



MOUNTAIN SPIRIT VOLUNTEERS RECOMMEND:

How to be better in volunteering
for nature conservation?

Collection of recommendations
from participants in the
Mountain spirit seminar

24.05.2019 – 30.05.2019
Village of Vlahi, Bulgaria



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MOUNTAIN SPIRIT PROJECT

mountainspiritvolunteers.wordpress.com

The Mountain spirit volunteers' blog collects info about project activities, reports, stories, data and findings of the volunteers.

Mountain Spirit – Strategic EVS for Nature Conservation is a project that aims to combine efforts of international volunteers and local people from rural mountainous areas for nature conservation activities in protected areas. Several complementary activities contribute to strengthening the capacity of organizations and volunteers. Additional goal is to encourage cooperation with the respective institutions.

Through the project more than 60 young people volunteered for protection of Balkan Mountains in Croatia, Kosovo, Serbia and Bulgaria through Erasmus+ program from 2018 to 2020.

The **international meetings** aim at providing space for the partner organizations (and volunteers) to analyze and evaluate previous activities.

Project partners discuss current trends in volunteering for nature conservation and agree on common approaches. Another goal is to evaluate the project activities and adapt future ones. The meetings are also the place for exchanging good practices, working methods and planning common projects.

The meetings include: **Kick-off Meeting** in Croatia in March 2018; **Partnership Building Activity** in Kosovo in February 2019; **Seminar Meeting** in Bulgaria in May 2019 and **Evaluation & follow-up meeting** in Croatia in March 2020.

Velebit Association Kuterevo Croatia

(Project Leading Partner)

Velebit Association Kuterevo (kuterevo.wordpress.com; fb.com/kuterevobears) is a small local organization in the Velebit Mountain, Croatia. International youth started coming to this village in 1978, where they would get the opportunity to experience a simple and traditional lifestyle, to get to know more about each other and themselves, to learn about and from nature.

Since 2001, the organization is running a Bear Refuge, and ever since more and more people started coming. The Bear Refuge became home to 9 bears, and these bears are ambassadors for bears in the wild. The Refuge was founded on the principle of awareness rising for the preservation of brown bears and their habitat.

Velebit Association Kuterevo works for preservation of natural and cultural heritage, nature conservation and promotion of sustainable lifestyle.

The organization has no full time staff; all the activities are coordinated and carried out by voluntary activities of the members. There are more than 20 members actively involved in the organization, local and international people, activists of all generations.



Vlahi Nature School, Bulgaria

(Project Partner and Seminar Host)

Vlahi Nature School (vlahi.org, fb.com/VlahiNatureSchool) is a small educational project based on the principles of permaculture. It is located in a remote village at the foot of Pirin Mountain (UNESCO World Heritage) where only several people live permanently but nature is spectacular, the landscape is unique and the people are resilient.

Vlahi Nature School, where nature is our teacher, friend and home!

A group of like minded people started the project in 2002 when they bought the old building of the school. With the help of hundreds of volunteers it was restored to become again a functioning place for learning through doing, experimenting, collecting information from local people. Moreover, volunteers are implementing ideas from around the world. Through volunteer weekends, summer camps for children, and workcamps volunteers share and exchange knowledge, skills and know-how with anyone who cares for a life in balance with nature.

Local Partners in Bulgaria

CVS Bulgaria

Cooperation for Voluntary Service (CVS Bulgaria) is an organization that encourages volunteering as a tool for social change in the area of social justice, environmental protection and peace. It is part of the international peace movement and volunteer network Service Civil International.

