

**Volunteers in Hong Kong Environmental Groups:**  
**Idealistic Scolds in a Society Devoted to Consumption**

See-Ching CHUN

Environmentalism is a topic that everyone has on the corner of their mouths, talking about global warming, recycling, consuming less etc. It's widely covered in the news and you can see government and NGO campaigns everywhere. It's a global crisis. To look at environmentalism as a subject, one could look at its history (McCormick 1989), the logic behind it (Smith 2006), but also the anthropological approach to studying this subject. Kay Milton looks at how anthropology with its emphasis on a holistic approach can provide significant input into research on environmentalism (Milton 1993), and more specifically cultural anthropology can contribute to a better understanding of the phenomenon (Milton 1996).

The environmental movement has also been referred to within the context of globalization, with many works on globalization with a chapter dedicated to the environment. Robert Weller's *Discovering Nature: Globalization and Environmental Culture in China and Taiwan* (2006) provides an insightful approach to analyzing the environmental discourses in China and Taiwan using globalization theories. Weller shows that there are differences between China and Taiwan in their approaches towards environmental conservation due to their different histories, which means that the case would also be true for Hong Kong and thus Weller's case studies will not be directly applicable to Hong Kong.

One very popular area of interest is the environmental movement as a form of power struggle between different parties, an act of resistance towards globalization, governments and governmental policies or industries. A lot of research looks at the political struggles involved in the environmental movement as a whole around the world, such as in *Ethnographies of Conservation* (Anderson and Berglund 2003), the focus is on conservation from the view of the local people, versus the government and NGOs, or Matthew Paterson's *Understanding Global Environmental Politics: Domination, Accumulation, Resistance*. Closer to Hong Kong, Jun Jing's work on environmental protests in China (Jing 2000) provides an analysis of the nature of environmental movements in China, placing "the emphasis in rural environmental protests on protecting people's welfare, not on preserving nature for its own sake" (Jing 2000:143). Bin Wu (2003) and Lei Xie's (2009) work also show that activism in China involves the organization from local people who have their immediate welfare at stake as a result of environmental destruction or pollution.

With works more specifically related to Hong Kong, there is research on the

management of the environment in Hong Kong (Wong 1996), whether through policies (Carr 1984; Yeung 2007), education (Stimpson 2002) or mass media (Martin 1993; Chan 1996). Timothy Choy provides an ethnography of environmental activism in Hong Kong, looking at it through politics and construction of identity after the handover to China (2003).

What must be noted about the literature is that although there has been a lot of research on the agents that are involved within the environmental movement (Berglund 1998; Mauch et al 2006), such as the government, environmental groups like ENGOs, the local population (Chan and Hills 1993; Hills and Chan 1997), parents and their children (King 1995), the work on environmental activists is largely from an organizational approach, and does rarely look at the individuals within these structures. In this paper, I will be looking at volunteers of the environmental movement in Hong Kong, more specifically the volunteers for major ENGOs.

Environmentalists can be considered as a rare group of people, because in Hong Kong with its famous status as a free-market economy, most people aspire to achieve economic goals. People are practical in their approach to gaining wealth, like attending university for a Bachelors degree to secure a well-paid job. What makes environmentalists so interesting in the context of Hong Kong is their opposition to many of the practices carried out by the mainstream. They are eschewing a comfortable, luxurious lifestyle that many people aspire to achieve. Instead, they criticize and try to persuade others to live a more environmentally-friendly and sustainable lifestyle.

When talking about environmentalists, there are not only those that make environmentalism their profession, but also those that participate as volunteers. These people play an important role in the whole movement of environmentalism because these are not only people who recognize and participate in the movement, but they are not working within the 'normal' attitudes of Hong Kong people, where everything, (especially labour) can have a price tag attached. Volunteers are working for ENGOs without gaining any monetary reward, working in their spare time. Particularly in the capitalistic and materialistic tendencies of Hong Kong, volunteers must therefore see environmentalism as a worthwhile cause.

### **Who are these volunteers?**

Throughout my fieldwork, I met many volunteers, and I myself was also working as a volunteer. While working as a regular volunteer, it is difficult to talk with other volunteers because you are working in the office, which does not have a good atmosphere facilitating conversation. However, while working at events, you get to have conversations with other volunteers and learn about their interests and motivations. It was interesting to see where all these volunteers came from and to consider why they

were working as volunteers.

The volunteers were mainly students, either in secondary school, post-secondary institutions or attending some form of tertiary education. Secondary school students would volunteer after school for a few hours and also at events that are held on weekends. Students attending post-secondary institutions and universities are able to help out more often, regularly on their days-off when they have no classes to attend, but also on weekends. What I learned most about the reason behind the majority of volunteers being students is that these are people available during weekdays when the ENGOs operate. They are then able to work at the ENGOs, as compared to the volunteers that have jobs and can only volunteer outside of work hours. The point must be made that students are not particularly environmentally friendly, but rather they have the time available and it fits in with the schedules of the ENGOs, making up for the majority of volunteers I meet.

Motivations for working as volunteers varied. Some students replied because the organization was in a convenient location, close to school and since they had spare time, they could clock in some hours that would help them on their CV. Others said because they thought the mascot was cute so they were interested in the work of the organization, and would help out in their free time. But a majority said that it was because they had applied to several organizations to gain experience and make their CV look better, and the particular ENGO was one that had work for them to do. While many of the people were aware of the environmental movement, only a few people mentioned that they worked for the organization because they thought the environment was important.

