WHAT MOTIVATES PEOPLE TO VOLUNTEER: A CASE STUDY USING COASTAL CLEANUP DAY IN SAN LUIS OBISPO, CALIFORNIA

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Introduction

Volunteering is a behavior that has been studied by sociologists for years. It is a type of helping behavior that is defined as “doing charitable or helpful work without receiving pay” (Encarta). Why would a person choose to commit time and energy to a cause without receiving monetary compensation? The purpose of this paper is to analyze the motivations behind an individual’s decision to participate in an environmental volunteer event.

There are two main categories of motivations to volunteer: societal and personal. Societal motivations are altruistic in nature and are in favor of the benefits to society as a whole, whereas personal motivations focus more on the benefits to the individual. Some examples of altruistic motivations include contributing to the “greater good” of society, preserving the environment for future generations, and improving natural wildlife habitats. Personal motivations include career or professional benefits such as networking and resume padding, feelings of satisfaction and happiness gained from helping behavior, and opportunities to make new friends or spend time with old ones. It was necessary to narrow the context in which to study the motivations behind participating in an environmental volunteer event, so Coastal Cleanup Day in San Luis Obispo County, California was used as a case study.

California Coastal Cleanup Day is organized by the California Coastal Commission and has been in place for twenty-five years (CCC). It also coincides with International Coastal Cleanup Day which is organized by the Ocean Conservancy (OC). It is an annual event in which volunteers go to local beaches and coastal areas and collect marine debris. According to the
International Coastal Cleanup 2010 Report, marine debris consists of “any persistent, manufactured or processed solid material discarded, disposed of, or abandoned in the marine and coastal environment” (Ocean Conservancy). In 2009, over 80,000 people volunteered and collected over 1.3 million pounds of debris across California (California Coastal Commission).

With so many individuals participating in this event, there must be some very powerful motivations involved in the decision-making process. In order to further investigate these complex motivations, volunteers were surveyed on the day of the event. The survey will be discussed in more detail later in the paper, but it can be stated that the survey was designed to target both societal and personal motivations in order to establish whether one held more significance than the other.

It is also important to explain why this research is important in today’s society. With growing environmental concerns and lenient legislation, volunteer work becomes increasingly significant. The research compiled for this paper will be useful to environmental organizations for recruitment and marketing purposes. By understanding the motivations volunteers have for participating, environmental organizations will be able to focus on satisfying those motivations through different types of volunteer activities, as well as using advertising and marketing strategies that target those motivations.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the motivations behind an individual’s decision to participate in an environmental volunteer event. In the first section, background information will be presented about the rise of the environmental movement in the United States, the history of Coastal Cleanup Day, and the organizations that support this event. The next section will
discuss societal motivations to volunteer, followed by a section on personal motivations. The subsequent section will present the case study: Coastal Cleanup Day in San Luis Obispo County, CA on September 25, 2010. A sample of thirty surveys taken from volunteers on the day of the event will serve as primary data. This section will include a firsthand account of the event, as well as the author’s personal experience working with the county’s coordinating organization, the Environmental Center of San Luis Obispo (ECOSLO). The following section will be an analysis of the primary data, which, in conjunction with secondary research, will establish that both personal and societal motivations are involved in an individual’s decision to participate in an environmental volunteer event. The closing section will review the findings of the paper and reaffirm the final conclusions that were drawn.

**Background**

In this section we will begin by discussing the history of the American environmental movement, followed by the history of Coastal Cleanup Day and the participating organizations. “The environmental movement is one of the largest, most diverse, and longest-lived social movements in the United States” (McLaughlin, 422). It is commonly acknowledged that the modern American environmental movement began with the publishing of the book *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson in 1962. “By examining the ecological impacts of hazardous substances that pollute both the natural and human environments, like pesticides, Carson fundamentally altered the way Americans perceived the environment and the dangers of toxins to themselves” (Silveira, 504). The decade of the 1960s was characterized by social activism, most notably the African-American Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War protests (Longhofer, 509).
environmental movement gained momentum from the spirit of social activism alive in America during these two decades.

Richard Nixon came into the presidency during the height of the environmental movement in 1969, and his legacy of environmental policy is impressive. Several influential federal environmental acts were passed during Nixon’s presidency, including the Clean Air Act, the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), the Clean Water Act, the Endangered Species Act, and the banning of DDT use in the United States (Train, 186-192). Nixon was also responsible for the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) (Silveira, 508). It seemed that the environmental movement was achieving great success in raising awareness and influencing politics. However, in the 1980s, President Reagan tried to weaken these environmental laws in favor of big corporations. It was during this era that Coastal Cleanup Day was created.