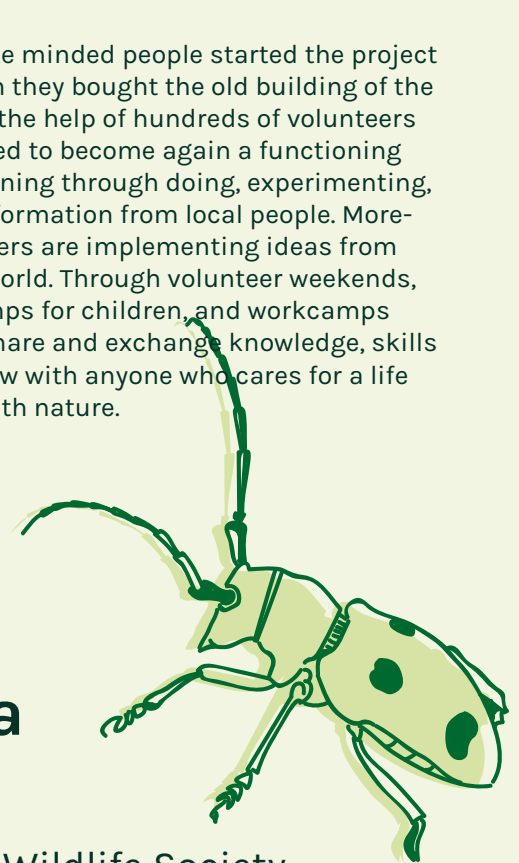
CVS Bulgaria activists imagined creating a place for learning about nature in nature, hence, in 2002, the organization bought the old school building in the village of Vlahi. Later Vlahi Nature School was founded. The organizations are closely linked with volunteering being the main pillar of both NGOs.

CVS Bulgaria today provides opportunities for young people to grow and get more active through volunteering in international initiatives, participation in youth exchanges, training courses and other projects.

BALKANI Wildlife Society

The main aims of Balkani Wildlife Society are study, conservation and restoration of flora and fauna in natural ecosystems, their preservation for future generations and raising public awareness on the problems of nature conservation.

BALKANI Wildlife Society runs a Large Carnivore Education Centre in the village of Vlahi. The centre includes exhibition hall dedicated to learning about biology and ecology of the brown bear, grey wolf, golden jackal and the European lynx. The focus of the exhibition is to learn to appreciate those species and to inform visitors on ways of peaceful co-existence between carnivores and people. Moreover, the wolves Vachka (female) and Bayto (male) are the wildlife ambassadors that help children get their fears of carnivores disappear.



Vlahi and Pirin Mountain

Vlahi village is located 9 km away from Kresna and about 160 km away from Sofia. It is small and abandoned village with only 7 permanent inhabitants, but with local people taking care of their gardens and coming to spend a weekend in nature. Vlahi is situated at the gateway to Pirin Mountains and boast a stunning view of one of the most beautiful and spectacular peaks – Sinanitsa.

Pirin Mountain is a UNESCO Heritage site, one of Europe's biodiversity treasure spots and home to many rare and endangered Balkan species such as brown bear, chamois, golden eagle. Pirin is favorite place for nature lovers, explorers and hikers.

Besides the varied landscapes and reliefs, the climate is Mediterranean which guarantees distinct and varied habitats for rare and endemic species. The Kresna Gorge (the Struma river valley) is the richest place in terms of biodiversity in whole Bulgaria.



