

Friends of the Helmeted Honeyeater Volunteer Engagement Project

Volunteers have been the lifeblood of the Friends of the Helmeted Honeyeater (FoHH) since its inception in 1989. Without the contribution of volunteers, our achievements in securing the future of the Helmeted Honeyeater (HeHos) would not have been possible. In 2019, the year of our 30th anniversary, it is timely to take stock of what has been achieved and how we can best meet the challenges of the future. Like other volunteer-dependent organisations (for example, Landcare), we need to continue to attract and retain the number of volunteers required to sustain our activities. The wide range of activities of the FoHH which depend on volunteer input include:

- seed collection and sorting, weeding and rubbish removal in Yellingbo Nature Conservation Reserve (YNCR)
- propagation of plants, and nursery maintenance, in the indigenous plant nursery
- revegetation and habitat restoration
- supplementary feeding and monitoring of helmeted honeyeaters (now called the field assistant program) and assisting with banding of HeHos etc
- grant seeking and reporting on grants received
- sale of merchandise and other fundraising
- communications (eg The HeHo Herald)
- advocacy, and representation on the Recovery Team and other high-level bodies
- management and governance of the organisation (through the committee of management and sub-committees)

This represents an extraordinary and sustained commitment, one which we cannot take for granted. For this reason, philanthropic support was sought by the FoHH Public Fund Committee to undertake a Volunteer Engagement Project. In August 2018 a grant of \$15,726 was received from the Hazel and Arthur Bruce Bequest (Equity Trustees) for a project to enhance our capacity to engage and retain volunteers. The grant application included an in-kind contribution on behalf of FoHH – a survey of current FoHH volunteers undertaken by Alan Clayton, Dorothy Scott and Amy Tipton.

Project Overview

The key elements of the Volunteer Engagement Project are:

1. Reviewing the research literature on conservation volunteer engagement.
2. Documenting “best practice” policies and procedures in volunteer recruitment, management and retention.
3. Interviewing current volunteers about a range of factors including; motivation, satisfaction and possible barriers to volunteering.
4. Analysing pre-existing data on volunteers over the past few years.

5. Developing recommendations to enhance volunteer engagement.
6. Sharing the learnings from this project with other organisations.
7. Using our 30th anniversary to promote volunteering with FoHH.
8. Spending the grant in ways that support engaging volunteers and doing the acquittal to Equity Trustees on the outcomes of this project by July 31, 2019.

This report outlines the findings of this survey, identifies possible implications and makes recommendations for consideration.

Survey of Current Volunteers

People who were regular FoHH volunteers during the months October-December 2018 were invited to participate in an interview (with the option of this being in person or by phone). Sixty-one volunteers were interviewed – 31 whose primary volunteering was as field assistants, 21 whose primary volunteering was in the nursery and 9 volunteers whose primary volunteering was classified as “other”. The “other” group included people who served on the committee, and/or undertook activities such as seed collecting, fundraising and production of the FoHH newsletter etc. The categorisation of volunteers into these three groups is rather arbitrary as a majority of interviewees were either currently volunteering in more than one area or had done so in the past.

The method of recruitment differed for the three groups of volunteers. Nursery volunteers were invited to participate in person by Dorothy Scott being “on the spot” during those days they were at the nursery. All regular nursery volunteers agreed to participate so the sample of nursery volunteers is close to the total number of regular volunteers during the period of the survey. A small number of regular nursery volunteers were not included due to being absent for reasons of ill-health or travel. Nursery interviews were nearly all face-to-face.

Volunteer field assistants were invited to participate by email, and the response rate was approximately 50%. Compared with most surveys, where a 30% response rate is regarded as good, this was excellent, but it has resulted in a somewhat unrepresentative sample of volunteer field assistants, at least in relation to age and duration of volunteering. Field assistants who were tertiary students were largely unresponsive to the request to participate. This is likely to be related to the survey being undertaken at a demanding time of the academic year, as well as a tendency to disregard the many survey requests students receive via email. It is also the time of year when many students typically leave the field assistant program, having fulfilled the academic requirement for fieldwork associated with their course. The Field Assistant sample of interviewees was also skewed toward those who were longer-serving, with only 5 of the 31 interviewed having commenced as a field assistant in the last 12 months (compared with one third of volunteers in the field assistant program as a whole having joined in the last 12 months). Most of these interviews were done by phone due to the work and time constraints of field assistant interviewees.

Those volunteers classified as “other” were recruited through direct face to face contact, by phone or email. All those approached agreed to participate. These interviews were

conducted through a combination of phone and in person. Field assistant and “other volunteer” interviews were conducted by Dorothy Scott, Alan Clayton and Amy Tipton.

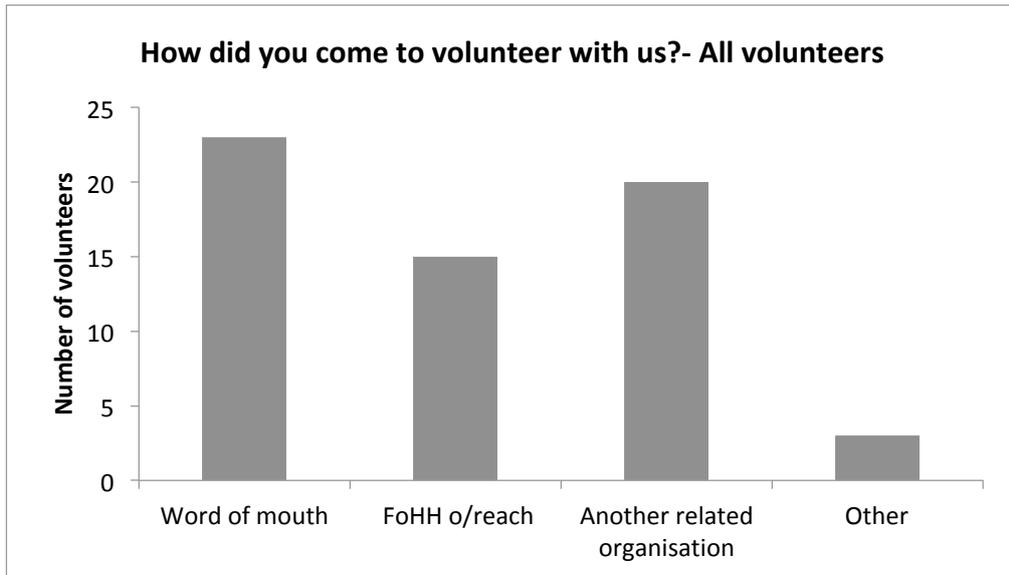
The interview guide was structured around questions relating to:

- Pathways by which people came to be a volunteer
- Main reasons for volunteering initially
- Main reasons for currently volunteering
- Number of years of volunteering
- Current volunteering experiences with other organisations
- Demographic data (age, gender)
- Whether we are seeing positive environmental outcomes from our efforts
- Whether the FoHH has a clear focus and direction
- Average number of hours a month volunteering for FoHH
- Approximate travel time to and from home when volunteering
- Whether the tasks are not challenging enough, about right or too challenging
- Most enjoyable aspect(s) of the volunteering
- Least enjoyable aspect(s) of volunteering
- Things which make volunteering difficult
- Level of satisfaction with current experience of volunteering
- Level of satisfaction with preparation for volunteering tasks
- Likelihood of continuing to volunteer in the next 12 months
- Likelihood of recommending volunteering with FoHH to others
- Membership of the FoHH
- Ways the contribution of our volunteers could be recognised
- Suggestions for how we might best recruit and retain volunteers

The findings in relation to the above issues are summarised below. Where there are significant differences between groups of volunteers, these are identified. Due to the small number of volunteers in the “other” category, these are not analysed separately except in relation to their number of volunteering hours per month and the barriers to their volunteering. The “other” group differed markedly from the other two groups in these categories.