The current situation in Hong Kong and for many students around the world is that just studying, gaining top grades in academics is not enough to get you into a good university or secure a well-paying job later on in life. Universities and companies are increasingly looking at the extracurricular activities that students participate in. Not only do they have to study, and study hard in the current education system, but the students also have to take part in activities outside of school. This is to show that students are not only able to study, but also have some experience of life outside of academic studies. Many have music lessons like piano, others have painting classes, not to mention attending cram school, as well as English and Putonghua lessons. Others participate in student unions and debate teams. But many students also work as volunteers at various NGOs and also work at companies for work experience. This is particularly popular during the summers of Form Five to Seven when the students are waiting for the results of their public examinations. Many of the students I met during the summer of my fieldwork were of the Form Seven category, about to enter university and because they had an extended summer vacation, they decided to do some volunteer work and gain some experience.

Flag-selling was especially popular amongst secondary school students. Many of them sold flags on Saturday mornings and are easily identified by wearing school uniforms. After talking to friends and other informants, it turns out that while the students seem very proactive about the selling of flags, the majority of them, especially those in school uniforms are actually required by their respective schools to participate in flag-selling. By wearing school uniforms, they are in a sense walking advertisements for their schools. This shows that not only do students feel that they need some evidence of community service for their CVs, but their schools also feel this is necessary.

Another type of student volunteer is the students attending vocational schools or community colleges in Hong Kong. Many student volunteers that I encountered at events during the academic year are students from post-secondary institutions, where they have not received enough marks from their HKCEs to enter the Sixth Form, or have been unable to enter university because of their HKAL grades. These students are required by their schools to fulfill a number of community service hours and therefore apply for volunteer work. These volunteers tend not to have much knowledge about the field, and only apply for volunteer work because they need to fulfill certain credits.

An example of this is a large scale charity walk held by Green Globe which attracted some one thousand participants. This charity walk took around two hours through a conservation area, where participants had to arrive at several checkpoints, play educational games and get stamps for a prize at the end. Due to the large number of participants and the large area which the walk covered, roughly eighty volunteers were recruited to help out at this event. Of these eighty volunteers, two-thirds were students from post-secondary institutions. While half of the students were studying in courses related to the environment, the other half were students in other fields, such as event management and business administration, and they really stood out as a group. These students were easy to identify among the volunteers because they were dressed like they were out on a date. Girls were dressed in very short shorts and boots, exposing a lot of skin which were not appropriate for the location, as it was a hot day and there were many mosquitoes. Their faces had been carefully made-up, with many following the trend of using false eye-lashes, all of which 'melted' in the heat of the day, disfiguring due to sweat. The guys were dressed in slick jackets with the latest branded sneakers, clothing fit for a day at the air-conditioned shopping malls but not for a charity walk in a natural reserve. Their hair was gelled up so stiffly that even when there was wind, not a strand of hair was out of place, which would start to 'smell' during the day as it mixed with sweat in the heat of the sun. The image that they presented was of youngsters out to have fun in the middle of bustling Mongkok, and not volunteers out in the wilderness at a charity walk. Libby, who studies in environmental management at a community

college and has volunteered at several ENGOs said, “Why are they dressed like this? Do they think they are out window shopping? (佢地着咩呀?以為去行街呀?)” It was interesting to see a group of trendy young adults in the middle of a conservation area, as if they had accidentally been transported by a time warp from a shopping mall to the wilderness.

Aside from their inappropriate dress code, their behavior was one that demonstrated their lack of enthusiasm for the event and volunteer work. During the course of the day, many of them could be seen walking between checkpoints so that they could chat with friends located at other checkpoints. They also took pictures of each other as if at a photo-shoot for a magazine, not only utilizing each other to take the picture, but also asking the environmentalists and participants of the charity walk to hold the camera too. They were not only slacking from the work assigned to them, but also inconveniencing others for their own enjoyment. Libby commented, “They’re acting as if they are on holiday (好似自己去旅行咁),” and mentioned that she had overheard the environmentalists commenting on how they were “immature” when they had to be evaluated at the end of the event. The volunteers were clearly enjoying themselves, chatting and laughing with each other. However, they did not fully participate in the work that they had volunteered for, but chose to enjoy the event like an excursion for their group of friends, rather than an opportunity for work experience. The only reminder that they were in fact here for work was in the evaluation that the environmentalists had to fill out for the students at the end.

A reflection of their attitudes could also be seen at another event. Students from the same community college were volunteering at an event organized by Green Group, which I was also volunteering for a second time. The incredulous looks on their faces upon hearing that I was volunteering again out of my own accord demonstrates they were not at the event because of their dedication towards environmentalism. One of the volunteers actually expressed not wanting to be there.

Of course, not all volunteers from post-secondary institutions acted in that way; those enrolled in courses related to environmental protection and management are especially interested in work with ENGOs. Many need some experience in related fields for future jobs or to pursue a degree later. Libby, a volunteer studying in an environment related subject said, “I hope to work in an ENGO in the future, but it seems to me that they really look at qualifications. I’ll just gain some experience and work as a volunteer [in the mean time, since I don’t have the qualifications].” These volunteers show an interest in many environmental issues and express the desire to work in similar fields in the future.

Two other volunteers Tim and Thomas who also study environmental protection and management in a community college have also volunteered at Green Globe several

times. They were working as volunteers at the registration counter of a talk organized by Green Globe. They expressed interest in the current activities of the ENGO, and were very interested in what was to be presented at the talk. These talks were targeted at specific businesses involved in manufacturing with factories in the Mainland. Tim said, “We may study the subject [environment management] at school, but we can see what is going on in the real world and what we learn being put into practice here.” Although the subject was one they were not familiar with, both of them stayed behind after their volunteer work was over to listen to the talk.