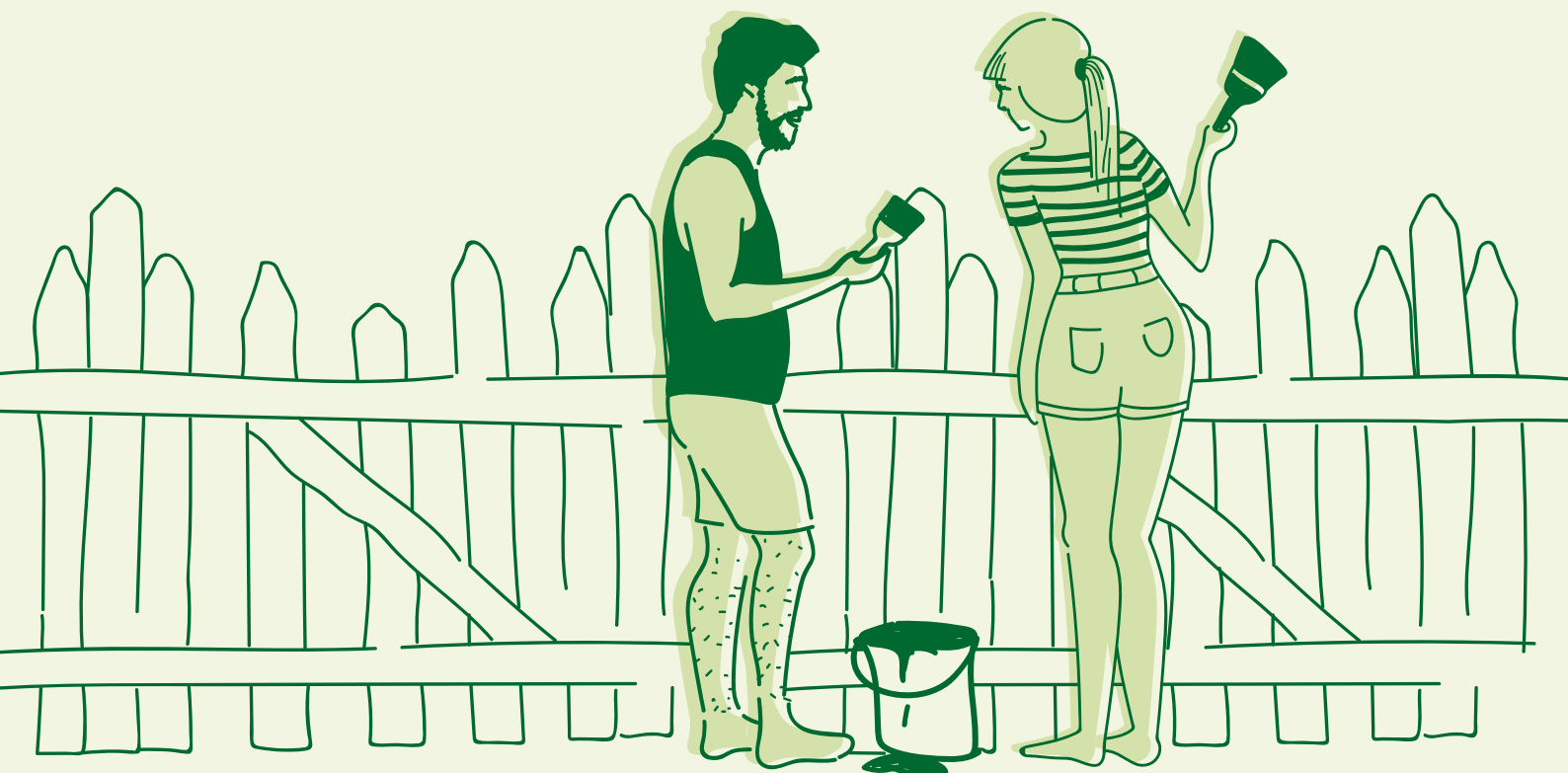
MOUNTAIN SPIRIT SEMINAR

At the end of May 2019, the Nature School in Vlahi, hosted a Volunteering for Nature Conservation Seminar within the Erasmus + supported Mountain Spirit project. Fully in the spirit of the Seminar, the participants immersed themselves in nature and spent almost a week at the foot of Pirin Mountain National park. The 27 participants had the opportunity to improve their skills and knowledge of working with volunteers and reaching out to more people.

The seminar brought together young people with experience as volunteers for preserving wildlife and natural resources. Their main motivation for participating is to get more engaged in organizing volunteer activities for others. The seminar welcomed also young people who are currently or have been participants in short- and long-term volunteer exchanges part of the Mountain Spirit project. They provided feedback regarding

the project and build it up by offering ideas and suggestions for future cooperation. Moreover, the seminar participants got more familiar with financial tools to help them implement conservation ideas and initiatives through Erasmus+, European Solidarity Corps and LIFE program.

The seminar started with presentations of participants' personal and organizational goals. Great variety of very inspirational and motivating environmental projects was shared. The accumulated knowledge and know-how was related and adapted to other initiatives and ideas that came up within the seminar activities. Based on the shared information, personal experience and skillful facilitation, the participants spent some time giving suggestions and ideas on how international volunteering for nature conservation could improve. Those recommendations are presented in the current document.