1. Pathways to becoming a volunteer

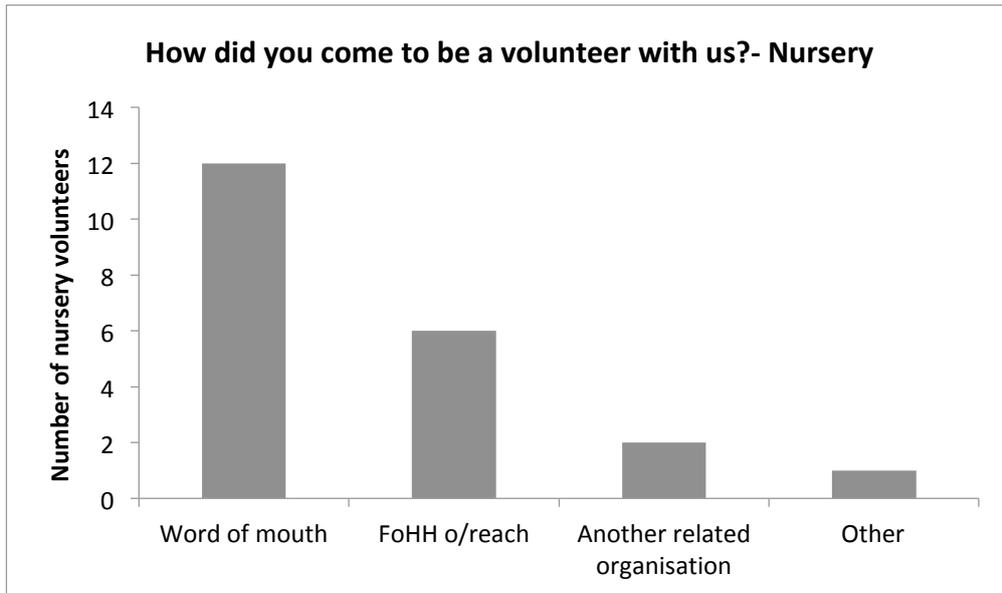
Knowing the pathways through which volunteers come to FoHH is valuable information for future recruitment strategies. The findings in relation to this question identified three main routes: word of mouth (eg friend or relative); FoHH outreach activities (eg local newspaper coverage, talks to local groups, posters in community venues etc); and through a related organisation.



Overall, word of mouth was the most common pathway, followed by a related organisation and then FoHH outreach. There were clear differences between field assistant volunteers and nursery volunteers in relation to this question, as illustrated below, with the most common pathway for field assistant volunteers being a related organisation (most commonly Birdlife Australia).

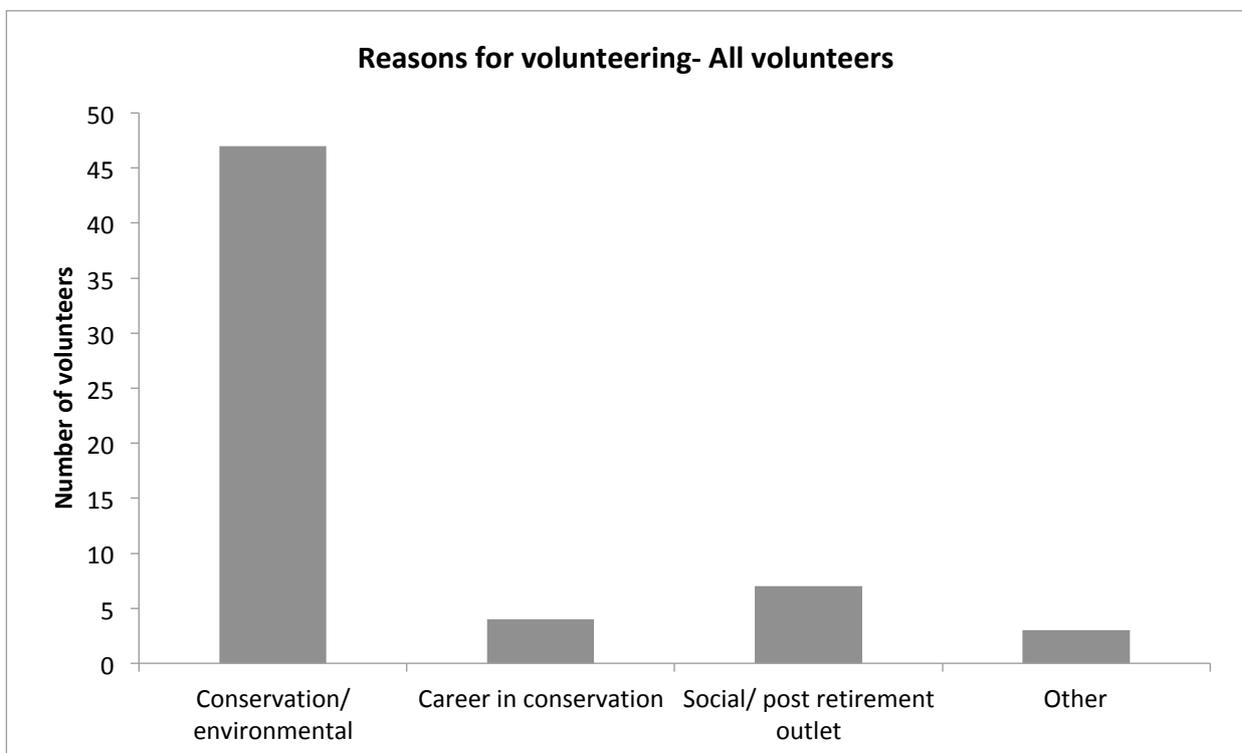


For nursery volunteers the most common pathway was “word of mouth”. FoHH outreach was also a frequently mentioned pathway by a group of long-serving nursery volunteers who recalled initiatives such FoHH displays and stands at local community markets and other venues. (These events typically involved two FoHH members giving away a native plant and an information brochure and engaging in conversations with people considering volunteering. This was done over a number of years).



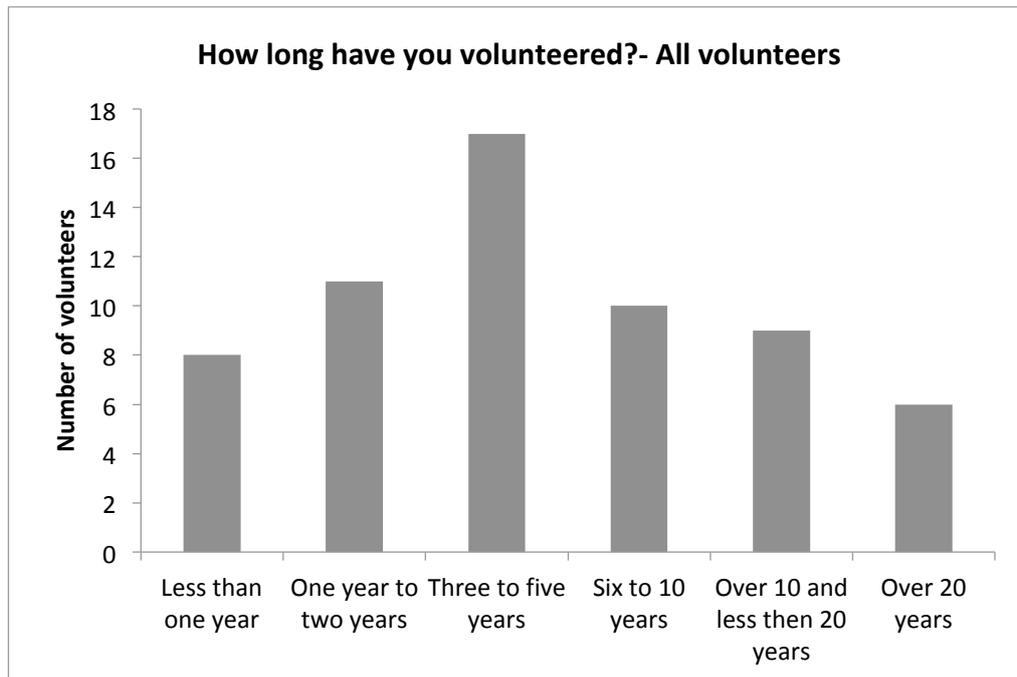
2. Main reason for volunteering

The overriding reason for volunteering was a commitment to conservation. A small number of nursery volunteers were looking for a post-retirement outlet and social interaction. While the main reason remained the same for two thirds of volunteers, a third experienced a shift in motivation, with the social and friendship aspect becoming more important over time.



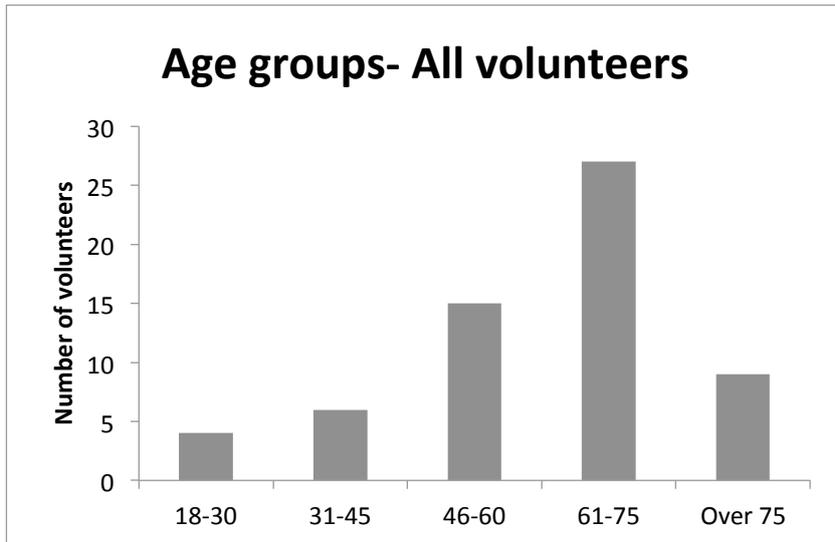
3. Duration of Volunteering

Approximately two-thirds of those interviewed had been volunteering for more than three years, with the most common category being three to five years. The longest serving volunteers were those involved in seed collecting and the nursery. The overall duration of volunteering is most impressive, as highlighted below. Without data on those who discontinued volunteering it is hard to estimate the retention rate of our volunteers over time. In the field assistant program data on discontinuation is routinely collected. Those agreeing to be interviewed may belong to the more stable core of field assistants.

