

## Volunteers— the Overlooked Resource

Earle Kirkbride and Terry Jones



*Helping to relocate some cattle found on the wrong grazing unit produced a photo taken from horseback and proudly shown by a volunteer "Range Rider." Photo by Earle Kirkbride.*

Properly recruited and coached, volunteers can provide some unsuspected benefits as well as some very measurable aid. The unplanned benefits may well be as valuable as those expected.

Some resource managers have been known to ignore inquiries about volunteer openings or have given terse replies that turn off the potential candidate. This situation develops because the frustrated manager has decided that coaching an untrained tenderfoot is more trouble than it is worth. Perhaps it is—sometimes. However, when you don't have any other available source of extra help, maybe you should look at the idea of volunteers again. This is equally true whether you are a range manager for the Forest Service, Soil Conservation Service, Bureau of Land Management, or perhaps a rancher who needs a little help in herd management or other ranch tasks.

Any range manager, public or private, who believes he or she will have more fully funded personnel in the next few years doesn't need to read further. A well-trained, full-time employee who would do exactly as you wish would probably be much more useful than any volunteer could be immediately.

### Where are Volunteers?

Potential volunteers are everywhere. Maybe the reason you haven't seen them is that you are too close to your work, and you see much of it as WORK. Some of the jobs that you do somewhat reluctantly may well seem like a vacation to potential volunteers.

For example, anyone who has been on a cattle drive knows that it is hot, dirty work. But, a lot of people pay good money each year to spend a week or so following cattle over dusty trails. It gives them a chance to get outside and do something they have heard about and always wanted to do. Those who have wanted to, but

couldn't afford to do it in person, have paid a lot of theater admissions to watch Billy Crystal and some other movie stars do it in "City Slickers."

If you want to try attracting volunteers, look at all of the things you do and list the ones that might have some appeal to someone who would like to get away from his or her day-to-day routine and experience your part of the world. The chances are pretty good that you live and work in places that seem very romantic (particularly in the summertime) to people who live in big cities or who have been stuck in classrooms.

Try to put yourself in the position of that person who would like to get away from it all, and picture what he or she might find attractive about your job situation. Have you ever read a travel brochure? Did it say anything about all the mosquitoes or lumpy mattresses? Of course not. It pictured blue skies, the solitude of mountain meadows, etc.

Next, write an advertisement, or otherwise get the word out, that you are interested in hearing from people willing to help you for a few weeks or months. Yes, months. The reason people don't take longer vacations on dude ranches and working farms is that they can't afford it. You probably would be surprised at the number of people today who would be with you for months if you provide them just a little encouragement.

For example, a listing by the Custer National Forest in a book of volunteer opportunities published by the Forest Service was headed "Range Rider." The ad described a task of monitoring grazing permits while staying in an isolated cabin 25 miles from the nearest town. This ad appealed to a number of people who probably always wanted to play cowboy. The ad didn't say anything about building fences, spraying weeds, or digging ditches for installing water tanks, but the volunteers didn't flinch from that kind of work, because they rationalized that was

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*Fence building wasn't advertised as a duty of a volunteer "Range Rider," but it was accepted as "cowboy work" by this volunteer who doesn't even mow his own lawn when home. Photo by Chuck Martin.*

what real cowboys did as well as chase cows. You can also point out sightseeing or leisure-time activities available in your area. Such opportunities probably account for much of the success of the use of volunteers as campground hosts by both the Forest Service and the Park Service.

At the same time the Custer National Forest ad was attracting volunteers, an ad for similar position in another Forest emphasized constructing springs and fences, and the people who did respond were quickly rejected if they had no range experience or education.

There are potential volunteers out there who are looking for opportunities for field experience after varying amounts of classroom study in range management or



*Spraying weeds under the direction of a trained seasonal Forest Service employee isn't all that much fun, but when presented as part of a typical Forest Service or "Cowboy Work" it gets done cheerfully by volunteers. Photo by Patricia Rose.*

related fields. The grapevine may let some of them know of opportunities with your agency or on your ranch, but with a little effort on your part, you could let more candidates hear of some of the forage utilization studies or range management projects, etc., that you would like to do. Some volunteers can be particularly productive as they explore your work world and try to decide where they want to be in a few years. You can help them as they help you.

Also, in all likelihood, there are thousands of able-bodied young and not so young men and women willing to work in the outdoors for practically nothing helping your agency or on your ranch. If you doubt that, look at the number of people who are willing to turn out to give a hand in brandings or roundups. All you have to do is divide up some of your tasks

into manageable packages, then get the word out.

### Care and Feeding of Volunteers

You will get some applications from people who clearly aren't qualified to do the kind of work you want done. But, you will probably find some who can learn to do what you want them to do with varying degrees of success. Forget trying to find someone with a lot of experience in the field. You probably didn't have much when you first started out either, but you were of some use to your first boss, weren't you? The same is true of a volunteer, or a new employee for that matter.

