

## Give Time, Get Thanks

by Tina Kelly, Ocean Advocate,  
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Wild, wet and laid-back are some of the words used to describe the West Coast. How about the "giving" West Coast? British Columbians win the award for the most volunteer hours by province. According to Imagine Canada, in 2004, 45 percent of British Columbia residents over the age of 15 volunteered their time. Broken down, that is 1.6 million people providing a total of 315 million volunteer hours or the equivalent of approximately 164,000 full-time jobs.

Not-for-profit organizations rely heavily on individuals donating their time. These run the gamut from crisis lines to food banks, from environmental organizations restoring damaged habitats to sorting groceries for house-bound seniors and from teaching English to new immigrants to educating boaters on how to be "whale-wise."

Many of the events and festivals we enjoyed over the summer and all year long would not have happened without volunteers. Visitors to nature centres and museums would have a much different experience without docents, naturalists or interpreters donating their time. This certainly holds true for visitor experience at the Shaw Ocean Discovery Centre. Volunteers aged 11 to eighty-five, referred to as oceaneers, are an integral part of all Centre operations.

From behind the scenes helping with animal care and feeding to front-and-centre teaching school programs, oceaneers see to it that with each visit, our guests not only have a good time but have also learned something new about an animal or an environmental issue. Oceaneers help out in retail, upgrading a guest admission to an annual pass or selling an educational book. The largest contingent of oceaneers can be found in our galleries – greeting guests as they disembark the submarine through to the end where they ensure crea-

tures in the touch pool are handled gently by guests. Others are quick to jump to needed tasks such as flyer distribution, marketing at local markets and festivals, or working special events, including corporate parties and weddings.

The benefits of volunteering flow in both directions. Of course, the organization, the environment and the community win, but the benefits for the volunteer are tremendous. Young volunteers learn skills for future employment, meet mentors, gather references and gain important insight into possible careers. University students may volunteer for those very same reasons yet with more urgency as their career choices loom.

A poster on the wall of the Volunteer Victoria office shows an image of an older gentleman and beneath it reads: "I volunteer because I am retired from work, not from life." Retirees, the formerly stereotypical volunteer group, may help out to use their expertise or skills from a former career or hobby, to maintain social links or because they have a keen interest in learning something new. The benefits of continued learning and being engaged with the world around you are better than relying on Sudoku to keep the mind active. A study of older couples done by an American university found that those who contributed to the lives of others may extend the length of their own lives.

If you have participated in a beach clean or a broom bash, given your time to a local food bank or hospital or helped out at a festival or fundraising event, society thanks you. Healthy and vibrant communities result from all your hard work. To the oceaneers at the Shaw Ocean Discovery Centre, I thank you – for your enthusiasm, hard work and commitment to ensuring visitors see and learn about the wonders of the Salish Sea.

For information on the many ways you can volunteer, check out [www.volunteervictoria.bc.ca](http://www.volunteervictoria.bc.ca) or contact an organization or community service you are interested in directly. 🌐



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