There are also college and university students from environment-related disciplines that work as volunteers. However, when compared to the post-secondary students, they are fewer in numbers. I was only able to meet two university students during my fieldwork from related disciplines, other university students were from a range of disciplines such as marketing, translation and political science. University students from related disciplines that I have encountered did not volunteer for the organizations under their own name, but often collaborated with the ENGOs using their student groups on environment. Each university in Hong Kong has at least one student organization dedicated to activities concerning the environment, and university students interested in the environment or work related to the environment could participate there, as council members of the student organizations or just as participants. The university students have access to a number of ways to participate in the green movement, rather than only working as volunteers at the ENGOs. Working in their own organizations, students have much more control over the work they do and can gain management skills because they are responsible for the activities that they hold. Some still work at ENGOs, but often as interns rather than volunteers.

At functions held on weekends and after work hours, I was able to meet volunteers that weren't students, but had freed up their evening or weekend for the event. One volunteer commented, “I would like to volunteer more often, but there aren't many opportunities for me as I work during the week. I grasp every chance that shows up [that don't occur during normal weekday work hours] through the volunteer recruitment emails and try my best to make it.” Most of these volunteers that have jobs during the week are repeat volunteers, in the sense that they have already volunteered several times before for the ENGO and they would try to volunteer again in the future. When asked why they are interested in volunteering for that particular organization, they often stated because they thought the organization had a “good, environmentally-friendly” reputation and they think that the organization is doing a good job of a worthwhile cause. One volunteer said, “The environment is an important issue right now, and since [organization name] seems to be doing [their work] quite well, I thought of playing a part and trying it out.” These are often the most dedicated of

the volunteers and often very knowledgeable in many of the issues related to the environment, but due to work constraints, are unable to fully participate in the environmental movement.

Volunteers for ENGOs therefore come from many different backgrounds and have their own agendas for participating in the environmental movement. It seems that the younger the volunteers are, the more likely that they are there for building up some volunteer experience for their future CVs, while the older volunteers especially those that have a career outside of their volunteer work show a more genuine interest in the environmental movement. This situation however is not unique to volunteer work of the environmental movement, but can be found across volunteer work in other types of NGOs. It is best expressed by the extensive literature on voluntarism (Cohen 1960; Korten 1990; Smith et al 1983) and also the works on management of volunteers (Liao-Troth 2008; Connors 1995).

Hartenian's analysis of short-term and long-term volunteers (Hartenian 2008) can be applied to the environmental volunteers in Hong Kong. Volunteers are largely short-term volunteers, with few long-term volunteers. Many of the volunteers I encountered belong to the "Misfit" category, egoistic in orientation with extrinsic motivations, like gaining job experience (Hartenian 2008:58). The secondary school and community college students mentioned earlier generally belong to this category. They volunteer for an event and are unlikely to return, unless they have to fulfill a course requirement or gain more experience that will add to their CVs. They may have knowledge of environmentalism and understand it, but do not actively participate in it, nor believe in it.

Some volunteers like Libby, Tim and Thomas, are "Contingent Consultants", where they may have more long-term experience at volunteering, but for short periods at several organizations (Hartenian 2008:63). They are more altruistic than the Misfit volunteers, because they are not only interested in environmentalism, but would like to help facilitate it too. However, some egoistic orientation prevails as they are likely to give up on volunteering due to school work or other activities. These volunteers would like to try their best in being a part of the environmental movement, but it is not of highest priority.

"Project Consultants" (Hartenian 2008:62) are those volunteers which volunteer for specific project and activities, using their skills and expertise. Hartenian describes these volunteers as those volunteering because of the particular skills and experiences that can be gained from participating in the project, but these volunteers are difficult to come by in Hong Kong because majority of volunteers actually do not have the said skills. If an individual is trained in environmentalism, it is very likely that they are actually employed by an ENGO or working for an institution which is related to

environmentalism.

“Cultivated Missionaries” and “Natural Missionaries” are the long-term volunteers (Hartenian 2008:65-66), more attached to the ENGOs. It is possible to have Cultivated Missionaries, where the volunteers identify themselves with the ENGO after repeated positive experiences as a volunteer there, taking pride and feeling committed to the ENGO. They are different to Natural Missionaries in the sense that their attachment to the organization results from their positive experiences at the ENGO, which is greater than their belief in the organization’s cause. These volunteers are more likely to be those that have established good relationships with environmentalists in the organization, so they volunteer often to help out their friends there.

Natural Missionaries are those that are committed to environmentalism first, and regularly work as volunteers at the organizations, but their loyalty to a particular organization is not as great as the Cultivated Missionaries. It is difficult to find Natural Missionaries in Hong Kong, as individuals that are really committed to environmentalism are likely to already be employed by an institution that works as part of the environmental movement. The reality of needing to earn a wage for a living prevails in Hong Kong, so if an individual is dedicated to the environmental movement, they will often have acquired enough knowledge, skill and experience to work as an employed environmentalist, rather than as a volunteer.

### **Volunteer Recruitment**

During the summer, there is an influx of volunteers and interns hoping to gain some experience, but once September comes, few stay behind and continue to help regularly. This is a problem for because there are activities all year round, not just the summer, but also educational events that are held at schools during the school year. It is harder to find volunteers during the school year.

Volunteers are recruited in different ways, but only three of the organizations (Green Globe, Green Group and Green Game) that I have worked with have a system in which volunteers can apply. Volunteers are asked to fill in an application form detailing their contact information and preferred work hours for reference. Then they are put on a mailing list where volunteer positions are sent out to members on the list regularly, and volunteers have to contact the person-in-charge as listed in the email. The work is often allocated on a first-come-first-served basis, after applicants have expressed their interest and if they have fulfilled any requirements that may have been listed.

