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COORDINATION: ORGANIZING VOLUNTEER WEED PROJECTS



An increasing number of land managers throughout the Bay Area sponsor regular opportunities for volunteers to participate in weed control efforts. There are dozens of work parties happening every month in public parks and open space, along urban creeks, and even on private land. But there are also tens of thousands of acres that have not yet been adopted by a dedicated band of volunteer weed workers.

Before you go out and start ripping out Cape ivy, however, there are a few important things to think about. Do you have permission to work in the area of concern? Can you confidently recognize your target weed and not confuse it with a native plant? Are you versed in the potential risks of poison oak and wasps? Do you know how to run a work party for volunteers? You need to be able to answer these and other key questions before initiating an invasive weed program. In this chapter, we offer tips for those readers who want to organize their own weed projects.

WORK CLOSELY WITH THE LAND MANAGER

In this era of reduced budgets, our parks and open space can sometimes look and feel as if they have been forgotten by the agencies responsible for them. It's easy to feel indignant towards the land manager—how dare they let such a gem of open space go to ruin! Usually, though, park staff members are just as concerned as you are, but they don't have adequate resources to take care of everything. That's where you and your volunteers can have a huge impact. Your

demonstrated commitment and helpful attitude—not to mention your on-the-ground success—can encourage upper-level managers to devote more attention (and maybe funding) to natural resource management.

Building a good relationship with park staff at the field level will help you in many ways. If they understand and support your work, they can give invaluable logistical assistance, from providing tools and garbage bags to helping publicize your workdays and hauling away your debris. Even if they are too pressed with other business to provide much assistance on the ground, their partnership is still essential, because removing weeds can sometimes be controversial. So make sure that the land manager knows exactly what you are doing and has given you permission to engage in particular land management activities. Public agencies hold parks in trust for the community at large, and they are responsible for the long-term stewardship of the land.

Here are a few tips for building a strong relationship with land managers.

Understand and appreciate the agency predicament. It doesn't help your cause to accuse an agency of being a poor manager that isn't doing its job. Acknowledge that times are tough, and that agency personnel don't have nearly enough resources to do all the work that needs doing. Understand that agencies are usually juggling complex issues like recreational use, grazing, fire control, and the like.

Ask the agency to assign a particular staff member as your liaison. This helps the continuity and clarity of communications. Your liaison can become your best advocate and ally if they know what you are doing. Communicate with your liaison regularly.

Ask for help from the agency when you need it. Park staff will have some resources that can help your work, and soliciting their active involvement helps build a partnership with the landowner. That's a much stronger position than being a lone operator.

Garner support for your work from all levels of management. Your relationship with an agency will be strongest if upper-level managers—particularly those who are elected or serve in supervisory positions—also understand and support your stewardship efforts. Let them know that you are a team player who truly wants to work with them.

Know and adhere to the agency's liability policies and permit requirements. Before you start volunteering—and especially before you start leading other volunteers—make sure that you understand the ins and outs of a particular agency's

liability policies and permit requirements. These are not uniform across agencies. The National Park Service, for example, requires its volunteers to sign a form acknowledging that the park will cover any medical expenses, while other agencies take the opposite approach and require their volunteers to sign a liability release form.

Leave a paper trail to ensure accountability. Most agencies experience frequent turnover in field staff positions, so you may have to work with new people every year who are unfamiliar with your project and the history of your relationship with the agency. A paper trail can help bring them up to speed. In the unlikely event of conflict, you will feel much more comfortable if you have documented everything—permits, waivers, releases, date and time of work parties, maps and photographs demonstrating accomplishments, plans, and so on—in writing.

In dealing with the public or the media, identify yourself as a volunteer working on behalf of the agency. If you receive public recognition for your weed work, be sure to acknowledge the land manager. When working on public land, it's often important that people know that you are working with the consent of the public's representative, the agency that owns the land in question. It helps to wear a shirt, cap, or even a patch that identifies you as a volunteer working for the park or open space, especially when working in remote areas.

KNOW HOW TO DISTINGUISH AMONG THE INVASIVE WEEDS AND THE NATIVE PLANTS

Your knowledge of plants doesn't have to be perfect. There's not a single weed worker who isn't still learning. The best thing you can do is to get really good advice early in the process. Go on a walk with the local plant experts. Ask them what the worst weeds are. Ask them what other plants can be confused for that weed. When possible, visit proposed work sites with them and ask them to help you identify plants in the vicinity, particularly ones that you should be sure not to disturb (like rare ones).

As a leader, it's up to you to make sure your volunteers aren't removing the wrong thing. Your best strategy for working with volunteers may be to focus on just one or two weeds at a time that are easy to distinguish.

