SPECIES on the EDGE
Gnèithean air an Oir

Our volunteer approach and how it drove and sustained action



Thematic review at a glance

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Beyond the count: what it really takes to keep volunteers coming back



Overview

Species on the Edge couldn't have delivered landscape-scale conservation without local people.

Over 1,000 volunteers gave their time across all seven project areas, contributing more than £180,000 in support. But getting people involved was only half the story.

This review reveals that sustainable volunteering develops where a flexible, place-based framework integrates three essential pillars: ownership (a personal connection to place); resources (practical skills and opportunities); and purpose (a shared vision with eNGOs). What works in one community doesn't always work in the next.

Key impacts

- **Over 1,000 volunteers** took part **across 3,400 engagements** and **9,000 hours**, significantly outperforming core targets.
- **895 people** took part in survey and monitoring volunteering, with **361 volunteering** regularly to create a vital, ongoing data stream for species recovery.
- Accessible micro-volunteering campaigns and public events successfully removed barriers, r**eaching over 2 million people** and driving biological records.
- By combining inclusive, community-based activities with direct volunteering asks, **the programme drove higher engagement and action**, proving that both short-term participation and long-term strategies must work hand-in-hand to secure a lasting legacy.

What made the difference

Standardised, top-down recruitment frameworks and complex survey methods cause administrative fatigue, not momentum.

Sustainable flexible and placed-based delivery models included:

- Face-to-face mentoring, field shadowing and peer buddy systems, instead of broad national training modules
- Diversified pathways embedding creative, educational and non-physical roles alongside species monitoring
- Local groups and networks backed by a designated eNGO or strategic lead to provide light-touch, ongoing coordination
- Regular, localised feedback loops demonstrating how volunteer records and effort were making a difference

> "I'm growing what my parents thought were weeds and I understand why.
>
> I am walking but with a different purpose ... to find and record stuff."
>
> **Volunteer**

Key findings

1 Ownership drives action.

Volunteers who felt a personal connection to a species or a local site - built through direct discovery and hands-on mentoring - were far more likely to sustain their involvement and go on to advocate for conservation more widely.

2 Resources enable capability.

One size does not fit all because communities and organisations start from different baselines. Success relied on meeting people where they are and developing flexible resources tailored to local needs. The North Coast focused on linking up existing volunteer efforts, Shetland expanded outreach beyond its nature reserves, and Orkney took a dedicated mentoring approach.

3 Purpose requires a shared vision.

While communities supplied local energy, long-term legacy depends on bridging grassroot enthusiasm with the strategies of established partner organisations. Even the strongest volunteer groups struggled to sustain action alone. Without continued staff support and a clear link to a wider purpose, enthusiasm is at risk of fragmenting after the programme ends.

> "Everything I've learnt about beetles I'm passing on to clients (Rainbows and Girlguiding). I get them looking for them, they love that kind of thing."
>
> **Volunteer**



From sightings to stewardship

Volunteers didn't stop at recording species. Many went on to run their own local groups, fundraise, design signage, and champion local wildlife. This progression reveals a vast reservoir of community enthusiasm and a deep desire to take direct action, potential that remains ready to flourish when backed by ongoing support.

Read the full *Our volunteer approach and how it drove and sustained action* Thematic Review

Explore case studies, data, and recommendations for building sustained volunteer action. Coming soon - available from our website: **www.speciesontheedge.co.uk**

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Thanks goes to The National Lottery Heritage Fund and all National Lottery players for making Species on the Edge possible.

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