The first California Coastal Cleanup Day took place in 1985 a year after the first organized beach cleanup in Oregon during the previous year. Close to 2,500 volunteers came out to clean up the California coast during that first clean-up, organized by the California Coastal Commission. According to the organization’s website, “the California Coastal Commission was established by voter initiative in 1972 (Proposition 20) and later made permanent by the Legislature through adoption of the California Coastal Act of 1976” (CCC). The purpose of the Commission is to maintain the environmental quality of the California coast and to ensure that it is managed in a sustainable way. “The Coastal Commission, in partnership with coastal cities and counties, plans and regulates the use of land and water in the coastal zone” (CCC). The
Commission is an important regulatory agency because it is non-partisan and exists solely to enforce the protection of the California coast.

One of the key environmental problems that Coastal Cleanup Day attempts to address is the issue of marine debris. According to the California Coastal Commission, “plastic marine debris affects at least 267 species worldwide, including 86% of all sea turtle species, 44% of all sea bird species, and 43% of marine mammal species” (CCC 2009 Report). As stated by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, “Marine debris has become one of the most pervasive pollution problems facing the world’s oceans and waterways” (NOAA). There are many negative effects of marine debris, including damage to marine ecosystems, wildlife endangerment, and human health and safety risks.

Another important environmental organization that has had significant involvement in the development of Coastal Cleanup Day is the Ocean Conservancy. The Ocean Conservancy is a non-governmental organization headquartered in Washington, D.C. As stated on the organization’s website, the Ocean Conservancy was founded in 1972 with the purpose of protecting the world’s oceans (OC). The Ocean Conservancy is also involved in the political arena and uses its resources to influence environmental policy. “In 1986, the Ocean Conservancy ran its first Coastal Cleanup Day in Texas, and in later years became the coordinating agency for the International Coastal Cleanup Day, helping to spread the concept to nations around the world” (Heal The Bay). Coastal Cleanup Day is a grassroots environmental event that evolved from the work of ordinary citizens who wanted to do something to help the
environment around them, and combined with International Coastal Cleanup Day is part of one of the largest volunteer events of the year (CCC).

Since its inception in 1985, overall participation in California Coastal Cleanup Day has increased at a relatively steady rate. While there are a few years in which participation dropped from the previous year, overall participation is definitely increasing over time (Figure 1). There are many possible explanations as to why participation fluctuated in the past. For example, the President at the time clearly has a huge influence over environmental policy in the United States. As discussed previously in this section, during the Reagan Administration (1981-1989), and then during the following George H. W. Bush Administration (1989-1993), enforcement of much of the environmental protection legislation put into place by Nixon during the “environmental decade” was greatly reduced.

![Figure 1 California Coastal Cleanup Day participation rates over time. Source: California Coastal Commission.](image)

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These political circumstances could have been a contributing factor in motivating people to volunteer for events which aimed to maintain environmental quality. During the Clinton Administration (1993-2001), however, there were several advances in environmental policy. Then again with the George W. Bush Administration (2001-2009), there were massive environmental cut-backs (Whitehouse.gov). It is possible that there is a relationship between fluctuations in volunteer participation and shifting environmental policy in the United States.

**Societal Motivations**

This section will discuss some of the societal motivations which lead people to volunteer. Societal motivations for volunteering are altruistic in that they are actions that are seen to benefit the general public as a whole rather than just the individual. “Generosity seems to be a cross-culturally ubiquitous feature of life. It is well documented that humans are often altruistic toward unrelated individuals, even strangers” (Bereczkei, 95). There are many sociological and evolutionary theories that attempt to explain the reasons for this altruistic behavior.

An important factor of societal motivations is values. A value is defined as “a desirable transsituational goal varying in importance, which serves as a guiding principle in the life of a person or other social entity” (Groot, 332). Every individual possesses their own set of values, of course, but one common value that often comes into consideration in the context of volunteering is the importance of helping others. This includes helping to maintain the quality of the natural environment. “It has been theoretically reasoned and empirically validated that values play a significant role in explaining specific beliefs and behavior and can therefore be
used as predictors for various variables such as attitudes and behavioral intentions” (Groot, 332). These attitudes and behaviors are certainly involved in the motivations to volunteer; the most significant of these values are humanitarianism and environmentalism.

