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# Wilderness State Park Volunteers: A Qualitative Case Study of Meaning and Sustainability

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WILDERNESS STATE PARK VOLUNTEERS:  
A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY OF  
MEANING AND SUSTAINABILITY

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Environmental Studies

San José State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Science

by

Christina A. Peterson

August 2016

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The Designated Thesis Committee Approves the Thesis Titled

WILDERNESS STATE PARK VOLUNTEERS:  
A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY OF  
MEANING AND SUSTAINABILITY

by

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APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL STUDIES

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August 2016

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## ABSTRACT

### WILDERNESS STATE PARK VOLUNTEERS A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY OF MEANING AND SUSTAINABILITY

by Christina A. Peterson

In an increasingly urbanized world, parks, open space and wilderness areas are vitally important to human well-being. California State Parks provide people with the ability to connect with nature and engage in outdoor recreation. Moreover, these parks protect natural and cultural resources and preserve biodiversity. California State Parks are underfunded and rely on volunteers to support essential park services. The Wilderness State Park Uniformed Volunteer Program provides essential recreation, resource protection, and biodiversity services. In order to determine the elements of the volunteering experience that contribute to a strong sense of volunteer identity and meaning, a qualitative case study was conducted using semi-structured interviews and grounded theory analysis. Results show that three themes emerge as providing a strong sense of meaning for volunteers: connecting with nature, working together, and helping others. Volunteers in this study demonstrated that they construct deep meaning around their volunteer experiences and foster an environmental stewardship identity within a framework of shared values, significance, goal-orientation, and belonging. This study has implications for volunteer satisfaction and retention as well as for overall sustainability of the parks' mission.

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This work is dedicated to all members of the Uniformed Volunteer Program.

“In Wildness is the preservation of the world.” (Henry David Thoreau, 1862)

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CDP: California Department of Parks and Recreation

UVP: Uniformed Volunteer Program

VFI: volunteer functions inventory

VPM: volunteer process model

VSTM: volunteer stages and transitions model

WSPCA: Wilderness State Park Cooperating Association

WSP: Wilderness State Park

## **Introduction**

### **Motivation and Scope**

In an increasingly urbanized world, humans, who as a species evolved in nature, are losing touch with the natural world. The built environment is replacing natural landscapes, with resultant loss of open space and parkland. The preservation of parks and wild lands is put at risk as development encroaches on these civic spaces; consequently, adults and children alike become unable to understand and appreciate the value of natural processes for example, the water and nutrient cycles, which foster both ecological and human well-being by supporting agriculture and controlling disease pathogens. Health benefits of outdoor recreation are forgotten or foregone because open space becomes scarce. However, when city dwellers spend time in nature, they can develop an attitude of biocentrism that gives strong priority to the needs of nature as well as to those of human life. Outdoor recreation supports shared family and community enjoyment, provides challenging environments for adventure-based recreation, and contributes to both physical and mental health.

The California Department of Parks and Recreation (CDP) administers 280 park units and offers opportunities for healthy recreation and deeper understanding of the natural world. CDP is chronically underfunded (Siders, 2015) and, in order to support visitor services, relies on a volunteer work force to provide visitor information and safety, park maintenance, interpretive programs, and restoration work.

In the United States volunteerism provides strong supplementary human resources across the service sector and according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 62.6 million people contributed volunteer services to diverse organizations in the twelve

months ending in September 2015. It is important that these organizations maintain a thriving group of volunteer workers. Managers in California State Parks that rely on volunteers benefit from research-based understanding about volunteer work force retention. This research considers a volunteer group from one California State Park and examines how individual volunteers construct personal meaning from their contributions to the park and its visitors. This study generates knowledge that will assist volunteer coordinators in understanding how volunteers benefit from their work and what keeps them committed to a volunteer program.

## **Background**

Volunteerism plays a vital civic role in the United States by strengthening and expanding governmental or nonprofit services that support communities, families, and individuals. Volunteers also provide substantial support for broader initiatives that support environmental and economic agendas. Reductions in funding for social, recreational, and other services has made volunteers indispensable to government agencies and other service organizations in order for them to meet their stated goals (Musick & Wilson 2007). There is currently no overall theory of volunteerism although it has been studied from psychology, sociology, economics, and political science perspectives (Hustinx, Cnaan, & Handy, 2010). Wilson examined volunteerism through a sociological lens and reviewed the research literature of volunteering, highlighting the benefits of volunteerism to individuals, organizations, and society (Wilson, 2000; Wilson 2012). Disciplinary scholars have developed frameworks by which volunteerism can be examined through complex models of understanding, multidisciplinary, and a marked broadening of definition. Consequent explanations and narratives have addressed

motivation, process, change, social welfare, negative consequences, and cross-national variation (Hustinx et al. 2010, p. 414).

Two models are of particular importance when examining complex volunteer settings. The volunteer process model (VPM) looks at volunteering through analysis of antecedents, experiences and consequences within individual, group, agency and societal stages (Snyder & Omoto, 2008). The volunteer stages and transitions model (VSTM) examines the life-cycle of volunteering, a process whereby new recruits become emotionally involved in a program and then go on to serve as established volunteers (Haski-Leventhal & Bargal, 2008). Motivational factors for volunteering have been studied at the individual level through the volunteer functions inventory (VFI) (Clary et al., 1998).

## **Literature Review**

### **The importance and scope of volunteerism.**

Volunteering plays a vital civic role in the United States by strengthening and expanding governmental or nonprofit services that support communities, families, and individuals. Volunteers provide substantial support for broader initiatives such as environmental and economic agendas. Reductions in funding for social, recreational, and other services, combined with a widening income gap in the United States, have made volunteerism indispensable to government agencies and other service organizations in order for them to meet their stated goals (Musick & Wilson, 2007, p. 4). These agencies and organizations are eager to determine how best to recruit, train, employ, reward, and retain their volunteers (Musick & Wilson, 2007, p. 6).

Volunteerism is a multifaceted social phenomenon in regard to venue, sponsorship, goals, and compensation and, as such, has been studied through the lenses of sociology, psychology, economics, and political science. Volunteerism incorporates activities in diverse venues with direct or indirect personal contact with recipients. One widely-accepted definition differentiates volunteerism from other forms of unpaid helping and issue-based activism by the presence of such factors as provision of formal work or service, working without compensation, and acting under the auspices of an organization (Musick & Wilson, 2007, p. 25). Volunteerism incorporates factors of free will and direct work with beneficiaries (Hustinx et al., 2010). Volunteerism also emphasizes attributes of acting on the basis of one's own volition, deciding to contribute for a period of time rather than in response to an emergency, and expecting to meet personal goals and/or express values (Snyder & Omoto, 2008). Three sources of survey statistics on volunteerism, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the Panel Study of Income Dynamics, and the Arizona, Indiana, and Michigan Giving and Volunteering Survey use these parameters to collect and report statistical data on volunteering in the United States (Wang, Yoshioka, & Ashcraft, 2013). This widely-used definition of volunteerism excludes care work with family members, casual informal helping on a sporadic basis, passive membership in an organization, and political activism, even if uncompensated.

A number of rules and restrictions may be in place when volunteer work occurs under the sponsorship of an organization, for instance, limits on type of work, bureaucratic expectations of conduct, and commitment to hours, training, and organizational socialization. In fact, organizations generally define volunteer roles, develop a screening process for entry into the program, manage and deliver training, and

effect dismissals. Organizational incentives such as awards and socializing may be in place to strengthen retention. Volunteers may develop role identities around their contributions (Musick & Wilson, 2007).

Given these efforts to define volunteerism, the concept and circumstances of volunteering are still evolving in parallel with modern life: “the new volunteerism” has been characterized by increasingly short-term commitment, “semi-professionalism,” and mandatory training for volunteers who work in social services and other settings (Schnell & Hoof, 2012, p. 36). In addition, citizen science has recently emerged as a phenomenon within volunteerism. Many citizen science projects include biological and ecological data collection by trained amateurs in species surveying, environmental quality monitoring, and phenology (the study of timing in natural processes such as species life-cycle events), and are administered under the auspices of national and local organizations. Citizen science may be conducted by institutions motivated as much by cultivating a wider public understanding of science and developing broader community support for environmental issues as by the collection of data itself (Bonney et al., 2009).

As population demographics change in United States, volunteerism research has begun to address “cultural, social, and community context factors” that play a part in volunteering decisions (Schnell & Hoof, 2012, p. 36). In a study that examines the cultural context of Hispanic formal volunteering, Wang et al. contend that “the literature...shows that minority groups in the United States, including African Americans and Hispanics, typically participate less in a broad range of formal [volunteer] activities than non-Hispanic whites” (2013). In addition, they write that “minority groups are interested in... [focusing] on the needs of their community,” that is, crime, politics, and



social services (2013). These volunteer areas may not be administered under the auspices of a formal organization and consequently are not documented in the three major aforementioned statistical surveys that measure volunteering.

**Conceptual frameworks for volunteerism.**

In the last two decades, scholars have developed and employed frameworks that describe and categorize forms, processes, and outcomes of volunteering (see Table 1). These ways of perceiving the personal and organizational volunteer experience are relevant to environmental and outdoor volunteering and provide blueprints that account for interdisciplinarity in volunteering, volunteering as a process, and how organizations and volunteers mutually shape each other as well as the delivery of services (Clary et al., 1998; Haski-Leventhal & Bargal, 2008; Hustinx et al., 2010; Schnell & Hoof, 2012; Snyder & Omoto, 2008).

Table 1

*Frameworks for Describing and Categorizing Volunteering*

| <b>Model</b>                        | <b>Authors</b>      | <b>Description</b>   | <b>Comments</b>   |
|-------------------------------------|---------------------|--|---|
| Volunteer functions inventory (VFI) | Clary et al. (1998) | Thirty-item survey of individual motivational factors in volunteering: some items include protective, values, career, social, understanding, enhancement | Replicable, widely used, does not include environmental or biocentric motivations, uses a psychological framework |

|   |                                    |  |  |
|---|------------------------------------|--|--|
| Hybrid conceptual framework                   | Hustinx et al. (2010)              | Conceptual framework for studying volunteerism; definitions of volunteerism: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• multidisciplinary approaches</li> <li>• multidimensional theory (explanation, narrative, critical perspectives)</li> </ul>           | Provides overarching ways of studying volunteerism as a complex phenomenon, beyond individual motivation; a hybrid framework   |
| Volunteer process model (VPM)                 | Snyder and Omoto (2008)            | Framework for analysis of volunteerism; levels of analysis: individual, interpersonal, organization, societal/cultural context, stages of volunteer process, antecedents, experiences, consequences  | Postulates a multilevel framework for organizing the analysis of volunteerism, allowing for comparison between studies; social and psychological perspectives  |
| Volunteer stages and transitions model (VSTM) | Haski-Leventhal and Bargal, (2008) | Model for stages and transitions of individual development and progress as a volunteer in an organization; stages: new volunteer (entrance, accommodation); established volunteer (emotional involvement, affiliation, renewal); retiring volunteer (exit) | Acknowledges nuanced stages and transitions marking passage through a volunteer experience; uniquely, includes fatigue, exhaustion, renewal and exit; strongly applicable to social service volunteering; grounded in organizational socialization |
| Constructing meaning through volunteering     | Schnell and Hoof (2012)            | Multi-dimensional model of meaning, coherence, significance, direction, belonging  | Demonstrates meaning-construction through volunteering and pro-social behavior, with social and psychological perspectives   |

Volunteerism has been studied at the individual volunteer level through the VFI, a 30-item functional psychology-based survey with motivational variables clustered under

the six categories of protective, values, career, social, understanding, and enhancement (Clary et al., 1998). Functional psychology considers how individuals acclimatize to their environment and how they use activities to enhance their well-being. Studies using VFI survey research show that participants were found to volunteer for both altruistic reasons and personal benefit (Clary & Snyder, 1999). However, self-reporting of motivation has been thought to be unreliable (Musick & Wilson, 2008, p. 69). Because the VFI does not measure personal benefits of environmental or park volunteering, some researchers have adapted the VFI to include additional variables that characterize environmental values (Bruyere & Rappe, 2007). Environmental values such as biospheric altruism are characterized by ecological worldviews that inform a sense of obligation to take environmental actions (Dietz, Fitzgerald, & Shwom, 2005). For environmental and park volunteers, altruism prompts volunteering through concern for the environment or for future generations and these volunteers also participate for personal interest reasons such as getting outside, learning, making career contacts, and socializing (Asah, Lenentine, & Blahna, 2014; Bruyere & Rappe, 2007; Jacobson, Carlton, & Monroe, 2012; Moskell, Allred, & Ferenz, 2010).

Hustinx et al. (2010) introduce an overall theory of volunteerism, using a hybrid conceptual framework that describes three areas of complexity that characterize volunteering. First, the volunteer realm is constructed as a multiplicity of activities, venues, and sectors that, to varying degrees, inform the nature of specific volunteer programs, acknowledging that internationally, the meaning of volunteerism differs among cultures. Second, volunteerism has been studied under frameworks from a number of disciplines, for instance economics, sociology, psychology, and political science.

Theoretical perspectives differ considerably among these fields, as do meanings assigned to volunteerism (2010). Hustinx et al. argue that most studies treat volunteering as a “uni-dimensional” phenomenon and, in counterpoise, their hybrid framework compares and contrasts layers of complexity, theoretical elements, and frameworks for integrating multidisciplinary lenses to study volunteerism. They outline approaches that allow investigators to develop studies from multiple disciplines, construct new meaning within a complex, integrated framework, and address questions of motivations, benefits, participation, process, and context of volunteerism (2010).

Snyder and Omoto envision volunteerism as both the expression of individual values as well as a process with stages of participation that can be analyzed using the VPM at several levels of organizational hierarchy. The VPM outlines defining features of volunteerism at distinct scales of analysis and over time and can be used to compare volunteer programs. Using Snyder and Omoto, the volunteer process can be studied through lenses of the individual, the group, the organization, and within a societal or cultural context. The VPM acknowledges the changing nature of the volunteer experience by defining overlapping but distinct stages within each level of analysis: antecedents, experiences, and consequences. These stages unfold over time and are marked by different meanings and nuances in personal identities (2008). Volunteers can be altered by their experiences and both their reasons for volunteering and sense of responsibility may change considerably over the course of volunteering (Musick & Wilson, 2008, p. 71).

The antecedents stage, on the levels of the individual volunteer and the volunteer group, encompasses motivation, personality, and group membership and norms. This

stage comprises an introduction to volunteering within a specific setting and can predict the extent of the match between the individual volunteer and the group or setting. The experiences stage is characterized by complexity, integration, and shifting dynamics between the individual and group or organization. Finally, the consequences stage marks how the individual has been assimilated into the group with elements of accommodation in attitude, behavior, and knowledge. Snyder and Omoto identify “bottom line” behaviors at this stage as intent to participate as a sustaining member and willingness to recommend volunteering to others (2008, p. 8).

Haski-Leventhal and Bargal examine volunteerism through the VSTM and show that organizational socialization can be used as a lens to consider volunteers’ “attitudes, values, knowledge and expected behavior” (2008, p. 68). Under the VSTM, individuals can be shown to attempt to modify organizational culture so as to shape their personal experience as volunteers. Change can take place through role negotiation, active participation, training, mentoring, and sense-making (Haski-Leventhal & Bargal, 2008, p. 68). Organizational socialization may require change on the part of volunteers and can foster commitment by the organization and by volunteers (Haski-Leventhal & Bargal, 2008, p. 69). Changes and stages of volunteer involvement, socialization, and commitment include the nominee phase in which potential volunteers contemplate and investigate volunteering; the new volunteer phase when beginning volunteers enter the organization and take training and/or begin working; the affiliation stage which is characterized by commitment, expertise and high satisfaction; and the retiring phase during which volunteers separate from the organization and gain perspective on their work.

Moreover, the VSTM describes transitions between stages of volunteering. These passages facilitate transformations in perception, relationships, roles, meaning, and commitment in experienced volunteers. Transitions may be marked by personal growth, willingness to take on new roles, acknowledgement of a bad fit between organization and individual, or attitudes that preclude the adaptation of appropriate roles. The VSTM facilitates investigation of the “life-cycle” of volunteering, and perhaps most importantly, how a new recruit becomes emotionally involved in a program and, consequently, an established volunteer (Haski-Leventhal & Bargal, 2008).

The VPM and the VSTM are based in functionalist theory that postulates that action is guided and sustained by individual purposes, for example, helping, learning, and making friends. These models posit both the importance of the volunteer’s relationship with the organization as well as a deepening involvement that leads to stronger commitment over time. Because these models allow for complexity in our understanding of the long-term course of volunteering over time, they indicate that, within a frame of individual volunteering, important changes can take place that foster mutual investment by the volunteer and the organization. The VPM can be applied not only to individuals who volunteer but also to organizations and even society at large. In addition, the VSTM focuses on processes occurring between the individual and the organization. Both the VPM and the VSTM can be used to examine experience, motivation, rewards, commitment, and change.

Schnell and Hoof (2012) developed a multidimensional model to understand how volunteers construct meaning from their volunteerism activities. The construction of meaning has been shown to have “relations to well-being and mental health variables,

such as happiness, life satisfaction, positive and negative affect, depression, anxiety, and stress” (Schnell & Hoof, 2012, p. 87). Individual meaning can be constructed through acting in a way that animates personal values and supports a strong and multidimensional purpose in life. Musick and Wilson say, “volunteer work is a way of expressing and dramatizing a particular view of the world” (2008, p. 450). Schnell and Hoof advance and have tested a model that demonstrates four factors underlying construction of meaning in volunteerism: coherence of action with belief, significance of activity, directed behavior, and sense of belonging.