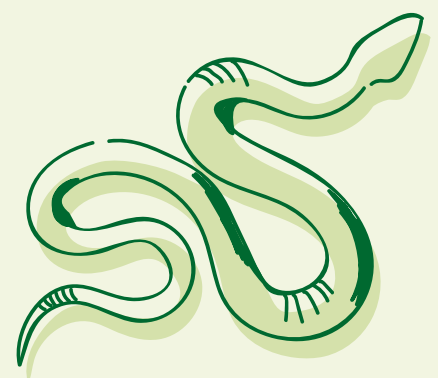




An important moment for the seminar participants was the possibility to get their hands into work and volunteer for couple of hours every day in the Nature School. They helped protect the fence done in 2018 by the short-term Mountain spirit volunteers in the Nature School. The participants in the international meeting worked in the garden and took care of some educational and demonstration elements in the School.

The last days were dedicated to planning next projects or ideas. Time wasn't enough, so communication continued via online tools. One of the options on how to stay connected and involved was presented during the seminar - Perangua, a global network in development. It aims at connecting activists and communities around the world that work for different causes in endangered areas.

Besides Pirin Mountain the seminar attendees visited another biodiversity hotspot in the region - Belasitsa Nature park. They met with one of the park employees who is responsible for community outreach and education programs. The main discussion topics were volunteering opportunities in the protected area and volunteers' participation that helped improve the park tourism infrastructure. Last but not least, the participants visited the Large Carnivore Education Centre, at which ground they were accommodated.



Program

Mountain spirit – volunteering for nature conservation

24.5	25.5	26.5	27.5	28.5	29.5	30.5
Arrival day	Introduction	Volunteer management & Nature Conservation Theory	Local context	Volunteer management & Nature Conservation Feedback & Practice	From idea to a plan of action	Departure day
	Getting to know each other & premises, introduction, program and logistics	Introduction to nature conservation		Recommendations for improving volunteer involvement and management in nature protection		
	Mountain spirit project, volunteering in 2018 – presentations, feedback, lessons learned	(International) volunteering for nature conservation	Visit to Belasica Nature Park	OPEN SPACE	Finalizing work in groups	Departure after breakfast
	Volunteer work in the Nature School			Volunteer work in the Nature School		
Arrival afternoon		Volunteer management	Visit to Rozhen Monastery and the Rozhen Sand Pyramids (protected area)	sharing of ideas and volunteer program proposals	Group work presentation	
Welcome dinner and evening	Presentation of organizations/volunteer projects	Erasmus+/ESC volunteering, LIFE+, other possibilities	Cultural heritage of the town of Melnik	Works in groups	Evaluation	
	Nature & Culture & Volunteering bazaar	bazaar Evening guest (tbc)	Dinner out	Movie about nature protection	Goodbye party	

Process of Collecting the Recommendations

One of the aims of the seminar was to gather the participants' recommendations about improving international volunteer management process in the context of nature conservation activities. **The suggestions are based on the participants' diverse experience as volunteers, coordinators, organization representatives, activists, etc.**

We don't claim that the recommendations are universal or covering all topics. However, they are the result of collaborative work of many people.

During the seminar the focus in the volunteer management was put on the **3R process – volunteer recruitment, recognition and retaining**. Through the world café method the participants collected the related group knowledge. Later, it was discussed in plenary and summarized by the facilitators who shared their expertise and experience.

An individual session followed where participants were asked to think of **how those three phases in the volunteer management process could be improved from an organization's perspective**.

The participants also worked individually to describe the **ideal volunteer profile**.

All of the collected recommendations were summarized and categorized by the facilitators. The collaborative process continued online. The drafted recommendations were shared with the seminar participants for final feedback. Later on, they were sent to volunteers from the previous Mountain Spirit exchanges and to project partners for comments and suggestions.



On the next pages you can see the final version of the recommendations summarizing the feedback of altogether 50 volunteers and organizations' representatives.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Volunteer Recruitment, Retaining and Recognition

(Improvement of the volunteer management within an organization)

COMMUNICATION

- Open communication between organizations and volunteers - expressing needs and having understanding for the other side.
- Transparency and honesty of organization and volunteer.
- More communication among all volunteers and employees, explanations of the organization's vision and volunteers' involvement in the whole organization.
- Share more information about local life, nature and species, organization and local history, goals of the volunteer project. Giving volunteer the bigger picture of their project.
- Ask, give and accept feedback all over the process, react and adapt according to the feedback.
- Up to date information about the topic of the project, but not just find it or download it from the internet.