Scholars Stern & Dietz have divided environmental values into three categories: egoistic, social-altruistic, and biospheric value orientations (Groot, 334). An individual with an egoistic value orientation will likely weigh the costs and benefits of volunteering as affects them personally. This type of motivation will be discussed later in the paper. An individual with a social-altruistic value orientation will consider the costs and benefits of their actions with regard to others, and an individual with a biospheric value orientation will base their actions on the costs and benefits to the environment as a whole. “In general pro-environmental beliefs, intentions, and behavior appear to be positively related to social-altruistic and/or biospheric values and negatively to egoistic values (Groot, 335). It is logical to assume that individuals who are generally more inclined to put others’ needs above their own would be more likely to be inspired by societal motivations to volunteer.

However, some scholars argue that the relationship between values and volunteering is insignificant. According to Wilson:

“There are a number of reasons why values fail to predict volunteering reliably. Volunteering takes many forms, each inspired by a different set of values. Highly generalized value questions fail to capture this variation. Another reason is that different groups in the population attach different values to the same volunteer work … A third reason is that values tend to be ineffectual outside support communities where norm
enforcement is possible. In general, then, values are less important in helping decide who volunteers than in helping decide what volunteering means to the people who do” (Wilson, 219).

This is a fair argument because of course every person holds a different set of values close to their heart. “Because the value approach to volunteering emphasizes the subjective meanings that individuals attach to volunteering, the diversity in volunteer activities and in people’s value systems across communities makes it more difficult to predict or explain volunteering based on moral values and norms” (Lee, 513). That said, the fact that not all value systems are the same should not exclude the possibility that there is a value-related aspect to the motivations to volunteer.

Another theory that attempts to explain why people engage in helping behaviors like volunteering is costly signaling theory. Costly signaling theory, as defined in a study by Bereczkei et al., states that “generosity is one means by which individuals gain social recognition and preferential treatment in their group and thereby gain reproductive benefits in the long run.” (Bereczkei, 95). Costly signaling theory is a human evolutionary ecology theory which means that its aim is to explain why certain human behaviors evolved over time.

Human behavioral ecology also generally implies that human behaviors that persist over time do so because of a measurable benefit to the person exhibiting the behavior. Continuing this line of thinking, it follows that an altruistic act is not purely altruistic because “individuals who engage in altruistic acts serve their own interests by reliably demonstrating qualities that
underlie the altruistic act, such as resource control, trustworthiness, social skills, etc.” (Bereczkei, 95). The cost portion of costly signaling theory refers to the donation of commodities such as time and money. Clearly participating in volunteer activities requires time that an individual could potentially be spending doing something else. Whether or not this cost-benefit analysis is done consciously or not is debated among sociologists. Costly signaling theory will be discussed further in the next section with the discussion of personal motivations because there are aspects of it that fit into that category as well.

It is my personal view that there is an altruistic motivation, at least in part, for most individuals who choose to volunteer. Although there are certainly personal benefits to volunteering, which will be discussed in the next section, they cannot outweigh the societal benefits significantly enough to make them the sole motivation. There is also very little chance that an individual would be unaware of the societal benefits of their decision to volunteer, so even if those effects weren’t the initial motivation, they could certainly contribute to the decision to continue volunteering in the future. I also believe that while they may not be the primary motivating factor, values do play an important part in the motivation to volunteer. Without upholding societal values such as humanitarianism and environmentalism, or even an inclination toward social activism, there would be no reason to be invested in the well-being of the world around us. The next section will discuss some personal motivations to volunteer.
Personal Motivations

Personal motivations to volunteer are relatively self-explanatory in that they are performed for the benefit of the individual. “Individual-level theories of volunteering founded on behaviorist assumptions argue that the decision to volunteer is based on a rational weighing of its costs and benefits” (Wilson, 219). There are many personal advantages gained from volunteering, including social, psychological, and career/educational benefits. As stated by Bekkers:

“In most social contexts, contributions are rewarded with approval while refusing to contribute will damage one’s reputation as a good citizen. The act of contributing money or time will thus yield some social reward. The higher the social rewards for giving and volunteering … the more likely that a person will spend some of her resources to comply with a request to give and volunteer” (Bekkers, 370).

