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Environmental Volunteering and Older Adults*

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What is the Issue?

The level of citizen participation in environmental activities has increased over the past ten years. While there are efforts to engage people of all ages in volunteer activities, the rapidly growing older population presents an untapped potential resource for recruiting environmental volunteers. In New York State alone, the population age 65+ is projected to grow from approximately 2.5 million persons in 2010 to 3.1 million in 2020 and to over 3.6 million by 2030 (see CaRDI Research & Policy Brief Issue 28/April 2009). Not only is this age group increasing in number, it also constitutes a growing share of NYS's total population, increasing from 13% in 2010 to more than 18% by 2030 (Program on Applied Demographics, Cornell University).

Volunteering benefits the community and region where it takes place, but volunteerism also benefits the older volunteer. Retirement, particularly early retirement, can lead to a fairly long period of "rolelessness". Being a volunteer can provide unique opportunities for social integration among older adults, whether retired or not. Connecting environmental volunteerism with retirees is a win-win for the individual and the local community.

Who Volunteers, and What Do They Do?

About sixty-two million people in the US volunteered for an organization at least one time between September 2007 and September 2008 (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2008). Individuals age 35 to 44 are the most likely to volunteer, although over 30% of those age 65+ are engaged in some kind of volunteer work (AdvantAge Initiative 2004). In general, women tend to volunteer more frequently than men, whites more frequently than African Americans, Asians, and Hispanics, and married more than unmarried persons. College educated people also volunteer at higher rates than do those without a college degree (BLS 2009, see: <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/volun.nr0.htm>). Older in-migrants to rural retirement communities have also been shown to be active volunteers (See CaRDI Rural NY Minute Issue 14/February 2008).

Religious organizations currently engage the most volunteers (34%), particularly among those aged 65+ (44.8%). Social and community service organizations attract the next largest group of older volunteers (18%). Currently, only about 2% of volunteers age 65+ work with environmental and related organizations (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2009 – <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/volun.t04.htm>).

While only a small portion of those aged 65+ currently volunteer for environmental causes, volunteering for the environment could be particularly rewarding and beneficial for this age group. Interest in environmental issues is also particularly high among older adults (Moody 2008). A national survey done through the Cornell Institute for Translational Research on Aging (CITRA) found that while only 12% of respondents 65+ were members of an environmental group, more than 80% agreed with the statement: "I do what is right for the environment, even when it costs more money or takes up more time" (Survey Research Institute 2008). Moreover, environmental organizations tend to be more age integrated than the majority of senior citizen-focused organizations and activities, and older persons benefit from engaging in age-integrated activities (Achebaum 2008).



Encouraging volunteering among older adults

It can be challenging to motivate older volunteers to become engaged in environmental work and to link them with appropriate activities. While environmental volunteerism can include physical and outdoor activities, which are important for long-term health and well-being (Librett et al. 2005), some older adults may have limitations that restrict their physical ability to engage in more rigorous pursuits. Environmental organizations can emphasize a wide range of volunteer opportunities directed to the 65+ age group that match an individual's skills, physical abilities, and interests, rather than treating older adults as an homogeneous group. In addition, while older persons who are retired may have a wide range of interests, specific life priorities and disposable time and income, they may be less willing to spend time volunteering (Achenbaum 2008). Motivation to participate must come from an interest in new experiences after a formal career, a desire to give back to the community, and, perhaps, a curiosity about environmental issues (Sykes, et al. 2008). Volunteers may also be intimidated by the technical knowledge perceived as necessary in order to be an effective volunteer. Emphasizing an educational component to these programs and offering a broad variety of opportunities can help to address this issue.

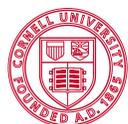
More research and outreach needed

Given the aging of the Baby Boom generation, there is a need for more targeted information about how environmental volunteerism can fit into the later life activities of older adults. Important questions to address include identifying what factors determine whether an older adult will become engaged in environmental volunteerism; what the physical and mental health consequences of environmental volunteerism for older adults are; whether environmental volunteerism can be a mechanism for reducing ageism; and how environmental organizations can be more open to older adult volunteers.

More education and outreach on linking environmental volunteerism and older adults is also needed. The Environmental Protection Agency has developed the Aging and Environment Initiative, and organizations such as Cornell Cooperative Extension have developed programs like Master Gardener Volunteers, Master Composters and Master Naturalists while Generations United links older adults with younger age groups. All of these provide an outlet for rewarding environmental work. In addition, the federal Serve America Act provides opportunities for environmental organizations to more actively include older adults in volunteerism. Connecting environmental volunteerism with retirees is a win-win situation for the individual and the local community. A better understanding of individual-level motivation and how to overcome institutional barriers is critical.

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*References are available in a separate document posted on the CaRDI website alongside this publication.



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