COORDINATION AND VOLUNTEER PROCESS

- Organization should supervise the coordinator, to ensure their work with the volunteers is qualitative.
- Detailed plan and organization of volunteer coordination - continuously improving planning and organization.
- Being specific about the volunteer work during the project.
- Introduce the plan that a volunteer should follow. Be also tolerant to change according to situation.
- Be flexible.
- Prepare some plans for unexpected situations and conditions, such as weather conditions inappropriate for planned work, electricity shortage, and lack of material or people for specific task.
- Trust the volunteers. Give them more work and responsibility. This will make their motivation stronger.
- Diverse tasks and appropriate time frames for them.
- Explain the meaning of volunteer tasks, it is important for motivation.

RECRUITMENT

- During application process, be aware that the volunteers are applying to share their time and experience, so offer them as much background of the project and organization as possible. This way they can understand certain situations and see if they would appreciate the position they are applying for.
- During the selection process, make a skype interview after the application.
- Reply on time and be correct with the given information.
- If possible, before the final selection of long-term volunteers, invite them for some days to the hosting organization. This would create an opportunity for both volunteer and hosting organization to make the final decision.
- Tasks for volunteers should be equally and fairly distributed.
- Provide opportunities to rotate places of work if there are several.
- Include wishes of volunteers if they are appropriate (diversity of tasks).
- Give some time for personal projects and interests. Take consideration of the personality and put focus on their personal development.
- Make sure the accommodation conditions are acceptable for the volunteers, and of course, that their personal and work space is safe.
- Powerful motivation rewards.
- Be always willing to give more details and help to participants or volunteers.
- Make time for volunteers and their needs.
- Include skill gaining activities during the volunteering service. This will be interesting and learning experience. Also it will give extra motivation and provide a different atmosphere among the volunteers.
- Provide clear role description for every volunteer.
- Make sure new volunteers are welcomed warmly.
- Ensure a safe and healthy working environment.

MENTORING AND PERSONAL SUPPORT

- Some talk about the mental state and private individual growth of the volunteer is encouraged.
- Don't separate volunteers of different programs, let them get to know each other, spend time and work together.
- If there are many volunteers in the same time, group meeting with the coordinator, but also personal meetings to express feelings safely (listen carefully and take their needs seriously).
- Show support to volunteers and their needs.
- Encourage and motivate the volunteers.
- Have empathy toward volunteer feelings.
- Respect the volunteers.
- Be their leader, but also a friend of the volunteer. Make time for them and listen to them as friends do.
- Don't treat volunteers as second class citizens.
- Help volunteers feel good about themselves.
- Give volunteers a real voice within the organization.
- Tell volunteers they have done a good job, it will motivate them for further tasks.

INTEGRATION AND INVOLVEMENT WITH THE LOCAL COMMUNITY

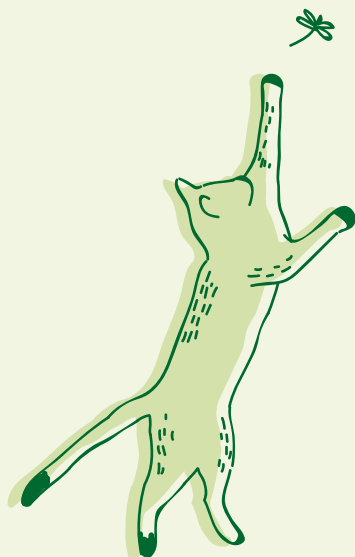
- Help the volunteer to better integrate in the communities outside and inside the workplace—visit locals for coffee and getting to know each other, invite locals for a dinner, create local crafts together, cook traditional food together.
- Involvement of local volunteers - more engagement of the local community towards the

problem to attract the volunteers and make it visible that the work of volunteers will keep on growing after they finish their project.

- Create a positive community feeling to retain the volunteers and encourage the volunteers to feel part of the project.