Maintaining a good reputation is important to many people in today’s society, because most people want to be perceived in a positive light by those around them. This brings us back to costly signaling theory, which was discussed in the previous section. Now we can discuss the personal side of this theory, which involves reputation building.

As previously stated, costly signaling theory is a way in which individuals gain social recognition for altruistic actions. This personal benefit means that the action is not purely altruistic after all. Bereczkei explains further:
“Public generosity as an honest signal may benefit both signaler and observers. The payoff to the altruist comes from being favored by the others as a reliable partner in cooperative relationships … The observer can evaluate the signaler’s qualities that would be beneficial in future social interactions in the group, involving friendship, alliance, and mating. In this respect, costly signaling may be regarded as a kind of reputation-gaining strategy” (Bereczkei, 96).

This explanation clarifies why this type of altruistic behavior has continued to evolve in humans over time. Survival is the most important factor of human evolution, and if there were no personal benefits to altruistic actions such as volunteering, those behaviors would not have continued to evolve.

There are also more obvious social benefits to volunteering, including meeting new people, spending time with family and friends, and interacting with community organizations. Volunteering can also facilitate networking with local professionals and businesses, which is often desirable for students and young adults who are eager to meet potential employers. High numbers of volunteer hours and activities on resumes are attractive to potential employers, as well as universities, because they signal valuable qualities in applicants that would otherwise be difficult to measure. “Volunteering is used as a proxy for desirable personality characteristics. As a result, individuals who volunteer are more likely to be admitted or hired and to command higher salaries than non-volunteering individuals” (Hustinx, 358). Volunteering is such an educational and beneficial experience for young people that many high schools now require their students to complete a certain amount of community service hours before graduating.
Another category of personal motivations to volunteer is psychological incentives. “People who give money or time for the benefit of others experience a number of psychological rewards. In the economic literature on philanthropy, the ‘warm glow’ from giving is assumed to be an important ingredient in donor motivation” (Bekkers, 370). Anyone who has ever volunteered knows that there is a feeling of satisfaction and happiness that comes along with helping others without expecting anything in return, and sometimes these feelings alone can be enough to motivate people to volunteer.

Emotional involvement can also lead to a sense of responsibility to repair something that has been damaged and that cannot fix itself. The concept of stewardship is an important part of many environmental organizations. The EPA defines environmental stewardship as “the responsibility for environmental quality shared by all those whose actions affect the environment” (EPA.gov). Although environmental stewardship has aspects to it that could be considered altruistic, such as taking care of the environment for the benefit of everyone, only those individuals who possess adequate environmental awareness take part in it. After taking on this responsibility and making a contribution to bettering the environment, a well-deserved feeling of personal achievement is obtained. Because this is a distinctly personal benefit I am classifying it as a personal motivation.

Another important emotion involved in personal motivations to volunteer is empathy. “Empathy refers to an emotional response congruent with the perceived welfare of another. If another is oppressed or in need, empathic feelings arise that include emotions of sympathy, compassion, and tenderness” (Berenguer, 271). Empathy is connected to volunteering because
feeling connected to other living things, including the environment, can motivate people to want to help alleviate negative conditions. Studies suggest that it may be possible to trigger feelings of empathy in order to promote pro-environmental behaviors. For example, in a study conducted by Shultz in 2000:

“Participants [were assigned] randomly to view one of three sets of pictures: people engaging in recreational activities in a natural environment, animals in a natural environment, and animals being harmed by human activity (a seal caught in a fishing net … a bird with a plastic bag around its neck) … Results revealed … that those participants who were instructed to take the perspective of an animal harmed by pollution scored significantly higher on biospheric environmental concern than participants instructed to remain objective. These results suggest that it may be possible for empathy to be generated with regard to the environment” (Berenguer, 271).

The fact that people are able to feel these types of emotions toward animals and the natural environment suggests that the desire to protect these resources can be an important emotional factor in motivating people to volunteer. Another key factor to this emotional motivation is the fact that wildlife and natural ecosystems are suffering due to irresponsible human activities. It is possible that there is an additional feeling of guilt or obligation to fix what the human race has damaged in so many ways.

