



## EuMon policy briefs – No 1

### People Count Too – key issues for success in recruiting and retaining volunteers for biodiversity monitoring

Monitoring of species and habitat requires the participation of large numbers of people that far outstrip the capacity of professional scientists. Even if there were sufficient numbers of skilled professionals to cover large geographical areas in high enough numbers during peak monitoring periods, the financial costs would be too high. Significant numbers of volunteer naturalists are needed to contribute to the wide range of activities connected to the collection and analysis of biodiversity. As well as contributing their skill and time volunteers are important as they support monitoring organisations through subscriptions and donations. They also represent a core of citizens who are committed to contributing to nature conservation and management. There is a great deal of variation in the amount and types of volunteer monitoring and the organisations in which it takes place. These organisations are defined as **Participatory Monitoring Networks (PMNs)**, a broad term that includes a host of very different arrangements and involves collaboration between a range of nature specialists, both professional and amateur.

Useful references:

Carr, A.J.L. (2004) Why do we all need Community Science? *Society and Natural Resources*, Vol.17, No.9, pp.841-849

Lawrence, A. (Ed.), (forthcoming in 2009) *"Taking Stock of Nature"*  
Cambridge University Press; Cams.

EuMon – web page <http://eumon.ckff.si/pmn.php>

**Key factors for successful volunteer involvement in biodiversity monitoring:**

- 1) Socio-political background influences levels of participation
- 2) Different strategies needed for recruitment and retention of volunteers
- 3) Inform volunteers about how the data that they collect is used
- 4) Several factors motivate volunteers – think about them all
- 5) Carefully consider relations between professionals and volunteers
- 6) Collaboration with other PMNs adds value to monitoring

**1) Socio-political background influences levels of participation**

In European countries the willingness of citizens to undertake voluntary activities of any kind has to be understood in relation to a country's social, political and economic situation.

Voluntarism thrives in EU member states with a relatively undisturbed tradition of democratic political institutions and where voluntary associations have long formed a significant portion of civil society. In post communist countries historical circumstances mean that social, political, economic, and religious factors can prevent the expansion of voluntarism. In seeking to understand the different social contexts affecting volunteer biodiversity monitoring in European countries, it is also important to consider the historical and cultural significance of natural history and the kinds of roles played by amateurs. For example, social status attached to being an amateur naturalist varies from country to country and from one era to another. In trying to sustain a viable volunteer base each PMN must adapt to changing social, political, or economic circumstances.

**Useful references:**

- Bell et al (2007) *The Social Science of Participatory Monitoring Networks*. Available at <http://eumon.ckff.si/pmnm.php>
- Cuthill, M., (2000) An interpretive approach to developing volunteer-based coastal monitoring programmes. *Local Environment*, Vol.5, No.2, pp.127-137
- Lawrence, A. (Ed.), (forthcoming in 2009) *"Taking Stock of Nature"* Cambridge University Press; Cams.
- Pilz, D., Ballard, H.L., Jones, E.T., (2006) *Broadening Participation in Biological Monitoring: a Handbook for Scientists and Managers*. US Dept of Agriculture Forest Service; Portland, Oregon.

## **2) Different strategies needed for recruitment and retention of volunteers**

Strategies for both recruiting and retaining volunteers differ according to the types of PMN in question. A general measure for success is the extent to which the PMN's attitudes towards volunteering match the desires and aspirations of its volunteers.

PMN's can use a range of publicity material and media connections to recruit volunteers. However, any PMN should be wary of recruiting more volunteers than it can manage. The degree of effort needed to bring in new volunteers while consolidating and motivating the existing body of participants requires lots of effort and inventiveness. Interpersonal interactions are important for the retention of volunteers. If numbers become unmanageable, communication and interaction can suffer leading to negative experiences and de-motivation amongst volunteers. Good communication is a key attribute of vibrant PMNs.

### **Useful references:**

Bell et al (2007) *The Social Science of Participatory Monitoring Networks*. Available at <http://eumon.ckff.si/pmn.php>

Lawrence, A. (Ed.), (forthcoming in 2009) *"Taking Stock of Nature"*

Cambridge University Press; Cams.

Whitelaw, G., Vaughan, H., Craig, B. & Atkinson, D., (2003) Establishing the Canadian Community Monitoring Network. *Environmental Monitoring and Assessment*, No.88, pp. 409-419

## **3) Inform volunteers about the use of their collected data**

The responsibility and commitment that volunteers often bring to their monitoring activities means that they care about what happens to the data that they produce and what it is used for.

There is an extensive spread of expertise, skill, and commitment required from volunteers according to the types of PMNs in which they participate. Volunteers are willing to take responsibilities beyond recording work, preparing it for publication in bulletins, reports, and atlases produced to extremely high standards.

