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# Motivations of Trail Volunteers of the Adirondack Mountain Club

## **Cover Page Footnote**

Thanks to the volunteers who participated in this study and to the Adirondack Mountain Club staff including Deputy Executive Director John Million and Trails Coordinator Andrew Hamlin whose collaboration made this study possible. This work was supported by JSPS KAKENHI Grant Number 26450489.

## **Motivations of Trail Volunteers of the Adirondack Mountain Club**

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### **Introduction**

Managers of many natural areas are facing challenges in maintaining greenways, given limited human and financial resources to deal with the vast areas of land that they manage. Volunteerism has increasingly been considered key to maintaining trails and other facilities. Organizations have sought ways to incorporate people into trail maintenance practices. For example, the Adirondack Mountain Club in New York provides various volunteer opportunities for members and non-members. Over 300 volunteers participated in the Adirondack Mountain Club's supervised trail volunteer programs in 2013, providing 3,500 hours of labor. What motivates people to participate in such physically and mentally demanding activities remains unclear.

### **Previous research on the attitudes of environmental volunteers**

Studies have suggested that various factors may influence volunteers to decide to participate in environmental volunteer programs. The functionalist approach is one way of understanding their motivations (Clary et al., 1998). Six functions of volunteering—values, understanding, social, career, protective, enhancement—have been suggested to motivate volunteers in the fields of healthcare and social service. For volunteers in environmental stewardship programs, helping the environment and learning were initial motivations while social factors and project organization had effects on volunteer commitment (Ryan et al., 2001). In urban conservation projects, the frequency of volunteers' participation was most explained by personal and social motivations rather than reasons related to the environment (Asah & Blahna, 2012).

### **Goals and objectives**

The goal of this study was to investigate participants' motivation to volunteer and their satisfaction that they got from engaging in a trail volunteer event in the Adirondack Park in the State of New York (USA). Moreover, the study aimed to explore the characteristics of the participants in a trail volunteer event, including their demographics, place of residence, and their volunteering behavior.

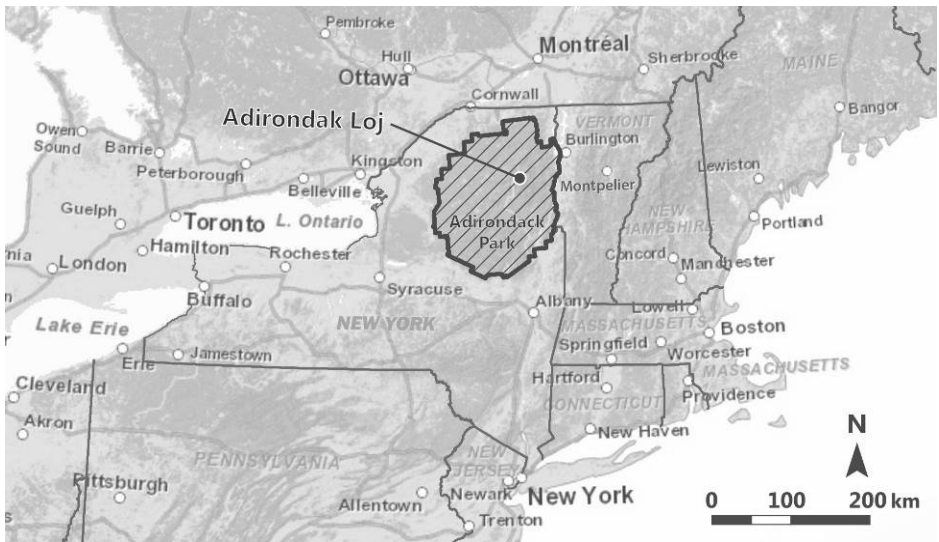
## **About the Adirondack Park and Adirondack Mountain Club**

The State of New York created the Adirondack Park in 1892. It is located in the northeast corner of the state and has an area of about 6 million acres (24,282 km<sup>2</sup>), making it the largest protected area in the contiguous United States. A little less than half of the land is owned by the state as forest preserves and the rest is privately owned (Adirondack Park Agency, 2014).

The Adirondack Mountain Club was established in 1922. In 2013, it had 16,320 members among 27 local chapters operating throughout New York. The club focuses its work in conservation, advocacy, recreation, education, and stewardship. The club organizes various volunteer opportunities, including one-day trail volunteer events; multi-day supervised volunteer trips for adults and high school students; and trail, shelter, and summit stewardship programs. In addition to these programs offered by the main body of the Adirondack Mountain Club, many of local chapters offer ongoing trail volunteer opportunities in nearby natural areas. (Adirondack Mountain Club, 2014).



**Figure 1. Volunteers on a supervised trip**



**Figure 2. Location of the Adirondack Park and the Adirondack Loj**

## Methods

The study was conducted during a one-day trail event that was held in the High Peaks region of the Adirondack Park on a weekend in October, 2015. The purpose of this event was to clean up the ditches along the trails at the end of the hiking season. We distributed the survey to the participants at the club's facility (Adirondack Loj) after the work day. We collected 35 surveys from the 35 participants at the event for a response rate of 100%. There were a considerable number of students (49%) at the event; many of them came as part of a trip organized by a college outdoor club. The survey included questions that asked about their motivation, satisfaction, types of activity, frequency of participation, residence, and demographic information. Due to inclement weather, the number of participants was significantly smaller than expected. Therefore, the study sample will be expanded with distribution of online survey to the members and the previous participants of the programs of the Adirondack Mountain Club.