### **Volunteering in nature.**

Volunteers who work in parks or in a wilderness environment are exposed to nature and may meet personal needs or construct meaning around being outdoors. They may develop or strengthen individual and communal values underlain by connectivity with the natural world and which inspire protection of the environment, being a part of nature, and feeling a heightened spirituality (Marsh & Bobilya, 2013; Snell & Simmonds, 2013; Vagias & Powell, 2010). These environmental values may contribute to private or civic decisions based on biocentric precepts developed through volunteering (Dietz et al., 2005).

Direct contact with the natural environment may have positive health consequences for individuals who volunteer in natural settings. Observational studies have shown that benefits include opportunity for physical activity, reduction in exposure to stressors, and emotional or cognitive restoration. On the other hand, wilderness recreation and volunteering may provide a sense or actuality of risk and danger absent in an accustomed mundane life and consequently a need to develop and exercise self-

sufficiency (Ewert & Hollenhorst, 1997). Social cohesion linked to shared norms centering on the value of outdoor activity or of environmental stewardship can contribute to feelings of well-being. While research does link health benefits to being in nature, there are methodological challenges inherent in the study of contact with nature and in outcomes measurement (Hartig, Mitchell, De Vries, & Frumkin, 2014). One study looked at conservation volunteers' connection to nature as reported through surveys and interviews. Volunteers indicated that they volunteered in order to learn about nature, to be outside, to feel close to nature, to give something back, and to foster a stewardship ethic in others (Guiney & Oberhauser, 2009). Volunteers in watershed stewardship groups developed strong ecological identities connected to their sense of belonging to the natural environment of the watershed. This sense of place was initially localized to the volunteers' watershed and, in some volunteers, became more generalized to a bioregional level (Gooch, 2003).

### **Research on volunteerism.**

Much of the research on volunteer motivation is quantitative and rooted in functionalist psychology. The functionalist approach to understanding human motivation is guided by the construct that people act to satisfy identifiable psychological functions that inform attitudes, behavior, emotions, and social life (Clary et al., 1998). Snyder and Omoto, in a seminal paper on theory and research in volunteering, described how functionalist theory addresses volunteerism: "In accord with this functional principle, research has revealed a diversity of motivations that bring people to volunteerism and that sustain their involvement, including affirming values, enhancing self-esteem, making friends, acquiring skills, and community concern" (2008, p. 11).



The VFI is a scale measuring six functions—values, understanding, social, career, protection, and enhancement—and it asks respondents to indicate both the presence and ranking of each of these categories of variable (Clary et al., 1998; Musick & Wilson, 2007, pp. 56-65). While the VFI is in wide use and considered a sophisticated instrument for determining replicable data on motivational factors, Musick and Wilson (2008, p. 56) indicate that it may result in an incomplete picture of volunteer motivation. Unlike the VPM and the VSTM, the VFI does not incorporate motivational changes over time or through stages of volunteer service. In addition, the VFI does not address factors important to environmental volunteering such as valuing time spent outdoors in nature or practicing land stewardship. Significantly for this thesis research, while the VFI does consider building and reinforcing social ties to be salient variables in volunteerism, the instrument does not measure the concept “working together.”

Several survey-based studies of outdoor volunteers have used or modified the VFI to provide a functional model to determine motivation in urban landscape restoration, parks, natural resource organizations, and recreation associations (Bruyere & Rappe, 2007; Jacobson et al., 2012; Lu & Schuett, 2014). Common modifications to the VFI include the addition of extrinsic factors such as volunteer training or recognition (Jacobson et al., 2012, p. 56), the importance of civic engagement (Lu & Schuett, 2014, p. 75), and the importance of being in or connecting to nature (Guiney & Oberhauser, 2009). Other psychology-based studies have found altruism to be of importance in motivating volunteers to give their time and expertise as well as to remain in a volunteer program (Kahana, Bhatta, & Kahana, 2013; Veludo-de-Oliveira, 2015).

Survey-based methods allow for wide anonymous participation within one program or as a comparison between volunteer groups and they provide statistical data for analysis. Survey research on outdoor volunteers in the last two decades has demonstrated the importance of a wide variety of motivating factors, and across most of these studies, there are two stable, highly-ranked factors: helping the environment and sociability.

Miles, Sullivan and Kuo (1998) studied participants in the Illinois Volunteer Stewardship Network, an umbrella group of ecological restoration volunteers. They developed a survey with factors postulated as relating to personal satisfaction specifically in regard to participation in restoration activities, level of involvement in restoration, life satisfaction, and life functioning. In the 306 usable survey returns, “meaningful action” and “fascination with nature” were significant while “participation” (working in a group, having shared goals) and “being away” were also significant but of secondary importance. “Personal growth” was rated as the lowest in importance.

Grese et al. (2000) surveyed volunteers in stewardship programs in Michigan and Ohio using a functional approach, asking that respondents rate questionnaire items according to personal importance. Items were codified under headings and listed in rank order from highest to lowest: helping the environment, exploration, spirituality, and personal and social. In addition, comments appended to surveys indicated that learning and practicing vocational skills were also of importance to participants.

In an important study on links between volunteer motivation and longevity in restoration programs, Ryan, Kaplan, and Grese (2001) reviewed the research on volunteer motivations and factors that influence sustained participation, finding that “volunteer

restoration projects provide volunteers with the opportunity to see direct, tangible results from their efforts. For example, after clearing invasive shrub species from a forest, volunteers are able to observe an increase in the native spring wildflowers” (2001, p. 631). Other notable motivators were helping, learning, leading, environmental protection, specific place, social contact, and recreation (Ryan et al. 2001, p. 630-632).

In their original research using a functional approach, Ryan et al. surveyed volunteers who had participated in three ecological stewardship programs for at least one year. Their questions centered around six ideas developed from previous research and the authors’ interest in sustainable volunteering:

- Motivations for continued participation
- Change in environmental outlook
- Attachment to natural areas
- Change in expertise levels from the onset of volunteering
- Level of activity
- Strength of commitment

Findings showed that development of expertise in environmental restoration was correlated to continuing participation and that being active in stream and native plant restoration activities were stronger predictors of commitment than trash removal or stream cleanup. In general, volunteers rated highly helping the environment and learning; project organization and “a good leader” were also important in keeping volunteers involved (Ryan et al. 2001, p. 638). Using regression analysis to predict the motivations of committed volunteers, the researchers found that project organization, socializing, and learning were the strongest predictors of commitment. This study also showed that

volunteer motivations change over different stages of participation. For example, in the early stages, volunteers enjoyed learning plant species identification while experienced volunteers said they benefited from learning how to lead plant walks.

Bruyere & Rappe (2007) employed functionalist principles to study motivation in environmental volunteers using a quantitative survey. In addition, they solicited qualitative responses about personal motivation through open-ended questions. Survey results indicated eight motivating factors: helping the environment, values and esteem, getting outside, social, being a user, career, learning, and project organization. Themes from the open-ended qualitative questions were reviewed and coded back to align with the quantitative factors. This study found a hitherto-unidentified factor that motivated volunteers, the experience of being a previous or ongoing personal user of the environmental area for which a volunteer provides services, whether interpretation, restoration, or conservation (Bruyere & Rappe 2007, p. 512).

Jacobson et al. (2012) surveyed park volunteers working in several capacities for the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission and found a number of motivating factors. In order of strongly important to strongly unimportant, they are helping the environment, learning, being a user of the park, expressing values and feeling needed, project organization, social, and career. Based on this research, Jacobson et al. offer recommendations to park volunteer managers, including development of a recruitment and retention plan, using official and informal recognition to thank volunteers, keeping records of volunteer activities and time, and being aware of motivating factors at work in the current volunteer work force (2012, p. 64).

Qualitative research on volunteerism provides insight into how people make meaning and express values while engaging as volunteers. Construction of personal meaning involves creation and internalization of life goals. Meaning-making can consist of perceptions and actions and may be expressed positively, such as being able to realize an ambition and play a fulfilling role, or negatively, as in having an empty life and feeling that there is no point in continuing. Positive meaning imbues experience with deep and rich feeling and fosters commitment while negative meaning can inspire despair or initiate personal change (Frankl, 1959). “Place meaning” is a closely related construct that describes personal affinity to a specific locality, for instance a designated wilderness, regional watershed, or other natural area. Place meaning has been shown to strengthen local environmental stewardship commitment (Amsden, Stedman, & Kruger, 2013; Brehm et al., 2012; Lukacs & Ardoin, 2014).

Schnell and Hoof (2012) describe the construction of meaning as being related to well-being, social commitment, and self-knowledge, as well as with having a sustainable work-role fit, being engaged in work, and doing work that benefits others. Qualitative research methods offer the opportunity to uncover deep, rich meaning from expressed and observed participant experience (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 47). In contrast to quantitative data collected through closed-ended survey questions that can influence and restrict the range of participant response, qualitative methods employ open-ended data collection. Data is collected in specific contexts through methods such as interviews, participant observation, or content analysis of text. The researcher is able to discern themes in the data that show how interviewees or participants derive meaning from their experiences in a specific context.

A few qualitative studies have described how environmental volunteers characterize their motivations or show how they make meaning from their work. Schroeder (2000) analyzed newsletter text from Chicago-area restoration programs that described ecological restoration volunteers' motivations including learning about ecosystem problems, developing an environmental ethic, belief that they were making a difference, and the opportunity to see that their work mattered in a tangible way. In describing Schroeder's work, Ryan, Kaplan, and Grese (2001) emphasized that these kind of discernible results are important.

Volunteers in a Streamwatch restoration program were interviewed about how they instilled meaning in the place where they monitored water pollution and restored habitat. These volunteers felt that they had made a direct impact on the landscape which imbued their roles and work with meaning. Amsden et al. describe four themes that arose from grounded theory analysis of the Streamwatch interview data: "the river: how it is 'supposed to be,'" "the campground as a place to teach and give back," "the campground as a social space," and "recreation at the river." Volunteers later added personal meaning to these constructs when they adapted and utilized the themes as they interacted with visitors and organizational stakeholders (Amsden et al. 2013).

Asah et al. (2014) used a survey containing quantitative questions as well as two open-ended prompts to gather volunteers' accounts of motivation for and benefits of participating in one-day environmental restoration or conservation events in the Seattle-Tacoma area. The questions were (1) why do you volunteer? and (2) what do you think are the benefits of volunteering? The authors analyzed participant answers using grounded theory methodology. Twenty-four subthemes describing motivational factors

emerged through iterative coding of survey results, and twenty-two of these subthemes represented social-psychological motivations. The top seven themes are listed here in descending order of frequency of expression: positive emotions, community, socializing, meaningful action, values, learning, and altruism. Two environmental subthemes emerged: helping the environment and protecting the environment (Asah et al., 2014, pp. 473-474). Because this study looked at environmental volunteering in the context of one-day events, ranking of motivations may differ from programs that emphasize sustainability and longevity of volunteer tenure.

Principal motivations for environmental volunteering have been described through in-depth interviews as contributing to community, experiencing social interaction, caring for the environment, and making an attachment to a particular place (Measham & Barnett, 2008, pp. 540-541). Connection to place and nature has been shown to be important to volunteer commitment in watershed and Master Naturalist programs (Amsden et al., 2013, pp. 116-117; Gooch, 2002, pp. 4-7; Guiney & Oberhauser, 2009, pp. 189-192; Lukacs & Ardoin, 2014, pp. 60-61). Schnell and Hoof demonstrate that construction of meaning is a valid lens through which to study volunteering (2012).

Qualitative methods have been used to construe how people make meaning in the context of non-environmental volunteer work. Haski-Leventhal and Bargal (whose work was discussed above in the section on emerging conceptual frameworks) used organizational ethnography methods with participant observation and ethnographic interviews to study a group of volunteers providing outreach services to at-risk youth. They showed that, as volunteers went through stages and levels of experience in their

outreach work, their construction of meaning evolved from high idealism to realism, cynicism, and, finally, to more general idealism (Haski-Leventhal & Bargal, 2008, p. 74). Volunteers constructed meaning through participation in training, commitment to a one-year contract, taking part in rituals (e.g. a rite of passage for new volunteers who completed initial training), building relationships with other volunteers and the adolescent recipients, giving actual assistance, and coming to understand the emotional challenges of the work. Participants did not describe volunteering as a steady state but rather as a process of stages and transitions (Haski-Leventhal & Bargal, 2008, p. 76).

Grounded theory methodology was used in a secondary study to analyze transcripts of interviews from earlier research with “older volunteers” (ages 57-60) who participated in Habitat for Humanity projects. A process-based theory of “becoming” an older volunteer emerged, with strong elements of spirituality, continuity, and connection, showing that these volunteers “incorporated volunteering as an integral part of their personal, emotional, and spiritual identities” (Brown et al., 2011, p. 6).

In a recent study comparing the construction of meaning in two groups—one, a sample of volunteers in hospices, churches, and social services organizations, and the second, a representative sample of the general population, participants were surveyed using the Sources of Meaning and Meaning in Life Questionnaire. This instrument examines the factors of self-transcendence, self-actualization, order (holding to values), and well-being. Analysis of responses showed that engaged volunteers were more likely than members of the general population to pursue “challenge, development, creativity, and knowledge” (Schnell & Hoof, 2012, p 46). Volunteers identified more sources of meaning-making and stronger meaning-construction in the areas of sense of



accomplishment, feeling of belonging, self-transcendence, and relatedness to other people (Schnell & Hoof, 2012, pp. 46-48).

While these grounded-theory-based studies did not look at construction of meaning by environmental or outdoor volunteers, their foundational approach and methodology can be used productively as lenses to examine meaning-making in environmental and park settings. Haski-Leventhal and Bargal state that the VSTM shows transferability to other settings (2008, p. 97-98), Brown et al. believe that their research may “lead to strategies that...keep older adults volunteering” (2011, p. 7), and Schnell and Hoof say that their study can be of practical value in “diverse contexts of volunteering” (2012, p. 50).

### **Problem Statement**

The CDP provides outdoor recreation, protection of cultural and environmental resources, and preservation of biodiversity in 280 park units. These parks play a crucial role in introducing children to the natural world and reinforcing in all visitors the importance of open space. The CDP is underfunded and many individual parks rely on park-associated volunteer workforces to provide essential services for visitor safety, nature interpretation, and conservation of open space. Parks expend resources to train, manage, and acknowledge their volunteers. In this setting, volunteer retention is an important factor for high-quality visitor service.

This qualitative study explores, through semi-structured interviews analyzed by grounded-theory methodology, how members of one CDP volunteer program construe the meaning and importance of their volunteer service. Their insights will give volunteer

program managers nuanced insight into management and retention of their volunteer workers.

## **Methods**

This research used case study research methodology to examine how members of the Wilderness State Park (WSP) Uniformed Volunteer Program (UVP) derived personal meaning and expressed core values from their work and how they viewed the importance of their contribution to the park's mission. Long interviews with park volunteers yielded strong, nuanced data describing how UVP members constructed deep personal meaning from their work at the park. Using grounded-theory analysis, interviewees' descriptions and stories were examined to identify themes of satisfaction, frustration, and meaning. Construction of strong meaning and development and expression of personal values were shown to underlie volunteer loyalty, longevity, and sense of purpose. Volunteers also acknowledged that their contributions, both as individuals and within the volunteer program, were integral to realizing the park's mission.

### **Case Study Methodology**

Case studies are based on data collection through observation and/or in-depth interviews in a well-defined, time-bounded situation such as an organizational group, a program, or a distinct social or developmental process within a defined context. This method allows the researcher to apply an in-depth focus in a real-world setting while examining a single or small number of cases (Yin, 2012, p. 4). Case study research can yield in-depth and comprehensive understanding of complex conditions that characterize the background, circumstances, and conditions surrounding a situation. Several interrelated dimensions of any given case may be studied. The case study method is

productively utilized when research asks descriptive questions rather than studying the comparative effectiveness of different actions or programs (Yin, 2013, p. 5).

Steps in case study methodology include:

- Define the case as a distinct organization, event, or social phenomenon
- Select the case study design—single-case or multiple-case
- Decide to employ an existing theoretical perspective or to allow theory to emerge through analysis of findings

The research presented here was generated from a single-case study with data collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews and analyzed through grounded-theory methodology. The researcher was knowledgeable about published theoretical frameworks addressing volunteerism but did not use existing theory to inform this study at the outset. Instead, grounded-theory methods enabled analysis of interview data in order to frame an original overarching theory of environmental and outdoor volunteering (Charmaz, 2006, p. 133-140; Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 270-273; Gibbs, 2007, p. 47-48).

### **Study Site**

The researcher evaluated several environmental and outdoor volunteer organizations through participation in training and/or service activities and determined the UVP to be a rich volunteer setting with a professional and strongly service-oriented mission and atmosphere. The researcher applied for UVP membership, was interviewed, attended training, and went on to serve as a volunteer. This afforded insider access to park volunteers who serve as trainers, members of the volunteer committee that oversees the UVP as well as rank and file volunteers and park rangers and park aides (collectively

referred to as park staff). This training and volunteer experience revealed several important factors that may influence the nature of the volunteer experience in the UVP. First, the UVP is a complex organization with over twenty volunteer work venues within the park. There is strong membership investment and leadership among the volunteers. Oversight of the program is organized by volunteers themselves and lastly, there is significant program and participant longevity.