All biological records collected by amateur volunteers are personalised to some degree, because they hold unique meanings for the person who on

their own accord went out and collected them. PMNs need to inform volunteers about the fate of their data and consult them about decisions relating to data. The greater the internal solidarity within a PMN the less chance there is that its recorders feel separated from the records that represent the nature to which they are so closely attached.

Many PMNs depend on websites to reveal the results of their surveys and hold themselves accountable to their volunteers. They also communicate results through reports and other forms of media.

#### **Useful references:**

Bell et al (2007) The Social Science of Participatory Monitoring Networks. Available at <http://eumon.ckff.si/pmn.php>

Gouveia, C., Fonseca, A., Camara, A., Ferreira, F. (2004) Promoting the use of environmental data collected by concerned citizens through information and communication technologies. *Journal of Environmental Management*, Vol.71, No.2.

Amateur Experts UK

Grove-White, R., Waterton, C., Ellis, R., Vogel, J., Stevens, G., Peacock, B.

(2005) *Amateurs as experts: harnessing new knowledge networks for biodiversity*. [www.lancs.ac.uk/fss/projects/ieppp/amateurs/index.htm](http://www.lancs.ac.uk/fss/projects/ieppp/amateurs/index.htm)

#### **4) Several factors motivate volunteers**

The motivation of volunteers involves a combination of wanting to learn, passion for nature, and the desire to be with other like-minded people. PMNs need to cater for the combination of these factors and find creative ways of addressing them.

The desire to learn is a hallmark of serious volunteer recorders who demonstrate a hunger for increasing their knowledge and skills.

Volunteers talk about their enjoyment of being outdoors and feeling close to nature. This sense of intimacy with the natural world relies on developing a better understanding of how nature works; a goal that is sought through mutually supportive learning partly by engaging with others who share similar enthusiasms.

PMNs need to find ways to harness volunteer naturalists' desire to follow their love of nature through the acquisition of knowledge and skills. But they must also ensure that volunteers - driven by interest and passion -

have opportunities to become ever more skilful at collecting data. There is a marked tendency among volunteer monitors to want the scientific knowledge they contribute to be placed at the service of conservation. Volunteers also want assurance that their work carries a sufficient degree of scientific legitimacy to have influence in policy domains.

**Useful references:**

Bell et al (2007) The Social Science of Participatory Monitoring Networks. Available at <http://eumon.ckff.si/pmn.php>

Ellis, R and Waterton, C. (2004). Environmental citizenship in the making: the participation of volunteer naturalists in UK biological recording and biodiversity policy, *Science and Public Policy*, 31:1, 95-105.  
Lawrence, A. (2006). 'No personal motive?' Volunteers, biodiversity, and the false dichotomies of participation, *Ethics, Place and Environment*, 9:3, 279-298.

**5) Carefully consider relations between professionals and volunteers**

While professionalisation can benefit certain types of PMNs, potential negative effects need to be acknowledged and managed to create a balanced relationship between professionals and volunteers so that neither category of people feel under valued or isolated.

Our research suggests that the balance between professionalisation of a PMN whilst retaining the respected status of volunteers is often difficult to achieve and may swing backwards and forwards across the history of an organisation. Problems can arise when processes of professionalisation are allowed to degrade the amateur status and make it appear an inferior version of professional practice. These circumstances can lead to lack of opportunities for amateurs to build expertise through participation in monitoring projects, creating disillusionment among an organisation's membership, dissent between amateurs and professionals, and eventual institutional decline.

**Useful references:**

Bell et al (2007) The Social Science of Participatory Monitoring Networks. Available at <http://eumon.ckff.si/pmn.php>

Ellis, R. & Waterson, C. (2005) Caught Between the Cartographic and the Ethnographic Imagination: the whereabouts of Amateurs, Professionals

and Nature in knowing Biodiversity. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 23, 673-693

Mayfield, C., Jouat, M. & Cowan, D. (2001) The role of community networks in environmental monitoring and environmental informatics. *Advances in Environmental Research*, Vol.5, No.4, November 2001, pp.385-393.

## **6) Collaboration with other PMNs adds value to monitoring**

Collaboration with other organisations has many benefits and can be an efficient and cost-effective tool for monitoring programmes.

Most PMNs have connections with other organisations for the sharing and management of data and some collaborate for other purposes. Monitoring programmes that are interrelated or even nested within one another (e.g. monitoring several species and/or habitats) could prove to be extremely effective models for future monitoring in Europe. Collaboration provides a means for PMNs to pool volunteers and expertise of their staff and share the financial burden. There is also an added benefit of creating wider networks for greater dissemination of information and results.

### **Useful references:**

Bell et al (2007) The Social Science of Participatory Monitoring Networks. Available at <http://eumon.ckff.si/pmn.php>

Battersby, J.E. & Greenwood, J.D. (2004) Monitoring terrestrial mammals in the UK: past, present and future, using lessons from the bird world. *Mammal Review* No 34, pp.3-29