RECOGNITION, THANKS, BENEFITS

- Document volunteer's specific task and publish it.
- Offer some sign of belonging to the organization that the volunteers can wear and be proud of.
- Make the volunteering service attractive with as much benefits as possible for the volunteer - i.e. souvenirs and merchandise materials; certificates; access to closed events/activities/trainings; one-time experiences. Be creative and take into consideration the volunteer's personality.
- Provide some resources for positively surprising the volunteer (food baskets, trips, small presents, opportunities for exchange with other volunteers).
- Offer a dancing, yoga or some other kind of lesson. It always brings positive energy.
- Thank you gifts for volunteers (especially personalized).
- Make a "funny" game of nominating volunteers for awards such as "Most Inspirational" or "Most Enthusiastic" and other categories.



The Ideal Volunteer

(described by volunteers that participated in the Seminar)

- Eager to be a volunteer!
- Willing to discover themselves by giving their service and time. Willing to grow (trying and learning new things, developing themselves) and willing to share.
- Communicative, ready to listen and to speak out.
- Able to express their concerns, demands and needs, and to share their passions and ideas.
- Willing to give and accept feedback, and to react to it.
- Committed, willing to engage in the project from the start to the end.
- Respectful, open minded, tolerant and accepting.
- Reliable, aware and responsible.
- Curious, but also critical.
- Honest, sincere and loyal.
- (Highly) motivated - (great) willingness to work hard, be helpful and cooperative, but still knowing the boundaries between volunteering and exploitation.
- Interested and involved in the project and their tasks.
- Having a good mindset and positive attitude, capable of encouraging others.
- Skilled, with relevant background and versatile knowledge.
- Having a goal or knowing what they want.
- Taking initiative (suggesting, doing, making, hands on): to have self confidence for the things that are their responsibility, to make changes or decisions without always asking.
- Seeking challenges and difficult tasks, and then overcoming them.
- Willing to step out of the comfort zone, adventurous.
- Having a systematic and creative way of problem solving.
- Creative and imaginative - allowing their mind to be free and passionate.
- Flexibility - being able to adapt to the changes, different situations and people.
- Team spirited - capable of following or learning to follow team dynamics and decisions.
- Enthusiastic spirit - positive, communication spirit, looking for what can be done better, not only criticizing.
- Energetic and dynamic person.
- Empathic and compassionate.
- Able to deal with their own and other's emotions.
- Sharing similar values as those of the organization.
- Ready to face challenges, endure difficult situations with the goal to learn to handle, adapt and grow resilient.
- Having good manners, being patient and calm (in conflict situations).
- Leadership skills.
- Respectful and responsible to the tasks given. Understanding that in certain situation following exactly the instructions is important.
- Willing to experience simple lifestyle, such as outdoor showers, cooking on fire stove, dry toilets and ready to get disconnected from virtual and get connected with natural world.
- Upright and civil towards the organization's team and local people.
- With more time spent in the hosting organization, the volunteer should start to notice where and when his help is needed and can act pro-actively and accordingly.



MAIN CONCLUSIONS

COMMUNICATION IS THE KEY TO THE PROJECT SUCCESS.

Being honest and transparent, giving feedback and speaking up goes **both ways** from the organization and for the volunteer.

Having a mindset with expectations adjusted to the local reality and being open to new ideas, personalities and ways of doing things helps for better understanding between the organization and the volunteer.

Setting common aims and understanding the process contributes to the volunteers' motivation and to better outcomes for the project and the organization.

THE SUPPORT SYSTEM OF MENTORING AND SUPERVISION IS ESSENTIAL IN NATURE PROTECTION PROJECTS.

Take the time to **introduce the volunteer in the local reality** – by explanations, providing the needed information with special focus on nature specifics, answering questions; by creating and following rituals and letting the volunteer experience on their own the place and the people; by integrating the volunteers in the local community and including local volunteers in the tasks

Nature protection work is often slow and results are not so tangible – make sure to think in advance or together with the volunteer about **how to document project results and progress**. Introducing field work protocols, event reports, field diary is a good idea.

Outdoor and manual work poses physical risks – **safety and risk prevention are important**. Plan ahead and prepare some worst case scenarios procedures.