Most ENGOs rely on volunteers to help at events, used on a one-time basis, but there are also volunteers that work regularly for several months doing work in the office. Volunteer work varies amongst the different ENGOs, but all organizations have volunteers that work for them, particularly at events like exhibitions and charity walks.



The canvassing of volunteers is necessary for these events because just the regular employees are not enough to help facilitate and manage these events. Volunteer work at these events is therefore very useful to ENGOs.

Volunteers have some perks given to them, aside from the recognition of their work, such as a token of appreciation for their efforts from the organization. They may have opportunities to attend functions that may not be open to the general public. Often at events, there are souvenirs distributed to the volunteers, such as the T-shirts they wore as uniforms, files, key chains, re-usable shopping bags and other environmentally friendly merchandise. This creates a sense of being appreciated by the organization, while the merchandise creates a sense of affiliation or belonging. It also acts as a form of advertisement when friends see the memorabilia and ask where they got it from, and the volunteer can explain about the organization that they have been working for. This often involves a sense of pride, as if to say, "I spend my spare time on a worthwhile cause, and they gave me something nice as a token of appreciation."

### **Volunteer Work**

Working as a volunteer for ENGOs is different from working for other NGOs, because you are working striving for something which does not directly interact with you. Volunteering at an orphanage you play with children, flag-selling for charities for handicapped people you are able to purchase equipment that help people, or even working at dog rescue organizations you might feel a sense of satisfaction when the dog recognizes you. Nakano's work on voluntarism in Japan covers a variety of experiences in volunteer work, but all revolving around community volunteer work. She found that voluntarism was justified as making the volunteer's life meaningful, not only establishing relationships with recipients but also learning certain skills and knowledge as a volunteer (Nakano 2005:168). One core difference between environmental voluntarism and community voluntarism is the relationship between volunteers and recipients. Not only community volunteers working for a cause, but also for people for they get to know, making the experience more intimate and personal. In working as a volunteer for environmentalism, the work is more impersonal, working for a greater cause which affects the society as a whole but unlikely to be appreciated at a personal level.

Peter, a volunteer for a number of organizations was able to summarize and compare his experiences at two different NGOs. He had been working as a volunteer for Green Group regularly at their events, so that several environmentalists of the organization were able to recognize him despite not having worked with them directly. He was also volunteering at Life As Usual, an NGO that organized services and activities for blind people in Hong Kong. His work there involved acting as guides to

participants in activities, such as a recent hiking excursion where he was not only guiding them but also the ‘eyes’ for them, describing the scenery to them. When asked how that compared to working at Green Group, he said,

*“It’s [Life As Usual] a lot tougher; we’re working on a one-to-one basis, sometimes two to a volunteer if we don’t have enough volunteers. But it’s really satisfying because you know that you are giving these people some variety in their life. You are directly affecting them. Here [Green Group], we’re more involved in education, and there is more distance [with the public]. The state of the environment is a growing problem and we must educate people to be more aware and they will change. We can only hope that they receive our message.”*

While volunteers will have different experiences at various NGOs, Peter’s comment reflects much of the distinction between working for ENGOs and other types of NGOs. Not many volunteers have worked for both ENGOs and other types of NGOs, but those that have share similar views to Peter. In general, the work for ENGOs is part of a greater global movement, a force that environmentalists want the public to become aware of and to work in accordance with the movement. There can be more local issues that are unique to Hong Kong alone, but it all forms part of this idea of sustaining the environment and preventing it from further degradation in the hands of human beings. Work at other types of NGOs is more direct, dealing with people and the change can be seen more immediately.

The nature of the work varies, but the volunteers are essentially acting as free labour; helping move or set up booths, acting as human signposts, selling flags, making cold-calls, conducting research and entering data etc. Volunteer work may be considered easy because it often does not involve any specialization or qualifications, but perhaps because of the little academic knowledge required, the work is often monotonous and considered boring. Constantly explaining and reciting the same snippet of information, or sitting at a computer entering data all day can be tough on the volunteers’ patience. Yet there remains a pool of people prepared to work as volunteers.

### **The Good**

Working at the functions, volunteers also come in contact with the public. On many occasions, members of the public walk up to the volunteers and ask them, “Do you work for [organization name]?” and on learning that they are volunteers, the people often comment on the goodwill of the volunteers, helping the organizations in their free time, working for a cause and also their perseverance (if the work involved is

monotonous or tiring). This acts as a confidence booster for the volunteers, giving them a sense of pride and that their efforts are meaningful and of value to the society.

A person after seeing me working as a volunteer over several months, exclaimed, “You’re very good! Coming back on a weekly basis working for long periods without any supervision! And you’re only a volunteer!” ( “妳好好呀!個個禮拜都返來,自己係度做野. 妳仲係義工添!” ). I learned that there was also another volunteer doing the same job as me and working on the days I wasn’t working, so the lady was interested in what we were doing there. She and her colleagues were in awe of the fact that as volunteers we could regularly go and collect data at her office, more so than the idea of the environmentalist who works for the organization and occasionally came with us.

This suggests that the volunteers are a positive aspect of the organizations. If the volunteers are friendly without being overbearing, members of the public are more likely to accept the idea of environmentalism for them because these volunteers do not benefit directly in financial terms from working for these organizations. From an outsiders’ point of view, these are people who care for the environment and do it as a volunteer. The environment is worth caring for, and if these volunteers are willing to work with this ENGO, maybe the nature of environmentalism is not as extreme as it may seem.

The organizations take care of their volunteers as they recognize the importance of volunteers in helping them with their work. They teach the volunteers about different aspects of the environmental movement and generally advertise different events within their organization. Volunteers express interest in upcoming events, but also have opinions about different environmental issues as they are often interested in environmental issues as a whole. This leads to discussions and clarifications from the environmentalist on what they know from their position within the industry.