From my perspective, these personal motivations are exceedingly important in driving individuals to volunteer. The various motivations in this category are both numerous and highly influential, and they originate from a broad spectrum of sources. Emotional connection to the
cause one is volunteering for can be a significant motivating factor to participate. The combination of societal and personal motivations forms an exceptionally strong set of incentives to motivate individuals to volunteer. The next section will introduce the case study for this paper.

**Case Study: Coastal Cleanup Day**

The 26th annual California Coastal Cleanup Day took place on September 25, 2010. According to preliminary data from the California Coastal Commission:

“The statewide count stands at 80,312 volunteers. Those volunteers picked up 953,476 pounds of trash and an additional 146,646 pounds of recyclable materials, for a total of 1,100,122 pounds. The Coastal Commission expects to exceed the 2009 record for volunteer participation (80,622) when the final numbers are tallied…Since the program started in 1985, over 1 million people have participated in California’s premiere volunteer event” (CCC).

Exceeding the participation record for 2009 would be an outstanding accomplishment, seeing as it was “the largest cleanup in the event’s history and marking a 60% increase in participation over the past three years” (CCC).

An extensive amount of organization and planning goes into the preparation for this event every year. Beginning in February, six months before the event, local organizers all over the state begin laying the groundwork for one of the biggest volunteer events of the year. The organization responsible for coordinating Coastal Cleanup Day in San Luis Obispo County is the
Environmental Center of San Luis Obispo County (ECOSLO). During my internship with this organization from June-September, I participated in outreach and marketing for Coastal Cleanup Day.

One of our tasks was to create informational boards to display at the local Farmer’s Markets in downtown San Luis Obispo and other surrounding areas. We had two boards dedicated to human impacts on the marine environment, one board with the event details and how to participate, and one board asking volunteers to Bring Your Own Stuff (BYO). This BYO initiative was a new aspect of Coastal Cleanup Day this year. By asking volunteers to bring their own cleanup supplies to the event, the CA Coastal Commission hoped to decrease the amount of waste generated by the cleanup itself. “For example, in 2009, Coastal Cleanup Day volunteers used more than 130,000 plastic bags and 135,000 plastic gloves during Coastal Cleanup Day” (CCC). This year, volunteers were encouraged to bring a bucket or reusable bag to clean up trash, a pair of gardening or other gloves, a filled reusable water bottle, and to carpool, bike, or use public transportation to get to the cleanup sites. ECOSLO was lucky enough to obtain a donation from Home Depot for 250, 5-gallon buckets for volunteers to use to pick up trash (CCC).

The volunteer information display board was very straightforward, with the basic event information such as who, what, when, where, why, and how. The two human impact boards were geared towards grabbing the attention of people passing by and to inspire them to volunteer for the event. Using online resources such as the California Coastal Commission, Ocean Conservancy, the Environmental Protection Agency, and other environmental organizations, we
gathered statistics, interesting facts, and pictures to put on the boards. We tried to find information and pictures that were both shocking and thought-provoking in order to maintain the interest of potential volunteers. We believed that the most direct way to involve the emotions of passersby would be to show pictures of wildlife being negatively affected by marine debris; for example, we had pictures of seals entangled in fishing line, sea turtles trying to eat plastic bags, and birds trapped in plastic six-pack rings. These types of pictures had a much higher emotional effect on people than simply pictures of trash on the beach.

In order to better understand what motivates people to participate in Coastal Cleanup Day, a short questionnaire was designed to survey local participants. The survey was given at the Morro Rock cleanup site in Morro Bay, which is located in San Luis Obispo County (Figure 2). This site is one of the most popular in the county, and it is also one of the most diverse, which is why it was chosen as the survey location.

![Figure 2 Morro Bay Harbor, Morro Bay, CA. Site of the Coastal Cleanup Day survey. Source: Ocean Conservancy. Satellite imagery courtesy of Google Earth.](image-url)
Respondents consisted of people from all walks of life—young and old, families, groups of friends, people on their own, and members of many different organizations. During the event from 9am-12pm, thirty surveys were taken by local volunteers. The survey was designed to be straightforward and concise and consisted of four questions (Figure 3).

Coastal Clean-Up Day Survey

Please take the time to complete this short survey. The information will be used to evaluate the efficiency of marketing and outreach as well as contributing to research for a Cal Poly student’s senior project. Thank you!

1. How did you learn of this event? Please mark all that apply.
   - TV media / Local news
   - Print media (newspaper, magazine, etc.)
   - Friends or family
   - Through an organization or group
   - Farmer’s Market booth
   - Social networking site (Facebook, Twitter, etc.)