The researcher presented a study proposal to the UVP Volunteer Committee and the committee, along with the ranger who served as Volunteer Coordinator, approved this study. “Wilderness State Park” is a pseudonym for an existing park in the California State Parks system that is not identified by its real name in this research in order to protect the confidentiality of research participants.

The CDP has a three-part mission focusing on biodiversity, protection of resources, and recreation. Specifically, its mission is “to provide for the health, inspiration and education of the people of California by helping to preserve the state's extraordinary biological diversity, protecting its most valued natural and cultural resources, and creating opportunities for high-quality outdoor recreation” (California Department of Parks and Recreation).

WSP, established in 1959, is located in the larger San Francisco Bay Area and is one of the largest of the 280 park units within the CDP system. Much of the surrounding local area is comparatively more affluent and educated than California’s total population (US Census). WSP is comprised of three contiguous or overlapping areas differentiated by proscribed use and degree of remoteness. These areas are interconnected by trails and unpaved roads; they are the Headquarters Sector, which houses the main visitor center

and consists of 10% of the park's area, the backcountry, which makes up the remaining 90% of the park and a State Wilderness Area<sup>1</sup> within the backcountry consisting of 25% of the total park.

The backcountry is generally undeveloped and closed to public motorized vehicular traffic except for an annual weekend-long event. It is publically accessible by foot, horseback, and bicycle. The park contains three watersheds and is home to three threatened or endangered species: the California Tiger Salamander (*Ambystoma californiense*), the California Red-Legged Frog (*Rana draytonii*), and the Foothill Yellow-Legged Frog (*Rana boylei*).

WSP staff consists of one supervising ranger, five rangers, one senior park aide, and two park aides. While three to four rangers are headquartered at the park, all rangers spend a proportion of each week working or training at one or more of the other 17 state parks in the wider local CDP Park District. Visitor attendance is low to moderate in relation to park size and in comparison with other district parks (Table 2).

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<sup>1</sup> California's state wilderness areas are defined by these characteristics: (a) Appears generally to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature, with the imprint of man's work substantially unnoticeable. (b) Has outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation. (c) Consists of at least 5,000 acres of land, either by itself or in combination with contiguous areas possessing wilderness characteristics, or is of sufficient size as to make practicable its preservation and use in an unimpaired condition. (d) May also contain ecological, geological, or other features of scientific, educational, scenic, or historical value (Public Resources Code 5019.68).

Table 2

*Wilderness State Park Visitors: Fiscal Year 2014/2015*

|                     |               |
|---------------------|---------------|
| Paid day use        | 18,231        |
| Free day use        | 10,066        |
| Camping/backpacking | 29,148        |
| <b>Total</b>        | <b>48,443</b> |

WSP has faced several threats during the last ten years. A state budget crisis beginning in 2011 prompted the proposal of an emergency strategy to close 48 California state parks and WSP was on the closure list (Fimrite, 2008). By 2013, \$20 million in previously unaccounted-for state funds with the addition of donor contributions of \$7.5 million were used to keep state parks open (Lagos, 2012). Budgetary problems continue to have consequences for both park staffing and morale. In addition, drought conditions and wildfire have resulted in consequences for landscape integrity and recreational use of the park. Lastly, because of its location in a heavily urbanized area, the park has faced pressure from potentially pernicious metropolitan development.

Several parks in the CDP system partner with associated non-profit membership groups, designated as cooperating associations. These groups are legally allowed to accept public donations and can serve as a source of additional financial resources beyond the state budget for ongoing operations and special projects. The Wilderness State Park Cooperating Association (WSPCA), a pseudonym, is a CDP cooperating association affiliated with WSP, and it works closely with park staff and the UVP to support interpretive and educational services for park visitors. Funding for this support is

developed through public events, visitor center bookstore sales, donations, and membership fees.

The WSP UVP was founded at the park in 1980 by a ranger and eight volunteers and in 2015, the program had 135 active members who contribute fifty or more hours annually (Table 3).

Table 3

*Uniformed Volunteer Numbers and Hours for 2005 to 2015*

| <b>Year</b> | <b>Active Volunteers*</b> | <b>Total Hours</b> |
|-------------|---------------------------|--------------------|
| 2005        | 139                       | 15,619             |
| 2006        | 120                       | 15,134             |
| 2007        | 118                       | 16,188             |
| 2008        | 124                       | 15,552             |
| 2009        | 141                       | 14,004             |
| 2010        | 136                       | 13,040             |
| 2011        | 135                       | 16,049             |
| 2012        | 128                       | 14,985             |
| 2013        | 134                       | 15,722             |
| 2014        | 143                       | 14,669             |
| 2015        | 135                       | 17,437             |

\*An active volunteer is someone who logs 50 or more hours of service per year.

UVP members staff visitor centers, maintain trails and springs, give interpretive nature walks and presentations, provide trail safety patrols, plan and manage special events, lead hikes, and provide administrative support for the UVP through the Volunteer

Committee. According to the volunteer handbook, “the Volunteer Committee serves not only as a liaison between the volunteer community and Park Staff through the Volunteer Coordinator [Ranger], but also as a resource to volunteers in promoting and supporting the ideas and actions of uniformed volunteers.”

New volunteers are accepted into the UVP annually in the fall after going through an application and interview process led by the ranger who is designated as Volunteer Coordinator and assisted by UVP volunteers. Entering volunteers then go through an extensive four-month training program developed and managed by members of the UVP and park staff. Curricula include staffing of visitor centers, nature interpretation, trail patrolling, water resources and trails maintenance, radio communication, and emergency procedures. Training takes place at the park headquarters, in work venues (for example, springs and trail maintenance) and in the backcountry and the state-designated wilderness.

### **Sample Description**

The sampling frame for this research consisted of current members in good standing of the WSP UVP. The site was chosen, as described above, based on factors of program longevity and complexity, strong organizational investment in the volunteer workforce, and high level and amount of volunteer leadership and autonomy.

An initial purposive sample of five interviewees identified as UVP leaders was developed during the researcher’s volunteer training process. Leadership areas represented in the sample included program coordination, training development and delivery and program oversight. In addition, a few volunteers with fewer years of service were invited to interview. Volunteers were recruited through email. Continuing



purposive sampling was used to reflect the complex structure and functions of the volunteer program in terms of work roles and longevity in the program. The researcher sought out volunteers who showed leadership, strong participation and/or longevity in venues such as visitor assistance, visitor safety (trail patrol), natural history interpretation, outreach, springs and trail maintenance, or program administration. Twenty-three UVP volunteers were invited to be interviewed and fifteen consented and were subsequently interviewed. An additional three volunteers approached the researcher after an announcement of the study during the UVP annual meeting in January 2015. All three were interviewed. In all, 18 uniformed volunteers were interviewed (Table 4).

Table 4

*Study Participants by Gender, Age Bracket, Race/Ethnicity, Education, Service Years*

| <b>Participant*</b> | <b>Gender</b> | <b>Age Bracket</b> | <b>Race/<br/>Ethnicity</b> | <b>Education</b> | <b>Years of Service</b> |
|---------------------|---------------|--------------------|----------------------------|------------------|-------------------------|
| 001                 | M             | 60s                | White                      | MA               | 11                      |
| 002                 | F             | 50s                | White                      | Some college     | 14                      |
| 003                 | F             | 60s                | White                      | BA               | 24                      |
| 004                 | M             | 50s                | White                      | AA               | 4                       |
| 005                 | M             | 70s                | White                      | MA               | 29                      |
| 006                 | M             | 40s                | White                      | BA               | 14                      |
| 007                 | F             | 70s                | White                      | PhD              | 27                      |
| 008                 | M             | 70s                | White                      | MS               | 18                      |
| 009                 | M             | 40s                | White                      | JD               | 2                       |
| 010                 | M             | 60s                | White                      | BA               | 6                       |
| 011                 | F             | 50s                | White                      | AA               | 16                      |
| 012                 | M             | 50s                | White                      | BA               | 8                       |

|     |   |     |                   |                 |    |
|-----|---|-----|-------------------|-----------------|----|
| 013 | F | 60s | White             | MA              | 8  |
| 014 | M | 50s | Declines to state | BS              | 6  |
| 015 | M | 60s | White             | AA              | 5  |
| 016 | M | 20s | Asian             | College Student | 1  |
| 017 | M | 50s | White             | BS              | 17 |
| 018 | M | 70s | White             | PhD             | 28 |

*\*n=18*

**Data collection.**

Data was collected using qualitative in-depth interviews guided by a semi-structured interview schedule (Appendix I). Demographic data collected included gender, age, ethnicity, highest level of education, and profession. An additional question solicited length of service in the UVP. Using a semi-structured interview schedule, participants were prompted to speak in depth and encouraged to elaborate with examples and experiences. This allowed the researcher to collect and analyze data addressing the multidimensional properties of the meanings that volunteers construct through their work in the UVP (Kvale, 2007, p. 80). Interview prompts focused on the following areas.

- Activities and roles as a volunteer
- Working with other volunteers, the public and park staff
- Training and learning
- Personal values related to volunteering
- Leadership roles in the UVP
- Impression of cultural diversity in the UVP
- Motivation and disincentives related to volunteering in the UVP

- Sustainability of personal and organizational features of UVP
- Meaning of volunteering

Interviewees volunteered or were invited to participate in the study. Interviews ran from 40-90 minutes and took place from January to June 2014 in a place of the interviewees' choosing, for example, coffee shop, library, or other site where the privacy of the conversation could be assured. Interviews were recorded using a password-protected iPad with VoiceRecord Pro software. A professional transcribed the recordings and, during transcription, confidentiality was safeguarded by the deletion from transcripts of identifying information related to participants. Confidentiality was further protected through removal from all transcripts of any personal names mentioned in the course of interviews and with substitution of numeric codes to indicate all names. In the results section of this study, interviewee identity is kept confidential through slight changes in descriptions of volunteer venues and removal of gender-based pronouns. All printed transcripts are safeguarded in a locked cabinet and will be held for 36 months as per the San José State University Institutional Review Board's requirements.

#### **Data analysis.**

Data consisted of 18 transcribed qualitative in-depth interviews. Interview transcripts were analyzed using constructivist grounded-theory methodology based on seminal work in the methodology (Charmaz, 2008; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Charmaz says, "constructivists study *how*—and sometimes *why*—participants construct meanings and actions in specific situations" (2006, p. 130). Grounded theory is an approach used to systematically analyze qualitative data by employing a series of interpretive steps that serve to explain the relationships between participants' experiences (Figure 1). This

analysis results in the generation of theory, which can be described as “a set of well-developed categories (themes, concepts) that are systematically interrelated through statements of relationship to form a theoretical framework that explains some phenomenon” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 55).

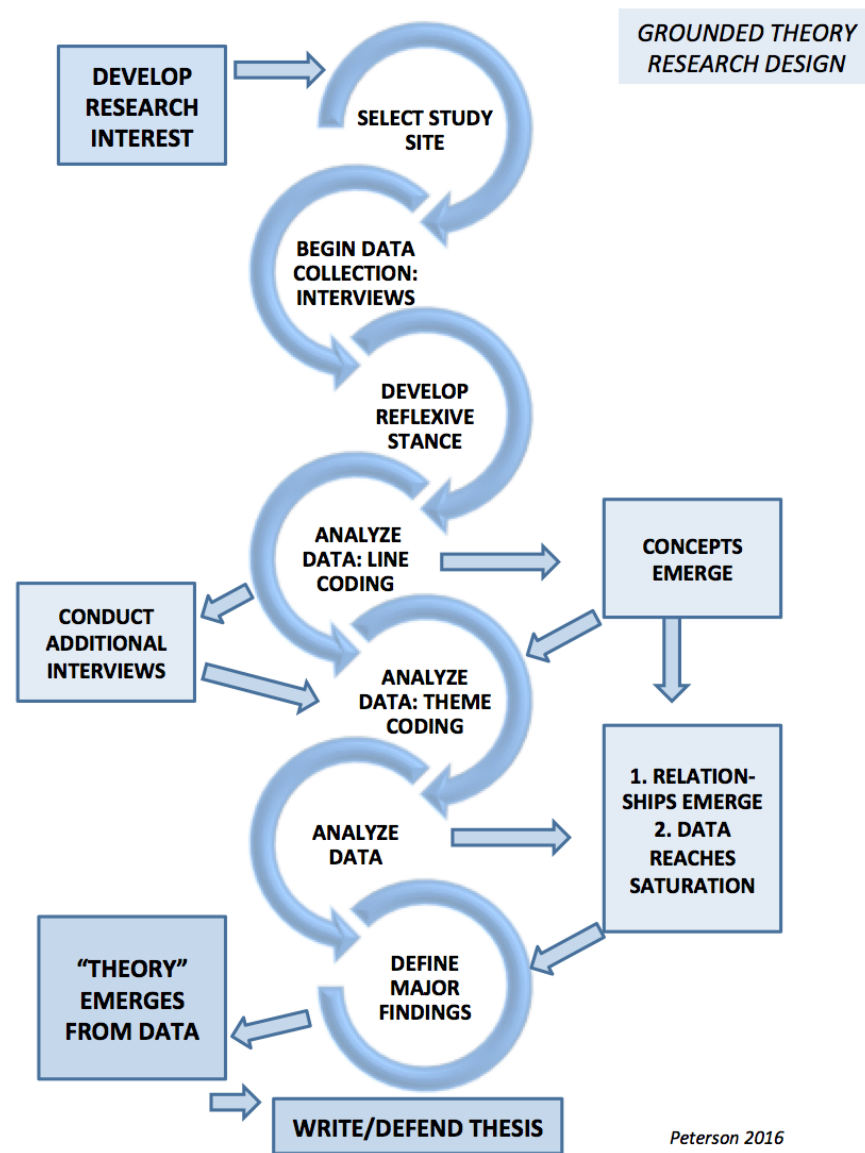


Figure 1 Grounded theory design.

Corbin and Strauss contend that, “the descriptive details chosen by storytellers are usually consciously or unconsciously selective, based on what...they thought important”

(2008, p. 54). These descriptive details become the initial core elements of analysis. Analysis proceeds with coding of transcripts by a succession of modalities: line coding, theme coding, and concomitant development of relationships between themes. Charmaz says, “coding means categorizing segments of data with a short name that simultaneously summarizes and accounts for each piece of data” (2006, p. 43).

Line coding consists of line-by-line analysis of transcripts and is characterized by close attention to how interviewees specify their experiences. Line coding is where emphasis is placed on descriptive detail. Later, theme coding analyses larger chunks of data such as participants’ complete thoughts and the expressed meaning of stories told by interviewees.

Initial line coding of the first five interviews was conducted by hand on printed transcripts and it revealed significant details about volunteering in the park. Coding revealed volunteers’ experiences such as getting to know park infrastructure, going on hikes during training, helping visitors find appropriate backpacking sites, and feeling anxious about planning an event. Once the coding of five transcripts was complete, broader themes were seen to emerge. Specific line codes were then theme-coded into the broader categories of attachment to place, finding my niche, frustration, growing pains, personal development, social interaction, visitors, and working together. These themes were color coded in the printed transcripts for easy access. To further explore patterns among emerging motifs, deep themes were aligned with the relevant research literature (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 36-38). Memos were developed analyzing how different and complementary descriptions of experiences were expressed, for example around the

concepts “backcountry” and “environmental stewardship.” Analysis proceeded across participants’ stories and explanations.

Focused themes arose through further memo writing and all subsequent interview transcripts were then hand coded using a resultant set of focused and broader themes that emerged during the next ten interviews: learning about the environment, environmental care, communication, leadership, recognition, attachment to place, mental health, mentoring, spirituality, and training. The final three interviews provided rich descriptive data that reinforced the existing themes and indicated that data saturation had been achieved.

Throughout the analysis phase, a deepened understanding was cultivated by continuous reflection and writing. Data analysis then proceeded using NVivo software for Mac version 10.2 to aggregate interview transcripts by theme or key concept. NVivo facilitates the development of subject queries by keyword and the viewing of related ideas and interviewee experiences. NVivo was used to reveal how participants described themes in related and disparate terms. Charmaz tell us that “[g]rounded theory coding generates the bones of your analysis. Theoretical integration will assemble these bones into a working skeleton” (2006, p. 45). Though iterative analysis and further memo writing, three comprehensive themes arose, comprising the “working skeleton” of this research and informing the major findings of the study.

Throughout the study, the researcher used a reflexive stance to guide the research process, relate to participants, and prepare the analysis. Reflexivity is cultivated in order to mitigate against the potential of a circular effect prompting interviewees to compose responses reflecting what they think an interviewer expects or wants to hear. In

qualitative research, there are standard self-reflection methods to foster reflexivity in order to “assess how and to what extent the researcher’s interests, positions and assumptions influenced [the] inquiry” (Charmaz 2006, p. 188). Three reflexive methods were used:

- Self-reflective writing on the researcher’s potentially asymmetrical position relative to participants (e.g. gender, social class, ethnicity, culture)
- Examination and articulation in writing of the researcher’s personal value system related to wilderness, environmental stewardship, and volunteering
- Bracketing, a technique where the researcher “know[s] the literature yet maintain[s] sensitivity to [the] data, . . . use[s] the library and the published work on the topic to generate alternative explanations and hypotheses, or to confirm/endorse emerging findings” (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007, p. 230)

## **Results**

### **Meanings of Volunteering in the Wilderness State Park Context**

“When we get up here, we’re all up here with one goal. So we have that in common. [And the goal] is to give the visitors a good experience and to help run the park” (interviewee).