It is during these times in which I was able to learn most about environmentalism because I only had to express an interest in the issue or to raise a related question and they would tell me their knowledge of the issue. The idea is then that the volunteer can pass on their information and experience on to their friends and to spread the knowledge they have learned to their friends. It is easier to transmit this knowledge through volunteers than just random people of the public that they may come in contact with, as the volunteers have an element of belief in the work.

### **The Difficulties**

Volunteers come and go within the organizations. It is very difficult for volunteers to consistently work with the same organization on a regular basis as volunteering is not a priority. People have their own lives outside of volunteer work,

like school and work, and the environmentalists understand that. Every time they contact the volunteers, it is in a polite and friendly tone, and they let the volunteers know that their work is of value to them. They are coaxing the volunteers to continue working for them, and the volunteer feels that they are of help, resulting in going back to help them. This is a positive feedback system which environmentalists try to carry out carefully in order to retain volunteers. An example of this is when an environmentalist constantly reminded me of how the data that I was putting into a database was very important and useful to him. In effect, this gesture is saying that the work you do may be mundane, but really needs to be done, and the best person to do it is you, the volunteer.

Blake said, "I tried my best to make the job description as interesting as possible, but still no one has replied to my offer. Many people just come once or twice, but I need someone who after being taught how [to do the research], can be left to their own devices and just regularly report back to me on how things are going on."

Volunteers are given a lot of autonomy during their volunteer work. The environmentalists are not there to guard the work of the volunteers, but act as a guide when help is needed after the initial briefing to start the particular work. Therefore it requires a lot of initiative on the volunteers' part to maintain a pace of progress in their work. Provided that the volunteers are available, they can pretty much decide the time they arrive and leave, or negotiate the times they work in the office.

This work however, is exceptionally tiring on the patience of volunteers. Much of the work is really tedious and mundane, just constantly entering of data which is of no particular use to the volunteer in terms of gaining experience. The volunteers are essentially clocking in the hours for their work, but experience-wise, they are unable to gain much insight into the environmental movement. This makes it very difficult on the volunteer to continue working at the job and very often, they make excuses to leave. Libby and one other volunteer asked me how long I had been working on the particular project, and on learning that I had been working over a course of several months, one said, "How can you keep at it so long? I've only been working for three hours and I already want to stop." In the end, the other volunteer asked for another project and Libby stopped going, saying that she was unavailable due to school commitments. Libby had previously expressed that the workload at school was indeed very heavy, to the point that she was unable work as a private tutor and earn money, a favourite part-time job for students. At the same time, Libby had also said "Let's see what happens" when I asked her if she thought she could continue, implying that she would make something happen. Libby had also discussed with me the possible tactics we could employ into wriggling out of the data research, one of which was to go several times and then cite being too busy as an excuse. This was understandable as the task at

hand seemed to never end when the environmentalists would ask for increasingly more data, and increasingly more detail.

While working at an event, Nancy (the environmentalist in charge of us) was a little worked up that the main organizer of the event (not Green Globe, the ENGO) was delegating so much work to us without prior notice and also making the volunteers do the more physically straining jobs. The volunteers that showed up to the event were all girls in their late teens and early twenties, relatively slim in size, some with an air of fragility. Nancy was infuriated that the volunteers were made to carry the luggage belonging to some one hundred participants of the event from one location to the next under the scorching sun. She had specifically stated that the volunteers would all be females, and should not be expected to carry equipment or luggage and if the organizer needed things to be carried around, she would recruit some male volunteers. While none of the volunteers complained about the work nature, it was interesting that Nancy would be so perplexed over the volunteers having to do some hard labour. I later asked the rationale behind her anger, she said, “They requested our [the ENGO’s] help in running the event, asking us to take over registration procedures and act as human signposts directing people to the correct locations. So I asked for ten or so volunteers, which should be more than enough. If I had known that there was all this luggage carrying, I would’ve made sure that we had some strong people, especially guys and also trolleys to help us move luggage. These volunteers are not here to be used according to their whim and fancy; they’re here to help and they don’t need to be here. If other volunteers find out that this is how volunteers are treated, what would happen if we don’t have any volunteers left?”

That particular event was run in a *laissez-faire* fashion, where Green Globe was not the event organizer and was only there to assist the event. Nancy therefore had no control over how the event was to be run or organized and needed to adhere herself to their working manner. There was no briefing on how the event was to be run, nor as to what the volunteers needed to do, resulting in Nancy trying to make sense of the event so that the volunteers could work. It was therefore interesting that the organizer of that particular event lost his temper at the volunteers when they were unable to answer his question on registration particulars, information that he asked for in hindsight.

The volunteers at the event did not show any complaints towards the work that they had to do, although they did find the situation a little awkward, particularly when the organizer lost his temper. The atmosphere amongst the volunteers remained relaxed and enjoyable, working as a team. Nancy tried to reinforce this atmosphere by maintaining lively conversations with the volunteers despite her apparent discontent with the organizing party and doing the best she could with the little information available to her. At the end of the event, Nancy said that although this was not the first

time she had worked with that organization, she would try not to work with them again next year, as they asked too much of Green Globe in the assistance to the event.

### **Blessing?**

There is a problem with recruiting volunteers because they may be enthusiastic to help, for various reasons as mentioned earlier, but can they actually help? No matter how easy a volunteering job may be, it still requires some resources, such as a place to sit, equipment to use (such as a computer or a telephone) and also takes time for the environmentalist to teach them the ropes in the beginning. Perhaps it is because of this lack of resources that makes some organizations reluctant to receive volunteers, or make it harder for volunteers to contact them for opportunities. If you are a student from a related field or discipline, your professors or alumni could refer you to particular organizations for internship opportunities. However, if you are from an unrelated discipline, as I was as a volunteer, there are fewer doors open to you and the work becomes less specialized and more mundane.