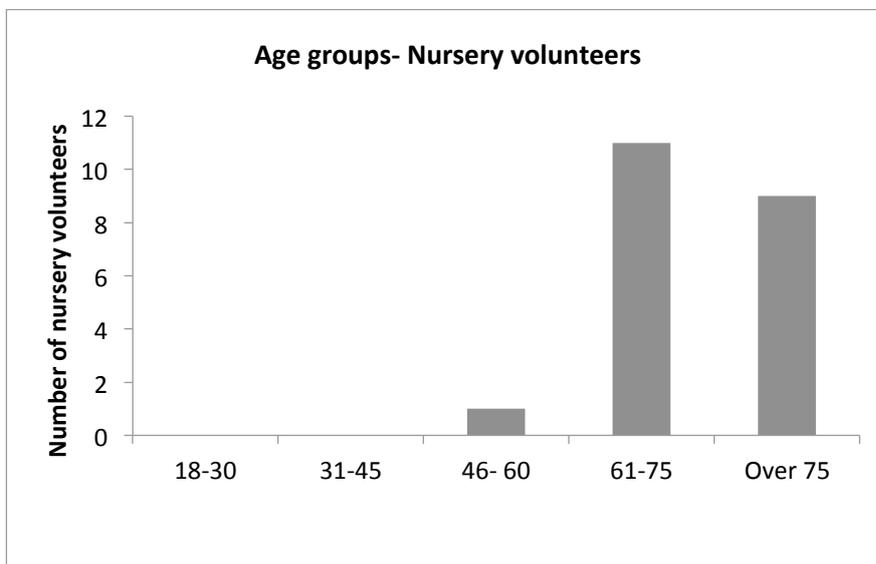


4. Age

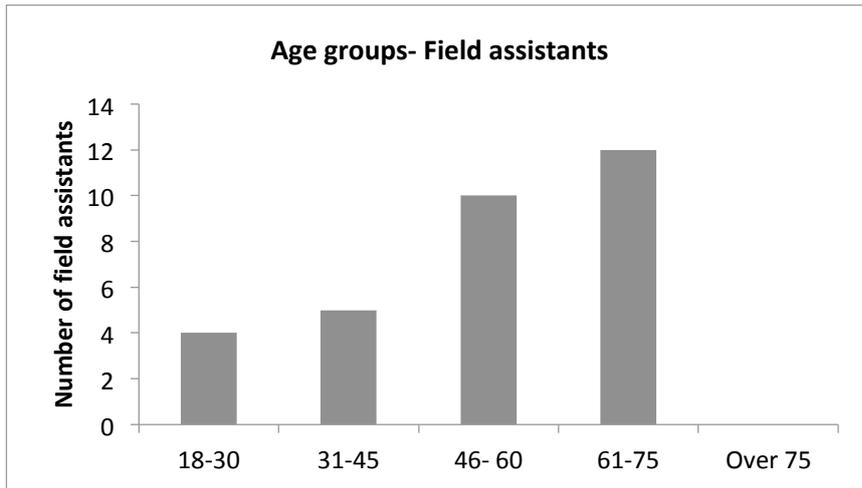
Overwhelmingly, those interviewed were in late middle-age or elderly, with only 10 interviewees out of 61 being 45 years or less.



There are clear differences in the age profile between nursery and field assistant volunteers, with just under half of nursery volunteers being over 75 years or above. While this is highly commendable, the aging cohort of nursery volunteers means that recruitment needs to be a priority if a volunteer-based workforce in the nursery is to be sustained and production maintained. Reaching out to recent retirees or those approaching retirement may help stem the likely loss of nursery volunteers due to death, infirmity and cessation of driving. The potential to recruit people in full-time employment is limited by the weekday nature of nursery volunteering.



The more physically demanding field assistant role and the fact that it can be done on weekends by those in full-time employment are contributing factors in explaining the different age profiles between the two groups. As noted earlier, the actual age profile of field assistants is likely to be younger than the sample interviewed suggests.

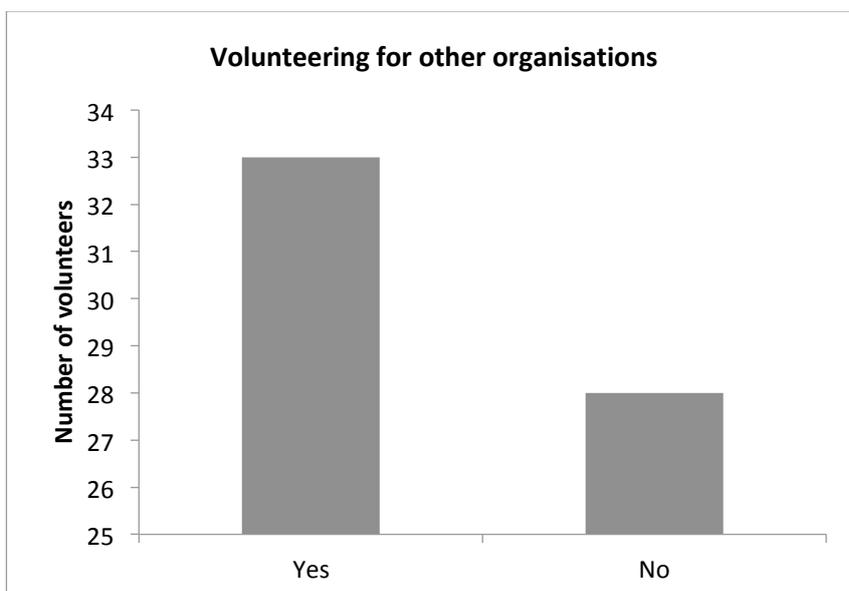


5. Gender

There were double the number of female volunteers to male volunteers. This ratio of 2:1 was true for both the nursery volunteers and field assistants. Several of the male volunteers became involved as a result of their partner's initial interest and a number commented that they enjoyed being able to volunteer as a couple. This is important to note as the opportunity to enjoy volunteering as a couple may be worth highlighting in targeted recruitment efforts.

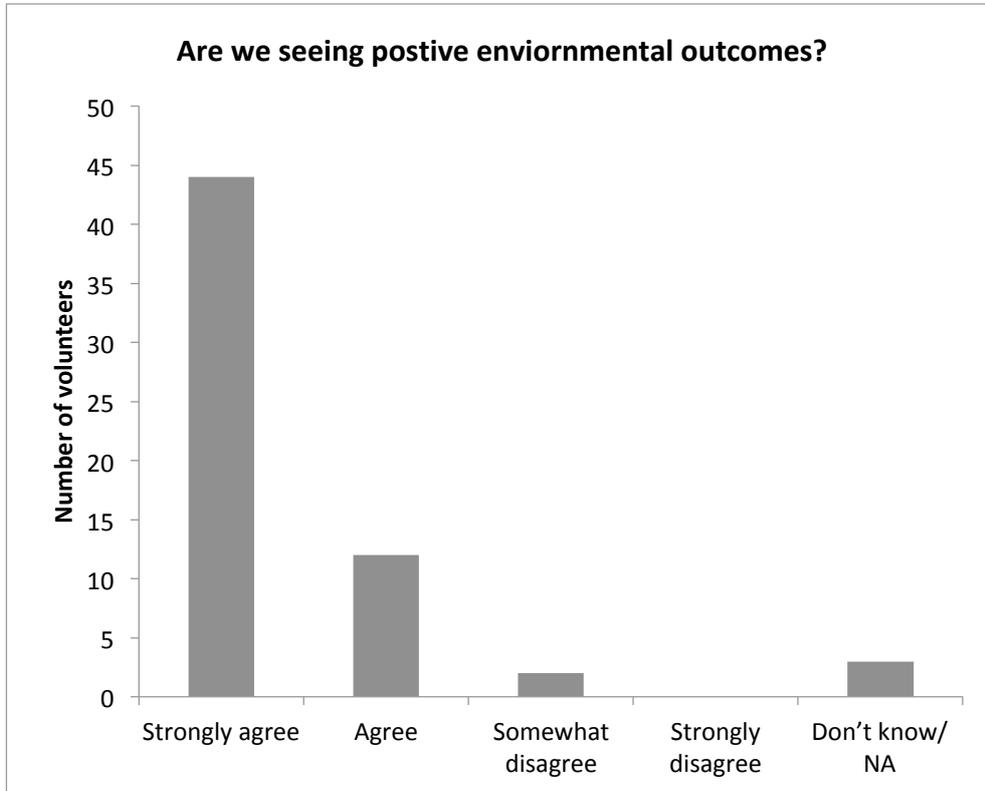
6. Volunteering for other organisations

Two thirds of field assistants and one third of nursery volunteers were currently involved in volunteering for other organisations. Many of those not doing so had previously volunteered elsewhere. The other organisations which people served were often environmentally-oriented but also represented a broad range of community organisations.