This section shows how study participants understood and described their significant roles and experiences as volunteers and how they revealed deep personal meaning and values associated with their service. Personal meaning has been described as being constructed with the attributes of coherence, significance, goals, and belonging (Schnell & Hoof, 2012). The material here derives from responses to interview prompts asking volunteers to talk about their experiences working with other park volunteers,

rangers, and the public, to describe lasting effects of their service, and to explain what volunteering meant to them.

Three strong themes of volunteering emerged from the interview data, broadly categorized as connecting with nature, working together, and helping others. Meaning centered on the coherence of personal and CDP values such as environmental stewardship, belonging to a working group, and contributing as a volunteer (a core value of the CDP mission). These concepts do not always stand alone with separate meanings but, instead, often display robust interrelationships as described by study participants.

### **Theme One: Connecting with Nature**

“We all feel better when we’re around the trees” (interviewee).

WSP volunteers chronicled a strong attachment to the landscape and biotic environment of the park and found profound meaning in the natural world that was an integral part of their experience in the park. This affinity with the natural world also reflected a set of shared values and was apparent in stories about every facet of their volunteer practice. Two major threads shared with the California State Parks and Recreation mission ran through volunteers’ stories about being in nature: a personal meaning of nature and the wilderness and the importance of environmental stewardship and learning.

#### **The meaning of nature and the wilderness.**

Interviewees spoke about the natural beauty, spirituality, and therapeutic solitude they felt while in the park and how they found being in nature to be restorative, egalitarian, and conducive to personal examination and growth. They gave examples of how they felt in awe of the remote and vast wilderness, worked to provide significant



environmental stewardship, helped visitors have an enjoyable and safe time in the backcountry, and recognized the spiritual aspects of being in wild nature through several stages of their volunteer experience. Some volunteers were drawn to join the UVP by their experience of the park's natural beauty. During initial training, new recruits spent a training weekend in the backcountry led by experienced volunteers. Some volunteers reward themselves for their work by scheduling personal time in nature and others celebrate the wilderness by planning and staffing a much-anticipated annual public event, the Wilderness Weekend, where park visitors and volunteers mingle and relax in a beautiful setting. Interviewees were eloquent in describing the significance of being in nature: one volunteer spoke about how being in the backcountry helped focus the mind and clarify workday problems.

I drove out to staff the Wilderness Weekend, wrestling with [a professional] work issue and came back dusty and tired and dirty later on a Sunday afternoon, not having thought about this troublesome issue at all on the weekend. And as I was driving back down [towards home], the right thing to do just popped into my mind and it was just totally clear. No more wrestling. So my subconscious had been at work the whole weekend.

Several participants expressed a strong and therapeutic draw to being in the wilderness.

One said,

I discovered Wilderness Park around the time of 9/11. So I think there is something about the park where you go there and you feel like "I can escape" for maybe a few hours. I think one of the attractions [of being in Wilderness Park], there is a spiritual element to go into the park and going into the wilderness by yourself and finding...that spiritual experience with the universe.

Another volunteer linked that spirituality with scientific curiosity and inspiration invigorated by experiencing the natural world.

I think for me going to Wilderness Park...is I'm finding God and maybe nature in terms of the science of nature... You know, it's interesting: a lot

of scientists have made their discoveries by going out into nature. Einstein loved going out sailing and Charles Darwin went sailing to the Galapagos.

The park is a place to learn more about oneself, in “the wild” and away from the ordinary distractions of life and to celebrate the beauty of nature.

It’s a place where you go to find yourself. And...on the [park] monument [there is] a little thing about “This is for those who are seeking,” and I think that really says a lot about the spiritual aspect of going to wilderness.

One volunteer spoke eloquently about how the beauty of the wilderness was restorative.

I think of it as my therapy, as well. I need some alone time. I have a very strong need for that. And so, that’s part of the appeal and then just really the beauty of the park. I marvel at it every time I go. I’ve been out there [on patrol] in all four seasons. I’ve been out there in sunshine. I’ve been out there in the driving rain and I’ve not been out there in any conditions that I didn’t appreciate.

To one volunteer, being in nature seemed to bring disparate people together in democratizing ways.

[H]ere is a [volunteer]...everyone knows that he is a multi-, multi-millionaire—in the tech world. He was leading a hike up there; we walked the trail, just like me and my [*sic*], you know? Because it’s this level; you get out there, it’s [at the] nature level.

Through describing powerful recreational experiences, spiritual connections, and appreciation of natural beauty, some volunteers told stories about initially being a park visitor and then deciding to join the volunteer program. This participant was awed by a hike down to the river and then later became a volunteer.

A lot of people go to Wilderness Park just to visit that [swimming spot in the creek]. I think it’s amazing cause it’s basically an oasis. I went there last year [before I decided to volunteer] and there was still water in it. And there was [*sic*] fish and turtles and wildlife in it. So I found that pretty amazing, especially in a dry climate like that.

Another volunteer vividly remembered early park visits that sparked and solidified a personal intent to make the leap from visitor to volunteer. As a visitor, this person

especially found the narrow ten-mile drive up to park headquarters, at “the edge of the wilderness,” symbolic of leaving behind everyday life. “I think the fact that you have to drive on that winding uphill road, it separates you even further from the valley. You’re in a different world.” Being in this “different world” was a strong enticement for joining the program.

One interviewee told about retiring and having more time to devote to personal interests and how that opened up the opportunity to first experience the park and then join the UVP.

When we retired, we started hiking with some of our fellow retirees. And we were up at Wilderness Park and I said, “Wow! This is some kinda park.” We met the rangers and they told us about the Wilderness Weekend. [You] drive in on a dirt road right to the edge of the Wilderness, which looked very enticing and it was wonderful... And that’s the way [my volunteering] started...

The backcountry itself also enticed an equestrian who recalled earlier experiences riding in the unfenced and unsigned park. Getting “way back in there” became a strong incentive to volunteer.

I didn’t even know about the Volunteer Program ... but I knew about the park because I was doing horse packing trips back into the wilderness area. Way back in there. And at that time, there were no signposts; there was nothing. So that was my introduction to the park and then [I] decided: “You know? I’ll try this.” That was [many] years ago.

Joining the UVP broadened another participant’s options to backpack and become more familiar with the backcountry.

One of my motivations for being a volunteer was...more opportunities to learn about that giant park. I wasn’t gonna have time to backpack that whole thing...but through the volunteer program, I learned all kinds of nooks and crannies way out in the boonies.

One interviewee became concerned when, because of budgetary problems, many California State Parks were threatened with closure. This situation prompted a personal

decision to join the volunteer program in order to support the State's mission for parks and contribute to continued preservation of the wilderness. The interviewee said, "I became concerned when there was a threat of closure. I had been at Wilderness Park [as a visitor] before, hiking, and...and I thought, 'I better get involved and see what I can help do.'"

New recruits to the UVP begin volunteer training in autumn. Seasoned volunteers introduce them to the backcountry through a camping weekend called the Big Overnighter, considered a mandatory key element of initial training. For new volunteers, this is an opportunity to learn about backpack camping, location of springs, where to fish, and, essentially, the nature of the wilderness itself. One volunteer remembers experiencing an expanse of undeveloped land: "And from the Big Overnighter, [new volunteers] see that you drive out... [and] you're in the original [California landscape]. I mean there are parts that are simply the same. And it's just amazing and we're this close to [suburban sprawl]." During training, volunteers are awed by the splendid isolation of the park. A new volunteer says:

It's so isolated from everything. I mean it's [quite a few] miles away from the highway. And when you're up on there and you look out towards the ridge—it's like... it's an amazing view. It's just very breathtaking. Yeah.

After the Big Overnighter, this trainee talked about plans to share this awe with visitors by leading a nature walk up to a special ridge in the park:

And when you get there, you see a good chunk of the watershed and the valley and it's pretty amazing up there. And you know, to expose [visitors] to that kind of beauty would mean a lot to them and make them value Wilderness Park a lot more.

When they are able to get out into the wilderness, some volunteers feel compensated for the time and effort they have spent helping visitors, clearing trails, or

staffing events. One volunteer described how being out in the wild land pays back: “[O]ne of my interests is getting out in the backcountry and seeing the wilderness. And so, whenever I get a chance, I like to reward myself [for volunteering] with an opportunity to go visit the backcountry.” And for another volunteer, a trip “all the way up” into the backcountry with a ranger is particularly rewarding:

We were lucky enough to be taken out on a special trip with a ranger way out into the backcountry, which was amazing. Gone all the way up to the [big valley]... and... all the way from the entrance, all the way up.

### **Environmental learning and environmental stewardship.**

Participants spoke passionately about how their volunteer work in the natural world of WSP increased their appreciation of environmental learning and stewardship. They explained how they valued opportunities to learn about environmental processes and to practice stewardship and advocacy, describing a number of ways that an environmental ethos permeated their work and thinking. “I’ve been actively involved at Wilderness Park and learning about landscapes in particular, how to say what needs to be said in terms of advocating [for parks].” Some are increasingly aware that their park work has significant environmental implications, for instance, considering the “impact of the trail” they are building or maintaining. Seeing the landscape with new eyes, one interviewee who had done trail maintenance said, “You might think about trail erosion and things like that, [which] a hiker, for instance might not think about.”

Several participants expressed pro-environmental values, many espousing a “protect-and-preserve sort of attitude” and they talked about sharing that belief with visitors on hikes or at the visitor center. One volunteer wanted to help visitors understand the importance of wilderness preservation: “I try... to talk about the stewardship aspect

of the park and get people thinking about leave-no-trace, visit-the-wilderness kind of ethics.” Another says,

...when you [advocate for wilderness], do that in the right way, then you can influence in a very, very small way how they might cast votes in the future for an open space and actually, for keeping parks open...so there is a purpose to it all, but it’s not a blatant purpose.

At one time, a wildfire swept through over half of the park’s wilderness acreage; it was a major landscape-changing event that seasoned volunteers later turned into a teaching and learning opportunity for all volunteers. One long-term volunteer who has had a renowned career as a scientist developed a fire study and recruited other park volunteers to collect data. One of those volunteers talks about the project:

...he had about 30 volunteers sign up and their charge was to go out to these different locations in both burned and unburned areas of the park that were fire plots in a line all set up, stake at each corner and string around them with the GPS and a camera and recorded...over time to see how the landscape recovered from the fire. Hugely valuable thing to do...

One outcome for this volunteer was the insight that “you can learn from even a catastrophic event such as wildfire.” Furthermore, this volunteer said,

...doing the resource inventory work has given me a greater understanding of the work that other people do to assess [environmental] issues and problems and propose solutions and make judgments about what’s going on...

This fire had burned an area where new volunteer recruits were camping during the Big Overnighter weekend of their training period. One recruit had vivid impressions of the wildfire’s aftermath.

...the trees were scorched. And it smelled like smoke. There was no wildlife out there, no birds. But even though this fire was an accident, the fire is still a very important part of the natural cycle in these hills—you know, primarily much smaller fires, which are just started through the lightning strikes. We were able to use that as education—to teach us new volunteers about the importance of fire, the importance of not having fire, but the importance of what fire does (of clearing out brush, burning off

dead wood, providing different habitat as well as the nutrients that come from the ash).

The trainees were able to incorporate a landscape-scale perspective of the role of fire within a California ecosystem by experiencing and studying its aftermath. Another volunteer augmented and deepened an academic understanding of hydrology by joining the work group that maintains vital water resources in the dry landscape of WSP.

I picked springs [for volunteering] because I was interested in the hydrology of the region. And that's what I really wanted to do with my [college] major, anyway, was to work with water. So it was interesting to learn how the springs worked in the park and how the type of geology actually helps transport the water through the rocks and dirt and it comes out filtered.

Environmental learning and stewardship is inherent in outdoor work at WSP whether through "just being in nature," doing research on fire effects, or maintaining trails and springs. This interviewee described the lasting benefits of leading interpretive hikes through the WSP landscape.

I probably bring a lot of Wilderness Park with me when I go anywhere...from the point of view of just looking at the flowers and being interested in what's blooming now even in the other parks, and just the knowledge of the trees and the landscape.

And, from several years of varied experience at WSP, another volunteer was able to integrate important elements of land stewardship and conflicts between human access and wilderness protection.

When I say "stewardship," I mean it's sort of a love of the park in the context of being a volunteer there (you love that park), a desire to share it and help other people enjoy it and yet a sense of, you know, preserving it as well for the future generations. So there is always a balance between having public access to an area and preserving it. They're kind of, you know, opposing.

Because WSP incorporates a highly protected but sometimes accessible area of designated wilderness within the backcountry, this interviewee was able to realize and

articulate the inherent conflict between the recreation and protection missions of state parks.

[T]he backcountry is a good example. There is a lot of room back there and boy, wouldn't it be great to get everybody in there in the wild to have access to the backcountry, but there are some issues with that, too, beyond [visitor] safety.

There is a kind of wear and tear on the park itself—the idea that people can damage the roads...if they're wet or if they're too steep.

Another volunteer reported that, even though the Wilderness Weekend is the most popular and highest revenue-generating annual event, a contingent of volunteers thinks that it is inherently harmful, causing degradation of environmentally sensitive creek narrows from vehicles, clearing of trails and general human activities and saying, “there are also people in the volunteer community who are vehemently against Wilderness Weekend, park volunteers who absolutely believe it should never happen.”

### **Theme Two: Working Together**

“It's very seldom that you're doing anything up here by yourself” (interviewee).

Volunteers indicated through animated descriptions of their work activities in the park that they are strongly group-oriented. They enhance their skills, take on complex projects, and keep the park in “running order” by working together. In interviews, they talked about working with other volunteers, park rangers, and park aides. And, they expressed some dismay that their working group, the UVP, was “a monoculture.” Additionally, some interviewees talked about problems finding initial work venues or groups with whom to start volunteering during the first year after they finished their training.



### **Working with other volunteers.**

WSP volunteers work together in the park and feel a strong sense of belonging, to both the UVP as a whole and to specific committees and workgroups with whom they work. They help visitors have a safe and enjoyable recreational experience, protect natural and cultural resources, and preserve the park's biological diversity. Along with park rangers and park aides, they serve the public in the headquarters visitor center and manage several annual public events. Volunteers take the lead to protect and improve springs and trails, design and guide interpretive walks, give campfire programs, and do regular trail patrols on foot, horseback, and bicycle. Volunteers manage much of the administrative business of running the UVP such as facilitating online communication among volunteers, tracking hours served, developing and presenting an extensive program of introductory and refresher training, and running and staffing the UVP Volunteer Committee along with the assistance of a park ranger. Almost all of this work is done with one or two other volunteers or in a group. In telling about experiences working together, interviewees focused on two areas: working with other volunteers and working with rangers.

Study participants from the WSP UVP belong to several workgroups, some permanent such as the Volunteer Committee and springs or trails groups, and some specific to a public event. Working together with other volunteers, they came to occupy a certain group identity and also subsumed themselves into group norms and goals. In interviews, they emphasized the significance of "sharing the workload" and were clear that "working together" was a prominent value and major theme of their experience. Working with others lightens the work burden, provides sociability, and gives diverse

opportunities to learn from more experienced volunteers. Common activities include helping visitors plan camping, backpacking, and hiking trips; managing and staffing large public events; co-leading interpretive birding or wildflower walks and strenuous hikes; taking small groups of visitors on multi-day backcountry outings; maintaining springs and trails; and teaching local school children about nature in the Park Connection program. These activities support the California State Park mission of promoting outdoor recreation, protecting natural and cultural resources, and helping people understand, appreciate, and connect with those resources. One volunteer said, “Pretty much anything you do at the park, other than a solo foot patrol or vehicle patrol, involves working with other volunteers.”

Interviewees described collaborating closely with other volunteers while assisting the public at the headquarters visitor center. Many enthusiastically told about working year after year in teams and groups to put on the park’s public events, such as the Wilderness Weekend, Spring Breakfast, Fall Festival and 5K/10K Fun Run. They described how tough physical work, such as maintaining springs and trails, was always best done together, particularly in the more remote park areas. Most of this shared work was described as being enriched by the labor and companionship of other volunteers although there were some interpersonal annoyances as described later in this section.

Park events for the public are “a great chance for the volunteers to get together and get to know each other” while setting up and working the event. Solidarity develops as volunteers work together and as one event volunteer said, “I always feel like I’m part of a team.” Volunteer teams take particular pride in “cooperative dirty work,” as seen in this description of how one person recalled a tough weekend out in the backcountry

preparing trails for an upcoming public event: “I remember some time ago working on a project to clear trail way out. [Another volunteer] organized a work party weekend out there. We nearly killed ourselves clearing the brush off these trails.” Spending the weekend contributing hard labor left this volunteer feeling that the effort was satisfying because of the strong camaraderie received from other volunteers.

Participants talked about their personal values in the context of working together and one volunteer traced an affiliation with working together back to childhood. “Being part of the team is real fun... growing up on the farm, we were all part of a team going out to pick stones together.” Teamwork felt natural to this volunteer and generated intrinsic enjoyment, regardless of the activity at hand. One extended example shows how teamwork took on additional meaning for another interviewee when the outcome was perceived to enhance visitors’ experience. A volunteer described helping out at an annual public event by working in a “team.” At these public events, the work team may “end up” managing visitor parking, a hot, dusty job.

So I end up doing parking at the Wilderness Weekend. We’re gonna be doing parking of all the cars along the road. We have to do a lot of work to lay it out, make sure we get all the cars parked out there.

