

October 2023 Volunteering Report



Volunteers are part of the Earth Trust family and are invaluable to our team. It is because of their commitment, energy and expertise that we are able to achieve so much during the year. Earth Trust is most well-known for our volunteering opportunities that are outdoors, weekly and enable people to come together, under the guidance of one of our Land Managers, to help manage our woodlands, meadows, hedgerows, ponds and backwaters. We also have many opportunities for people to volunteer behind the scenes, supporting our events and working with our education team.

This report looks at how we have been managing and developing the Volunteer Programme from April-October 2023 reflecting the Trust’s 5 years strategy and the priorities outlined to funders. The ‘Snapshots’ section summarises the variety of ways that Earth Trust’s volunteers contribute to the public benefit and charitable work of Earth Trust.

A range of organisations and funders have supported the Volunteer Programme recently, including South Oxfordshire District Council, Schroder Charity Trust, Bartlett Taylor Charitable Trust, Sandra Charitable Trust, Doris Field Charitable Trust, Nineveh Charitable Trust, Pye Charitable Trust, Cecil Pilkington Charitable Trust, DLM Charitable Trust. We are very grateful to all these and to many other supporters of Earth Trust.

The scale of volunteering at Earth Trust

- We have **335 registered volunteers** (as at mid Oct 2023); these are people who have enquired about volunteering, received a call from our Volunteer Officer and, after that, chosen to register to receive our weekly Volunteer newsletter with all the information about training, what’s on and how to take part in any of the coming week’s activities.
- Of these **220 are active** (ie volunteered in the last year).
- Most of our volunteer roles are full; 1 in 20 people volunteer in 2+ roles.
- Together all volunteers contributed **15,569 hours** in the last year.
- Our volunteers, in the main, are over the retirement age and come from within a 30 mile radius. They are predominantly male but some groups have a more even gender split.
- Earth Trust Volunteering is growing; on various measures it is about **50% bigger than it was in 2016**.
- Since 2016 (when our detailed records began) we have worked with **725 volunteers**; some of these people are still volunteering with us.



Proud to volunteer!

Managing and Developing Volunteering at Earth Trust

The priorities set out for Earth Trust's Volunteering Programme for 2022-23 were:

- *Engaging our service users:* To involve our volunteer community more in the running and development of the Programme.
- *Increasing the diversity and number of volunteer roles:* To widen access to the Programme by offering roles to suit any age and ability and for those who want occasional as well as weekly volunteering.
- *Celebrating the work of Volunteers:* To better acknowledge the contribution of volunteers and to help more people find out about the opportunities.
- *Training and Development:* To give back to our volunteers and build the skills, knowledge and engagement of our volunteer community.
- *Partnership:* To developing our work with Aspire Oxfordshire and other partners.

In addition, during this reporting period significant work has been done to produce a Volunteer Plan. The plan has been developed following the publication of Earth Trust's Strategy, *Communities for Change 2022-2027* and sets out some strategic priorities and a roadmap for how we will evolve, improve and grow volunteering from 2023 to 2026. The Volunteer Plan is now one of the Key Documents published on the [Volunteer Policies](#) page of our website.

Engaging our Service Users

Our Volunteer Steering Group, a small group of staff and volunteers set up in 2022, has continued to meet every month to plan and review progress against the priorities. The group has been involved in the development of the Volunteer Plan and the creation of a range of policies and resources for volunteers including a new [Volunteer Handbook](#), [Volunteer Safety Guide](#) and a range of policy documents clarifying what volunteers can expect from Earth Trust and vice versa.

Responding to volunteers' requests, a sheet for volunteers with FAQs about managing green spaces was produced to help volunteers answer questions from members of the public.

The group led two surveys: an engagement survey, seeking to understand why people who register do not go on to volunteer, and the annual Volunteer Survey.

Feedback from the **engagement survey** was positive: it showed that communication and encouragement from the Volunteer Officer was good but that many people found they did not have as much time available to volunteer as they had hoped. The **annual volunteer survey** conducted over the summer received input from 67 volunteers which was more than double that of last year's survey. The survey was publicised repeatedly and the Volunteer Officer also took copies out by hand to groups in the field to secure their engagement.

2023 Volunteer Survey highlights

- What do you find most rewarding about volunteering?
"Spending time with like-minded people, taking action for the environment, doing something for my local community"
- What is most important for you about the volunteer programme?
"Flexibility, variety, support"
"Earth Trust is for everyone, people are treated as individuals and with respect."
"It's fun and rewarding, there is a sense of teamwork amongst volunteers and staff"
- What would you like included in our learning and development sessions?
"nature identification, guided walks, Earth Trust projects, future farming ideas and methods"

Increasing the diversity and number of roles

We currently offer [15 volunteer roles](#), grouped under three headings: *Be outdoors*, *Cosy inside* and *Meet & greet*. The idea of the three headings is to enable people to see that there is a wide range of roles and to help them think about what type of role would suit their interests and skills.