2. Please rank the top three reasons why you participated in the event, with 1 being the most influential.
   - __ I needed community service hours
   - __ I care about the marine environment
   - __ Someone I know encouraged me to participate
   - __ Taking care of the environment is my number one priority
   - __ I was curious about the event
   - __ Other (Please specify): _______________________________________________________

3. Do you feel more informed about the sources and consequences of marine debris?
   - ☐ Yes
   - ☐ No
   - ☐ I already knew about marine debris

4. How likely are you to attend this event in the future?
   - ☐ Very likely
   - ☐ Somewhat likely
Figure 3 Coastal Cleanup Day Survey given at the Morro Rock cleanup site.

Survey Results

Twenty-two out of thirty, or seventy-five percent of respondents said they learned of the event through an organization or group. Half of those respondents said they also learned of the event from friends or family. TV media, local news, and print media made up nearly the other twenty-five percent. Only two respondents marked social networking site, and only one respondent marked farmer’s market booth. Clearly these two types of public outreach can be greatly improved upon. Word-of-mouth appears to be the greatest mode of information distribution.

Seventeen out of thirty, or fifty-five percent of respondents ranked “I care about the marine environment” as the most influential reason for why they participated in Coastal Cleanup Day. Twelve out of thirty, or forty percent of respondents ranked “I needed community service hours”, all of those respondents being middle- to high-school age. However, most did not rank this as the most influential reason for their participation. Respondents who marked “Someone I know encouraged me to participate” were also generally younger people. Some interesting things that people wrote in under “Other” were “Spending time with my four-year-old son”, “Spend time with Code Pink volunteers”, “Been involved for 15+ years”, “I love groups coming together for the environment”, and “Karma”.
Eighteen out of thirty, or sixty percent of respondents marked that they felt more informed about the sources and consequences of marine debris, and twenty-five percent said that they already knew about marine debris. Twenty-seven out of thirty, or ninety percent of respondents said they were very likely to attend the event in the future, and the remaining ten percent marked somewhat likely. The next section will analyze these results in more detail.

**Analysis and Conclusions**

The objective of this paper was to discover and analyze the motivations which make individuals decide to participate in environmental volunteer events. Coastal Cleanup Day in San Luis Obispo County, California on September 25, 2010 was used as a case study. The paper began with a brief overview of the history of the environmental movement in the United States, followed by the history of Coastal Cleanup Day and the organizations responsible for managing it. The next section examined the societal motivations behind volunteering, with the following section discussing the personal motivations. The next two sections presented the case study and analyzed the results.

It was found through this research that both societal and personal motivations are almost equally involved in an individual’s decision to volunteer, which was proposed at the beginning of this paper. Societal motivations consider the benefits to others whereas personal motivations consider the benefits to the individual, and the interaction between these two types of motivations is what ultimately drives people to participate in volunteer events. It was also found that societal and personal motivations contribute almost equally to the decision to volunteer, with societal motivations being slightly more influential.
The most significant section of the survey is the section which asks respondents to rank the most influential factors which motivated them to participate in Coastal Cleanup Day. Each option was chosen in relation to a specific type of motivation and worded in a way that would not indicate to respondents what that underlying motivation was. This was done in order to prevent respondents from choosing the answer they thought we wanted to hear. The options “I care about the marine environment” and “Taking care of the environment is my number one priority” are the more altruistic-oriented choices.

As stated previously, fifty-five percent of respondents chose the first of these altruistic motivations as the number one most influential factor that made them decide to participate in Coastal Cleanup Day. The difference between those two options is that one is a very general interest in caring for the environment and the other puts caring for the environment as their number one priority. This was done on purpose in an attempt to differentiate between the people who care in general and the people who are more extreme environmentalists. Four people actually ranked “Taking care of the environment is my number one priority” as the third of their most influential factors, which I found interesting because it seemed somewhat contradictory. Regardless, the majority of respondents did in fact choose an altruistic motivation as the most influential to their participation. The specific reasons behind why respondents chose this motivating factor are unknown, but nonetheless it is clear that societal motivations for volunteering are indeed significant aspects of why individuals chose to participate in this event.