But the work doesn’t stop as the last parking space is filled: “when the parking is done, I go help wash dishes.” Even tasks that may seem mundane at home become enjoyable when experienced with other volunteers. “And the fun part is you get to work with people that are enjoying it as well as I am. So it’s always fun to work with others and you become part of the team.”

Ultimately, a “successful event,” the outcome of teamwork, is visibly clear at the close of the day:

Well, it's about collectively getting a job done and doing it correctly and getting it completed. And camaraderie that goes with that and sometimes joking back and forth, but encouraging others to help get it done and the output of it is a successful event and everybody is pleased with and that they enjoy.

And, if the task at hand becomes stressful, other volunteers can help put it into perspective and, more broadly, contribute to commitment and strengthen volunteer identity.

And so, when I'm worried about the parking lot overflowing when I'm on duty and I talk to [another volunteer] about that, I say, "We're here at Spring Breakfast, what if there are too many cars?" And he goes, "This is so much better than being at work, I don't care! This is great!" It's just therapy. Just therapy.

Working together promotes volunteer learning, whether at the headquarters visitor center, in working groups, or at events. New volunteers are encouraged to work at the visitor center in order to learn more about both the park itself and how visitors use the park. One volunteer says, "I usually try to pair up with somebody who is an experienced visitor center person cause I don't get there that often." New volunteers know that they will learn by working side by side with "wise and experienced volunteers," a special WSP appellation for people with deep involvement and longevity as volunteers in the park. This strategy benefits both volunteers and visitors.

Yeah, I think it's always good to work with somebody else [in the visitor center]. And especially when you're working with a wise and experienced volunteer cause they're pretty knowledgeable and you can feed off that, pass on their knowledge to visitors as well.

One volunteer, in a working group for maintaining springs and trails, described paying particular attention to those volunteers who understand the technical details of the job at hand. "[Y]ou identify somebody that, hey, that person... they really know a lot.

I'm gonna hang around and see what I can pick up." And wise and experienced group leaders foster learning by "showing rather than telling".

"My gosh, how can we do that?" and I go, "Well, watch." And we just go out and do the job and they will pick up the [flow]. There may be tools that help do a particular project much easier. And just showing people how the tools are used. And, you know, "Oh, great! I have to get me one of those!"

An annual training event called All-Training Day brings together a series of learning workshops for all volunteers, new and experienced. Most sessions are developed and led by UVP volunteers and cover areas such as geocaching, animal tracking, safety, and park history. In addition, this event provides an opportunity for attendees to network and learn about park volunteer work opportunities.

All-Training Day, the day where volunteers can come together for training is not only a social event and camaraderie, but out of that, volunteers can talk to each other and someone can say, "You know? I'm looking for something to do."

Camaraderie through working together is beneficial: it can strengthen commitment to the volunteer program and heighten a sense of identification with the volunteer role. However, working together can also bring into high relief some annoying features of fellow volunteers. Several participants acknowledged that, at events and in the visitor center, other volunteers sometimes did increase the already inherent stress levels of providing service to a crowd of park visitors. Interviewees told of receiving too much advice, as when this volunteer was unsure about cooking skills but felt that other volunteers hindered by giving too many directions.

I've worked at Spring Breakfast event a few times and I remember one year I was asked to cook ...and I am not that good of a cook but I had lots of unsolicited advice about how to cook and you know, maybe a little more than I felt was necessary [mild laughter] in some cases.

Another interviewee alluded to being uncomfortable when there are “too many volunteers and not enough visitors” in the visitor center because, under a past UVP rule, there was a “whole crowd of volunteers who don’t particularly want to be [there, but are] trying to get their hours in.” This volunteer’s primary purpose was to help park visitors because “it was fun...you know, you’d talk to visitors.”

Some volunteers revealed their ability to respond to “touchy” situations that called for tolerance and to carry on in situations that made them feel uncomfortable. The breakfast cook who felt overly advised clarified, “But it was all well intentioned, so you know, I did my best to take that all in stride.” Another interviewee showed patience with volunteer colleagues when they weren’t as forthcoming with event help as had been hoped: “Especially when it comes to volunteers—and this is true with paid employees as well, but I think it’s even more true of volunteers—life happens.”

In a more serious situation, one volunteer talked about leaving the UVP altogether due to the dismissal of a volunteer colleague over “political and outspoken” comments in a public forum with “an implication that [the volunteer] was speaking for the park.” That volunteer was dismissed “and that was as near as we can tell because when they dismiss a volunteer, it’s confidential.” Some volunteers thought he had “gotten a raw deal” but “park management saw it differently.”

This interviewee had to decide whether to stay in the program or to leave in solidarity. Though self-examination and by rereading some points about confidentiality and “privileged information” in the UVP volunteer handbook, the volunteer decided that, “If you’re going to say something in the guise that you’re representing the park, you need to have approval. And this didn’t happen.” More importantly, “I realized that there is

really a bigger picture here and if I leave the program, everything [I have contributed] up to that point is sort of lost.” This “bigger picture” viewpoint demonstrates that committed volunteers are resilient and invested in the whole program. They are able to remain loyal to the UVP despite disliking some aspects of the volunteer working environment such as dismissal of a colleague or having to suppress the public expression of an opinion that might show the park in a poor light.

Resilience such as this volunteer demonstrated fosters service longevity and that provides a feeling of security to the volunteer and to the whole group. As one participant said of familiar volunteer colleagues, “I think it gave a lot of people a comfort in knowing that when you came to volunteer, you knew who the people were.”

#### **Working in a “monoculture.”**

Several interviewees talked about an absence of cultural diversity in the UVP, saying that the people with whom they shared their work belonged to “a monoculture.” This was viewed as a problem needing attention. One volunteer said,

I would like to see more [cultural diversity] in the UVP. The [surrounding] community is more diverse than the volunteers and that would say to me that maybe people are not reaching out to get volunteers in these numbers of diverse groups. But if [visitors] saw someone that looked like them, I would think that the next time they might say, “Well, let’s go back.”

However, one volunteer said, “I don’t know if there is a great deal of diversity. I think people try to work together and get a job done,” while another said, “There are no institutional biases, or in the personnel, that says, ‘We don’t want you.’ You know? This type of person, we want everybody. We’re accepting of anybody who wants to sign up.” But, as another alluded, someone may need to “work on” promoting diversity: “I’m not sure if anybody is working on [cultural diversity.] I mean I think it’s an issue that the [volunteers] are aware of... like anybody, I’m not sure even how to go about attracting

more minority membership.” In speaking of specific groups, interviewees cited problems in building diversity into the UVP, mentioning diverse physical abilities, sexual orientation, and ethnicity.

...the nature of what we do out here...hiking and camping, we don't really see disabled people, you know. This isn't a volunteer job for somebody who is wheelchair bound... [After some consideration] I'm sure they could come up here and work at the visitor center.

I think people of different orientation would find acceptance here. I'm not seeing much, but I'm not looking for it either.

Primarily, if you look around, we're a bunch of old white folks—you know, middle aged white folks. And we're trying to do better at that.

Some interviewees had applied constructive thought to developing ways of appealing to diverse visitors. One interviewee talked about an effort already underway.

I've been translating some of the [visitor handout] materials, to Spanish particularly, but I've also discussed doing it in a couple of other languages just to try and help reach out to more people in the community. But one of the things I don't have yet within the...group of the volunteers is a proofreader ...so I need help with that.

And another talks about a connection that might foster better service to the local community.

The Hispanic community seems quite underserved here and yet Wilderness Park is a major part of an important Spanish trail (it goes right through the park). So I would think that that community would take a lot of interest in that and I'd like to see more focus put on that, but I guess that's one of my back-burner projects.

And the interviewee goes on to say, “But I don't really have the community connections to where I could go out and get people in that community interested and that's what needs to happen.”



### **Working with rangers.**

Interviewees talked about working together with rangers and park aides at public events, in the visitor center and on the Volunteer Committee. They mentioned in particular appreciating rangers' abundant gratitude for their work, for being willing mentors and for their role in emergency or other situations not in the scope of volunteer training.

Park visitors often mistake uniformed volunteers for rangers. New volunteers are introduced in initial training to the differences in volunteers' and rangers' distinct areas of responsibility and authority. One interviewee said, "We are volunteers, but when the visitor sees you with the uniform on, they don't know you're a volunteer. They think you might be a ranger." Both rangers and volunteers carry out the CDP mission. However, as a volunteer explained, "[rangers and volunteers both] wear uniforms and we all look like rangers. I mean obviously, we don't carry the weapons." And, rangers "all wear their Smokey Bear hats, you know. I mean, they're rangers." Volunteers learn how to differentiate the broad aspects of responsibility that fall under their purview from those that only rangers are charged with handling. As new volunteers begin to provide visitor assistance, they learn how to follow the procedure of "observe, advise, and report" when they see visitors committing infractions such as bringing a dog out on the trail. Volunteers advise the visitor of the park rules about dogs in the park and report to a ranger if the visitor is not compliant. Only rangers can then enforce the rule.

Rangers and volunteers do work side-by-side and their contributions and expertise may overlap or differ considerably depending on their experience and longevity at the park. Park rangers have strong law enforcement roles. One volunteer explains, "They go

through a state trooper training essentially. And they're licensed to give you tickets. They're licensed to arrest you." Volunteers are "not expected to have the knowledge of the staff, although some long-time volunteers, I think they know more than the rangers; they've been...volunteering out here for 20-30 years."

Although the public might blur some volunteer and ranger roles, none of the interviewees commented that that was a problem. Instead, interviewees talked about park rangers with admiration, appreciation, and, indeed, some frustration laced with a measure of understanding. One says of a current ranger, "He is just a wonderful man. You just like him and he's just got the best heart and love of the park. He is great with volunteers." And, "when you get his attention, [you] get all his attention; he is terrific." However, rangers are "incredibly busy. They're pulled all over the place to [other parks.] They are literally driving all over and how they keep it straight, I don't know." This volunteer has decided that, "If I have to send out two emails to remind the ranger about a meeting instead of one, I'm okay with that."

Another interviewee told about a growing understanding of the levels of bureaucracy within the park system and what that meant to being a volunteer.

And one ranger in particular (who happens to be in a position of authority) is one of the by-the-book types. And so, it puts restrictions on many of the volunteers and a lot of the volunteers adversely react to it.

This awareness led to an appreciation of the immediate rangers' roles in facilitating volunteer work. "So I find some of the rangers we deal with, as much as they can, anyway, running interference for us. Not necessarily, you know, breaking the rules or going against their authority. You know, they're the boss *[sic]*."

Interviewees welcomed acknowledgement from park staff. “Well, the rangers, I mean they’re very good about saying ‘Thank you,’ you know. ‘We appreciate what you do.’”

They’re not here to shake our hands as we head out the door at night, but they do. The head ranger, he is very good at letting the volunteers know that they’re appreciated. After I’ve led programs or done some things, he’s... offered a thank-you, or said, “That was very nice.”

Rangers express appreciation publically during the WSPCA annual meeting when awards are presented to volunteers.

[The head] ranger does make a point of talking [at the meeting] cause, you know, he has the audience of [a] hundred volunteers at that point. They do a very good job of showing appreciation and thanking the volunteer staff for what we do.

Rangers foster volunteers’ proficiencies in the visitor center. One interviewee described welcoming an instance of mentoring (“with the lower case ‘m’”) by a ranger when working with the cash registers which turned out to be a common conundrum for many interviewees and which one volunteer called “a quagmire of complexity.”

I would say that one of the trickier things to do is work in the visitor center because you got cash registers and procedures and things like that. And so, there is...some mentoring that goes on there where a ranger... who knows [how to work the registers]. They’re pretty good at recognizing where they can teach a little bit.

Furthermore, “a ranger would say, ‘Hey, can you do this?’ and then kinda guide you step-by-step, say, ‘First, you do this [step]. And then you do this [step].’” Volunteers described park rangers as vital colleagues when staffing the visitor center also because of their authority to make higher-level decisions, for example, when a visitor requested a park gate be unlocked so he could to drive rather than carry on foot a substantial quantity of drinking water out to the campground where a large group was spending the night. The volunteer thought that this required an executive decision and made a referral.

I...told him that he would have to go and talk to the ranger to get that straightened out. I just simply didn't know how to answer his question. That's what you have to do. I said, "I don't know, but you need to go talk [to] this other person, [the ranger.]"

One interviewee talked about taking steps to cultivate "an open line of communication with the backcountry ranger, the headquarters ranger, and the park aides" in order to maintain good working relations. "It's important if there's an emergency! It's important if you're out doing a patrol in the backcountry and you have an accident and you have to call the ranger. That's the new protocol."

Conversely, the absence of a park ranger in the visitor center can be troublesome. An interviewee talked about a situation that arose when the visitor center happened to be staffed by two volunteers but no rangers. A visitor became increasingly irate and had rattled one volunteer, first with demands and then with verbal abuse: "Here is an experience I had one time with a visitor [who] kept insisting he wanted something that we couldn't provide [and] he kept getting angrier and angrier and angrier. And he eventually started yelling and calling us names." The volunteer then attempted two strategies: first to defuse the situation and then to walk away. "Finally, one of the rangers came in and helped him, but it was, you know, very weird and uncomfortable. Cause we were trying to answer and give this [person] the best information to the best we could."

Rangers understand how to deal with volatile situations. They also play a vital role in visitor and park safety because they are legally able to provide first aid and they are sworn peace officers who carry weapons and have the authority and training to use them. One volunteer talks about encountering a situation while on trail patrol.

I came across something that wasn't quite right [on the trail] by the visitor center... and I heard what sounded like guns. And I came around the corner [and] saw a few people with guns and camouflage outfit and I thought, "Okay." Luckily, I was on patrol, so I had a radio with me [to call

the ranger] so I radioed into the visitor center, told the ranger on duty what I'd seen and told him which trail they were on. And [the ranger] came out. And they were kids with BB guns.

Another volunteer spoke of feeling uneasy when the ranger is out in the park instead of providing a peace officer presence at the visitor center.

Well, our rangers are a primary source of information...when they're around. That is what worries me at times. Often, I'm working [by] myself or with other volunteers in the visitor center and there isn't a ranger within miles.

And they're available by radio, but still long ways away. So if there is an emergency, I worry about that at times and how to handle that.

This individual felt the unwanted weight of having more responsibility than a volunteer should have to carry, being especially mindful of visitor safety and emergency situations.

One long-term volunteer told warm and meaningful stories about a ranger who helped initiate and shape the UVP, describing how this ranger provided helpful advice and direction as the interviewee grew into the volunteer role. "He was the one that probably I spent the most time with. And he had very good counsel also." Most importantly, this ranger showed respect for the volunteer's abilities to work independently.

[He] had some good leadership skills, manager skills in that I found I grew a lot as I advanced as a volunteer because he would say, "This needs to be done" and then just turn me loose to do it any way I saw fit, rather than micromanaging and saying, "Thou shalt do it this way, the way I want it!"

This approach tapped into the volunteer's ability to learn in a self-directed fashion and then be able to own the expertise that developed through the process. "[The ranger] said, 'This is what we need to do' and then I could use my own skills or learn skills to do that." The end-result of one project was a book that continues to be sold in the park visitor center. The volunteer says,

I had never written a guide[book] in my life and I based it on the old one that was badly in need of improving. I had to learn a lot of things about... [the resources] in the park. And then I had to write this up in Word and to get all the pictures in, and find sources, and do some reading, and so forth. So it was a whole project that this ranger turned me loose on. I learned a lot in the process.

The volunteer adds that while he worked independently, he was not operating in a vacuum and that the ranger “was always there to answer questions and help me figure out the best way to approach things.” This spirit of allowing volunteers to develop independently through self-learning and institutional trust backed up by guidance can also be described within the UVP today. Volunteers currently organize and manage many aspects of the park’s visitor contact, for example, public events, trail patrol, and service at the visitor center. These volunteers are themselves guided by strong training and consultation with rangers. Volunteers then develop and use their own skills and, in the process, become confident and provide strong service that supports the California Park and Recreation Department mission.

#### **Finding a volunteer work role.**

Established UVP volunteers shepherd new recruits into the program, starting at the initial interview. Rangers and established volunteers outline potential volunteer activities. “[T]hey want to make sure that the new volunteers [fit in]... cause when you just sign up, you don’t know necessarily what’s involved.” Once accepted into the program, new recruits do group training organized by the UVP Volunteer Committee. Training is extensive, lasts several months, and takes place in a classroom, on the trail, in the visitor center, and out in wilderness venues. Interviewees talked about how, as new recruits, they met senior volunteers, learned about different work venues and projects within the park, and heard about experienced volunteers’ specialties. One volunteer

remembers training: “You get to know who’s been here for 10 years or 20 years or 30 years.” Another recalls enjoying the training and being inspired to carry on with self-directed learning.

The first part of the volunteer experience was a tremendous learning experience for me because of the training and then I took every opportunity to get out. I’d enter the park and explore and understand it, and become acquainted with it and I enjoyed that tremendously.

As a culmination to group training, veteran volunteers take new recruits on the Big Overnighter, a weekend campout and tour of the backcountry to familiarize the new members with springs, backpacking areas, and to experience the extent of the wilderness. The Big Overnighter evening campfire fosters integration of new and seasoned volunteers.

All these volunteers and all the trainees getting—wonderful exchange of information [at] a campfire get-together and going all the way around the campfire talking ...all the trainees are invited to talk about why they’re there, what took everybody into the training and all the volunteers to share some stories about their experience in volunteering over the years.

