



Sweat Equity at East Bay

HOW VOLUNTEERS ADVANCE THE CAUSE OF CONSERVATION

By David Riensche

Located in the heart of the nation's fourth largest metropolitan area, the [East Bay Regional Park District](#) sometimes feels like a modern-day ark at risk of being swamped by urban sprawl. Increasingly, it's a ship that stays afloat because of the efforts of a huge crew of citizen volunteers. Coordinating enthusiastic hordes of people can seem daunting, but for wildlife professionals who take on the job, the rewards far outweigh the challenges.

Covering nearly 100,000 acres, the East Bay District extends inland from the eastern edge of San Francisco Bay to the Sacramento Delta. With 65 designated parks and preserves, the district provides educational and recreational opportunities for more than 14 million annual visitors while also protecting habitat for 80 special-status fish and wildlife species. Today, however, the demand to manage this wide array of animals has far surpassed the size of the district's wildlife staff (which counts just one biologist and one wildlife program manager). Understaffed and underfunded, the wildlife department would not survive without hands-on public involvement to monitor and protect its diverse and threatened species.

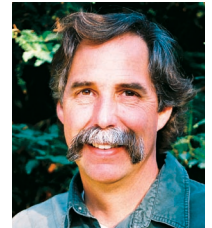
By recruiting everyday people and giving them training, tools, and inspiration, my staff and I have mobilized hundreds of concerned citizens committed to wildlife preservation. Each year some 1,200 volunteers devote more than 5,000 hours of supervised service, forming the cornerstone of East Bay's wildlife conservation programs. The melding of their energy with the expertise of our science staff produces extraordinary results with concrete application to wildlife management. Two notable examples:

Least Tern Island: In a project spanning seven years, some 2,500 people have devoted countless hours to build and monitor a nesting island for California least terns (*Sterna antillarum browni*) off the [Hayward Regional Shoreline](#). Beginning in 2001 we ripped out old vegetation and hauled in tons of sand and oyster shells to form a nesting substrate on the

island. Once the island was built, volunteers began to monitor nesting and predation during nesting season. Their data showed that the intensity and rate of predation by California gulls (*Larus californicus*) was so significant that we needed to implement a predator management program, which is improving nesting success for terns ([Riensche 2007](#)).

Saving the Whipsnake: Out in our eastern grasslands, the threatened Alameda whipsnake (*Masticophis lateralis euryxanthus*) favors a diet of northwestern fence lizards (*Sceloporus occidentalis occidentalis*). However, land-management practices in the area have depleted habitat for the lizards, thus jeopardizing the snakes. Trained volunteers help measure biomass per hectare to determine optimal grass cover to sustain the lizards. The data allow us to manage grazing to maximize lizard and whipsnake survival ([Riensche 2008](#)).

Volunteers carry out myriad other hands-on conservation and resource-management programs that enhance fragile wildlife habitats, from weekend projects ripping out invasive weeds or placing nest



Credit: Mary R. Riensche

David Riensche is the wildlife biologist for the East Bay Regional Park District in California, and a biology and ecology professor at Las Positas College in Livermore, California.



Courtesy of David Riensche

Volunteers pour a mixture of sand and crushed oyster shells onto weed-preventive fabric as part of a project to create a nesting island for least terns off California's Hayward Regional Shoreline. Bucket by bucket volunteers placed about 165 tons of substrate on the island, now home to 65 nesting pairs of terns.



Courtesy of East Bay Regional Park District

Covering nearly 100,000 acres (38,850 hectares), California's East Bay Regional Park District is the largest urban park system in the United States. Within its boundaries, 65 regional parks, preserves, lakes, trails, shorelines, and recreation areas lure visitors and sustain regional biodiversity.

boxes, to multi-year projects such as monitoring riparian areas for songbirds and assessing the impacts of recreational activities. It's hard work. So what motivates volunteers to do it? Some say it is because of a personal commitment to conservation or the satisfaction that volunteer service brings. Others enjoy the opportunity to renew their connection to the land by working outdoors. Still others come because of the pleasure of working with family, friends, and neighbors on a common goal. "We live in a very suburban area with much land taken by development, so what's left needs to be managed and watched," says Maggie Clark, a local bookkeeper who has volunteered at East Bay for about 15 years. "The reward is being outdoors with a nice group of people and making a small difference. It gives us a sense of pride."

Whatever the motivation, volunteers are crucial to our stewardship. It's also true, however, that recruiting, training, and coordinating a volunteer army requires a lot of time, effort, and energy—a daunting prospect for wildlife professionals who often feel too overextended to take on the task. I've been at it for 20 years, and in my experience, the rewards—both personally and in terms of our wild-

life goals—far exceed the challenges. What follows are some strategies that have helped us pave the way to a successful volunteer program.

