**Executive Summary:**

**Motivations and Level of Commitment of Volunteers to**

**“I Love My Park Day”**

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**Introduction**

This study examines the motivations and level of commitment of volunteers for the 2016 I Love My Park Day event in the state parks of New York State’s Central Region. This one-day event is organized by Parks and Trails New York in partnership with the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation (OPRHP). The event occurs every year on the first Saturday of May. Although the event has had continued success over the past several years, little is known about why volunteers partake in this day of stewardship. It is expected that the results from this study will help inform park managers about the typical motivations of volunteers for participating in I Love My Park Day events. With this information, managers can make changes to the planned park activities during the event to better suit volunteers’ motivations and possibly create more interest in the event, increasing future volunteer turnout. This information can be used in conjunction with recommendations set forth by Parks and Trails New York in their Organizer’s Manual, which includes social media marketing strategies, to attract volunteers and help improve park resources.

**Definitions**

Environmental stewardship: The protection of the environment for future generations.

Level of commitment: The amount of dedication a volunteer displays through the consistency, amount, and length of volunteer service.

Motivations: A reason that causes someone to take action.

**Methods**

An in-person survey was conducted with volunteers for I Love My Park Day (May 7, 2016) in nine parks (Chenango Valley, Clark Reservation, Delta Lake, Gilbert Lake, Glimmerglass, Green Lakes, Pixley Falls, Selkirk Shores, Verona Beach) in the Central Region of the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation. Only parks that were participating in I Love My Park Day were included; museums and historic sites were excluded. Two parks (Oquaga Creek and Chittenango Falls) either had no volunteers or had to cancel the event, and so were not included in the survey.

The survey included questions on motivations for volunteering at the event, past involvement with I Love My Park Day and other environmental stewardship events, and the demographic characteristics of volunteers. In addition, a write-in question was included so that respondents could indicate their most important reason for attending I Love My Park Day.

Prior to the event, survey administrators were trained in the data collection process. Volunteers attending I Love My Park Day were approached by these administrators to take the survey near the event registration table before they began the day’s activities. Only those respondents who were 18 years of age or older were asked to complete the questionnaire. Statistics were used to identify relationships between motivations and participation in the event.

**Results**

The 2016 I Love My Park Day had 150 adult participants in the Central Region, 122 of whom completed the questionnaire (a response rate of 81%). Table 1 below shows the number of surveys completed in each park. Demographic information can be found in Tables 2 through 5.

Volunteers were motivated to participate in I Love MY Park Day for different reasons (Table 6). The most important motivation was “helping the environment,” and the least important motivation was “career-related.” Other motivations were written onto the questionnaire by respondents (Table 7). The most common of these additional motivations was “helping parks, the environment, and/or the community,” “my connection with parks and/or the environment,” and “to participate in group volunteer work.”

#### Table 1.

Number of surveys completed at each park.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| State park | Number of surveys completed | Actual volunteer attendance | Response rate in each park |
| Chenango Valley | 18 | 38 | 47 | % |
| Clark Reservation | 29 | 33 | 88 | % |
| Delta Lake  | 6 | 6 | 100 | % |
| Gilbert Lake  | 14 | 17 | 82 | % |
| Glimmerglass  | 10 | 10 | 100 | % |
| Green Lakes  | 22 | 24 | 92 | % |
| Pixley Falls  | 9 | 9 | 100 | % |
| Selkirk Shores  | 5 | 5 | 100 | % |
| Verona Beach  | 9 | 9 | 100 | % |

Table 2.

Break down of respondents by age.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Age group | Percentage |
| 18 – 30 | 23% |
| 31 – 42 | 26% |
| 43 - 54 | 14% |
| 55 – 66 | 23% |
| 67 – 79 | 14% |

#### Table 3.

Break down by gender.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Gender | Percentage |
| Female | 58 | % |
| Male | 42 | % |
| Other | 0 | % |

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#### Table 4.

Household income frequencies.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Income | Percentage |
| $0 – $49,999 | 28% |
| $50,000 - $74,999 | 26% |
| $75,000 - $99,999 | 20% |
| $100,000 or more | 26% |

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#### Table 5.

Type of community frequencies.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Type of community | Percentage |  |
| Rural area, hamlet, or village (under 5,000 residents) | 39% |  |
| Small city or suburb (5,000 to 24,999 residents) | 33% |  |
| Medium city (25,000 to 99,999 residents) | 18% |  |
| Large city (over 100,000 residents) | 10% |  |

Table 6.

Motivations for volunteers at I Love My Park Day.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Motivation | Average  |
| Helping the environment | 1.79 |
| Personal values related to the environment | 1.71 |
| Productive use of time | 1.52 |
| Improving recreation experiences | 1.51 |
| Being a part of organized projects | 1.19 |
| Socializing with others | 1.03 |
| Learning about the environment | 0.82 |
| Gaining career-related experience | -0.22 |

Scale: -2 strongly disagree, -1 disagree, 0 neutral, 1 agree, 2 strongly agree

#### Table 7.

Written survey responses for why respondents participate.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Response | Percentage of responses |
| Helping parks, the environment, and/or the communityConnection with parks and/or the environmentGroup volunteer work | 44%39%17% |

In terms of level of commitment, the average number of years that volunteers participated in I Love My Park Day in the past was 0.7 years, indicating that the average volunteer is either new or has only attended I Love My Park Day once in the past. No significant relationships were found among demographics, motivations, and level of commitment of volunteers, indicating that these variables may not affect whether an individual participates or not. The “Career-related” motivation differed between age groups, with specific differences occurring between the 18 – 30 age group and the 31 – 42, 55 – 66, and 67 – 79 age groups. This result indicates that younger participants may be participating for career-related purposes (e.g., networking), while those in older age groups are not.

**Management Implications**

Park managers and event organizers can use the results from this study to attract more volunteers to I Love My Park Day. Although Parks and Trails New York provides an organizer’s manual with some tips on how to organize, promote, and run the event, promotions and marketing are done by each park individually. This process allows each park to tailor the event to its needs. The manual suggests many outreach methods, such as forming partnerships with service-oriented groups and using social media to reach volunteers (Parks and Trails New York and NYSOPRHP, 2017).

Below are recommendations for future events based on the results of the study, as well as recommendations provided by Parks and Trails New York.

* Share promotional and marketing strategies among park managers and event organizers to identify a wide range of techniques and focus on those that are most successful.
* Collect the contact information of volunteers for promotional purposes to help with volunteer retention in subsequent years.
* Emphasize the idea of “helping the environment” in promotions since that was rated as the most important motivation by respondents.
* Reach out to colleges and college students about volunteering at I Love My Park Day, since this age group indicated a stronger “career” motivation than other age groups.
* Target regular park goers to volunteer at the event.
* Reach out to volunteer organizations and groups that may be interested in community service efforts such as I Love My Park Day.

**Conclusion**

Environmental volunteerism is an excellent way to get people involved in parks, especially since many parks do not have sufficient personnel to accomplish all needed tasks. I Love My Park Day is a special, large-scale event that engages volunteers in the stewardship of New York State Parks. Based on these findings, managers can appeal to the volunteer motivation of wanting to help the environment via promotional materials and advertisements. In addition, managers can reach out to colleges, students, regular park goers, and groups who frequently engage in service projects in order to boost volunteer numbers. Managers can also share successful promotional strategies with other managers, and use volunteer contact information to encourage participation in subsequent years.