The last phase of initial training exposes new volunteers to some specific work areas.

It’s the specialty things that come later, which could be [mountain] bike patrol, horse patrol, trails, springs—you know, there are quite a few different focus areas...[all new volunteers go] through the basic training so to speak and then you branch off into as many of the other fields as you care to.

Integration into the volunteer program seemed easy for some recruits and hard for others. Some volunteers expressed frustration with finding venues to work together with experienced volunteers when initial training was over in late winter. When new volunteers finish the formal training sessions, they have met experienced volunteers, found out which volunteers are specialists in different venues, and they are expected to

have learned about worksites within the park where they might begin to volunteer. However, one long-term volunteer and trainer understood that there might be a gap between being trained and feeling confident enough to find a place that suits a person's skills and goals.

[A monthly online newsletter] is what I want to add to the September-February part of the training [to inform] the trainees that there is more. This is to get them on their feet. We don't expect them to be, you know, experts at things and now go forth and serve visitors.

Some WSP volunteers remembered being a beginner, searching for work venues that suited them. Some seem to find their place naturally and easily. "Most people see a niche for themselves, see something that they think needs to be done. And they go out and they do it." Volunteers defined "niche" variously, for instance as activities "beyond my [paid] job," "activities you are interested in," "a blessing," and "something of value to do." One interviewee, talking about "niche," described valuing the specific people in a working group, saying, "these guys are kind of special to me." The idea of "niche" in the UVP is multifaceted and was portrayed as the type of work done, learning new skills or using existing proficiencies, working with other volunteers or alone, accomplishing tasks and projects, feeling that one is being appreciated and being able to "give back." A niche can be "found" within an existing volunteer venue or developed when a volunteer sees an unaddressed need (for example, to establish a program for installing sponsored benches along park trails or developing visitor relief stations at important trail junctions).

Some interviewees talked about the process of "finding a niche" within the park as a series of planned steps that resulted in satisfactory roles. Others were frustrated in finding their niche within the complexity of park venues, opportunities, and methods of communication. One new volunteer developed specific personal goals during training:



“At the time [of entering training], I didn’t really know which skill to pick, but [then in a training session] I picked springs.” Others came into the program with ideas of what work they wanted to do and then maintained a stable role for years. “Really, nothing [has changed]. I think as far as the various projects, the things that I’ve helped with, I think it’s all been... it’s all been pretty similar.” On the other hand, another volunteer was surprised when the initial picture of volunteering was almost immediately supplanted by an unexpected role.

So interestingly enough, I thought a lot of what I would do would be trail maintenance kind of stuff in the beginning. And I’ve done very little of that, but what I have done is I’ve participated in several of the big events.

Other volunteers think that problems with finding one’s niche are natural, even inevitable, because the UVP is too complex to immediately develop a specialty or personal domain.

When you become a new volunteer at the park, there are all these things that are going on at the park and for myself, you know, nobody actually presented me a menu and said, “Here is the list of everything going on at the park.” You kinda have to dig them out and find some things on your own.

This volunteer remembers confusion during the first year after training.

I don’t know who’s in charge of this event or who is in charge of this activity.

Who is responsible for that? This list of [activities and leaders], you know... Where is this? There are all of these “Who?” questions. I talked to other people, they had that problem too—it’s that I don’t know who to talk to about this.

Another recalls beginning to search for activity and event leaders by asking around, but at the same time, thinking it could be construed as annoying to be “bugging” other volunteers. “I went out and started bugging people: Well, who does this? And who is on the team? And who are they? What are they responsible for? What’s their job

description?” Then the new volunteer developed a strategy for uncovering the key players in the UVP. “There is a small core group of people who are very active, like one particular person. And so, eventually, I would just default to sending email to say, ‘Okay, who do I talk to about that?’”

One seasoned volunteer considers at least the first year as a “learning process” whereby new people determine how and where to get involved.

I don’t know if you figure that out the first year. You do over time. You know, it takes time to figure out what’s going on, who are the people to contact and how you can be involved in those activities.

Much of the onus of finding suitable venues was said to fall on the new recruits themselves. This nonintervention practice has both positive and negative aspects.

Well, the good part is you’re kind of allowed the freedom to pick and choose the areas that you’re interested in. Of course, the down side is at least initially, for the first year or two as a volunteer, I sort of was kind of rocking around trying to figure out what was going on.

Not all new recruits feel puzzled about “fitting in” from the beginning. A volunteer who is now strongly established in the program talked about developing a strategic process as a new recruit and thereby succeeding in creating a niche. “We have to log a minimum of 50 hours a year. So I started looking around and I thought, ‘What interests me [and] would be somewhat time-consuming?’” Then, an opportunity opened up. “The superintendent at the park had sent out an email saying that they could use new people on the [event committee]. And I thought, ‘Well, what the hell?’, you know?” This volunteer chose to join a group that plans park events because it fit particular criteria for level of commitment and personal interest.

And there are monthly meetings. So literally for, like, two or three years I went to those meetings. I didn’t say a lot. I didn’t do a lot. But that was okay because what that did for me—going to those meetings through all

that time—was seeing how it worked, who was involved and gaining that trivial knowledge of what it was.

One volunteer began, after two years in the program, to attend the board meetings of the WSPCA, the nonprofit organization aligned with WSP.

I...went to WSPCA meetings...even though [I was] just a volunteer. And [I] just started showing up and talking with the people who were volunteers and they got to know [me]. And so, when a position on the board opened up, they asked me if I would run.

Again, an interviewee reports that finding and attending group gatherings opened up the door to finding a niche: “There is a sub-committee that deals just with the springs and I started going out to their events. And so, I fit right in that program.”

Interviewees reported that there is no formal mentoring program during new volunteers’ first year to ease the transition into straightforward and established “working together.” Several individuals talked about specific “wise and experienced” volunteers whom they met during training or working the visitor center and whom they rely on for help.

If I run into a situation where I don’t know the answer for something, “X” is the volunteer I would go to and I feel free to just bounce any and all kind of questions off this person. So I think this particular volunteer has been a good asset to have...kind of question-driven mentoring.

“Working together” was described by all interviewees but one. This interviewee self-identified as “an introvert” with heavy work and family responsibilities and who gained personal satisfaction by contributing to visitor safety in the park through solo trail patrol. The rest of the interviewee group chronicled a process of building strong working relations, some confidently and others with hesitation and worry. There was evidence in one interview that a senior volunteer recognized that this new volunteer experience of floundering once the initial training process was completed was a problem. This

established volunteer, describing how “some [new] volunteers are hesitant to ask ‘where do I plug in,’” referred to potential plans to “foster camaraderie” and improve the post-training experience through a newsletter where a new volunteer could “find things to do.” The volunteer said that “it’s another little idea for volunteer retention and encouraging participation and also giving insight to new volunteers on things that are going on, things that are happening, places where they can jump in.”

It became apparent that interviewees did eventually develop a process in testing and establishing their volunteer specialties, some with assistance from other volunteers and rangers. A few described building a path to their “niche” in a straightforward manner and others talked about feeling confused and called the process a “problem.”

### **Theme Three: Helping Others**

Volunteers valued opportunities to “give back” by sharing the park’s natural beauty with the public and by facilitating opportunities for visitors to learn about park natural history, develop a deeper understanding of stewardship, backpack in remote areas, find the best lakes for bass fishing, and sleep overnight in the backcountry. This happens, for example, through interpretive walks, strenuous hikes, visitor center advising and during the Wilderness Weekend.

Volunteers lead over 40 interpretive walks for park visitors each year, passing on their natural and cultural history and environmental learning to the public: “For me, that’s one of the big things...is to be sharing the park, sharing the outdoors and sharing the plants, the animals, just the beauty of the place.”

Volunteers learn about natural history and ecological processes at WSP through training and experience while working in the landscape of the park. They pass along their

understanding to visitors by leading nature hikes, responding to questions at the visitor center and through campground programs. One volunteer said, “[Nature interpretation] is something that both my spouse and I enjoy. And so, we lead a [nature] hike for campers or for volunteers, whoever wants to go.” Another interviewee felt an immediate connection with visitors when talking with them about the natural world: “I also enjoy, in the more personal sense, just giving people information [about nature], enabling and giving them knowledge and the tools to use to enjoy a place more, learn more about a landscape.”

The wilderness is beautiful and awe-inspiring, but it can become overwhelming if hikers, mountain bikers or backpackers run out of water, become injured, cannot re-cross a river on their way out after a rainstorm, or overestimate their stamina. At the headquarters visitor center where backpackers and campers register, volunteers help visitors by passing along advice on how to keep safe and stay hydrated while in the backcountry. A volunteer who staffs the visitor center says, “you’re responsible if somebody says, ‘Where should I backpack?’ and you send them to a place where there is no water, and you thought there was water, you really gonna do disservice.”

An extended story about a lost hiker in late December shows one volunteer’s conception of how events could have gone quite wrong were it not for volunteer staffing at the visitor center with the addition of a measure of luck. There had been no visitors for a long stretch and this interviewee and another volunteer were just about to close up a bit early when the telephone rang.

It was a lady who was alone in the park calling from her cell phone, whose battery was about to die. And it was pitch black out and she had no idea where she was or how to get out. She [was at] the southern entrance of the park. Far away from where we were.

The situation could have become dangerous for this visitor but the volunteers used a park radio communication network to enlist a ranger's assistance.

So it wasn't even at a place where we could have gotten to. And so...after a couple of dropped calls and wondering if...we would actually be able to help her ...we contacted Central Dispatch who was able to contact a ranger.

I was telling her, you know, to stay where she is, stay close to the road. She had heard about mountain lions. She was scared of mountain lions.

And when the ranger found her, she was actually going away from the road thinking she was gonna [*sic*] climb a tree.

So it was just kind of one of these things—kind of by the skin of our teeth, you know, we helped somebody from staying overnight in a very cold part of the year in the park.

This volunteer has told others this story “yeah, yeah, a few times. [Mild Laughter]. Oh, I felt great!”

Another volunteer talked about the role of responding to visitor worries over being out in the wilderness.

I get this question a lot: “Aren't you afraid of mountain lions?” I think there is a fear factor for people who are not comfortable with wilderness because they haven't been out there a lot. They think that it's very dangerous out there.

A hike-leading volunteer had some fears about some aspects of the park's wildlife at first and then learned about plants and animals of the park as a new recruit. “To start, with, I was very, very scared. It's like...tarantulas... Really scared.” In acquiring park knowledge and experience, this interviewee gained a new perspective that can be shared with visitors:

Thanks to the training, I know rattlesnakes, obviously, they are dangerous and you do want to give them a very wide berth. If I see a tarantula now, I don't sort of leap away and run like mad in the opposite direction. I'll actually go up and have a look at it. And I have had them walk over my hand.

This volunteer speaks movingly about working outdoors with a group of children on a field trip up to the park, with aspirations of inspiring them to experience and appreciate nature.

...there was a point where we would just stand still and listen. We'd count how many man-made sounds we could hear. And we'd count the natural sounds as well. So hopefully, they got a feeling that here and there, you'd hear the echo of woodpeckers in the distance.

And, moreover, to relax and become amazed by the natural surroundings.

They'd stand over there with their eyes shut and I think—I hope—that they got something out of that. We were just having lunch out, maybe sitting on the ground, and I hope that they felt something exciting from just being out in nature and away from the TV screen.

Volunteers talked about feeling rewarded for their service to park visitors in two distinct ways: they themselves perceived an intrinsic value in being of assistance and also valued appreciation from visitors. One volunteer chose the UVP because “I’ve been a hiker my entire life, wanted to have an opportunity to give something back to the hiking community.” To several volunteers, “giving back” is seen as “a good thing from the character perspective,” and it “makes me a better person.” Several volunteers mentioned helping families have a fun visit.

[M]ore than anything the most important part is... visits by families...because you've got a chance to make their visit a lot more pleasant. And so, when they've come up to the headquarters and they've just suffered a long drive and you can see that their mom is a little bit grumpy [Laughter] and having a hard time dealing with the kids then you can help out there. Make it easier for them to find [an appropriate] trail that's not gonna add to their stress.

Interviewees spoke about having a “good feeling” when visitors thank them for specific services, most particularly, for helping them plan a hike that fits their fitness level and goals for the visit.

Some people come in and...they say, "I've got three hours and we've got our eight-year-old child here, where should I go?" and you nail it [Brief laughter]. They get back and they say, "That was a great hike. Just perfect." You think, "Yeah, I helped that person today."

### **Discussion**

This research examined the experiences of members of an organized volunteer group that provides environmental stewardship, visitor services, event management, and resource protection in a state park setting. Nuanced volunteer accounts were analyzed through the lens of meaning construction. Meaning making took place amid threats of park closure, reduced staffing and extensive wildfire.

Through lengthy interviews, volunteers were able to express how their work in the park enables them to derive strong personal meaning congruent with their values and goals. Three vigorous interrelated themes emerged from grounded-theory analysis of interview transcripts: connecting with nature, working together, and helping others. In this section, each theme is treated separately and then shown to converge around the construct of wilderness. In addition, participant experience is discussed under the VPM (Snyder & Omoto, 2008).

### **Construction of Meaning**

An individual's construction of meaning can be related to well-being, social commitment, self-knowledge, having a sustainable work-role fit, being engaged in work, and doing work that benefits others (Schnell & Hoff, 2012, p. 38). Well-being comprises four personal attributes: coherence, significance, directedness, and belonging. Coherence describes consistency of values between the volunteer program and the individual volunteer. Significance indicates that volunteers deem their work to provide an important contribution to the program. Directedness is a way of indicating that both the individual



volunteer and the volunteer program are compatibly goal-oriented. Belonging denotes the building of community membership and stability. Volunteer work can be characterized by meaning-making. In demonstrating that volunteers do construct meaning in volunteer work, Schnell and Hoof cite commitment to something larger than themselves and willingness to act in ways that benefit others as well as themselves (2012, p. 36). In this study of WSP volunteers, coherence, significance, directedness, and belonging are strongly present in the interview data. As Schnell and Hoof point out (2012), each can be shown to play a role in the decision to join the UVP, in determining the areas where volunteers contribute their service, and in the way they express and carry out environmental values (Table 5).

Table 5

*Indicators for Constructing Meaning in the UVP*

| <b>Attributes</b>                          | <b>Meaning</b>   | <b>Examples</b>   |
|--|--|---|
| Coherence                                  | Personal and CDP/WSP values are coherent   | Environmental stewardship, outdoor recreation   |
| Significance                               | Volunteers' work matters to visitor experience, park staff, and continuing park operations   | Good-will and revenue generation (events)<br>Visitor safety (springs and trails maintenance, trail patrol)                          |
| Directedness (goal-oriented contributions) | California State Parks mission: provision of recreation, protection of cultural and environmental resources, preserve biological diversity | Visitor assistance and safety<br>Environmental stewardship<br>Resource protection (e.g., prescribed burn, invasive-species weeding) |
| Belonging                                  | Being a member of a community  | Working together<br>Training together<br>Wearing the uniform  |

## **Coherence**

Strong values of outdoor recreation are substantially apparent in both the recreation mission of WSP and in the volunteers who are attracted to the UVP. Many current volunteers first learned of the program as recreational visitors or through interaction with UVP members and park rangers. All interviewees participated in and felt a connection with outdoor recreation at WSP, regularly hiking, biking, horseback riding, backpacking, birding, or fishing. Volunteers give a congenial, knowledgeable, and welcoming face to the wilderness. When they work at the park, they animate encounters with visitors by being experienced in and knowledgeable about outdoor recreation and they inform the “personality” of the park itself.

Many interviewees demonstrated their solidarity with CDP environmental stewardship values by protecting the park’s wilderness lands, preserving biodiversity, and assisting with research such as resource inventories and a fire-effects study. In interviews, they talked about promoting “leave-no-trace” recreation and the importance of sharing these values with visitors, legislators, and their communities. They spoke proudly of their environmental stewardship activities and showed that they felt that they make important contributions to land preservation through work and sharing with visitors.

[We are] good stewards of the land—not just in the park, but elsewhere—and this gives me an opportunity...to be able to share it with others and to help preserve it for the enjoyment and use of other people too.

In response to a 2012 scare around closure of 80 California state parks, including WSP, some interviewees described expressing their volunteer identity by advocating for the park in Sacramento and locally. One said,

Well, [the UVP is] really essential for that park because [it is] helping to...make it known to the public. And then if that happens, then [the

public] wants to support [the park] and pay for it, keep it going and that results in the land being preserved.

Another interviewee talks about a heritage of volunteer action to raise awareness of WSP at the level of California state government: “The PR campaign to our local State Senate Assembly women, to help make sure that we’re funded—[that is the] type of thing that volunteers were able to do. That’s the lasting legacy of the volunteering out here.” In addition, this interviewee goes on to talk more broadly about volunteers’ other contributions: “Even if funding is perfect, there are so many programs up here that just couldn’t be done without the volunteers. You know, you wouldn’t have the big events like Spring and the Fall Festival.”

And, finally, the participant finishes the interview with this poignant image of WSP *without* the UVP: “And the park would be here and it would be a fine place to come camping and hiking, but maybe that’s all it would be.”

### **Significance.**

Interviewees described their contributions as playing an unquestionably substantial role in the delivery of core park services. When they said, “Without the Uniformed Volunteer Program there would be no Park,” it was heartfelt and with pride. One interviewee elaborated that “the volunteer program at Wilderness Park is the thing that keeps the park in existence because otherwise, it would be very hard to keep the park open and the visitors to have such good experiences without all the volunteers.”

