



# REvolution:

Engaging Audiences in Stewardship

The Southern Nevada Agency Partnership has developed a REvolutionary approach to environmental education by capitalizing on the synergy that exists when multiple agency teams work together. This presentation will describe how Restoration scientists, environmental Educators, and Volunteer coordinators created a successful model for environmental education programs that encourage stewardship while restoring natural areas. The model incorporates curriculum standards was piloted successfully with school groups and the public to provide meaningful context for volunteers engaged in restoration projects. The model ignited stewardship at a community level when students and teachers came together to develop additional stewardship projects.

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## Introduction

In Southern Nevada four federal land management agencies collaborate on projects to protect resources and promote stewardship. One innovative effort of this partnership combines the strengths of **R**estoration scientists, environmental **E**ducators and **V**olunteer coordinators to create a model for providing opportunities for citizens to engage in meaningful stewardship activities. Key components of the REV model include personalized recruitment efforts by volunteer coordinators, carefully selected restoration projects and project based education activities.

## Personalized Recruitment Efforts

The Interagency Volunteer Program maintains a database with the electronic contact information for thousands of current and prospective volunteers of the four federal agencies. Typical event recruitment efforts involve sending a monthly newsletter announcing upcoming events to these individuals. To encourage a continual commitment to the multi-staged REV events, REV team members decided that targeted recruiting was essential. After restoration scientists selected a plant restoration project, the volunteer coordinators reached out to the Native Plant Society and local gardening groups in a targeted recruitment effort. As the series of REV events progressed, previous participants were personally contacted and encouraged to attend upcoming events. This facilitated opportunities for the volunteers to experience the satisfaction that comes from being involved in all phases of a restoration project.

## Carefully Selected Restoration Projects

Many resource managers and scientists seem troubled by using volunteers in research projects. While volunteers are not appropriate for every restoration project, there are many projects that can enhance stewardship and assist resource managers in meeting their goals. Resource projects, when properly explained, convey a stewardship message and energize participants.

Traditionally, when resource projects are identified the project manager has developed the outreach, message, and plan implementation. However, the REV approach collaboratively aligns Resource, Education, and Volunteer programs. The Restoration team plays a crucial role by selecting an appropriate project. These scientists must consider multiple factors in their selection process. As the REV model progressed, restoration scientists developed a list of tips for resource managers interested in reaching out to volunteers to enhance citizen stewardship.

## Tips for resource professionals

- Be selective when choosing volunteer projects. Only a small percentage of projects are appropriate for volunteers. After classifying projects as possible volunteer events, Resource Managers must consider climatic variation; importance; quantity and quality of work; and project safety and logistics. These four factors are imperative for successful REV projects.

- Climatic variations that impact resource project planning include seasonality and weather which combine to affect the phenology (life-stage) of plants. When dealing with native plant resources timing is crucial for the success of many projects.
- The work of the volunteers needs to be meaningful, not just busy work.
- The amount of work to be done must match the allotted time frame and available labor.
- Many resource professionals contend that quality suffers when you use volunteers. Given this perception it is more important for the Resource professional to identify conspicuous plants, those not easily misidentified and detailed instructions given. Professionals and volunteers alike must adhere to certain standards. But the scientists must clearly articulate the importance and need for detailed work.
- Last, and most importantly is safety. Often, the actual fitness of volunteers is not known until they arrive at the event, making work with volunteers in remote or wilderness settings challenging. Safety plans, briefs, and one trained staff for every 6-10 volunteers is essential.

### **Project Based Education Activities**

The final piece of the REV model is environmental education. The education component is important to REV projects because it provides volunteers with baseline knowledge of the resource and helps them understand the importance of their stewardship activities. Restoration team scientists provided background information to the Education team on the species involved in the project to ensure the education activities were accurate and appropriate for the project, appropriate for the location, and appropriate for the timeframe of the volunteer event.

The information the Education team receives from the scientists is extremely valuable. It enables the educators to communicate the main goals and objectives of the event to the volunteers. The result of the education component of a REV event is for the volunteers to understand: Why are we doing this? Why is it important? and Why should I care about this type of project?

When developing educational activities for a REV event, consider the following:

- When smaller children volunteer engage older siblings and parents as mentors to involve all volunteers in the activity
- Select activities that can be delivered at a general level and a more advanced level so that it can be adapted easily based upon the knowledge the volunteers already have about the resource.
- Develop activities that build upon previous REV events since volunteers are encouraged to participate in all stages of the restoration project. However, each activity must also be able to stand alone since there will be new volunteers at each event.
- Determine what the guiding educational question for the overall restoration project is. For example if the restoration event involves volunteers substituting for a link in a life cycle the question might be: How does the life cycle of plants effect animals in the desert?
- Consider the location of the event when developing activities. Picnic tables are easier to work with for a trivia type or jeopardy style activity. Open space allows for role playing activities where more 'room' is needed.

- With the volunteer coordinators running the registration process, educators can use the sign-in time to meet and greet the participants. This time is critical to the ability to adapt the activity to fit the needs of the specific volunteers.

## Conclusion

This model for REV events is based on the concept of divide and conquer. Each team focuses on their unique role in the event to ensure success. Volunteer coordinators recruit and register volunteers, restoration scientists select projects, gather supplies and provide background information and environmental educators develop and deliver flexible activities that provide context and multiple opportunities to help volunteers understand the significance of their efforts.

## References

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