Recognize that you will have to plan the work you want done and break it up into manageable units. You will have to spend some time explaining what needs doing, and you will have to do some coaching. That takes time that you could spend doing the work yourself; but despite what you might think on bad days, you will get more done during the season with some patience and the use of volunteers to take over portions of your work. It is even better, if you have a subordinate, like a seasonal employee for example, that you can use as a day-to-day coach.

Volunteers aren't completely free for an agency or an individual rancher. The small stipend usually offered to cover some of the living costs is only part of what is required to support a volunteer. You will need to plan the use of your limited number of vehicles, horses, and materials so that you can get the most accomplished by volunteers. Also, you are going to need the support of peers, your boss, and possibly higher members of your organization. You have to convince them that it is a good investment to use volunteers. There is nothing much more frustrating to you and the volunteers than having them sitting on their hands with nothing to do while you try to round up equipment or supplies. But, you have the



*This water tank was hauled to the remote site and installed largely by volunteers working under the direction of a seasonal employee. Photo by Earle Kirkbride.*

same problem when you are managing any other project with people and equipment. At least with the volunteer, the salary clock isn't running.

Speaking of salary, one thing that range managers, or managers of any kind, sometimes forget when they are dealing with volunteers is that volunteers aren't working for money. What motivates the volunteer? The unique experience is probably what attracted and motivates the volunteer, but your encouragement and showing of appreciation can help keep him or her motivated. A sincere pat on the back and some tangible symbols of appreciation mean a lot. This is true of most employees—yourself included—but it is even more true of volunteers who aren't doing the job in hope that it will lead to a promotion or a higher wage. A belt buckle from you, for example, indicates that you really do appreciate what they have done for you. Also, it is something the volunteer will show his or her friends, and that makes some more friends for you.

Another thing that bosses of volunteers tend to overlook is that it helps to share the overall picture with the volunteers and let them know what the plans are for more than just the day ahead. Asking their opinion doesn't hurt either.

There is another aspect in dealing with volunteers that you might overlook if you are a career range manager thoroughly familiar with your agency. Chances are good that your volunteer has only sketchy knowledge of the organization, mission, and problems of your outfit. So, you need to fill him or her in on your agency or operation, its structure, objectives, and problems. Also, your volunteer needs to be introduced to as many of the other members of the staff as possible. Any employee deserves to know some of that, but it is crucial to getting the maximum benefit out of a volunteer. The volunteer can give you a lot more than the labor of a few weeks or months. They can be a powerful tool for better public information about your organization and its problems when they

return to their regular routine. It is not at all unusual for a volunteer to be a center of influence with two or three hundred people who will be interested in their experience as a volunteer. Some volunteers who have had particularly good experiences have ended up being interviewed for newspaper articles and appeared on TV talk shows. That kind of publicity can count for a lot.

Apt to be overlooked by the busy manager or rancher is the need for social life. This is particularly true in the summer when it seems there are never enough hours of daylight to get all the work done. If you want to get the most out of your volunteers, however, you need to take the social side of life into account. These don't have to be fancy events, they should be whatever you do for fun—picnics, dances, pack trips, whatever you do that might be a treat for the volunteer used to a different life. This is when you can get to know the volunteers better and they get to know you better, gaining some appreciation for your life and the problems you encounter daily. It is also when you have an opportunity to learn about another kind of life—the day-to-day life or past of a volunteer. This is particularly true of some of the active retired people who today volunteer for many different kinds of tasks all over the world. Getting to know them can enrich your life and the lives of your family.

At the beginning of this article, we hinted that in addition to some free labor, you could get some unexpected benefits from recruiting, caring for, and feeding volunteers. In addition to the public relations value we mentioned, there can also be some very direct tangible benefits for which you might not have advertised. For example, you may discover that you have recruited a computer expert or a technical editor, or a cartographer. The possibilities are nearly endless. In fact, you may discover that the volunteer you recruit will be coveted by some other manager who spots a capability that you were unaware of or for which had no use.

You may want to encourage the volunteer to return in coming seasons. If that happens, your investment in training and coaching will really pay off. Then, you can just point them in the general direction you wish and stand back out of the way. By the second or third season, the volunteer is apt to be as useful as a seasonal employee in the same job.

### **In a Nutshell**

With careful planning of jobs, imaginative recruiting and good care and feeding, you can attract outstanding volunteers who, with a small investment in time and good management of resources, can provide you a lot of assistance. The accomplishments that they produce not only reduce the frustration you have at the limitations on your resources, but they can help make you look like a hero to your boss or banker. People will marvel at how much you have managed to get done when you have been so hard up for money, equipment, and personnel. Also, you will probably have contributed a lot to the understanding by some people about the problems and joys of living and working in your part of the country and your organization.