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The Gentle Art of Volunteering

Both experienced volunteer and project leader, **Doug King-Smith** describes how the reciprocity of volunteering transforms people

Working with volunteers seems to be a hot topic at the moment. As vital services are underfunded, or cut entirely, it seems that government and big business are reaching out to volunteers to fill the gap. How is volunteering understood and what is the value of this exchange?

For over 10 years now we have been hosting volunteers at The Hillyfield, our woodland farm on Dartmoor in Devon (see *PM112*).

Here we are aiming to regenerate a neglected 18.6 hectare (46 acre) site into a viable woodland enterprise, where we provide timber for the local market, offer multiple community and ecological benefits, and inspire people to respect, enjoy and cherish the natural world in Dartmoor National Park, through sustainable principles of land management.

The project has developed naturally from the initial dream of a co-operative of friends sharing ownership of the land, to a family-owned farm managed for community and environmental benefit and supported by volunteer helpers. This journey has been deeply enriching and working with volunteers has brought another dimension to our

lives, keeping us going over the years, as well as providing hundreds of people with a unique and enlightening experience.

In the first year or two I would work in the woods on my own with occasional days of friends and family helping out. Soon my wife and I started hosting regular monthly volunteer weekends for the local community. Now I find myself working all year round with a team of residential volunteers, whilst also offering placements for day helpers as well as students from a local agricultural college and charity.

In practical terms, this means a huge investment of practical action on the land. With the help of volunteers, we have felled and replanted a diseased forest, set up a sawmill, cut new rides and established a new access, moved fences, planted an orchard, and most recently built three barns. Most days we have seen between four and ten people fully engaged in working on the land, 9-5pm. This is absolutely astounding. In the first week of December 2021, volunteers contributed a whopping 304 hours of volunteer work. That is 38 days of work in one week. During November, it was roughly 908 hours, or 113 days work in a month. Today we moved about 5 tonnes of compost, made about 50 metres of



LEFT TO RIGHT

You're never too young to learn how to work with timber

One barn is up with more to come

Doug and his son in the larch woodland

PREVIOUS PAGE Volunteer Dom drilling the barn's timber frame

new veg-growing beds, milled some timber, helped make a door, fixed a truck, and cleared a load of tree guards from the hill. To just stop and look around and witness the immense labour of love going on simply beggars belief.

For me, like many, a return to the land and community-living was of great personal interest. I studied Anthropology at Durham University which opened my eyes to issues of ecology and the interesting interface of sustainable development, identity, and of health and food production systems around the world. I was also inspired by the UK festival culture of the late '90s, especially festivals like 'The Big Green Gathering' and 'Buddhafield' where permaculture and community-living played a central role. Later, I embarked on a great adventure of exploring community-living in France, Peru, London and Devon over a period of about 12 years. For much of this time I worked as a volunteer, so I have experienced volunteering from a number of different perspectives.

About eight years ago we held a meeting in our local village to share the vision we had for looking after our little wooded valley and to hear back from neighbours about their ideas. It's amazing how enlightening a meeting like this can be.

Too Much Like Fun

One neighbour thought that our website made the work of looking after the land look 'too much like fun'. She said, "If you were to make the website look less 'fun' then people might take you more seriously." I went home and looked at the website. I thought about how I could make it look less like fun, and then realised that I'd nearly got caught in the trap. The whole reason for managing the land in the way we do is to enjoy it! It's to help marry that magic of hard work and fun. To take the fuel of our deep appreciation of the land, and of Nature, as well as the pleasure of working alongside and getting to know others, of using our hands and learning new skills, and to inject this into the land as proper hard graft.



Thinking about what it is to work with volunteers, I am surprised at some of the preconceptions and misconceptions that have come to light over the 10 years we have been working the land in this way.

To some, volunteers are seen as 'free labour', a relationship out of balance which has an undertone of slavery. To those of us used to volunteering, and from the experience of the vast majority of people who have spent time helping us on the land, the experience is deeply enriching on many levels, as well as empowering ...

Thirty-seven-year-old Phil (previously a chef on super yachts) spent over a year helping out on the land and shared this: "To have a space to work in Nature like The Hillyfield is one of the best methods to reconnect with yourself and find your place. It has been essential for me to take a step back from the noise of the modern world and feel like I am part of something that really cares for the future."