New roles which have been introduced/refined in the reporting period are [Education Gardener](#), [Earth Skills Volunteer](#), [Earth School Volunteer](#), and [Forester](#). These have been well received, many people showing interest in each role.

Forester Volunteers are learning all about the complexities of managing a woodland habitat, from individual tree management to looking at a wood as a whole to assess its quality for wildlife, timber and its general health. The volunteer team will play a key role in the ongoing management of Earth Trust's Paradise Wood, one of the UK's leading research collections. They will learn about the variety of research taking place as well as getting a chance to contribute to that research. Role training will cover forestry mensuration (measuring timber), habitat surveys and use of hand and power tools. As the work progresses Forester Volunteers will help Earth Trust to maximise its impact on biodiversity, carbon sequestration, education and engagement.



Using a Clinometer to measure a tree's height



How to correctly lop branches from the trunk to minimise damage to the tree

Clumps Go Ancient: Our [archaeology weekend](#) in August, which attracted 750+ visitors also attracted some new volunteers, helping us with car parking, welcoming visitors and Anglo-Saxon cooking.

Young People's Pilot: We have long wanted to increase the engagement of young people in our programme. Recently, due to a funded New to Nature apprentice role, we have had the resource to investigate how we might do this and have devised a pilot, aimed at young people aged 14+, and based on the Duke of Edinburgh framework. There are 3 roles on offer: litter-picking, record wildlife surveying and youth community warden. We have had 10 enquiries of which 6 have registered. Each young person will complete 13 1-hour sessions to put towards their Bronze DofE award.

Project roles: Hugh, our *New to Nature* apprentice, has also been leading on a project to map more of Earth Trust's ancient and veteran trees. Volunteers helped to survey Little Wittenham Wood, identify potential Veteran / Ancient trees and measure their key characteristics, girth and location to be uploaded to the national database. Another ad hoc volunteer opportunity has supported our Net Zero project; volunteers surveyed visitors' method of transport when visiting Wittenham Clumps.



Weekday vs. Weekend Volunteering: From November 2023 we are delighted to be introducing weekend volunteering – at this stage only once a month but we know that this will make volunteering

more accessible for people who also work full time or those who can only get to Earth Trust at weekends. On the flip-side, our weekday volunteering continues to attract individuals who are using volunteer days granted by their company.

To widen recruitment, we ran taster sessions during Volunteer Week for three roles, publicising volunteering widely and encouraging new volunteers to come and try it out. This attracted 30 people and recruited 6 new volunteers. We also publicised our programme at Oxford Brookes University – although this was less successful as most students find it hard to arrange transport from the centre of Oxford to Earth Trust.

“I am immensely proud of our volunteering programme and Nicola, our Volunteer Officer, is incredible with how she manages it and interacts with everyone. Volunteer week was terrific.”

Robin Buxton, Earth Trust Patron

Celebrating the work of volunteers

In July we held our annual Supporters Day. This included a panel presentation featuring a talk by Tom Heap, well known as presenter of BBC Countryfile. Tom’s talk was very well received; he discussed the issue of land use, and the models available to balance the needs of food production, carbon sequestration and nature.



We also offered volunteers access to exclusive talks and tours around the main event and used the gathering to honour volunteers with 10+ years of service. In Volunteers Week each of our 220 active volunteers received a hand-written thank you card, each delivered personally by a member of staff.



“We’re like a family. Long may it continue. See you soon.” Rose, 10+ years



In September we held our second Volunteer Social. This was an informal event, attended by 60 volunteers, with pizzas cooked by staff in our kitchen garden pizza oven and a band.



To publicise volunteering to our wider networks we have focused on one volunteer story, that of [Gemma our volunteer photographer](#) who describes the benefits she has experienced through volunteering, including for her mental health.

Training & Development

During the last 6 months we have offered a range of talks, tours and skills training for volunteers:

- **Guided walk in woodlands** (3.5 hours) led by Tim Read, Senior Ranger, showing various aspects of the woodland, how and why we manage it as we do and what you can see in the woodland. The talk delved into the theory behind the work so many volunteers do, particularly with coppicing in the winter.

- **Brushcutter training**

"The brushcutter training was very thorough, covering basic maintenance, refuelling, safety and PPE as well as how actually to use it. Hopefully I'm now fully trained!"

Alex, Education Garden Volunteer



Alex

- **Regenerative Pasture Management** a talk led by Earth Trust Ranger, Tristan, about the importance of good grassland management and how regenerative agriculture could help to mitigate the challenges of climate change and food security, and many other issues which farmers face.

"Thank you so much for the Regen Farming talk - absolutely brilliant! Also thanks for [introducing] the talks programme - excellent that the Trust is listening to what the volunteers are asking for and trying new ideas. Looking forward to more talks in the future."