## Results

Among the respondents, there were more men (66%) than women (31%); moreover, they were predominantly white (91%). More than half of the participants were younger than 29 (63%); there were also respondents who were in their 60s and 70s (17%). In addition to students, full-time workers (20%) and retired people (14%) attended the event. With regard to frequency of volunteering, nearly three-fourths of the respondents were participating for

the first time or had participated less than once a year in the club's activities (74%); some participated a few times a year (20%) and a few people participated monthly (6%). With regard to volunteer duration, one-third of the participants were participating in the club's programs for the first time (34%); another third had participated for three years or less (34%); and 20% of the participants had participated for more than three years. The most frequent type of volunteer activities were trail construction/ maintenance, trash clean up and brush removal. Additionally, participants indicated that they had relatively more knowledge/experience with nature observation and routine trail maintenance. Compared to those who participated by themselves (34%), a greater percentage of people had come to the event with a companion (63%). Almost half of the participants lived more than three hours drive from the Adirondacks (49%); a quarter lived an hour or less from the Adirondacks (26%); and others came from somewhere in between (20%).

**Table 1. Motivation item means**

Categories	Scale items	Mean Score
Environment	Protecting the environment	4.69
	Protecting the Adirondacks as a whole	4.48
	Helping to improve the outdoor recreation quality	4.42
	Protecting a specific place in the Adirondacks	3.58
Fun	Being outdoors	4.67
	Having fun	4.58
	Doing something physical	4.30
	Doing something in my free time	3.94
	Being pushed to my physical limits	3.58
Reflection	Feeling peace of mind	4.47
	Feeling of doing something useful	4.39
	Having a chance to reflect	4.09
	Getting away from the busy demands of everyday life	3.91
Learning	Observing nature	4.33
	Learning about the natural environment	4.30
	Learning about conservation techniques	3.94
Social	Meeting new people	3.91
	Volunteering with people I know	3.06
Organization	Supporting the group's ideas and its goals	4.03
Career	Gaining experience for my career	2.91

Scale: 1=not at all, ..., 3=somewhat, ..., 5=very much

The motivation items were preliminarily grouped into seven categories by the author: environment, fun, reflection, learning, social, organization, and career (Table 1). Items that had highest ratings were those in the environment and fun categories, such as “protecting the environment” (M=4.69), “being outdoors”(M=4.67), and “having fun” (M=4.58). Items related to reflection or

learning, such as “feeling peace of mind” ( $M=4.47$ ) and “observing nature” ( $M=4.33$ ) came next. Other motivations were those related to social aspects such as “meeting new people” ( $M=3.91$ ) and one related to the organization’s goals ( $M=4.03$ ). The survey also included an open-ended question that inquired regarding other reasons for volunteering. The typical answers were related to the college club and to “giving back to the trail.” Another question asked about participants’ satisfaction with their volunteer experience found high levels of satisfaction about how fun the event was ( $M=4.58$ ), the tools that were supplied for the work ( $M=4.30$ ), and the level of organization ( $M=4.13$ ).

## Discussion

The motivation items generally had high ratings, implying that the participants were highly motivated and had multifaceted reasons for participation. The most important finding was that the volunteers were motivated not only by environmental reasons, but by the enjoyable aspects (i.e., fun) of the trail volunteer activities. An earlier study of ecological stewardship volunteers (Ryan et al., 2001) found that the social aspects, which included having fun, were not among the top-rated items. These differences with the current study could be due to the nature of the trail volunteer activities examined in this study, which were performed while hiking, which may be considered a more fun activity. Moreover, Ryan et al. found that the social aspect was relatively more important to long-term volunteers; because there were more first-time volunteers at the event in this study, it is possible that results would differ among the long-term trail volunteers. Protecting the environment garnered the highest rating; this result was consistent with the results of other studies on environmental volunteers (Ryan et al., 2001; Asah & Blahna, 2012) and suggests that it is crucial to ensure that volunteers understand how their efforts contribute to the environment. The participants were highly satisfied with their volunteer experience. It should be noted that the club offered programs that were highly organized, which is crucial for a good volunteering experience.

Many larger natural areas are often distant from urban areas; while this could be thought of as a potential challenge to managers seeking to gather volunteers, the results showed that more people came from distant urban or suburban areas rather than from local areas. Moreover, again, many of the participants came on a college trip. This shows that some people are eager to come long distances to work on trails and that connection with other organizations, such as college outdoor clubs, could be helpful in gathering volunteers. However, the fact that there were notably fewer participants this year due to snow is suggestive of the inevitable difficulties that managers face in dealing with nature and people.

## Conclusion

This study revealed various motivations that influence people's engagement in trail volunteer activities. The findings from this study may provide insights for managers of the natural areas seeking to organize volunteer programs or retain volunteers in existing programs. Further research is necessary to explore the motivations of volunteers participating in different types of trail volunteer programs. Future research could also aim to discover how volunteers' attitudes change throughout the different stages of participation. In addition, details about the aspects of the program that encourage or deter people from participating in trail volunteer programs remain to be explored.

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