Another volunteer, after coming regularly to weekends with her young family, and in support of one of our planning applications, shared the following: "Hillyfield is a unique project where all three of my children (two boys and one girl) enjoyed spending time ... The children were able to learn about the natural landscape, the skills it takes to maintain it and the value of teamwork. Trees were planted, shrubs and brambles cleared, willow planted and, in the process, we learnt about plants, tree diseases, safe use of



machinery, etc. It gave the children a sense of belonging over time, as they saw their efforts grow, change and at times get washed away by the stream. The volunteers gave the children a sense of worth, as their efforts were appreciated and encouraged. Doug and Claire are very skilled at motivating people and creating a sense of belonging and of being part of a community. Doug's influence as a positive role model was also really important to me. As a family we had little involvement in the local community; The Hillyfield drew us out of our cocoon a bit. As my children's father suffers from alcoholism, and our immediate family and relatives live abroad, the children lacked positive role models, and we all particularly loved the shared mealtimes. Hearing people's stories instilled a belief in the teenagers, that their life can be lived, and dreams can be made a reality."

Volunteering is an Exchange – It's Not Free

On top of whatever agreement is in place, such as food, accommodation, or expenses, there has to be a quality to the exchange which has a value higher than money. This is difficult to understand from a capitalist mindset, a way of thinking written deep into our personal and collective psyche. Many people talk about the need for new modes of thinking and from my experience the act of volunteering can help shake loose some of the preconceptions that can keep us



The volunteer crew are 'learning by doing' on a barn build

stuck in this old paradigm. However, quantifying the value of this exchange is tricky. It's usually deeply personal.

I once walked with my two sons (aged five and seven years old) past a gentleman digging a ditch in front of a house.

"What are you doing?" asked one.


"Digging a ditch," said the man.

"Why are you digging the ditch?" asked the other.

"I don't know," he said, "I'm just doing my job."

With volunteers, this approach doesn't really work very well or create a meaningful relationship. There has to be something, or many things, far more meaningful than just doing the job we are told to do. As a volunteer there



Wild about wood? Try... 
 'Permaculture Woodlands' (PM97)
 'Transition Trees' (PM65)

LEFT A community 'barn blessing' in January 2020 to celebrate the 10th anniversary of The Hillyfield

BELOW Lunch is served on a volunteer day



has to be purpose, and what is so amazing about working with volunteers is that this purpose is often infused with something deeply personal. The work can take on a kind of spiritual dimension. Alternatively, people are passionately engaged in developing a new skill or set of skills which they see as fundamental to achieving their future dreams or personal development.

Another misconception is the belief that engaging volunteers is less effective than working with professionals. Also 'Blame the Volunteers!' can be used as catch-all for everything wrong on a farm.

In my experience, this is not the case. I've had professional contractors come in to the woods and spend most of the day hiding from the rain whilst smoking fags in their truck, a disgruntled macho work ethic oozing from their high-viz outfits. This is miles away from the experience of working with volunteers who take great pride in their work and will often pull out all the stops to complete a task and make sure things are done to their highest standard, rather than just rushing through a job to make a quick profit.

It doesn't have to be that a volunteer has any previous experience directly related to the task at hand. All you need

is willingness and adaptability. Everyone has a whole lifetime of experience and each of these can be used and cross-applied to entirely different skill sets. In our time on the farm I've seen a professional golfer become an expert forester, a chef become a barn-builder, a gardener become a timber-framer... It's extraordinary how adaptable we are.

If you are interested in exploring volunteering around the world, you might want to check out Workaway, WWOOF, or Helpex. There are literally tens of thousands of people pulling the plug and trading in their day-to-day lives for a month or more, helping out on a project somewhere in the world, adding a bit of spice to life, and through open-hearted generosity, they are making friends, discovering new skills and getting down to the business of making light work.

A father of three and wood sculptor, **Doug King-Smith** has been immersed in woodland work, community and the arts since 1998. Since moving to Devon he's been active in the local wood scene, organising various woodland events and acting as a consultant to DEFRA for small woodland needs. www.thehillyfield.co.uk