This leads to the idea that volunteers are not as great as they seem. They may be a blessing in the sense that there are a number of people willing to help, and work as free labour. However, these people may have the enthusiasm but lack the knowledge to help present the environmental movement. Volunteers helping out may not always understand the situation or the whole background of events that the ENGOs have carried out. It requires the briefing of the environmentalist. However, if people ask questions, the volunteer may not always have enough experience to answer the questions correctly or completely, and must always direct the queries to the environmentalist in charge. Although the environmentalist may have information in the form of leaflets and posters, volunteers may not have enough knowledge of the information being exhibited. It really requires the initiative on the volunteers' part to do background research on news related to the particular event prior the actual day of volunteering.

An example of this is the occasion where during an exhibition of anti-blue-fin tuna consumption, a volunteer was not aware of the fact that blue-fin tuna trade is still considered legal despite the fact that it is listed as an endangered species. This is one of the core principles behind the establishment of trade bans on blue-fin tuna, which the organization in question uses to justify its activities. This missing information came to light to the volunteer when participants at the exhibition asked if the blue-fin tuna was so endangered, why it was still not considered an endangered species.

A volunteer at an event promoting low-carbon footprint practices did not fully understand what low-carbon meant. In Cantonese, the term for the element Carbon is “*taan* (碳)” which has the same pronunciation as the term for charcoal “*taan* (炭)”.

The volunteer misinterpreted low-carbon to mean low levels of charcoal and used this to explain low-carbon. As many of the participants at the event were either primary school children or elderly, this mistake helped make the explanation of low-carbon easier to understand; the concept of an element would have been too abstract to fully understand. However, this mistake demonstrates that not all volunteers have sufficient knowledge for participating in the events. Half-an-hour into the event, this mistake was clarified by Oscar, the environmentalist in charge, when the volunteer wanted to know if these two terms were referring to the same thing. While it is possible to question why Oscar had not pointed this out during the short briefing session prior to the opening of the event, it would be fair to say that it was assumed that basic knowledge of environmentalism was understood by all volunteers. The volunteers were meant to have read the information available at the event and if there was something they did not understand, they were to ask the environmentalist. At the same time, the volunteers may not know whether they have interpreted the information correctly if they did not have prior knowledge.

Some volunteers may also present a face of enthusiasm in the face of the environmentalist, however when the environmentalist is no longer present, proceed to slack off and do other stuff, like homework or talk on the phone. This experience was particularly common at events relying on student volunteers.

While working at a booth organized at a university, the student volunteers appeared really friendly and enthusiastic about the work to be done, and in a proactive manner, walk up to people and explain the purposes of the booth. This was all within the first hour after setting up the booth, when the environmentalist was still present. After the environmentalist left, several of the volunteers left, saying they had class (which is understandable, considering they are students), two went off to have breakfast, and three went off to chat with their friends, only to leave with them saying they “would be coming back” (which never happened). One volunteer had been doing homework during the whole exhibition, and mysteriously disappeared without having said a word. As a result, from a total of ten volunteers that were supposed to be present, I was the only one left there, despite the fact that the student volunteers were supposed to be in charge of the exhibition, while I was a last minute helper.

After relating this incident to several environmentalists involved, I learned that this is not something new and had happened at the exhibitions at other universities. The exhibitions were more successful when the volunteers were allowed to use the participation in the exhibition as counting towards part of their grades or credits. The promise of partially fulfilling course grades was so motivating that at one particular university, they created a whole mural for display at their exhibition. In the case of that particular university on that occasion, there was no such system in place and it really

depended on the initiative of the students present that day.

There are also many occasions where volunteers didn't show up for work which they had previously agreed to participate in. While some may inform the environmentalist in advance, many of them only inform the environmentalist when the environmentalist calls them and asks if they are on the way. Some don't pick up the phone and only apologize a few days later. This lack of responsibility towards volunteering is characterized by the belief "since I'm doing it out of my goodwill, it doesn't matter if I don't show up." Environmentalists understand that volunteering is not a priority for the volunteers and other things like schoolwork come first, and are therefore unable to berate the volunteers for their lack of responsibility. However, this creates many problems for environmentalists, especially if the work is urgent.

Tina, an environmentalist, on learning that a volunteer would be able to work on that particular day, had bought some shark-fin soup for analysis the night before. However the volunteer did not show up that day and did not answer any phone calls. As Tina had to go out of her way and purchase the shark-fin after work hours the night before, she was annoyed because if she knew that the volunteer wasn't going to show up, she wouldn't have purchased the shark-fin soup. On top of this, the shark-fin soup needed to be analyzed as soon as possible after being purchased, resulting in Tina having to do the analysis herself after work that day, remaining in the office until 10:30pm that night. Tina was still very annoyed at the lack of responsibility shown by the volunteer and continued to relate her annoyance to me when I worked as a volunteer the next day. The volunteer in question still had not apologized for the no-show and was still unreachable by phone. It was only a week later that she had a lot of activities at school and did not have free time to volunteer.

Each volunteer is also characterized by their different life experiences and all have different attitudes towards environmental issues. They are not employed by the organization and may not share the same views as the ENGOs, so they are free to express their own opinions. These opinions may be different or even at odds to opinions represented by the organization they are working for. Environmentalists employed under the organization would be required to maintain a certain level of consistency with the views of the organization, but it is difficult to do that for volunteers. Therefore volunteers may not act as well as messengers as hoped.