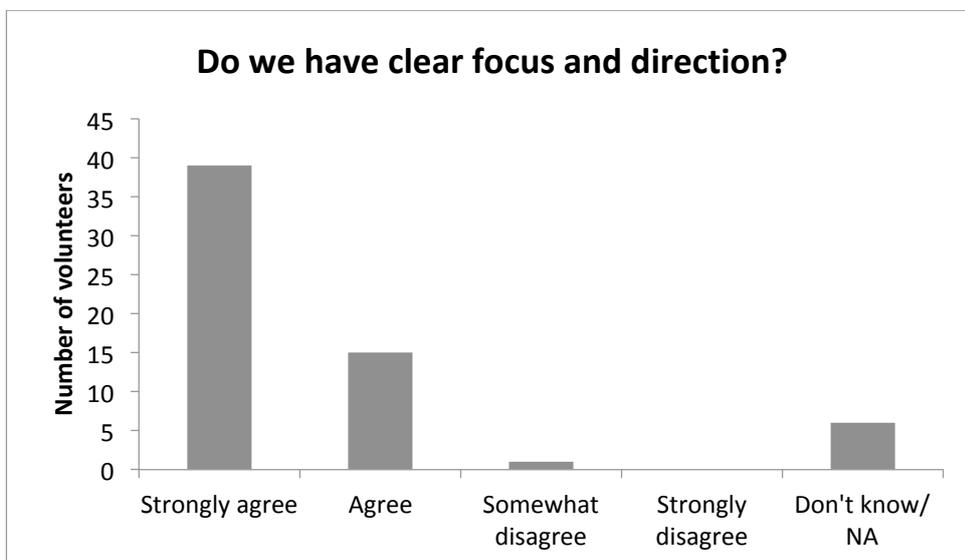
7. Views on Impact

The response to the question are we are seeking positive environmental outcomes was overwhelmingly “strongly agree” or “agree” across all groups. This suggests that volunteer recruitment and retention need to emphasise the positive outcomes being achieved.



8. Views on FoHH focus and direction

The overwhelmingly majority thought FoHH had a clear focus and direction. A few interviewees said they lacked information on which to make a judgment.



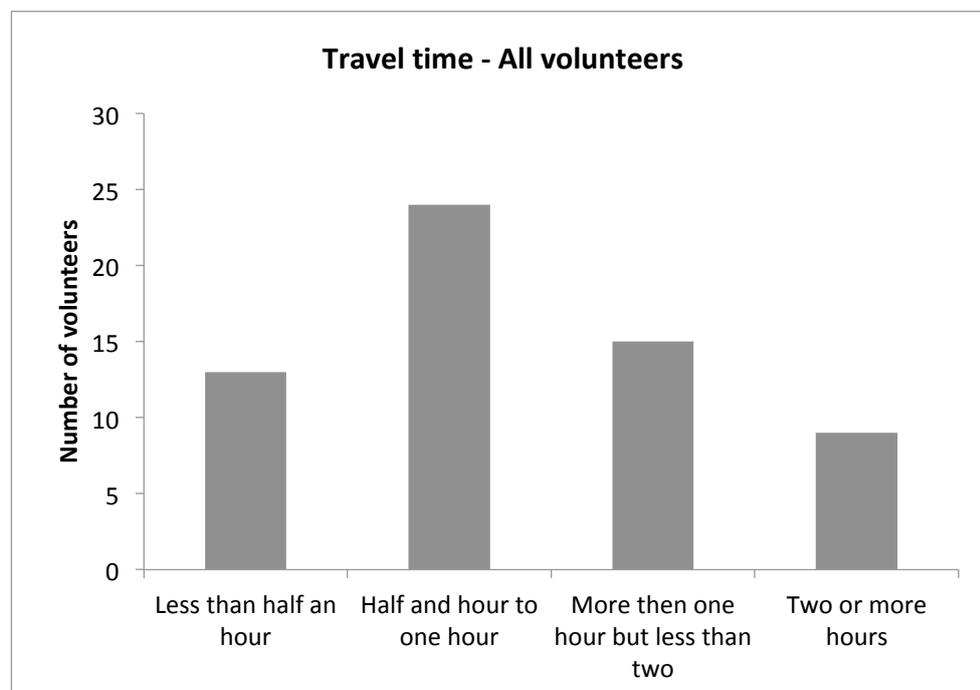
9. Number of Hours of Volunteering

Interviewees reported the number of hours each month that they volunteered for FoHH. The overall average was 17 hours. Nursery volunteers reported an average of 16.5 hours per month and field assistants 11.5 hours per month. This may reflect the fact that most nursery volunteers come once a week while for some field assistants their volunteering is done on a monthly basis.

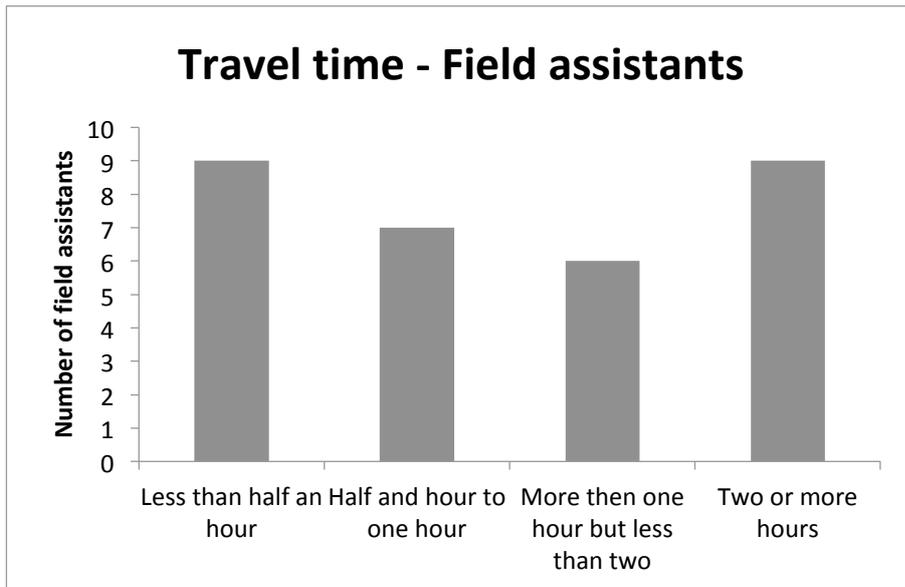
The interviewees in the “other” category had a very wide range of reported hours per month, with an average of 38 hours, much higher than the other two groups. There were several individuals in the “other category”, such as those in key office-bearing positions on the committee of management, who reported volunteering in the range of 60 to 96 hours per month. This reflects a common tendency in very small not-for-profit organisations for key office bearers such as the president or secretary, to act as a de facto executive officer. There is a major challenge for individuals in sustaining such a level of involvement in light of other commitments and life circumstances. It also highlights the difficulty of recruiting people to such positions if the expectation is equivalent to a half-time job.

