

## **Inquiry into volunteering in Queensland**

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**To:**

Queensland Parliament

Local Government, Small Business and Customer Service Committee

**From:**

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Friends of Parks Queensland Incorporated

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## **Re: Parliamentary Inquiry into Volunteering in Queensland**

### **Organisation Background**

Friends of Parks Queensland is a not-for-profit umbrella organisation that supports over 30 local “Friends of Parks” volunteer groups across Queensland’s protected areas. Established in 2022 in response to the post-COVID rise in local volunteering, our core mission is to build, connect, and support these groups. In late 2022, we secured funding from the Department of Environment, Science, Tourism and Innovation to advance these goals. In the 2023-2024 financial year, our member groups or our own programs engaged 658 volunteers, who contributed a total of 9,738 hours.

This submission outlines the work of our member groups, the significant benefits they offer to the local community, the state, and the volunteers themselves. Additionally, we will highlight the gaps in Queensland’s current volunteering landscape and propose solutions that can benefit not only our sector but other areas of volunteering that align with the objectives of the State Government.



## Local Friends of Parks Groups

The local “Friends of Parks” groups are volunteer-run organisations working in close partnership with Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service (QPWS) and other partners. These groups assist with invasive species management, rubbish removal, threatened species surveys, and environmental education. Their efforts are largely delivered through open community events or “working bees,” typically held once a month, though some groups operate more frequently.

Volunteer coordinators, driven by a deep commitment to their local environment, shoulder a wide array of responsibilities. Beyond leading events, they handle administrative tasks such as event promotion, sign-on management, health and safety oversight, and reporting. Many coordinators also represent their groups at community functions, network with other groups and politicians, and seek out grants to support their activities. Many coordinators even provide refreshments using their own funds and resources. Provision of morning tea, networking, planning, and the overall administrative aspect of coordinating a volunteer group is underreported in volunteer contributions.

## Benefits of Volunteering

The benefits of volunteering are generally well-documented and extend beyond the environment. Examples of the benefits of volunteering through Friends of Parks programs include:

### Social and Community Benefits

- Volunteering fosters a sense of community and belonging, with individuals welcomed and united by a shared, greater purpose, contributing to community cohesion.
- It promotes cross-generational, cross-cultural, and cross-socioeconomic connections, enriching social networks and building social capital.
- Volunteers gain valuable skills, enhancing their job-readiness and employability, capacity-building at local level.
- Post-event gatherings such as shared morning teas offer a space for individuals to connect and engage, even if they are unable to participate in the physical activity.

### Physical & Mental Benefits

- Volunteers enjoy the physical benefits of outdoor activity, often engaging in low-to moderate-intensity exercise for two or more hours at a time.
- Being outdoors in nature reduces stress, boosts mental health, and combats feelings of loneliness, particularly among retirees and newcomers to the area.
- Volunteering also reduces eco-anxiety, as participants feel they are contributing directly to environmental preservation.

- Seeing the tangible outcomes of their work such as clearing an area of weeds provides volunteers with a deep sense of achievement.

#### **Environmental Benefits**

- Volunteers contribute to environmental conservation efforts, raising awareness of local biocultural values.
- By engaging in hands-on activities, they directly benefit the natural areas they work in, while also educating the broader community on issues like habitat quality and invasive species.
- Many new volunteers remark that they had no idea their backyards were potential habitat for quite rare species but were full of weeds and proceed to improve land management on their own blocks while returning to volunteer events to continue to learn and improve their techniques.

#### **Benefits to the State**

- Volunteers help up-skill job seekers, particularly aspiring rangers, bush regenerators, and environmental consultants, thereby contributing to Queensland's broader workforce.
- Volunteer works assist QPWS with land management, particularly invasive species removal, citizen science data recording, and removal of rubbish. Volunteers also provide additional "eyes on the ground" to report incidents or environmental changes.
- Volunteer involvement fosters a sense of environmental custodianship, and many groups secure additional funding through grants and donations for state-managed land.

#### **Research & Land Management Benefits:**

- Volunteers contribute valuable citizen science data, including species surveys and environmental observations, that aid researchers and land managers.
- Their discoveries, such as identifying previously unrecorded threatened species, enrich scientific knowledge and guide more informed land management decisions.

#### **Feedback from Volunteer Coordinators**

Volunteer coordinators are integral to the success of Friends of Parks groups. However, their work is often demanding and largely unsupported. Some common challenges faced by local group coordinators include:

- Administrative burdens associated with managing event organisation, volunteer sign-on forms, social media outreach, and ongoing communication is time-consuming and unpaid.
- Many coordinators cover basic expenses like tools, supplies, and refreshments from their own pockets. Grant funding for these essentials is scarce and hard to secure.

- Coordinators juggle multiple roles, from handling administrative tasks to engaging with external stakeholders. The lack of funding for these roles often leads to burnout.
- The time coordinators spend on event planning, liaising with stakeholders, and securing funding is often not captured in official volunteer hours.

## Barriers to Volunteering

- Funding for tools and equipment is can be scarce. Many groups rely on QPWS or grants to supply tools, but this is inconsistent.
- Coordinators can struggle to find time for event promotion and volunteer engagement. Maintaining an active social media presence is time-consuming.
- Some coordinators lack expertise in areas such as social media, which hinders event outreach and overall volunteer recruitment.
- Volunteers often incur travel expenses, with little to no reimbursement, and limited public transport options make access difficult for volunteers who do not have their own vehicle.
- Essential items like safety gear, bug spray, and sunscreen often come out of coordinators' pockets.

## Government Support and Recommendations

Queensland Government funding has supported Friends of Parks Queensland to deliver a range of programs and services that benefit local Friends of Parks groups. This includes weekly event promotion, active recruitment of volunteers to events, engaging traditional media, assisting member groups with social media, applying for grants on behalf of member groups or assisting with their grant applications, managing grants and finances, delivering training, and hosting specialised events. However, we believe there are further opportunities for the State to enhance its support for volunteer groups:

- These positions are critical to sustaining groups, and the current scope of funding to support Friends of Parks does not cover the volunteer coordination roles. Many groups dissolve when coordinators step down due to burnout. Funding volunteer coordinator roles would ensure longevity of these groups.
- Government support in promoting volunteering events, particularly through official channels like Queensland National Parks' social media and QPWS' volunteer page on the website would greatly increase visibility and engagement.
- A unified digital sign-on system across State Government Departments would reduce administrative burdens and streamline volunteer registration, alleviating pressure on volunteer coordinators and making this information visible to the Department/s in real-time.
- Very few grants or funding opportunities exist for marketing and outreach of volunteer opportunities. As the volunteer sector ages, younger generations are an untapped resource. A concerted marketing campaign to reach these

individuals could rejuvenate volunteering efforts and diversify the volunteer pool. This is particularly true as younger generations seek a sense of purpose and also benefit from the up-skilling opportunities these groups provide.

## Conclusion

Thank you for the opportunity to share some insights onto the background of our exemplary volunteers and volunteer coordinators who selflessly dedicated their time into creating a sense of community and upholding Queensland's unrivalled natural heritage. Volunteering is a purpose-driven industry with far-reaching and profound social, environmental, and economic benefits. We hope this inquiry will result in the easing of administrative burdens, provide solutions to the incredibly limited funding available for volunteers, and resolve a strategy to recruit a younger volunteer cohort. Please do not hesitate to reach out if you require any further information or would like to discuss this submission further.

Sincerely,



Jessica Lovegrove-Walsh

On behalf of Friends of Parks Queensland Incorporated