NB1

There are many ways to work for nature protection – through direct conservation measures, education, activism, building up a strong community, etc.

Think about your organization's ways and reality and then apply it to the needed volunteer's profile.

- *Is that somebody who comes from educational and practical background of conservation studies?*
- *Or is it somebody who can tell a story?*
- *Maybe you want somebody who will understand better their own relationship to nature by participating in your project and will spread the message further?*

NB2

These are just guidelines and suggestions that come from the experience of people involved in nature protection activities.

The process of personal and organizational support is similar in most of the international volunteering projects.

If you are looking for concrete methods and approaches, follow SALTO's webpage for suitable training courses for volunteer management and mentoring.

salto-youth.net/tools/european-training-calendar

HOW TO USE THE RECOMMENDATIONS?

IF YOU WORK IN ORGANIZATION, ALREADY HOSTING VOLUNTEERS

- Discuss in your organization and adjust the recommendations to the local reality, to the organizational culture; discuss what you are doing well, what needs to be improved and what needs to be removed as a bad example.
- If you agree with the recommendations, publish them on your website together with calls for international volunteers.
- Send them to the candidates in the selection process and discuss it with them during the interviews.
- Use them as a starting point of a discussion during the initial training of the volunteers once they arrive in your organization.

IF YOU ARE A VOLUNTEER LOOKING FOR A PROJECT

- Think about what is written. Do you fit the profile of the ideal volunteer? What do you want to improve?
- Think from the perspective of the organization. What resources do they need to provide the needed support? Do they have them? What if they cannot provide all? What can be agreed to do?
- Send the recommendations to the organization and discuss them during your initial talks or when setting up agreements.



IF YOU WANT TO START A VOLUNTEER PROGRAM IN YOUR COMMUNITY

- Reflect on the recommendations.
- Think about the resources needed to provide support for the volunteers and to recruit the right volunteers for your project. How are you going to identify their skills and attitudes?
- Discuss them with the people you want to set up the volunteer program in your community.

USEFUL RESOURCES

ABOUT VOLUNTEER MANAGEMENT

- SEEYN volunteer management handbook
https://issuu.com/southeasteuropeanyouthnetwork/docs/seeyn_volunteer_management_2017-ele
- Volunteer Boost
https://www.salto-youth.net/downloads/toolbox_tool_download-file-1764/Booklet_Training_course_Volunteer_Boost.pdf
- EVSification manual – volunteer management in EVS projects
https://www.salto-youth.net/downloads/toolbox_tool_download-file-1414/EVSification%20manual.pdf

ABOUT MENTORING

- Be the Hero, Be the EVS Mentor
https://jaunatne.gov.lv/sites/default/files/web/ErasmusPlus/info_materiali/mentors_handbook_web_0.pdf
- Mentoring and Pre-Departure Training in European Voluntary Service (EVS) Ideas, tools and suggestions for practice
[https://www.salto-youth.net/downloads/toolbox_tool_download-file-1722/Mentoring%20and%20Pre-Departure%20Training%20in%20European%20Voluntary%20Service%20\(EVS\).pdf](https://www.salto-youth.net/downloads/toolbox_tool_download-file-1722/Mentoring%20and%20Pre-Departure%20Training%20in%20European%20Voluntary%20Service%20(EVS).pdf)
- Meant to be a Mentor (workbook for EVS mentors)
https://www.salto-youth.net/downloads/toolbox_tool_download-file-1300/2015%20EVS%20Meant%20%20be%20a%20Mentor.pdf

FURTHER INSPIRATIONS

- Climate for Peace Inspirations (SCI)
https://issuu.com/sciint/docs/c4p_2015_inspirations
- Love Nature
https://www.salto-youth.net/downloads/toolbox_tool_download-file-1297/Learning%20material%20LOVE%20NATURE.pdf
- Environment, Sustainability and Youth
https://www.salto-youth.net/downloads/toolbox_tool_download-file-1047/Manual%20Environment,%20Sustainability%20and%20Youth.pdf
- And much more here
<https://www.salto-youth.net/tools/toolbox/search/>



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Co-funded by the
Erasmus+ Programme
of the European Union