Recruiting

Engaging and motivating volunteers requires that we promote a sense of pride in our organization. We try to create a fun atmosphere in which we are all playing on the same team and people of all ages are involved. To spread the word about volunteer opportunities, we advertise through newspapers and fliers, talk with scouting and conservation groups like the Sierra Club and the Audubon Society, recruit college students studying biology and ecology, and post events on our [volunteer web page](#). We've also cultivated a group of 100 core volunteers who help train recruits and serve as team leaders on field projects. These veteran volunteers are the most effective means of gaining new people. As crew leaders, they're able to describe the commitment of time and energy that's required, and motivate newcomers to keep coming back.

Paperwork

Wildlife managers need to protect their programs as well as their volunteers, so it's important to have a legal department draft paperwork that takes into account state laws regarding workman's compensation, occupational health and safety standards, ADA laws, liability issues, and the like. We have volunteers sign a waiver form, a form allowing us to send them for medical treatment if necessary, and a form of understanding that describes the scope of a volunteer project.

Training

Whether volunteers are age three or 90, they can make significant contributions with the proper training. Volunteers who register for a one-day project, such as removing invasive weeds or replanting native vegetation, will receive advance instructions about where and when to meet, what to wear, what equipment to bring, and safety advice (i.e., to pack bug spray and plenty of water). On the day of the event we'll gather the group together, do a talk about what they're going to do and why it's important, and demonstrate, for instance, how to tell the difference between an invasive weed and a native plant or how to properly plant new vegetation. We'll then divide volunteers into small groups of five or 10 people with one team supervisor—usually a veteran volunteer—and they'll hit the field. For long-term scientific monitoring projects, we offer classroom training, using slides and video to demon-



strate, for example, how to identify a particular species by its markings or song, how to record data, and what behaviors to avoid in the field to minimize human impacts on animal behavior or habitat.

Fundraising

We need money to equip and run our programs. Fortunately, we've found that many public, private, and corporate groups prefer to donate funds to programs that employ volunteers because such programs accomplish the goal of supporting public outreach and education. When we seek funding we communicate our values to potential donors and make it clear that there's no way we could do the restoration and research we do without the help of volunteers. Beyond some basic funding from the California Department of Fish and Game and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, we've received generous donations from corporations such as Chevron, Clorox, Fremont Bank, Toyota, and New United Motor Manufacturing. Although we do not allow any consumptive use in our parks, we've also received support from Quail Unlimited and Ducks Unlimited for our work restoring game bird populations. By helping to attract supporters of our district's mission and resources, volunteers have generated more than \$375,000 in grant funds. In addition, the thousands of hours of support that volunteers have contributed to date have saved the district approximately \$750,000 in expenses. Thanks to the strength in numbers that our citizens provide, we are creating a successful model for others to emulate, while helping shape public awareness of wildlife stewardship.



Credit: David Riensche

Rebekah, Nathan, Sarah, and Daniel Riensche (left to right) help pull invasive weeds at Point Pinole in the East Bay District, where their father, wildlife biologist David Riensche, helps coordinate volunteers.



Credit: Mary R. Riensche

Employees of a local bank invest in the environment by planting a redwood tree at Quarry Lakes, a reservoir in Fremont, CA. Their efforts are part of a program to create healthy foraging and nesting habitat for herons, grebes, songbirds, and other wildlife at this former quarry site.

Recognition

Perhaps the most important element of a successful volunteer program is also the simplest: expressing gratitude for a job well done. We make it a point to thank people for showing up and getting muddy for a good cause. After an event we'll usually provide a meal and have some fun. In addition, we give volunteers rewards and recognition through verbal and written comments, recognition dinners, certificates of appreciation, wildlife merit patches, hats, t-shirts, sweaters, cups, pins, parking passes, and what we call the Good Tern Award for outstanding contributions. Our volunteers form an extended family, with older and younger people working together time after time. That sense of togetherness is a big part of the appeal. Ultimately, volunteers believe that their legacy will be the inheritance of a healthy, thriving ecosystem.

Our environmental restoration efforts in the East Bay Regional Park District do more than just protect the lives of a few animals. They also are a measure of our humanity, of what we cherish and what we leave for the next generation. Conservationists such as John Muir, Theodore Roosevelt, Aldo Leopold, and Rachel Carson worked from an informed passion that was contagious and effective at persuading others to their cause. We should follow their lead and excite the hearts of those around us to make a difference in the stewardship of wildlife resources by working through the hands of volunteers. ■