10. Travel Time

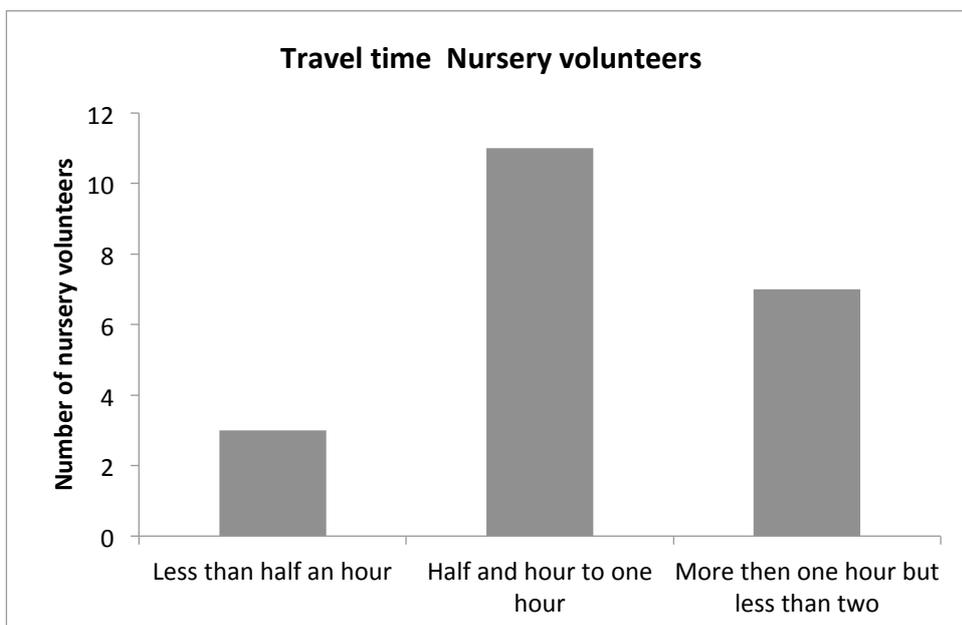
Given the time and the cost associated with travelling to and from Yellingbo, volunteers were asked how long the return trip from home took them. All came by car and the return trip for the majority was less than one hour.



The return trip for field assistants was, on average, much longer than for nursery volunteers.

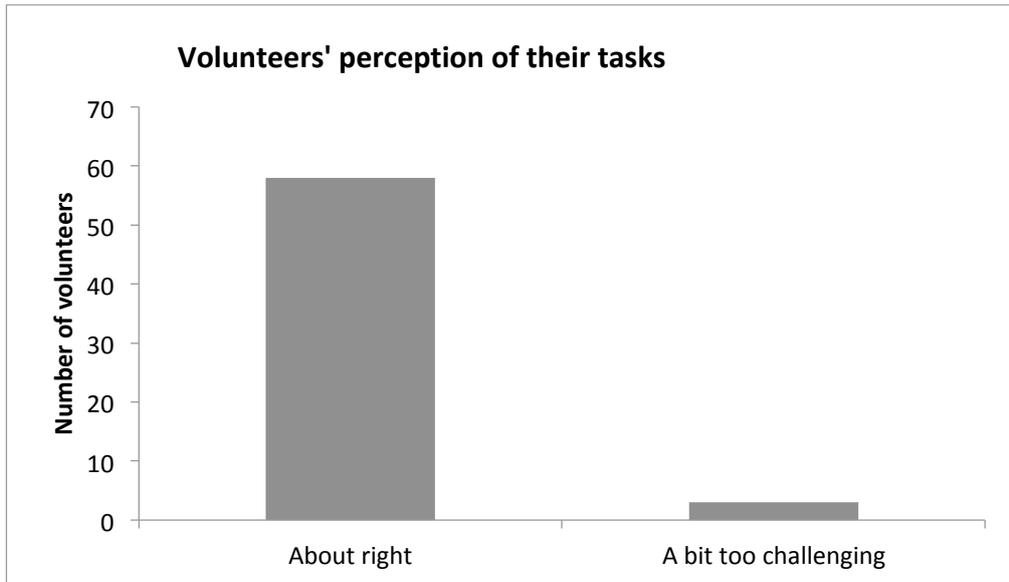


Half of the nursery volunteers travel one hour or less on a return trip. This suggests that targeting recruitment of all volunteer categories within a 30km radius of Yellingbo may be a useful strategy.



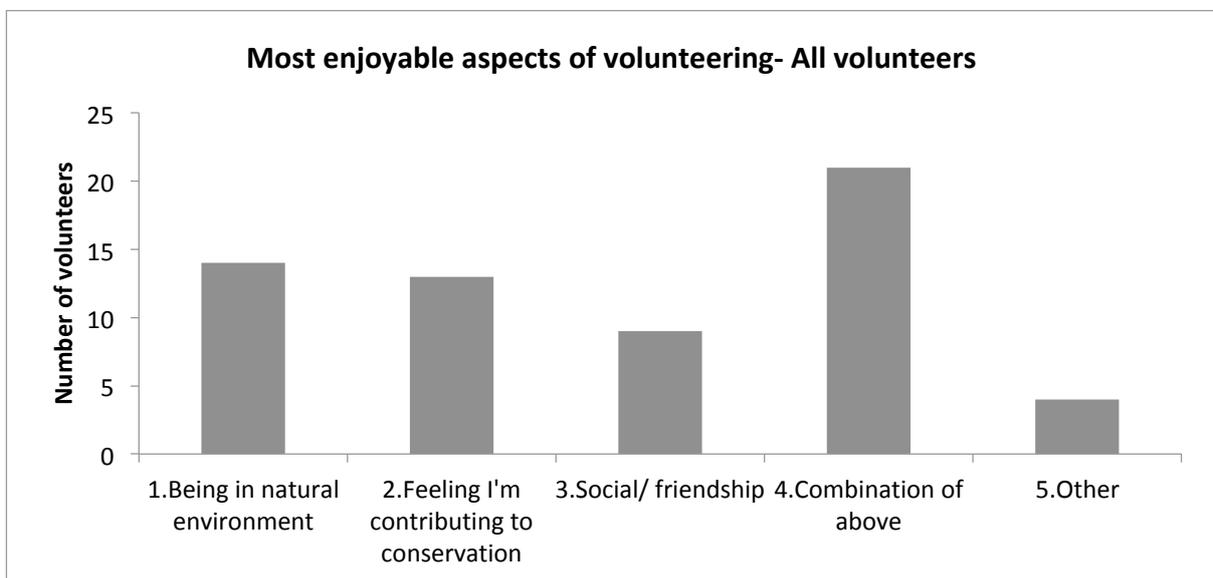
11. Complexity of Tasks Undertaken

Interviewees were asked whether the tasks they performed were “not challenging enough”, “about right” or “a bit too challenging”. Across the board the tasks performed were seen as “about right”. The few who found it a bit too challenging included field assistants who had difficulty differentiating the bands on HeHos.



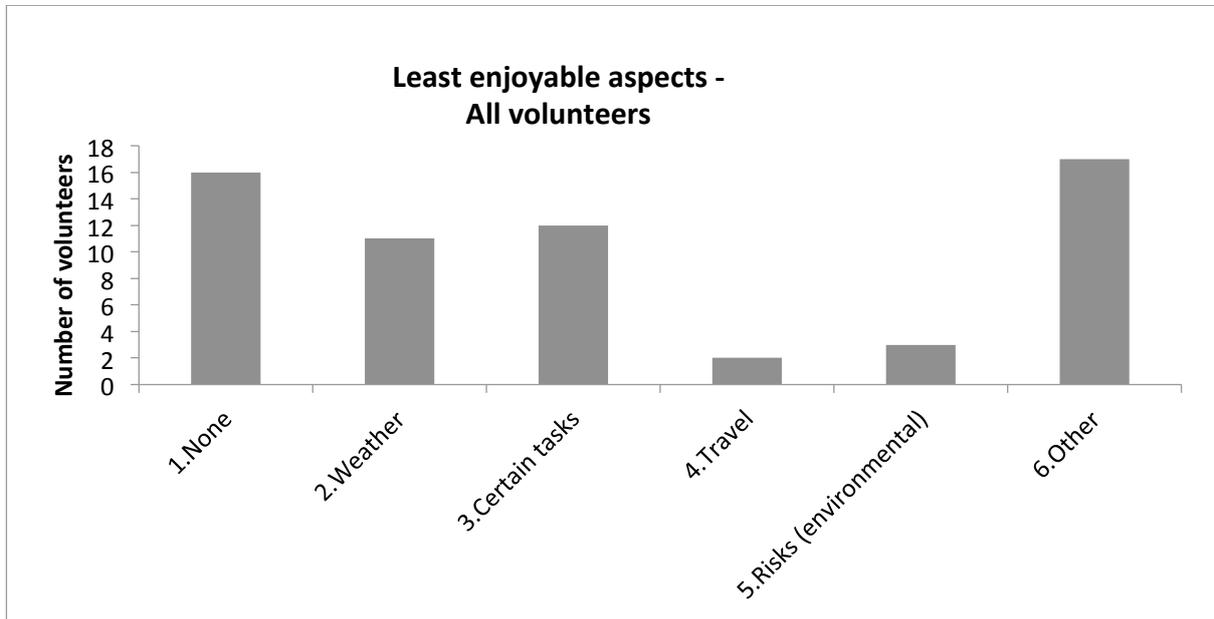
12. Most enjoyable aspects of volunteering

People responded enthusiastically about what they found most enjoyable in their volunteering. “Being in the bush” was a common response from field assistants while the social aspect was more commonly reported by nursery volunteers. This gives some clues about what might be useful to emphasise in recruiting volunteers for each program area.