KNOW ALL ABOUT POISON OAK

It is especially important that you are good at identifying poison oak, which is common (and native) in many plant communities throughout the Bay Area. The consequences of exposure to poison oak can be severe. Roughly 10 percent of the population is extremely sensitive to poison oak and may require medical

intervention (steroids or hospitalization) if their skin is exposed to it. Another 10 percent is apparently immune, but most of us exhibit a wide range of sensitivity to urushiol, the rash-causing compound found in poison oak leaves and twigs.

Many California residents can identify poison oak when its shiny and oily red or bright green leaves announce its presence. But when its deciduous leaves have fallen, or when it adopts one of its other forms—it can be a vine, a tree, or even an ankle-high shrub in grasslands—it can be hard to recognize. As a coordinator of volunteer work parties, you should become a practiced observer of its many forms.

Before selecting a work site, carefully scout the area for poison oak. If poison oak is common, the site may be unsuitable for a volunteer workday. If it is uncommon, flag the areas with poison oak and caution people to stay away from them. We recommend that you work only in areas where poison oak does not occur, unless you have an experienced team of folks who are used to working around poison oak. At the beginning of each workday make sure that every participant can recognize poison oak in its various forms and that they know how to stay out of it.

Sometimes, despite all precaution, volunteer leaders and their weed workers are exposed to poison oak. Here are some measures that you can take to minimize the impact of accidental exposure.

Wear long pants and long-sleeve shirts to limit direct exposure to the skin. If gloves have an elastic cuff, shirt sleeves can be tucked into the glove. Likewise, tucking pants into socks or boot tops can help limit contact.

Remove and wash clothing immediately after the event. This will prevent the oils from migrating to couches, clothes in the hamper, and other surprising locations. Clothing and gloves exposed to poison oak should be washed; cold water and regular detergent work just fine. Take caution with boots and tools, which can become vectors for spreading urushiol, poison oak's irritant.

Use a barrier lotion like Ivy Block to protect exposed skin, especially the gap between glove and sleeve.

Use an oil remover like Tecnu to wash skin immediately after potential exposure. Many weed workers find this to be effective in reducing the extent and intensity of poison oak rashes. It seems to be less effective when the urushiol has already permeated the skin after a long day in the field.

Take a cool shower with a non-moisturizing soap. Laundry detergent bar soap like Fels-Naptha also helps to remove urushiol from the skin. Hot water and moistur-

izing soaps open up the pores on your skin, making them even more receptive to urushiol, so stick with cold water and non-moisturizing soap at first.

If a rash has developed, there are ways to minimize its impacts. A new product called Zanfel is advertised as being able to remove urushiol after it has penetrated the skin and developed into a rash. It's expensive (nearly \$40 for a one-ounce tube that's good for about fifteen treatments), but some urushiol-sensitive weed workers swear by it. For severe cases, consult a doctor, who may prescribe cortisone shots that reduce swelling. That's the only treatment available when the rash becomes systemic.

KNOW ABOUT POSSIBLE WASP DANGER

Some weed workers feel that wasps are an even more serious issue than poison oak. Unlike poison oak, wasps seldom provide any advance warning—their nests are much more difficult to spot than poison oak bushes. Encounters with wasps don't happen often, but they are worth mentioning during your safety talk at the beginning of every work party.

For most people, being stung by a wasp is a painful annoyance, but for others it can trigger a serious allergic reaction called anaphylaxis. Those with the most severe reactions require treatment within minutes in order to avoid anaphylactic shock. Such people often carry a portable device that administers epinephrine, the most common being the EpiPen. As a work party leader, you should make sure that your volunteers, particularly those with severe allergies, are familiar with the risks involved. (For legal reasons, you can't administer the EpiPen, otherwise it would be a good thing to carry with you in your emergency medical kit.)

If your group encounters a wasp nest, mark the surrounding area with caution tape to keep people away from it. If people get stung, you're better off bringing the work party to an end and getting them home (or to a hospital if the allergic reaction is really serious) as soon as possible. There's no sense in putting people at risk by trying to get a bit more work done.

KNOW ABOUT TOOL SAFETY

As a work party leader, you must not only know how to use every tool safely, but also how to instruct all your volunteers in their safe use. Treat the subject seriously and forthrightly at the beginning of the work party, demonstrate how to use the tool properly and safely so that everyone can see how it works, and also demonstrate unsafe practices as well. Remind people how to work with tools in a group setting—such things as carrying tools low, not on your shoulder, and maintaining a safe distance between yourself and other volunteers. If you're

going to have your volunteers work with tools that require safety equipment, don't rely on them to bring safety gear. You should provide it yourself and require them to use it. This includes having leather gloves for volunteers working with sharp tools like pruners or loppers.

Be prepared for minor injuries by carrying with you, to every work party, a full first-aid kit and a cell phone. If cell phone reception is not good at your worksite, know where the closest phone is and how to reach park rangers and other emergency personnel. Some weed workers who regularly lead work parties have chosen to take CPR and EMT training courses so that they are even better prepared in the event of an emergency.