The options “I needed community service hours”, “Someone I know encouraged me to participate”, and “I was curious about the event” are the choices that are more oriented toward
the individual. As stated in the previous section, forty percent of respondents ranked this first option as having some influence over their decision to participate in Coastal Cleanup Day. Although this percentage is lower than that of the altruistic motivations to volunteer, it is still very close. As explained in the section on personal motivations, career and educational benefits are one of the major motivations to volunteer, especially as far as young people are concerned. This point is clearly emphasized with the survey data. The other personal motivation that was chosen with relative frequency was “Someone I know encouraged me to participate”. The people that chose this factor had also marked that they heard of the event through an organization or group or from friends or family, and it is possible that they had actually attended the event with that group. In any case, it appears that people pay more attention to requests to volunteer from people they know than from strangers.

As for the survey section which asked respondents how they heard of the event, most people who eventually decided to volunteer heard about the event from other people they knew. Local TV and print media also accounted for some of the circulation of event information. However, it is unfortunate that more people did not mark that they heard about Coastal Cleanup Day from the farmer’s market booth or social networking sites. These publicity initiatives were both new this year and we had hoped for greater success. It is also regrettable that more people did not hear of the event at farmer’s market because the display boards had a lot of valuable information and could have influenced many more people to volunteer. However, it is possible that with a greater sample size more people would have marked that they saw the display.
We had hoped that getting the information out over social networking sites would help to engage the high population of college students in the area, but perhaps face-to-face contact would be more effective, such as advertising or setting up a booth on campus the week before the event. Another issue that may have prevented a great number of Cal Poly students from participating is that sorority recruitment is the same weekend of Coastal Cleanup Day. Working with the Greek community at Cal Poly to get both fraternities and sororities involved would be a great way to increase participation in the event. Appealing to the value systems of Greek organizations as well as the social aspects would be sure to get many people involved and excited about the event. A way to get more high school students involved in the event would be to emphasize the personal benefits of volunteering, such as resume building and college applications. Short presentations could be given at both colleges and high schools in order to reach out potential volunteers.

Emphasizing the altruistic motivations behind volunteering, such as humanitarianism and environmentalism, in marketing materials will affect the emotions of potential volunteers, but pointing out the personal benefits of volunteering will further motivate people into action. It can also be advantageous to emphasize the considerable effect that this event has on the environment and marine habitats in only three hours of volunteering. Once people realize that they can make a difference in their environment and their community with only a minor personal time commitment, it is difficult to say no.

It would be beneficial to conduct a more in-depth survey to discover more details about what motivated people to volunteer for this event. Survey questions could be better developed
to target personal motivations and to encourage respondents to answer honestly. Information
gathered during this research provides an adequate source of potential motivations to be targeted
through a future survey. However, even with an imperfect survey, the results acquired during
this research already offer some potential ideas for future marketing and public outreach and
education initiatives. The fact that there was almost an even split between altruistic and personal
motivations chosen by respondents confirms the hypothesis that both types of motivations are
involved in an individual’s decision to volunteer. This also indicates that environmental
organizations should attempt to target characteristics of both motivations in their outreach
programs rather than simply focusing on the altruistic side. Although many people do care about
environmental quality and marine habitats, it takes some effort to get them to do anything about
it. When the personal benefits are highlighted as well, people will be more likely to be
motivated to volunteer.

These findings suggest that both societal and personal motivations are involved in an
individual’s decision to participate not only in Coastal Cleanup Day, but in volunteering in
general. This information will benefit local environmental organizations because they can use
this data to tailor their marketing and public education materials to both types of motivations.
They will also be informed of which types of outreach are effective and which types need to be
developed further in order to expand the number of potential volunteers reached. Maximizing
the number of volunteers who participate in these types of environmental events is important
because we are all responsible for the quality of our environment.
I enjoyed being involved with Coastal Cleanup Day because it was very inspiring to interact with so many people dedicated to environmental quality and preservation. I believe events like Coastal Cleanup Day are important in society today because they are a way for people to get involved with their communities and interact with the natural environment in a way that is both enjoyable and effective. It is also a way for people to see that they can make a difference. Throughout the event, marine debris is recorded, categorized, and accumulated at a designated spot. I believe that being able to see the visual representation of the fact that every individual can have a positive impact on improving environmental quality can have a huge effect on how people look at their place in the world. Once people realize what they can accomplish both individually and by working together, they will be more inclined to continue that behavior, and that will be beneficial to every level of society.
Bibliography