Volunteers’ work supports the CDP mission of public recreation, environmental and cultural resource protection, and biodiversity preservation. In this context, one interviewee talks about the ratio of park staff to volunteers.

I don’t think the park would really be what it is without the volunteers. With four, five rangers in total and just a handful of dedicated full-time

employees, the trails and springs couldn't be maintained. It just wouldn't be what it is without the network of volunteers.

While rangers are ultimately responsible for visitor safety services, volunteers feel strongly that their own service in trail patrol is similarly vital to safety within the park. This interviewee acknowledges that “[the ranger] can't be everywhere at once. So I can't imagine the park without the volunteers.” Another says, “Honestly, the park could not be open without people like the volunteers because they go out there and make sure people are okay.”

### **Directedness.**

Directedness can be described as the affinity and ability to work in a goal-oriented environment. Starting with the CDP mission statement citing provision of public recreation, protection of environmental and cultural resources, and preservation of biodiversity (California Department of Parks and Recreation, 2016) and continuing with the CDP *Volunteers in Parks Program Guidelines* which call for “protecting park resources and serving the needs of visitors” (California Department of Parks and Recreation, 2016), a demonstrated UVP intention aligns volunteer work along purposeful goals. One interviewee sums it up:

You know, we're all up here with essentially a goal in mind, right? So we all have something in common no matter what we do for our jobs with other organizations or things we might volunteer. When we get up here, we're all up here with one goal. So we have that in common... to give the visitors a good experience and to help run the park.

Furthermore, as another volunteer explained, goal setting is accomplished in a different way as a volunteer than it is as an employee at work.

Volunteers are much more informal. So you don't hold them accountable in [workplace] ways. You don't set goals and reward in that sense. Volunteering is all about letting people, in my opinion, make the

contributions they want and have the time to do and are comfortable doing, and then encourage them to do more and more and more of that.

At WSP, volunteers are allowed to create and manage their own goals as long as they fall within a range of appropriate volunteer behavior. If they notice that a park publication is out of date, they can run the project by the ranger to obtain permission to create and carry out the goal of editing and publishing a new edition. If they want to continue to make progress in their volunteer work, they are able to do so as long as they stay within the guidelines required by the CPD and park rangers. Within this framework of goal-setting, volunteers have published several books, developed an annual children's creek-walking event, enhanced visitor services with trailside benches and potable water stations, strengthened the volunteer online communication network, and developed campfire programs that promote understanding of environmental stewardship.

### **Belonging.**

Affinity and attachment are honed and established through wearing the volunteer uniform. Park volunteers can put on the uniform after they complete the five-month process of basic training. At the mid-winter annual meeting, new volunteers wear their uniform in public for the first time and receive an official name badge; thereafter, they wear the uniform whenever they work as volunteers in the park. The uniform is a khaki shirt with insignias, badges, and award pins. When volunteers are working on trails or in the backcountry, they can swap out the khaki shirts for tee shirts with park insignias and volunteer identification.

Interviewees talked about the uniform in the context of being a personal emblem of both the park itself and the mission of the CDP. One said, "you're a symbol of the park and so, [when you volunteer there], you wear your uniform, you present yourself in a

matter that makes the park look good.” Another said, “More senior volunteers have tried to pound into my head that...you put on the uniform and you go out. You need to be constantly thinking about the way you present yourself and the way you behave.” Park administration takes conduct in uniform seriously and one volunteer recounts a story illustrating the consequences of failing to live up to the responsibility.

[W]e can't have people who are wearing the uniform telling [visitors] stupid stuff. So that [volunteer] who [gave misleading information at the visitor center] was let go. Now whether that person understood why, I don't know. But it was one of those things that happened and then you don't hear about it until maybe years later when you realize that person is no longer around.

And, another interviewee articulated a philosophy behind the dismissal.

[Y]ou're representing the state. And it means that you've got a little bit more responsibility with the visitors. It means that, if you were to do something which wouldn't be a good experience for the park visitor, then they're associating that, definitely, with the park.

Some volunteers felt that the uniform symbolized their experience and training. One said that it is “an acknowledgement of having taken the time to acquire the knowledge and skills, to be sharing the park, sharing the outdoors and sharing the plants, the animals, just the beauty of the place” and another talked about how wearing award pins attests to commitment and longevity: “And if you look at some long-time volunteers' uniforms, they'll have a little Golden Bear pin. And that's quite an acknowledgement [of service.]” Other volunteers said that “when they work with visitors, the uniform establishes volunteers as belonging to the park and it is a sign saying, ‘Ask me. Here I am.’” To the volunteers, it says “I think I'm good in dealing with people and talking to them on the trail. And they see the uniform, they think, ‘Oh, [this person] is official.’” A uniform “gives you a sense of authority. It represents that to the public so they might listen to you

more when you say, ‘Don’t kill that snake.’ or ‘Don’t chase those birds.’ or ‘Stay on the trail.’”

Lastly, the uniform represents the privilege of being an official volunteer and identifying with the program. To one interviewee, it means,

...just to be able to work on the trails and use tools. And basically, unless you’re a uniformed volunteer...the public just isn’t allowed to come in and cut brush or dig dirt or anything. Becoming a formal volunteer allows you to participate in that.

### **Theme One: Connecting with Nature**

WSP, with its wildflower and forested trails, backcountry and wilderness, provides an extraordinary setting for connecting with the natural world and developing environmental values. Interviewees spoke strongly of their meaningful relationship with nature brought about by working directly in the park environment through maintenance and stewardship projects, advising visitors about hiking and camping, and leading interpretive programs and hikes (Guiney & Oberhauser, 2009). They expressed biospheric and self-transcendent values of unity with nature, the beauty of nature, environmental protection, and sharing these values with others (Brehm et al., 2012, p. 12; Dietz et al., 2005, p. 350-351). They described how the landscape of the park attracted wilderness enthusiasts who then became volunteers. Recreational use of the backcountry inspired deeper understanding of the social construct of wilderness (Ewert & Hollenhorst, 1997). Threats of park closure and wildfire engendered concern, advocacy, and action for sustaining the continuing integrity of its wild lands.

Connecting with nature was the strongest of the three themes, with elements of personal benefit (enhanced spirituality, physical exercise, and mental health) and communal interest (sharing natural history and environmental stewardship attitudes with

visitors) (Hartig et al., 2014). In studies of volunteer motivations, both personal and communal motivating factors play strong roles in environmental volunteer fulfillment (Measham & Barnett, 2008).

### **Theme Two: Working Together**

Most volunteer jobs at WSP were described as involving working with other volunteers or with park staff. Study participants told of working in congenial groups to maintain park resources, manage public events, and provide direct visitor services. They learned how to carry out their jobs through training together and direct on-the-job experience. They were guided in nuanced public service by observing seasoned volunteers and park rangers.

Working together is not a construct addressed as an important general theme in volunteerism research. Related variables common in the quantitative literature include “being part of a community,” “socializing,” “sharing knowledge,” “meeting new people,” “social networking” and “working with a good leader” (Asah et al., 2014; Bruyere & Rappe, 2007; Jacobson et al., 2012; Lu & Schuett, 2014; Moskell et al., 2010; Ryan et al., 2001). These related variables are elements that inform working together and, in quantitative research, are addressed separately. Working together achieves a two-fold strength through pairing the elements comprising work, exertion, and expertise with the elements of collegiality, fun, and learning. Going out in a workgroup to the backcountry to prepare trails for a public weekend may leave an individual “hot and dusty” but it also imparts a sense of communal accomplishment and pride, reinforcing values of both community and commitment (Snyder & Omoto, 2008, p. 17).



In telling about working together, some participants expressed dissatisfaction with staffing the visitor center when the park rangers were in the field or away at other parks. They told about incidents of handling disgruntled visitors and worry about visitor safety, particularly because volunteers are not authorized to deliver first aid under CDP guidelines. One interviewee reported, “I used to have my first aid card but haven’t taken the class lately because we aren’t allow to do first aid with visitors.” Another volunteer, in a harrowing story about a lost hiker with a dying cell phone in the far reaches of the park, talked about reaching the park ranger by radio. Interviewees cited an inadequate staffing budget as the reason for these worrying circumstances.

One study participant talked about “working in a monoculture” when describing the absence of cultural diversity within the UVP and other interviewees considered that this was a problem because the surrounding community “is more diverse than the volunteers.” Others said that they didn’t know how to effect appropriate change. Studies of park visitation show that there are significant differences in park awareness, perception, and usage between cultural groups but that no difference was found in activities such as camping in developed campgrounds (Child et al., 2015; Le, 2012). Outdoor agencies and foundations have published studies that describe outreach for and statistical pictures of diversity in outdoor recreation that document an interest in attracting a wide range of visitors (Adams, Baskerville, Lee, Spruiell, & Wolf, 2006; Gaither, 2015; Landres et al., 2015; Outdoor Foundation, 2015). These might be of help in planning for increased inclusivity in the UVP.

### **Theme Three: Helping Others**

WSP had 46,549 visitors in fiscal year 2014/15. Many required assistance in choosing hiking trails and campsites; others attended park events staffed by volunteers. During events, volunteers cook and serve food, lead nature walks, and entertain with songs and stories. Park volunteers provide the bulk of in-person visitor assistance along with park rangers and park aides and have taken mandatory training in staffing the headquarters visitor center. There they not only provide recreational advice but also handle money, credit cards, and cash registers. More importantly, they help visitors match hikes or mountain bike rides to their physical abilities. The park is rugged with over a thousand feet of repeating elevation change and the Spring-Fall climate is warm to hot. Some visitors “who’ve never been to the park before, have no idea what they’re in for.” To help visitors be safe, volunteers must know the trails, the current condition of water sources, and how high the river presently is at crossings. One interviewee related how a volunteer was dismissed from the UVP for “telling people...stupid stuff” in the visitor center.

Study participants connected with park visitors through a shared affinity for outdoor and backcountry recreation and a mutual sense of environmental stewardship. Volunteers valued working outdoors with children by sharing a sense of wonder in the natural world. They felt extrinsically rewarded when park visitors thanked them for their service and felt intrinsic value in giving back and thus being “a better person.” These personal, altruistic, and humanitarian values are strongly represented in the research literature of outdoor and park volunteering (Bruyere & Rappe, 2007; Jacobson et al., 2012; Moskell et al., 2010).

## **Interrelationships Between Themes**

The three motifs, “Connecting with Nature”, “Working Together” and “Helping Others,” although analyzed as separate values, generally do not stand alone as distinct elements of how WSP volunteers experience and express the significance of their work. In fact, volunteers construct strong interrelated meaning around nature, work, and service through supporting the California Park Department triple mission. Preserving biodiversity, protecting resources, and providing recreational opportunities are the institutional beliefs that inform volunteers’ contributions and that lead to deeply developed social and personal meaning. Resource protection requires working together. Preserving biodiversity helps develop environmental learning and stewardship. Providing recreation by advising visitors and maintaining trails is accomplished through working together and helping others. These values build and strengthen volunteer meaning-making.

### **Confluence of themes: the Wilderness Weekend and the concept of wilderness.**

Confluence happens most dramatically when volunteers work together to interact with visitors in the backcountry, lead interpretive programs, maintain springs and trails, or advise visitors on backpacking and hiking (Figure 2). Thematic understanding of the volunteer experience can be deepened by examination of the intersection or overlap of the three themes during planning and staffing of one annual event, the Wilderness Weekend. The Wilderness Weekend, an iconic yearly WSP event, illustrates how the confluence of the three themes promotes deeper understanding of environmental stewardship.

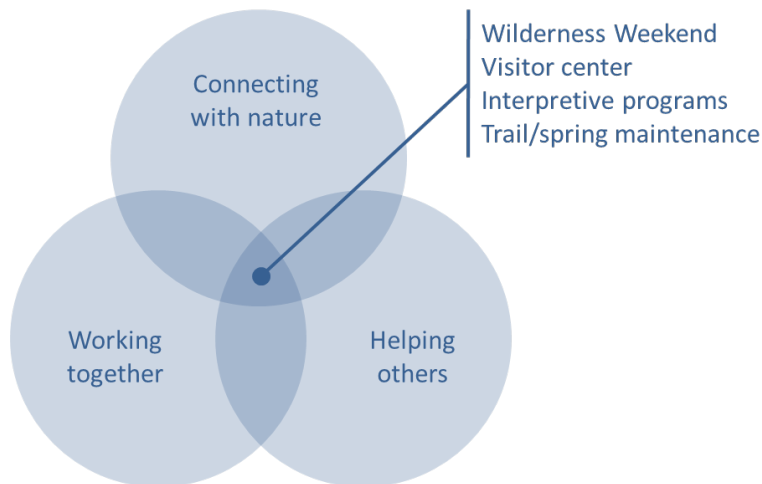


Figure 2 Confluence of themes in volunteer work.

The Wilderness Weekend takes place each spring in the park’s backcountry, an area that is generally inaccessible by motorized vehicle to the public. “Backcountry” is a colloquial, rather than legal, designation connoting a relatively pristine natural area characterized by remoteness and without public vehicular access. WSP is approximately 90% backcountry including a designated wilderness area. The California Public Resources Code defines wilderness areas.

A wilderness area, in contrast to those areas where man [*sic*] and his own works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man [*sic*], where man [*sic*] himself is a visitor who does not remain. A wilderness area is further defined to mean an area of relatively undeveloped state-owned land which has retained its primeval character and influence or has been substantially restored to a near natural appearance, without permanent improvements or human habitation, other than semi-improved campgrounds and primitive latrines, and which is protected and managed so as to preserve its natural conditions (Public Resources Code 5019.68).

Visitors are generally allowed to access the backcountry and the wilderness only by foot, bicycle, and horseback. Some UVP members can obtain permission to drive vehicles into the backcountry for both trail projects and their own recreation. Rangers occasionally bring volunteers into the backcountry during regular patrols.

One volunteer who always attends the Wilderness Weekend explained why it is a personal favorite: “I’ve always been drawn to that side of the park just because it’s more remote and more wilderness...a more unexplored area.” To volunteers, the park’s backcountry area is both a place on the map and a personal or social construct (Amsden et al., 2013). Three interviewees provided these descriptions of what the backcountry meant to them:

I usually think of the “backcountry” as almost any part of [Wilderness Park] that’s not within about a five-mile radius of [park headquarters]... the “Wilderness Park less traveled.”

“Backcountry” to me means any place in [the park] away from the end of the road—the point from which the public can drive no further.

To me, “backcountry” means a wild place, uninhabited by humans, and yet home to many. Empty and yet, full. Quiet and yet noisy. Alone and yet not lonely. This to me is “backcountry.”

Several interviewees described the backcountry as being “away,” for example, “away from the end of the road,” “away from industry,” and “away from the [park] entrance that most people walk on a casual day hike.” They speak passionately about it as a place of extreme solitude and natural beauty where backpackers are able to get “as far flung as they can.” In addition they looked at the backcountry as a preserve for wild nature and, indeed there are state restrictions on who can enter the area. “You still need a reason to be back there, and permission, basically.” Volunteers go “back there,” both as land stewards and to enjoy the natural environment. Planning the weekend in the wilderness requires extensive site preparation so volunteers work together to help visitors stay safe. Interviewees described spending a weekend camping together as a work party to prepare trails and signage for the Wilderness Weekend.

So before the Wilderness Weekend, there is an Adopt-a-Trail Program and certain trails that get cleaned off and re-marked... So as volunteers, we go

back there and hike the trail, put flagging tape on trees and bushes...so that the visitors don't get lost.

Marked trails serve to keep visitors away from fragile areas and provide safer footing than does "cross-country" hiking. Amsden et al. say, "a weekend spent maintaining a trail or serving as a backcountry caretaker...may foster an identity as a steward or protector" (2013, p. 111). Volunteers then pass this stewardship identity along to visitors during hikes or campfire programs over the weekend. One interviewee told explained how sharing enjoyment and respect for the backcountry with visitors was of strong personal importance: "one of the reasons I volunteer is to encourage people to go into the wilderness."

During the Wilderness Weekend, visitors and volunteers are allowed to camp in an area of the park that is generally off-limits. They hike, backpack, ride horses, attend evening campfires, and relax in nature. An interviewee talked about leading a favorite hike.

One hike I [lead] goes out to [the creek] and at the turn around, there is this, typically a fairly deep, pool in the creek. And the kids, they all just strip down to their underwear and go swimming. So you know, the water is too cold for me. I'm not doing that, but kids don't seem to care. And it's a lot of fun.

Another volunteer expressed concern for visitor safety over the weekend. "[I]t's the biggest event that we have out there and of course, I would like it to go well and be a good experience for the public as well as...nobody hurt."