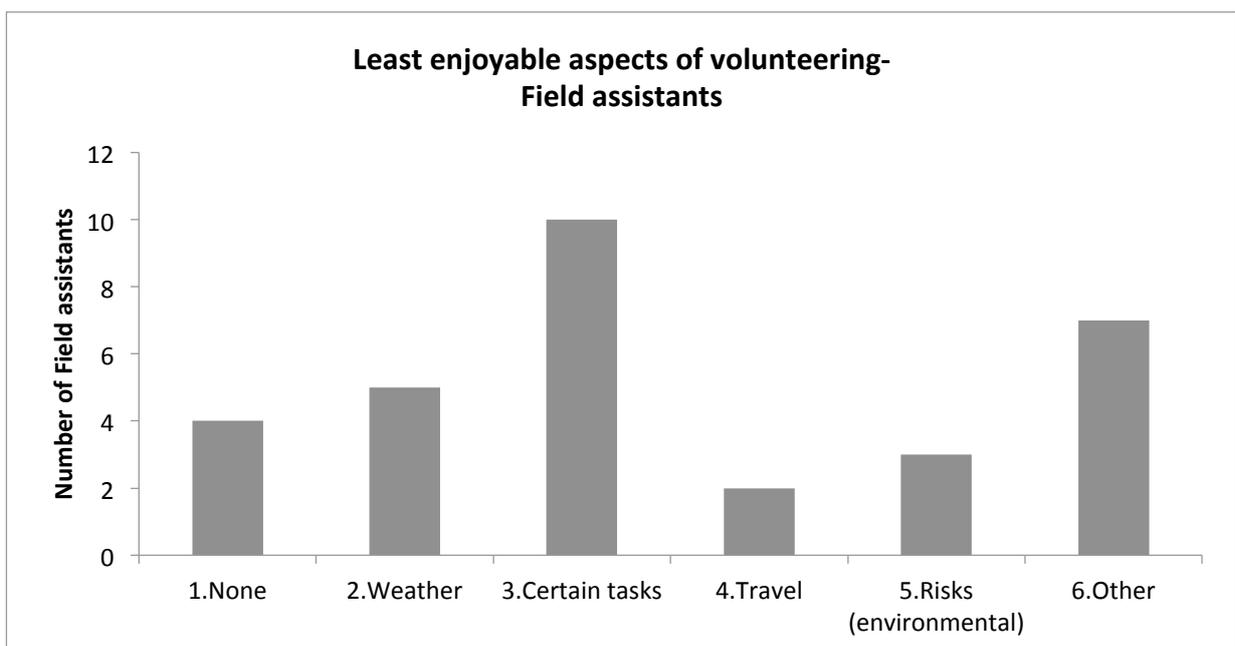


13. Least enjoyable aspects of volunteering

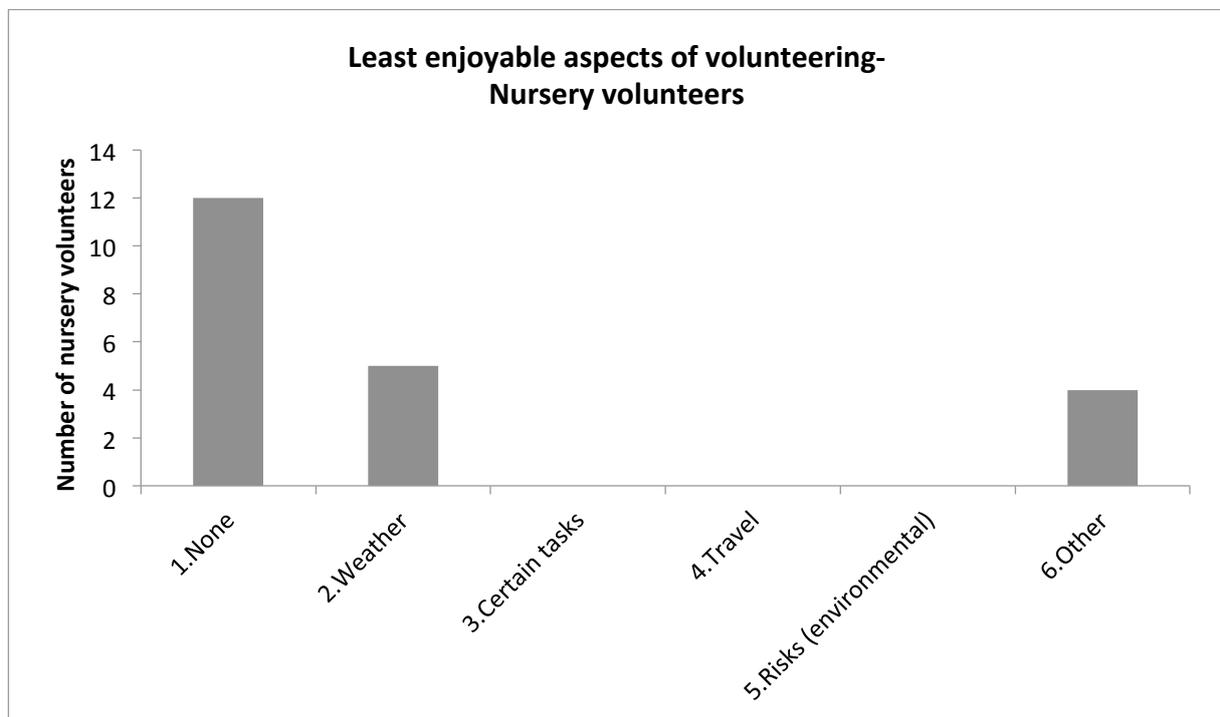
Interviewees were also asked about the least enjoyable aspect of their volunteering.



Overall, a quarter of all volunteers surveyed responded that there were no unenjoyable aspects of their role. There were disproportionately more field assistants that responded to having unenjoyable aspects of their role. Those unenjoyable aspects highlighted by field assistants were also more varied in nature. This is not surprising given that the nature of the field assistant role means they are very exposed to the elements and have some particularly demanding tasks. For example, trying to identify bands on the birds, the extensive “paperwork” or dealing with very messy wombaroo, were frequently mentioned. Risks such as snakes and mosquitoes, the distance required to travel were also reported by field assistants but not by nursery volunteers.



Over half of the nursery volunteers said that there were no unenjoyable aspects to their volunteering. Some of the longer serving volunteers commented on how in the past the hot and cold weather had been a problem but the upgrading of facilities had ameliorated this.



Of interest in relation to both groups is the “other” category. Aspects of volunteering that did not fit into the frequently mentioned categories such as weather and certain tasks, included a range of issues, such as the Occupational Health and Safety requirements or interpersonal tensions. These were only reported by a few people, but it is important to recognise the “downside” of volunteering for some people, and to consider what might be done about such issues.

14. Barriers to volunteering

Some of the responses elicited in the “least enjoyable” question were similar to the responses on any barriers experienced in interviewees’ volunteering, such as travel distance and physically demanding tasks. Interviewees were asked to comment on whether they experienced any of the following impediments to their volunteering:

- Financial
- Distance
- Interpersonal tensions
- Time constraints
- Physical capacity
- Family commitments
- Work commitments

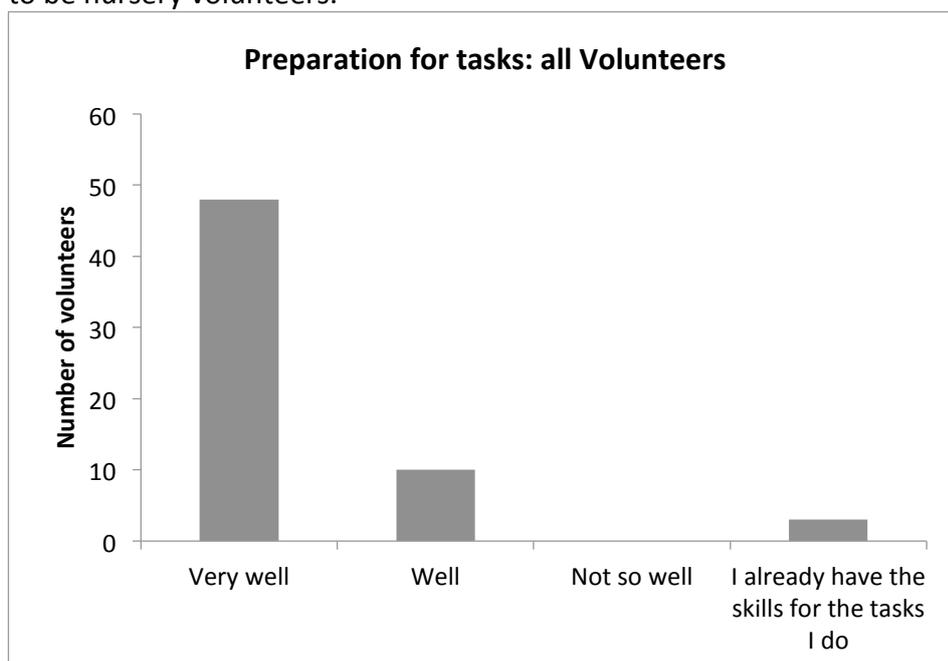
The significance of this information is twofold. One, addressing barriers (those which are modifiable) may be important in retaining volunteers. Two, these may be the same barriers which prevent potential volunteers being engaged in the first place. Overall, 45 of the 61 interviewees, or more than two thirds of all volunteers, reported at least one barrier. There were significant differences between nursery volunteers, field assistants and those classified as “other”. Only one third of nursery volunteers reported any barriers, while two thirds of field assistants did so. Those in the “other” category of volunteers were the most likely to report barriers, with over two thirds doing so.