The exhibition booths held at universities was best able to demonstrate this point. While the exhibition had a particular focus on blue-fin tuna, it was actually part of the whole marine conservation program which includes the problems of shark-fin consumption and the sustainable consumption of other seafood choices. Some volunteers were more interested in the direct issue at hand, the trade bans on blue-fin tuna, following the guidelines of the ENGO. Some were more interested in promoting



the sustainable seafood consumption leaflets because they felt that the blue-fin tuna case was a lost cause. And while the ENGO was interested in persuading people to stop eating shark-fin soup, not all the volunteers saw consumption of shark-fin soup as a problem, and few were willing to try and persuade others to refrain.

Therefore although these volunteers may appear as an important asset to the ENGOs, the question is whether they can really help? Perhaps the costs of training volunteers are greater than the benefits, which is why not all the organizations welcome volunteers enthusiastically. Volunteers have no obligation to tie themselves to particular organizations, more so than environmentalists employed by the ENGO. No organization can expect its volunteers to work for them on a regular basis and maintain a high level of loyalty to the organization. However, the environmentalists try to maintain a good relationship with their volunteers in order to retain them.

### **Volunteers as outsiders**

It must be noted that while there are volunteers who actively participate and that they maintain good relationships with environmentalists, the volunteers forever remain an outsider in the organization. They are not employed by the ENGO and therefore are not required to have a loyalty to the organization. Environmentalists understand the fleeting nature of the volunteers and also attach less sentiment to the volunteers. They may chat with the volunteers and get to know them a little, but the relationship is often superficial. Examples of this division between those that are part of the organization and those that are not are most apparent during meal times or breaks. During lunch, the environmentalists have their regular hang outs or they may order delivery together. Even if a volunteer is present, the volunteer is expected to make their own plans. The case became that volunteers try to go off to lunch together, forming their own little group. Depending on the working atmosphere at the different organizations, food may be passed around as snacks or during tea breaks and while some environmentalists include volunteers, asking them if they would like some out of politeness if they have not been introduced to the volunteer, there are also occasions where the volunteer is ignored.

The 'outsider' nature of the volunteers was clearly shown when there was an occasion where a volunteer had not shown up and the people in charge of the volunteer had not even noticed. This volunteer had been working regularly each week at the organization under the supervision of two environmentalists and had been missing all morning without an explanation as to why she was not at work that day. Her supervisors were not aware of the fact that she had not shown up until another volunteer asked for her, requesting to go to lunch together.

Volunteers are also invisible within the office of the ENGOs. Mealtimes as

mentioned above are one instance when you can witness their invisibility, but also during work. There is little need for interaction with the volunteers within the workplace as they would be left to their own devices, doing work at their own pace at the space they have been allocated. People in the higher ranks of the ENGO hierarchy would not need to directly converse with the volunteers, other environmentalists do not need to communicate with the volunteer, and other volunteers have their own work to do and so don't need to interact with other volunteers. The only interaction occurs between the environmentalist in charge of the volunteer, and really depends on the personality of the environmentalist and the nature of the work involved. The volunteer can thus be largely ignored.

The environmentalists may be joking amongst themselves, or complaining about particular people or events related to the organization, and ignore the fact that an 'outsider' in the form of the volunteer is present. In one organization, a lot of profanity was used in their conversation, used in a joking manner but also when complaining about particular incidents. The language used would be considered rude in a public setting and could certainly lead to fistfights if directed at strangers. However, the environmentalists were able to converse freely in such a manner. The volunteers then are not considered as so much 'outsiders', because an outsider would mean they, the environmentalists would take care of the image that they are portraying through the use of profanities. The volunteers are actually 'invisible' because their presence is not acknowledged, or deemed a threat to the image of the ENGO.

There were also many occasions where the volunteers were "forgotten", something I personally experienced several times but also retold by some volunteers. It may have been previously agreed upon that a volunteer would work at a certain time, but the environmentalist in-charge may have forgotten that the volunteer would be there that day, so no work was prepared in advance, or the environmentalist might not even be in the office that day. The volunteer would then have to wait for the environmentalist to find some work for them to do, or if the environmentalist was on leave, see if there was other work to be done. This is discouraging to the volunteer as it seems that their help is actually not important and actually questions whether the time they are dedicating to volunteering is worthwhile, if not appreciated.

Finally, the volunteers are also faceless, because it doesn't really matter who does the volunteer work, as long as it is done by someone. If one volunteer is unable to continue working, it is very likely that another volunteer can be found from the pool of volunteers out there to be trained and fill the position of the one who left. Names don't even need to be remembered of the volunteers are working for single events. At a large event, it would be impossible for environmentalists to know all the volunteers present. Volunteers can therefore be considered as a force of labour which the environmentalists

can utilize and shape to suit their needs. It must be remembered that while their labour and enthusiasm can be tapped for the ENGOs' purposes, the volunteers are not unified in their knowledge, capabilities and beliefs in environmentalism.

### **Conclusion**

Working as volunteers for ENGOs, it is easy to believe that the volunteers believe in the environmental movement and find it a worthwhile cause, therefore dedicating their time to work there. However, this is not entirely true for the majority of volunteers in Hong Kong. The volunteers may understand environmentalism but might not actually work as volunteers because they believe in the movement. It so happens that volunteering at these organizations can help them gain work experience and add to their CVs. The environmental movement is a convenient medium in which they can help achieve goals in other areas. This is not to say that they don't believe in the cause they are working for, as some do take an interest in environmentalism, but it is not high on their list of priorities.

