



# **Five Years of Volunteers in Banff National Park**

## **A SPECIAL VOLUNTEER PROGRAM UPDATE**

**July 2006 - June 2011**

[www.pc.gc.ca/banff-volunteer](http://www.pc.gc.ca/banff-volunteer)

### **Results since 2006:**

- 2,057 volunteers
- 29,014 hours
- 940 Park Ambassador Reports
- 653 Citizen Scientist Reports
- 628 Trail Condition Reports
- 40 Helping Hands activities – some annual
- 42 Stakeholder Groups – various levels
- 52 Parks Canada Staff engaged – various departments, leadership skills development

### **Outcomes:**

- ✓ Visitor experience enhanced
- ✓ Heritage resources (natural and cultural) monitored, protected, and presented
- ✓ Education and engagement improved
- ✓ Target audiences engaged (urban, youth, New Canadian, corporate / tour / outdoor clubs & groups)
- ✓ Award-winning program: 2009 “Leader of Volunteer Management”
- ✓ Multiple positive media stories
- ✓ Use of social & multi-media & other technology

### **VISION**

Our Volunteer Program connects people to parks with high quality opportunities to protect ecological integrity, promote natural and cultural heritage, and enhance visitor experience.

### **MISSION**

Volunteers participate in research activities, which help protect the ecological integrity of the park and surrounding areas. They promote the stewardship of natural and cultural heritage. They enhance visitor experience through complementing Banff National Park’s programs and services with their time, energy, skills, knowledge and passion for parks.

### **2010-2014 Park Management Plan Goals:**

By 2014, the volunteer program has expanded 10-15% to 1,000 volunteers annually and over 15,000 hours; including more effective engagement in stewardship by visitors through voluntourism; citizen science projects that are designed around core ecological monitoring programs that also facilitates learning between scientists and volunteers; and sharing knowledge and stories widely.

## HOW DO...

- **Volunteers enhance visitor experience?**
- **Volunteers monitor, protect, and present heritage resources (natural and cultural)?**
- **Volunteers improve education and engagement?**

Each year for the past five years we have had **45+ trained, identifiable, local Park Ambassadors** hiking and biking on trails and attending special events, enhancing the visitors' experience by being the friendly welcome from Parks, answering questions, sharing their stories and passion for the park, promoting natural and cultural heritage programs and sites and observing, recording and reporting human and wildlife use, park infractions, trail conditions while promoting and role modeling 'leave no trace'.

- ✓ 940 PA reports (mainly front country, including some bike, back country, and campground ambassador reports)
- ✓ 628 Trail Condition reports (including 153 winter reports)
- ✓ Over 35,000 interactions with visitors reported (not including PA's that talk about the program to their friends, family and colleagues)
- ✓ PA's often take along a family member or friend, increasing the exposure of the program to potential volunteers
- ✓ Positive feedback from the public

Over the past five years, we have had over **40 Helping Hands volunteer events** (litter-picks, invasive plant pulls, tree planting, trail work, etc) to enhance visitor experience and protect the ecological integrity of the park. Some activities are annual eg. The Annual Highway Clean Up and Fence Check Up - during the first week of June - National Environment Week; and the Alberta Underwater and Shoreline Clean Up at Lake Minnewanka in September, as part of the Great Canadian Shoreline Clean Up. Summertime weekly activities are open to visitors to participate in (eg. "Trail Tuesdays", "Weeding Wednesdays", and "Thistle Thursdays") and are fun, hands-on ways people can be stewards and 'give back to the park'.

- ✓ ~10 tonnes of litter collected
- ✓ Annually the wildlife fence along the Trans Canada Highway gets checked and problems are reported and fixed, helping with wildlife and public safety
- ✓ 200+ large bags of invasive plants removed including from sensitive riparian zones, eliminating the need for pesticides
- ✓ ~75 native plants saved from construction and replanted at the new Banff Recreation Centre
- ✓ ~15 bags of illegal fishing gear and other litter pulled out of Lake Minnewanka, ensuring people and wildlife are not harmed by hooks, lines and litter

Annually for the past five years, we have had **50+ trained, identifiable, local Citizen Scientists** who assist with a variety of research projects, monitoring various indicators and species in the park, and while out and about in the park, they interact with visitors and explain the research and share their stories and passion for their work, connecting people to the park in a unique way while deepening their own connection to the park.