The nature of the barriers also differed across the groups. The only three barriers reported by nursery volunteers were: physical capacity (mentioned 6 times); family commitments (mentioned 4 times); and time constraints (mentioned twice). The most frequently reported barriers for field assistants were: time constraints (mentioned 8 times); work commitments (mentioned 6 times); distance to travel (mentioned 6 times); and physical capacity (mentioned 5 times). Given the distance from Yellingbo that many field assistants live, and the fact that they are a somewhat younger age cohort and mostly still employed, neither of these findings is surprising.

The most frequently reported barriers for those in the “other” category were: time constraints (mentioned 5 times); interpersonal tensions (mentioned 3 times); work commitments (mentioned twice); and physical capacity (also mentioned twice). This, in addition to the high number of hours being undertaken by some volunteers in this category, is of concern in relation to the recruitment and retention of those in leadership roles.

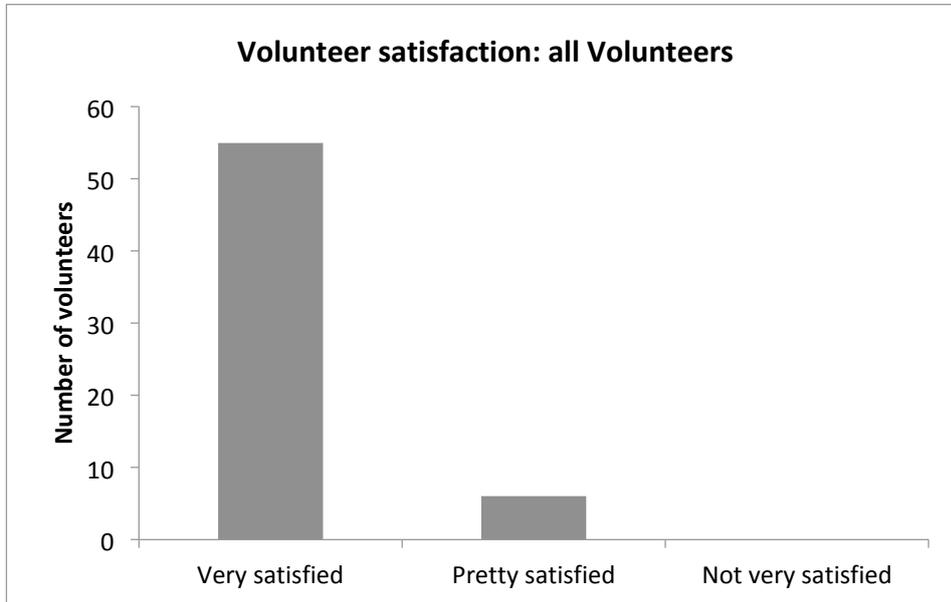
15.Preparation for tasks

Interviewees were asked to what degree they were prepared for the tasks they undertook. Overall people felt they were very well prepared, and no-one thought they had been “not so well” prepared. Those who responded with “well” rather than “very well” were more likely to be nursery volunteers.



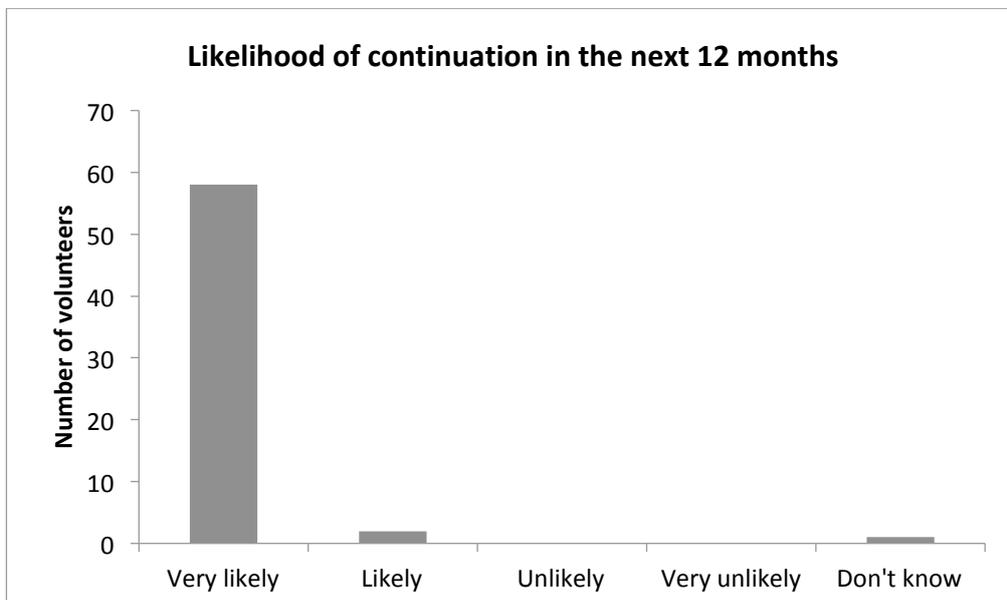
16. Level of Satisfaction

An important question in any study of this nature is the overall level of satisfaction reported. It is very encouraging to see that there was a very high level of satisfaction across all volunteer groups. However, it should be acknowledged that without “exit data”, it is not possible to assess the degree to which volunteers have been lost as a result of dissatisfaction.



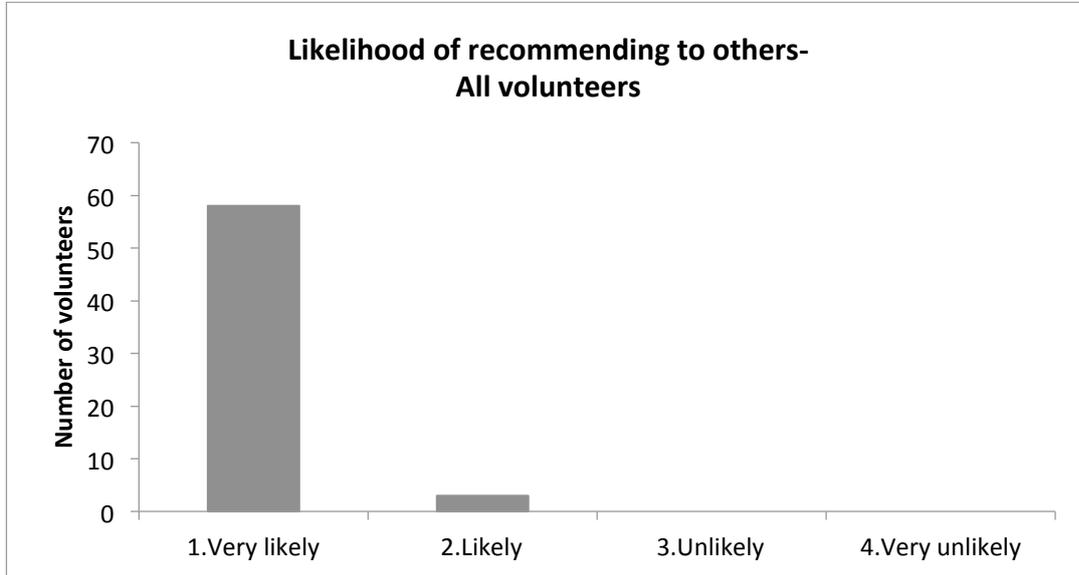
17. Likelihood of continuing in the next 12 months

An excellent indicator of satisfaction is the intention to continue. Nearly everyone interviewed reported that they intended to continue volunteering in the next 12 months. On the couple of occasions that this was not rated as “very likely”, this was due to uncertain health and changes in employment hours.