For the ENGOs, it may appear that the volunteers are important facilitators of the environmental movement, but their lack of knowledge, skills and sense of responsibility create problems for the environmentalists. Training and educating volunteers requires time and resources, which are already limited for ENGOs and therefore difficult to upkeep.

Volunteers' experiences at the ENGOs can also add to their attitudes towards environmentalism and their work as volunteers. ENGOs make an attempt to attract volunteers and retain them, such as training them, providing work experiences and giving them perks for a feeling of inclusion. However, there are also experiences like being forgotten and exclusion in the office which can cause volunteers to lose interest and feel underappreciated.

Volunteers for ENGOs can therefore be seen as a more approachable group of the general public, which the ENGOs are trying to educate. At the current stage, the volunteers cannot be fully relied upon as environmentalists, but they can be seen as members of the public that have a pre-disposed interest in environmentalism. While some volunteers have shown a lack of interest in environmentalism, the fact that they are participating as volunteers should be fully utilized by ENGOs to further educate them in the environmental movement. The volunteers may not show as much dedication or knowledge of the cause as ENGOs would like, but ENGOs can see them as the first stepping stone towards spreading environmentalism amongst the citizens of Hong Kong.

**Bibliography**

- Anderson, David G. and Eeva Berglund, eds. 2003. *Ethnographies of Conservation*. New York: Berghahn Books.
- Berglund, Eeva K. 1998. *Knowing Nature, Knowing Science: An Ethnography of Environmental Activism*. Cambridge: The White Horse Press.
- Carr, Neil. 1984. *Hong Kong Environment: An Economic Perspective*. Hong Kong: The Conservancy Association.
- Chan, Cecilia and Peter Hills, eds. 1993. *Limited Gains: Grassroots Mobilization and the Environment in Hong Kong*. Hong Kong: Centre of Urban Planning and Environmental Management, University of Hong Kong
- Chan, Ka Wah Kara. 1996. *Mass Media and Environmental Protection in Hong Kong*. Hong Kong: Department of Communication Studies, School of Communication, Hong Kong Baptist University.
- Choy, Timothy Keeyen. 2003. *Politics By Example: An Ethnography of Environmental Emergences in Post-colonial Hong Kong (China)*. Ph.D. thesis, Department of Anthropology, University of California, Santa Cruz.
- Cohen, Nathan E., ed. 1960. *The Citizen Volunteer: His Responsibility, Role, and Opportunity in Modern Society*. New York: Harper & Brothers.
- Hartenian, Linda S. 2008. "A Typology of Short-Term and Long-Term Volunteers." In Matthew Liao-Troth, ed., *Challenges in Volunteer Management*. Charlotte, North Carolina: Information Age Publishing, Inc.
- Hills, Peter and Cecilia Chan, eds. 1997. *Community Mobilization and the Environment in Hong Kong*. Hong Kong: Centre of Urban Planning and Environmental Management, University of Hong Kong.
- Jing, Jun. 2000. "Environmental Protests in Rural China." In Elizabeth J. Perry and Mark Sheldon, eds., *Chinese Society: Change, Conflict and Resistance*. London: Routledge.
- King, Donna Lee. 1995. *Doing Their Share to Save the Planet: Children and Environmental Crisis*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press.
- Korten, David C. 1990. *Getting to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Voluntary Action and the Global Agenda*. West Hartford, Connecticut: Kumarian Press, Inc.

- Liao-Troth, Mathew, ed. 2008. *Challenges in Volunteer Management*. Charlotte, North Carolina: Information Age Publishing, Inc.
- Martin, Ernest F. Jr., ed. 1993. *Green Journalism: Environmental Consciousness and the Mass Media*. Hong Kong: Goethe-Institut Hong Kong, School of Communication, Hong Kong Baptist College.
- Mauch, Christof, Nathan Stoltzfus, and Douglas R. Weiner, eds. 2006. *Shades of Green: Environmental Activism Around the Globe*. London: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- McCormick, John. 1989. *The Global Environmental Movement*. London: Belhaven Press.
- Milton, Kay, ed. 1993. *Environmentalism: The View from Anthropology*. New York: Routledge.
- Milton, Kay. 1996. *Environmentalism and Cultural Theory: Exploring the Role of Anthropology in Environmental Discourse*. New York: Routledge.
- Nakano, Lynne Y. 2005. *Community Volunteers in Japan: Everyday Stories of Social Change*. New York: RoutledgeCurzon.
- Paterson, Matthew. 2001. *Understanding Global Environmental Politics: Domination, Accumulation, Resistance*. New York: Palgrave.
- Smith, David Horton and Jon Van Til, eds. 1983. *International Perspectives on Voluntary Action Research*. Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, Inc.
- Smith, Joe. 2006. *What do GREENS believe?* London: Granta Books.
- Stimpson, Philip. 2003. "China – Hong Kong – ." In John Fien, David Yencken and Helen Sykes, eds., *Young People and the Environment: An Asia-Pacific Perspective*. London: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- Weller, Robert P. 2006. *Discovering Nature: Globalization and Environmental Culture in China and Taiwan*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wong, David O. Y. 1996. *Environmental Conservation and Planning: Hong Kong and Overseas Encounters*. Hong Kong: Wood Age Publishers.
- Wu, Bin. 2003. *Sustainable Development in Rural China: Farmer Innovation and Self-organisation in Marginal Areas*. London: RoutledgeCurzon.
- Xie, Lei. 2009. *Environmental Activism in China*. London: Routledge.

Yeung, Wang On. 2007. *The Role of Environmental Non-governmental Organizations in Environmental Decision Making Process: A Case Study of Hong Kong*. M.Phil. thesis, Division of Geography and Resource Management, The Chinese University of Hong Kong.