- ✓ Projects (including third party researchers'): Shrubwatch, Bear DNA Project, Wildlife Tracking, Harlequin Duck Monitoring, Douglas Fir Tree Fire Impact Project, Amphibian Monitoring, Water Quality Monitoring, Wolverine Project, Invasive Plant monitoring, reporting & removal

*"This was an excellent hike. My grandson kept track of the number of people on the trail. There were 82 in total on the trail and at the lake. I was kept busy talking to people. Very friendly and interesting."*

*-Park Ambassador  
Emerson Sanford*

*"We received lots of 'thank-you's' for picking up garbage. This was appreciated, but we also used the response, 'anyone can do it' to help encourage a very simple activity that has a great impact."*

*-Helping Hands Participant*

*"Being involved with CS has prompted me to pull thistles even out here in Canmore; develop my own Shrubwatch kit with ID books, GPS, measuring sticks, etc.; and it's a great pleasure to distinguish between the different 'greens' of trees now and know what I'm looking at. Definitely makes me feel part of the landscape. Sjors, me and Alice plan to meet our 26 plot goal."*

*-Citizen Scientist  
Alison Carter*

The volunteer program has attracted Parks Canada's target audiences (**urban, youth, New Canadian, corporate, tour groups, outdoor clubs etc**) and starting in 2011, **14 international volunteers** will be participating for four weeks at a time as "Park Stewards" - a pilot program made possible through partnering with Go International and the Juniper Hotel.

**At least two dozen positive media stories** have been published on various aspects of the volunteer program, through local media and using social media, multi-media and other technology (eg. Twitter). Most people who enquire about volunteering now have either found the program on the website or have been inspired by media stories and word of mouth from other volunteers.

**Here is what a visitor had to say about meeting a Park Ambassador:** "It was fun to have a knowledgeable hiking companion - thanks for answering my many questions! I had such a great vacation in the Canadian Rockies and there is much more to explore! We saw more wildlife as we travelled north - black bear, brown bear, elk, snowshoe hare, baby elk, baby sheep (wow - can they ever jump!), golden eagle, bald eagle, osprey, and a really ruby-crowned kinglet. At the Icefields Visitor Center it dawned on me that I was seeing the start of the Columbia River - very cool! It's been a bit hard readjusting to relatively tamer Oregon, but at least there are photos (and some bear videos) to bring back memories. I'm definitely inspired to get out on the local trails tout de suite!"

**Staff in Heritage Programs:** "I wanted to pass on my compliments and appreciation for Donna and Drew's terrific assistance with Heritage Program's 10th Annual Summer Sulphur Stroll with Sanson for Parks Day 2009. Donna was a tremendous asset with her knowledge of flowers and Drew equally shared his knowledge of local fauna and geology. The two of them are exceptional ambassadors for BNPC and Parks Canada. They were the perfect complement to Gareth and myself and helped contribute to another successful Stroll."

**And then again in 2010:** "I would like to pass on my thanks and appreciation for BNP Volunteers Les and Kathy for their help with our 11th Annual Summer Sulphur Stroll with Sanson. We had a great turnout and having Les and Kathy take groups and share their wealth of information was tremendous! We could not have provided such a good experience without them."

**And finally, a testimonial from a scientist:** "Citizen Scientist volunteers played a key role in the data collection for the Trans-Canada Highway Bear DNA Project. The volunteers conducted surveys to collect hair from bear rub trees as part of a study to investigate the conservation benefits of wildlife crossing structures for grizzly and black bear populations in the Bow Valley of Banff National Park. Citizen Scientist volunteers covered many of the trails that my field crews were unable to survey due to logistical constraints. A core group of volunteers even took the initiative to create a rub tree survey schedule for their trail segments and those leaders ensured that their trails were surveyed at the appropriate intervals. I definitely advocate for the use of Citizen Scientist volunteers in similar ecological monitoring projects, with caution to ensure that the goals of both the researchers and the volunteers are met. Citizen Scientist volunteers could be an integral component of a long term bear monitoring program based on rub tree surveys in Banff National Park, where they can complement back country staff monitoring activities. Rub trees surveys are a great fit for the Citizen Scientist program because they involve straightforward but interesting data collection of a charismatic and iconic species, the grizzly bear, which also happens to be an indicator species for ecological integrity in the mountain parks. Rub tree surveys get volunteers out on the park trails where they often encounter and interact with members of the public. This exposure is good for the Citizen Scientist Program and also helps to foster understanding of the research by the public. In my opinion, any long term bear monitoring efforts based on rub tree surveys in the park should involve the highly engaged and eager volunteers from the Citizen Scientist Program."

Michael Sawaya, Research Associate/ PhD Candidate  
Ecology Department, Montana State University

Volunteers are visitors too! In fact, volunteers will tell you –  
**"Volunteering is the ULTIMATE park experience!"**