Martin, Volunteer, May 2023

- **Badger Watch**, contributing to the 30 year old badger census data at Wytham Woods and offering a chance to see the bluebells are at their peak.

- **Hedgerow surveying**

organised with Wild Oxfordshire

- **Tree and Insect**

identification. Two talks with a walk in Earth Trust's arboretum.

- **Woodland Management:** a practical day on coppicing and creating ride-side scallops using pruning saws, bowsaws, loppers and billhooks.



Tree identification

Partnership

Each month Nicola Williams, the Volunteer Officer, attends the Oxfordshire Voluntary and Community Action Volunteer Coordinators forum. This meeting is for those who manage volunteers in Oxfordshire to get together either online or in person and discuss volunteering, share ideas and talk about what has gone well and not so well. Earth Trust hosted the forum in September sharing an overview of our volunteer community and discussing young person volunteering, corporate volunteering, support and training for volunteers, rural volunteering and recruitment & retention of volunteers.

Our partnership with Aspire Oxfordshire is ongoing. After the success of the pilot in the Spring of 2023, we are now looking for funding to co-design with Aspire clients a volunteer project tailored to the needs of people experiencing unemployment and homelessness. The progress of this project is dependent on securing external funding. The project was initially devised with North Wessex AONB but their priorities have changed.

Snapshots of Volunteering – April – Oct 2023

April

- April 2023, 93 volunteers supported the Earth Trust Lambing Festival over two busy weekends welcoming visitors, demonstrating hedge-laying and helping with family crafts, tractor rides, den making, ticket sales, food and farm information, café and parking.



May – June

- The Earth Lab kitchen garden for schools and special needs groups was created.



April - August

- Abbey Fishponds: cutting and raking the fens and grasslands – to reduce dominant species (reeds and Himalayan Balsam), reduce soil nutrients and promote wildflower growth in a diverse plant



April- Sept

- Butterfly surveying and wildlife monitoring – collecting data from *River of Life II* microphones and camera-traps. Supporting Drinkable Thames walk/citizen science and sharing information about Earth Trust's wetlands and rewilding work.



April – June:

- Helping to run '*Inspired by Nature*' art exhibition during Oxfordshire Art Weeks
- Helping Hugh, our *New to Nature* Trainee, to gather data re visitor travel for the Net Zero project
- Garden and maintenance – enabling Earth Trust's to host weddings and corporate events and generate vital income
- Removing hemlock – which is toxic for cattle – at Wallingford Castle meadows

July- September:

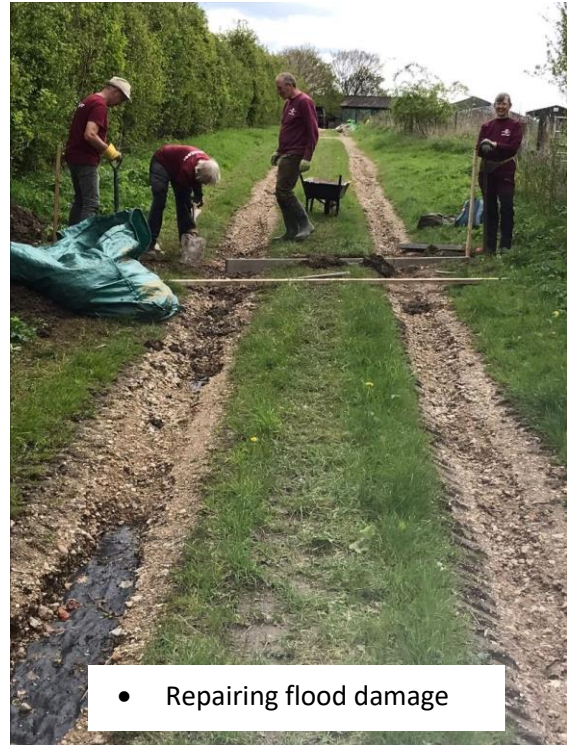


- Helping prepare for and run 'Thank the Earth' our open farm day – everything from weeding the pumpkins and creating a sweetcorn maze to car parking and welcoming visitors





- Tools maintenance team – everything from sharpening billhooks and pole saws to repairing rakes and tool handles



- Repairing flood damage

July - August

- Footpath maintenance and scything grass
- Maintaining scallop clearings in the woodland – promoting floral diversity, providing overwintering for insects and helping young trees to establish.

September

- Coppice work – clearing overgrown vegetation around hazel trees and to create a productive coppice. Regular work through a rotation of coppices in the woodland means good production of stakes and binders (used in hedge-laying) and increases the variety of habitat structure in the woodland by creating areas of different vegetation height and different light levels.



Further information: Nicola Williams, Volunteer Officer, Nicola.williams@earthtrust.org.uk