CALL IT A WORK PARTY! FACILITATING COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION

Who knew that there would be so many things to think about when working on weeds! So take a deep breath and say, "I'm a volunteer. I'm interested in doing this because I love this place and I love being outdoors." You don't have to obtain degrees in botany, interpretation, volunteer management, and medicine in order to make a difference.

It's helpful to know your limits. If you're a volunteer just getting started, don't try to take on too much. In our experience, coordinating anything more frequent than a monthly work party is too much for most volunteers. Only paid coordinators, or those rare volunteers who have fifteen to twenty hours a week to dedicate to stewardship, are able to handle the complex logistical details associated with more frequent work parties or with organizing dedicated work parties for school or corporate groups.

Assuming, then, that you know the limits of your ambition, here are a few tips about running successful work parties. One golden rule: long-term sustainability depends on short-term enjoyment. If it ain't fun, it ain't going to last. Work parties can involve challenging labor, but volunteers won't return if they don't get something positive and meaningful out of it. A few volunteers are drawn to weed work primarily for the exhausting physical labor, but they won't give you a broad base from which to grow. Reaching out to all kinds of people and accommodating their diverse needs and interests—even if you don't achieve quite as much on any given work day—is often critical to the long-term success of a weed program.

Below is a listing of the tasks to do before, during, and after a work party. The list will help you plan your own event. And here are several key things to remember for improving your success in attracting and sustaining a dedicated group of volunteers: first, maintain your enthusiasm! Nothing kills the spirit of a work party like a leader who isn't enjoying herself. Second, identify tasks that can be

achieved during a single work party—“Let’s remove every broom plant between here and that tree today.” And finally, offer a range of tasks that will provide variety for returning volunteers—“Who wants to pull broom? Who wants to collect native grass seed?”

Before the Day of the Work Party

- u Coordinate everything with your park liaison.
- u Scout the work site carefully, paying particular attention to poison oak and where the closest bathrooms are.
- u Take “before” photographs while you’re there.
- u Borrow sufficient tools and gloves, and get a first-aid kit from the park or other sources.
- u Develop an elevator talk that succinctly introduces yourself and the project to workday participants.
- u Advertise the workday in appropriate venues (posting flyers, placing articles in the local community newspaper, etc.).
- u Be realistic about the duration of the event. Don’t try to fit too much in. In our experience, the ideal work day lasts two to three hours (10:00-12:30, for example) with a break in the middle or toward the end for goodies. Weekend mornings are best, particularly Saturdays.
- u Arrange for donated goodies (or purchase them).
- u See if others will help you lead the event; review with them the goals and tasks for the work party.
- u Identify extra work in case too many people show up for the work party (this can actually happen!).

On the Day of the Work Party

- u Arrive early, and be friendly and welcoming, particularly with people you haven’t met before.
- u Have attendees sign liability forms and waivers while waiting for the group to assemble.
- u Pass a sign-in sheet so you have everyone’s contact info for future work parties.
- u Deliver your elevator talk and go over workday logistics (timing, tasks, poison oak, tool safety, bathroom location).

- u Ask knowledgeable weed workers to team up with new volunteers or to circulate and make sure everyone is getting started.
- u Seize teachable moments (with your workers or members of the public) that illustrate why we're engaged in this work.
- u Take “during” photographs.
- u Take a break for goodies!
- u Quit working, gather up tools, and return to initial assembly site (parking lot, for example). Make sure that all tools and volunteers are accounted for.
- u Thank everyone for coming and let them know how important their help is—and how welcome it would be in the future.
- u Write some notes about who attended the work party, what was accomplished (number of person-hours, area of particular weed removed).
- u Assess the work party itself: what worked, what could be improved, what follow-up is required with any of the volunteers.

After the Work Party

- u Return tools.
- u Report back to your park liaison.
- u Take “after” photographs.
- u Post signs at the work site if it's highly visible.

Ways to Improve Community Participation in Volunteer Work Parties

- u Have a consistent schedule (e.g., 10:00 A.M. on the first Saturday of every month).
- u Use dramatic before-and-after photographs to demonstrate the impact of volunteer labor.
- u Print and distribute flyers for your monthly work party.
- u Produce a calendar of upcoming work parties and post it in appropriate newsletters, list serves, and Web sites.
- u Offer other educational opportunities to your volunteers (field trips, walks with experts).
- u Cultivate fellow volunteer leaders who can help lead work days in your absence.

- u Develop a Web site for your project and keep it up to date.
- u Have a presence at appropriate community events (e.g., neighborhood street fairs).
- u Honor frequent volunteer participants with a gift (mug, T-shirt, cap).
- u Find ways to celebrate successes.