18. Likelihood of recommending FoHH volunteering to others?

All interviewees reported that they were very likely or likely to recommend volunteering with us to others. There were several examples given of this happening and resulting in new volunteers. This supports the earlier finding on the significance of “word of mouth” as a pathway to volunteering with FoHH. Our current volunteers are our best ambassadors for engaging new volunteers, and it might be possible to draw more on this.



19. Membership of FoHH

Just as not all members of the FoHH are volunteers, not all volunteers are current members of the FoHH. Over two thirds of those interviewed were members (of the 61 interviewees, 45 reported that they were currently members, 12 that they were not and four were not sure). Nursery volunteers were more likely to be members than field assistants. This is perhaps not surprising as field assistants are actually DELWP volunteers, while co-ordination is done through the FoHH.

A number of the interviewees who were not members expressed interest in receiving an electronic version of the HeHo newsletter and this was sent to them. The newsletter is an excellent way to engage volunteers who are not currently members, giving them a broader and deeper understanding of what is being done to secure the future of the Helmeted Honeyeater and its unique habitat. As an educational and promotion tool, it would seem appropriate for the electronic version of the newsletter to be distributed widely to members, volunteers, donors and key personnel in our partnering organisation as an educational and engagement strategy.

20. Acknowledgment of Volunteers

All interviewees were asked the open-ended question “In what ways do you think the contribution of our volunteers could be recognised?”. The responses were very varied and most interesting but not easily quantifiable. Most people prefaced their answer by saying

they did not need any recognition and that this was not why they volunteered. Some said they did not know. Others that volunteering was inherently rewarding. There was a general tone of reticence in people's responses. Some people remarked that they already felt recognised and affirmed by the staff member who co-ordinated their program area. Examples of how this was done included a simple comment of appreciation, thank you emails, a Christmas/end of year lunch or a morning tea bun (mentioned by some for nursery volunteers), and chocolate treats (mentioned by some field assistants).

When the issue was probed a bit further, and people were asked if others might feel the need for such recognition, this was readily acknowledged, and a range of suggestions was made. The following are all the ideas offered, and they include quite a number of forms of acknowledgment which are already in existence (the question was phrased in a way which was not meant to exclude current practices). The comments below are actual quotes, but where the same things were said by others, it is only stated once.

- Simple things like thank you emails and cards
- A roll of honour or life membership for long-serving volunteers
- Awards such as framed certificates at AGMs eg after 3 years
- Giving all volunteers an opportunity to see the Helmeted Honeyeater
- Newsletter should be sent to all volunteers, not just members
- Inviting volunteers to write a one-off column in the newsletter
- Giving items such as a HeHo lapel pin or hat after someone becomes a volunteer
- Something for everybody but still have recognition of exceptional effort
- Giving a HeHo shirt after say 12 months
- A badge you could wear with honour and that would start conversations with others
- We have Members Days but what about inviting all volunteers? Maybe twice a year.
- Using the website and Facebook to recognise people
- Highlight a volunteer in each newsletter
- A drawing of the HeHo and the volunteer after a period of volunteering eg 5 or 10 years – to be given to them
- Sharing data on our productivity (eg the nursery)
- When there is a concern that there's a really clear and immediate response
- Mugs would be fabulous
- A photo board ("we love our volunteers")
- Giving a leaflet and copy of the HeHo Herald to each person who does a site visit with Birdlife Australia
- Social occasion – bringing people together, just social, not scientific
- Breakfast with the Birds every 6 months
- Being affirmed when Governors or politicians visit eg James Merlino
- Publicity (about FoHH) makes you feel good
- Being provided with extensive information about the environment and the bird
- Annual "thank you" BBQ – all meet each other and pat each other on the back
- For students a certificate they can put on their CV
- Hat pin - at the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre we get an annual hatpin
- Feedback as to tangible results
- Visit to Zoo would be good – connection to Zoos Vic is disjointed

However, there were also cautionary comments such as:

- reward systems have the potential to offend
- any acknowledgement needs to be done sensitively and well
- in naming people, you inevitably miss someone

The inference from the above is that a range of tangible and less tangible forms of acknowledgement should be developed but this should be done carefully, recognising that most of our volunteers do not seek this, and there can be unintended consequences. Our 30th anniversary could be a focus for doing this.

21. Ideas on Engaging New Volunteers

Toward the end of the interview people were asked about their ideas for engaging new volunteers. The following is a summary of the most common responses.

(a) Field Assistants

- Closer collaboration with universities and TAFES
- Closer liaison with Birdlife Australia, Zoos Vic etc
- Through existing volunteers eg “bring a friend” special month
- Outreach to bushwalking clubs, environmental groups in the district
- Posters and leaflets in libraries etc in the district
- Publicity in local newspapers
- Stronger social media profile for FoHH

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(b) Nursery Volunteers

- Speakers at Retirement villages, Probus, Rotary, Lions etc
- Local newspaper and radio coverage
- Through local council (eg volunteering directory for seniors)
- Invite groups in eg U3A, gardening clubs and environmental groups
- Gardening Australia segment

(c) “Other”

Interviewees who were categorised as “other” made similar suggestions as those above. In addition, a few extended on the theme of inter-generational differences, and expressed varying views on the relative merits of targeting young people versus the retiree cohort. Other suggestions included:

- A comprehensive and sustained communications strategy
- FoHH website featuring volunteer stories through video clips
- Use reveg days to expose people to other volunteering roles with FoHH

22 Retaining Volunteers

Interviewees were also asked if they had any suggestions on how we might best retain volunteers.

(a) Field Assistants

- Continuous volunteer contact and feedback to keep engaged and make people feel they belong
- Facebook – even those who disappear – reach out to them...
- Being paired with the same, compatible partner field assistant
- More social opportunities to meet one another
- Make the tasks easier (eg use new technology, mark sites better)
- Select carefully for commitment in the first place

(b) Nursery Volunteers

- continue the really welcoming and atmosphere ...have someone like (individual named) as the welcomer, looking out for the new volunteer...it is hard for people coming into a group that knows one another
- Members/volunteers days on weekends
- Current things eg morning tea...
- Reconnect with those we haven't seen for a while eg send them a card
- Car pooling for those who are unable to drive any more and reduce petrol costs
- Just little things like always having some spare gloves available if you forget gloves

(c) "Other"

Again, the "other" interviews mostly expressed similar ideas to those above. In addition, the following were mentioned:

- Showing that our approaches are being successful
- Regular newsletters to all volunteers
- Opportunities to come to the reserve for a talk and a meal

21. Additional Comments

At the end of the interview, people were asked if they had anything they would like to add. Many people took this opportunity to express their admiration for, and appreciation of, the expertise and commitment of the staff who lead both the nursery and field assistant programs. This recognition of the calibre of our staff is most affirming.

Recommendations

1. The Committee of Management discuss at length the findings and implications of this study.
2. That this report be placed on the FoHH website and shared with members and volunteers with a view to inviting their feedback.
3. That ongoing data on volunteer turnover be collected and analysed at least on an annual basis and, if those ceasing their volunteering are willing, "exit interviews" be conducted with them.

4. That a series of very short video interviews with a few current volunteers be made as part of the project funded by Equity Trustees, so that these can be featured on the FoHH website for prospective volunteers to see, and shared with other organisations and various online platforms.
5. That a volunteer engagement strategy be included in the FoHH Strategic Plan.
6. That a “portfolio” of Volunteer Engagement be created and led by a member of the committee of management, and supported by a sub-committee of co-opted members and volunteers.
7. That this sub-committee develop and co-ordinate a volunteer engagement strategy and review FoHH policies and practices in relation to volunteers. An annual budget for volunteer engagement would be helpful so that this sub-committee could make recommendations to the committee of management on priorities on funding priorities.
8. A focus for such a sub-committee should be to develop and implement a district engagement initiative targeting communities within a 30km radius/30 minute drive of Yellingbo (ie outer boundaries such as Lilydale, Belgrave, Gembrook and Warburton).

The district engagement strategy could involve:

- (a) Asking FoHH members/volunteers to “adopt” specific locations in their own communities to ensure that leaflets and posters etc are displayed in libraries, community centres, cafes and on community noticeboards in these places.
 - (b) Identifying organisations within this district which may be receptive to having links to the FoHH website on their websites, having a FoHH speaker etc.
 - (c) Identifying the local newspapers and community newsletters across this district with a view to using these for a series of articles etc.
 - (d) Utilising locality-based social media to promote volunteering with FoHH.
9. That the 30th anniversary of the FoHH be used as an opportunity to:
 - (a) Reconnect with past members and volunteers.
 - (b) Recognise the contribution of past and present volunteers.
 - (c) Publicise FoHH activities and promote volunteering with us.
 - (d) Advance community education on the Helmeted Honeyeater.

Dorothy Scott, Alan Clayton and Amy Tipton

January 31, 2019