Several interviewees reported that attending the event was pivotal in their deciding to enter the volunteer program. One said,

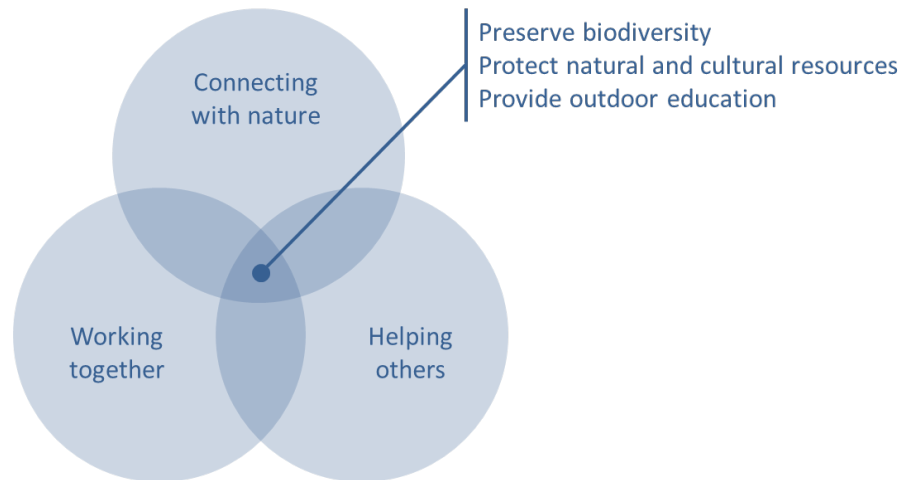
I've always been drawn to that side of the park just because it's more remote. That was one of the things that actually got me interested in the park to begin with. I was participating in that before I was a volunteer.

Most interviewees expressed affinity for the ruggedness and beauty of the backcountry. Many find gratification in sharing that pleasure with visitors. This volunteer likes to publicize the event when working in the visitor center.

I always talk up the Wilderness Weekend to park visitors, encourage them to sign up for it. And, I was doing a foot patrol during Backcountry... [and I heard] somebody was calling my name. I looked around and I saw two visitors. They... signed up for that Wilderness Weekend because I had talked to them about it at the visitor center a few months prior. They're just beaming! They've had such a wonderful time at the Wilderness Weekend and they're just thanking all of us volunteers for that.

Clearly, around and during the Wilderness Weekend, study participants constructed profound meaning through a synergy of experiencing nature, providing environmental stewardship, and working together to help visitors stay safe in the backcountry. As one volunteer says, "I've always liked nature, but I like it even more when I'm showing people things there."

The wild nature of WSP provides a framework for volunteer experience and construction of meaning but it also includes inherent contradiction and begs the question of how the Wilderness Weekend fits the received definition of wilderness. Given volunteers' affinity for the backcountry, the constructs of connecting with nature, helping others, and working together may converge in uneasy fashion around the California Department of Parks triple mission of protecting resources, preserving biodiversity, and providing recreation (Figure 3).



*Figure 3* Confluence of themes and park mission.

The Wilderness Weekend provides high quality recreation, generates revenue, and serves as a conduit for potential new volunteers to consider joining the program.

However, entrance to the weekend venue involves possible environmental degradation in the form of “[vehicular] creek crossings that were potential habitat for Red-Legged frogs.” Not all volunteers saw this potential for wilderness degradation as problematical, particularly in light of whether endangered or threatened species were actually present at the crossing sites. As one volunteer put it, “there is this fricking Red-Legged Frog thing...and even though [State Park environmental scientists] had not found evidence of the frogs, what they wanted to do was limit the number of vehicles we could have go out to the [wilderness].” Additionally, as one interviewee said, “I would say the whole [wilderness] is an archeological site,” causing it to require guardianship under the state mission of cultural resource protection. This participant goes on to explain that volunteers help manage visitors so that biodiversity and cultural resources are protected. Some volunteers are in charge of “off-limits camping,”

...so that there is somebody watching to see if people are going out there [in protected areas]. And I’ve done it many years and you know what?



[Visitors] are nice. You just kinda walk over and say, “Listen, I’m really sorry, but this is an area that camping is not allowed.”

“Wilderness” is a social construct and both the state and the park must work to provide services within designated boundaries set by mission statements and the law. Built into federal wilderness law are four qualities that characterize wilderness (Landres et al., 2015, p. 33-56):

- Untrammeled (the extent of human manipulation of the area’s natural processes)
- Natural
- Undeveloped
- Solitude or primitive recreation

Trammeling is the most likely problem during the Wilderness Weekend: the wilderness area is undoubtedly natural, undeveloped except for some former ranching-era back roads and it affords excellent primitive recreation. The U.S. Forest Service has promulgated guidelines for trammeling that can be linked to actions that occur as preparation for the weekend such as restoration, fire suppression and scientific monitoring (Landres et al, 2015), and the Bureau of Land Management cites “no-camping areas and campfire restrictions” (US Department of the Interior, 2013) as appropriate measures in order to avoid trammeling in wilderness recreation. The incorporation of these measures promotes environmental learning and stewardship, both strong sources of meaning for the volunteer participants in this study.

Meaning was further strengthened when study participants saw “wilderness” as a concept and source of spiritual inspiration, as when one volunteer revealed,

I think we live in the world that’s really overwhelming with digital technology and I think it hurts us in that connection with the universe...and... I see going to Wilderness Park as sort of leaving that

world behind and going towards something that's...more primal where you connect with Universal Conscious or Sense, or something like that.

This idea is reminiscent of the experience and writings of John Muir, an early and influential American environmentalist associated with the idea of wilderness preservation (Worster, 2008). Muir found beauty, spirituality and transcendence in the natural world of the Sierra Nevada. He writes,

Never before had I seen so glorious a landscape, so boundless an affluence of sublime mountain beauty. The most extravagant description I might give of this view to anyone who has not seen similar landscapes with his own eyes would not so much as hint its grandeur and the spiritual glow that covered it. (Muir, 1997, p.: 115).

Land preservation and resource protection ensures the continuing availability of these “glorious” experiences of wild nature. WSP volunteers know that recreational use of the wilderness during the Wilderness Weekend as well as by hikers, backpackers, and mountain bikers year-round is regulated by park rules regarding prohibition of campfires, limitations on camping, and restrictions on modes of access. Many study participants valued the concept of protection characterized by limited use and turned it into action—as one volunteer described it, in terms of “wanting to preserve that [wildness] and be able to share [with visitors] a stewardship attitude for the outdoors.”

### **Conclusions**

This study shows that outdoor/environmental volunteers at a California state park construct deep meaning around their volunteer experiences. The use of semi-structured interviews allowed study participants who are members of the WSP UVP to express nuanced and profound meaning-making experiences and grounded theory analysis provided a means to make sense of their multifaceted descriptions of participation, meaning, and values. This research looks primarily at the involvement of the individual

within the UVP in order to understand how volunteers make meaning and express personal values through their work and service. However, for the purpose of a comprehensive view of organizational volunteering, this study can be viewed on multiple levels: personal, organizational, and societal. The volunteer process model outlines stages of volunteerism across increasingly complex levels of social and psychological analysis and can be used to understand the complexities of the UVP and how volunteers understand their roles in the park (Snyder & Omoto, 2008). The antecedents stage highlights individual characteristics that predict volunteering at WSP including propensity for outdoor recreation, altruism, threats to park funding, and willingness of current volunteers to recruit. The experiences stage shows the lived participation that makes up the major themes of connecting with nature, working together, and helping others. Some aspects of volunteer participation were described as troublesome, for example, experiencing the dismissal of a volunteer colleague, working in a visitor center without a ranger at close hand, and having problems settling into compatible volunteer work after training. In the consequences stage, outcomes and “bottom line behaviors” that indicate continuing commitment in the program include an ability to work together in hot and dusty conditions, the acceptance of complexity in environmental stewardship, a commitment to visitor safety, and a powerful connection to wild nature (see Table 6, Stages of the Volunteer Process in the UVP, after Snyder and Omoto [2008]).

Table 6

*Stages of the Volunteer Process*

| <b>Stages of the Volunteer Process in the UVP</b> |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|---|
|   | <b>Antecedents</b>  | <b>Experiences</b>  | <b>Consequences</b>   |
|   | Personal, motivational, circumstantial characteristics  | Interpersonal relationships, positive benefits to recipients, continued service                               | Impact of volunteer service, attitudes, knowledge, behavior   |
| Individual  | Outdoor recreation, altruism, life circumstances, looking for specific work   | Environmental, stewardship, working together, helping visitors, connecting with nature, finding a niche       | Acceptance of complexity inherent in environmental stewardship, learning, commitment, willingness to recruit, enhanced visitor experience, connection to nature, frustration with finding work venues |
| Uniformed Volunteer Group                         | Recruitment, outreach, enthusiasm for outdoor recreation, concern about park closures, desire to help the environment | Working together: annual events, visitor assistance; resource protection; strong training program; dismissals | Learning, complex environmental projects, interpretation program, outdoor skills employment/development, visitor safety and enjoyment, designing ways to promote finding a niche                      |

|                         |   |   |   |
|-------------------------|---|---|---|
| Wilderness Park         | Budget problems, threat of park closure, wilderness and backcountry                                   | Well-established volunteer program, rangers spread over several parks, deferred maintenance                   | Revenue generation; concern over visitor safety; pride and accomplishment: “Without volunteers, no park”; recruitment   |
| CA Parks and Recreation | Threat of park closure, resource protection, biodiversity preservation, recreation provision          | Park advocacy, parks are short-staffed  | Learning, empowerment, anxiety  |
| Societal/cultural       | Volunteering as a social construct, increasing urbanization/decreasing open space, cultural diversity | Wilderness and backcountry protection, low-cost recreation, family/individual health, volunteer opportunities | Visitor: volunteer synergistic interaction, wilderness recreation, recruitment, environmental learning and stewardship, biophilia, working in a “monoculture” |

In this study volunteers testified to how they constructed meaning and developed and expressed personal values around strong themes of connecting with nature, working together and helping others. The three themes were experienced synergistically and strengthened commitment during a range of volunteer activities, from solo trail patrols to an event in the backcountry with 500 other people.

The theme of connecting with nature arose for participants during experiences in the park’s remote backcountry and in the busy headquarters sector, as well. This theme was expressed as a strong feeling of connection to the natural world akin to biophilia. Elements of the theme included appreciation of natural beauty, a deep feeling of spiritual

awareness, and experiencing a therapeutic effect when alone in nature. These phenomena prompted study participants to encourage park visitors to correspondingly appreciate nature. Volunteers also prompted participants to take part in environmental learning opportunities, develop and hold environmental values and to engage in environmental stewardship in the park. Participants shared these values with park visitors.

The theme of working together demonstrated that study participants enjoyed the company of fellow volunteers and strongly valued their contributions to planning and tackling the task or situation at hand. This theme played out in working groups where participants learned from and encouraged each other to do their best work. It also was apparent when participants staffed large public events and the park's visitor center. One volunteer alone could not know enough to advise all visitors on all trails, backpack camps, or safety measures on specific trails. Volunteers valued each other for the camaraderie and specific experience that contributed to the development of interdependent roles. Volunteers also recognized and honored park rangers' unique role of peace officer that proved invaluable in emergencies. Working together as a strong theme is unique in the research literature of volunteering.

When participants talked about helping others, their goals were for park visitors to have enjoyable, challenging, and safe experiences on the trail, at events, or while camping and backpacking. Volunteers developed a strong knowledge of trail and water resource conditions in order make recommendations on the best current hiking or trail riding routes. They planned events and campground programs for families so children could have interactive experiences in nature. Study participants felt strongly appreciative of WSP and wanted to share that feeling with visitors.

Three programmatic strengths emerged across themes: volunteers identified strongly with the UVP, volunteers felt that their contribution was vital to provision of core visitor and environmental services, and volunteers sought opportunities to learn. Volunteer identity is strongly linked with personal meaning, pride, and purpose and can make volunteering an integral part of how a person views himself or herself. When volunteers identify with a program, they are more likely to recruit others. Robust self-focused motivations such as feeling vital to a program's success have been correlated with increased satisfaction with volunteer work and continuing participation (Snyder & Omoto, 2008). Lastly, learning about organizational values and services as well as finding out from whom to learn is vital to making transitions from trainee to new volunteer and then to experienced volunteer (Haski-Leventhal & Bargal, 2008). Four problems surfaced during interviews: trouble finding a niche in the program after training, working in a "monoculture," worries about visitor safety when rangers are away, and continuing budget difficulties. None of these worries were enough to make participants want to quit the program but finding a niche was particularly troublesome to some interviewees.

### **Applications and Recommendations**

The findings of this case study indicate that park volunteers who perform outdoor recreation and environmental work can and do construct profound meaning as well as develop and express personal values connected with their volunteer experiences. In this study, volunteer meaning was analyzed into three themes: connecting with nature, working together, and helping others.

- Further qualitative research on outdoor or environmental volunteering is recommended in order to broaden our understanding of volunteerism in different park settings, including urban parks.
- The wilderness nature of the study site provides a strong background to volunteer experience. Studies in other settings, for example urban parks, may show results with a different ranking of thematic emphases.
- Survey research on outdoor or environmental volunteering should include further investigation into the working-together theme in order to inform volunteer program structure and management.
- Further survey research involving all volunteers at WSP with questions based on the results of this case study would provide a broader picture of the UVP.
- In this study, working together emerged as a strong value and volunteer dismissal was expressed as a disruptive and distressing factor for continuing volunteers. Almost all aspects of the UVP are administered by volunteers themselves or in concert with park rangers. Dismissal is, of necessity, confidential and under the purview of CDP staff. However, the Volunteer Committee might consider development of a wider dialogue within the UVP on the dismissal process that focuses on greater understanding of general principles and procedures of dismissal.
- Participants in this research expressed awareness that the cultural demographics of the UVP do not reflect those of the surrounding communities and wider urban area. Because many UVP volunteers have been inspired to become volunteers while visiting the park, learning more about attracting and serving culturally diverse park visitors is a step in recruiting similarly diverse volunteers. Recreation administration



researchers have addressed issues of the cultural diversity of park visitors and characterized formal volunteering in culturally diverse populations (Child et al., 2015; Le, 2012; Roberts et al., 2009; Wang et al., 2013). The Volunteer Committee might take these as a starting point in developing a recruitment strategy for increasing cultural diversity.

- The complications some new volunteers reported around “finding a niche” after training was completed may be addressed by referencing the volunteer stages and transition model which examines progress from new recruit to committed volunteer (Haski-Leventhal & Bargal, 2008). Additions to the training program are recommended, for instance a “buddy system” or volunteer advisor program that bridges the gap between the current culmination of training and entry into volunteer work.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix: Interview Schedule

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| Describe the project  | Purpose, confidentiality, voluntary, withdrawal at any time, recording, turn off recording, consent form, questions  |
| Gather demographic data   | To get started, I would like to collect some basic demographic data from you. Would you please tell me your: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Age</li><li>• Gender</li><li>• Ethnicity or racial identification</li><li>• Occupation</li><li>• Highest education level</li><li>• How far travel to WSP</li></ul>  |
| Gather information on volunteers' general experience, activities and roles with the UVP | Please tell me about how you came to volunteer in this program: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• How long have you been a volunteer here?</li><li>• Describe your volunteer activities.</li><li>• What activities or circumstances do you like the best? Why?</li><li>• What activities or circumstances have you found difficult or a bad match for you? How have you managed these situations?</li><li>• What has changed over time in your volunteer activities at WSP?</li><li>• What has changed in the volunteer program?</li></ul> |
| Volunteering with others  | Do you work with other WSP volunteers? Please describe some experiences.<br><br>Please describe some experiences working with the public.<br><br>Please describe some experiences working with park staff.<br><br>Please describe some times when you have felt part of a team.  |
| Where, how, and when does volunteer learning happen?                                    | Please describe the training you have had in this program.<br><br>Please tell me about your training cohort. Still see them?   |

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|  | <p>When you are working and have a question about how to handle something, how do you find out what you need to know?</p> <p>How have you learned what is considered unacceptable behavior for park volunteers?</p>   |
|  | <p>Are you a volunteer trainer?</p> <p>Please describe how and when you do training.</p> <p>What are the essential things for new volunteers to learn?</p> <p>How do volunteers continue learning after training is over?</p> <p>Describe a time when you felt challenged as a volunteer.</p> |
|  | <p>How do new volunteers meet other/more experienced volunteers?</p> <p>Did you receive any mentoring from other volunteers?</p> <p>Have you mentored others?</p>   |
| Values, way in which you work, desired outcomes  | <p>What does wearing the uniform mean to you?</p> <p>What personal values do you realize by volunteering at the park?</p> <p>How do your values relate to WSP's core organizational values?</p>   |
| How do volunteers identify, value and achieve leadership?                                  | <p>What are some of the ways that veteran volunteers make strong contributions in this program?</p> <p>Please describe some leaders in the UVP. How are they acknowledged and/or valued?</p> <p>What are the opportunities for volunteers to become leaders in the program?</p>               |
| How do volunteers describe cultural diversity at WSP?                                      | <p>How would you describe cultural diversity in the UVP?</p> <p>How does cultural diversity affect you personally as a volunteer?</p>   |
| How do they describe its effect personally?  |   |
| How do volunteers describe motivating and discouraging factors that impact their volunteer | <p>What motivates you to keep volunteering with this program?</p> <p>How has your motivation changed or evolved since you</p>   |

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| work in this program?  | <p>started volunteering in this program?</p> <p>Describe some instances when you received feedback on your volunteer work.</p> <p>Describe some times when you felt valued or respected for your contribution.</p> <p>What has or would motivate you to consider quitting the volunteer program?</p> <p>Are there ways you would like to see the volunteer program changed? Please describe.</p> |
| How do volunteers describe and value the sustainability of their work? | <p>What are some of the lasting effects of your own volunteer work in this program?</p> <p>What is the lasting importance of this volunteer program?</p>   |
| Wrap-up questions  | <p>Do you have other volunteer work? Please describe.</p> <p>What does volunteering mean to you?</p> <p>What else would you like to tell about your volunteer experience?</p>  |