofits, agencies, wildland groups most likely to cite “nice social experience.”

What are the biggest challenges to your volunteer projects with invasives? Pick UP TO FOUR.

Answered: 74 Skipped: 1



Biggest challenge: Long-term maintenance after major work done – for all groups.

After that: For vol.-led and agency: Lack of funds, lack of agency support/staff (these may mean different things). **For nonprofits:** Lack of funds second. Less important: lack of agency support, lack of volunteers – green-waste and controversy almost as important.

Comments next slide

What are your biggest challenges in dealing with invasives?

Slide 2, comments:

- (Organizing) regional eradication efforts
- Prioritizing invasive-removal sites
- Creating restoration plans for each of our sites.
- “Finding projects that are high priority and suited to volunteer groups” “Matching the type of work with the group”

- “Identifying the weeds to pull” “Many volunteers not well-trained enough to do more than work on invasive monocultures”
- Volunteers burn out quickly doing invasive work – important to mix up tasks
- How to accommodate people aging out of the volunteer program; how to engage younger kids (middle school and under)
- Safety hazards such as poison oak, yellow jackets, or sharps, which limit work areas or surprise us

- Staff resources to coordinate volunteers (more would-be volunteers than can handle)
- Lots of staff time to maintain our large volunteer base and track their hours
- Sometimes it feels more effective to use paid staff

- Lack of cooperation from fire department; difficulty and cost of permits for creek work
- Drought
- We have SO MUCH BROOM!”

What question do you wish we had asked?

- More specifics: group name, groups you have worked with (for future database?)
- Training methods – especially to identify invasives and natives
- How do you prioritize which species volunteers work on?
- What three invasives take up most of your time? What weeds do volunteers mainly treat?
- How do you monitor and share results?
- What about trampling/damage to wildlands from many volunteers?
- How do you handle liability issues? Safety issues?
- How to encourage public agency to involve us in more areas; how to get city or other jurisdiction to budget for volunteer work
- What is your main source of funding?
- What is your ratio to one-time volunteers to regulars?
- Lack of motivated volunteers in rural areas
- How can we attract volunteers right in the neighborhood
- Do volunteers accomplish meaningful work, or do you find yourself creating non-conservation work (beautification) to accommodate volunteers?
- Stop viewing volunteer programs as a chore. When you find yourself doing a task that could easily be delegated, save it! 2 volunteers can make quick work of installing those smoke-detectors, they will feel valuable, and you can work on other things.
- Did you volunteer before managing volunteers?

For more information, contact Susan Schwartz, Friends of Five Creeks, f5creeks@gmail.com, www.fivecreeks.org.