

Gallatin Valley Backcountry Horsemen 1/7/2023

The Value of Volunteer Retention and Engagement

The subject of community outreach in an effort to gain additional volunteers to join the Gallatin Valley Backcountry Horsemen has been brought up at several general meetings. An important component of such an effort is not only to welcome potential new members, but to also retain and engage volunteers we already have.



The COVID-19 pandemic has adversely affected group participation in community and leisure activities. Many organizations have struggled in the last 2 years and “...given social distancing measures and the combination of postponements or cancellations of organizational or event operations, the traditional form of in-person volunteering is threatened.”¹ A survey in early 2020² reflected that people weren’t able to attend events - a problem that carried through the next two years and perhaps into the present.

Additional challenges that BCH faces is the narrow and specific population that can volunteer with us. Though there is an active influx of people moving into our area seeking the Montana lifestyle, understand that many horse owners have had horses less than 5 years. Accepting people who are working to develop their skill set will increase membership and participation in GVBCH. The number one use of horses is for recreation,^{3,4} and the number one concern of horse owners is land use issues.⁵ These statistics fit perfectly with BCH, and indicate that membership should be growing as the population in the Gallatin Valley grows.

BCHA has information on logging volunteer hours and a “Double Diamond” award given to a chapter with an outstanding project. Giving awards to individual volunteers would be a way for our chapter to show appreciation.⁶

Potential Action Items for Helping New Members feel welcome

- An educational topic that could be covered for current members at a regular GVBCH Meeting is communication and welcoming of new members and volunteers.

¹ *COVID-19 and its Impact on Volunteering: Moving Towards Virtual Volunteering*. Available from: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/342829040_COVID-19_and_its_Impact_on_Volunteering_Moving_Towards_Virtual_Volunteering [accessed Jan 06 2023].

²

<https://solutions.volunteermatch.org/hubfs/Ebooks/The%20Impact%20of%20COVID-19%20on%20Volunteering%20-%20A%20Two%20Month%20Comparison.pdf>

³ <https://horsesonly.com/horse-industry/>

⁴ <https://www.ridewiththequo.com/blog/the-horse-industry-by-the-numbers>

⁵ <https://www.americanhorsepubs.org/2021-equine-survey/>

⁶ <https://www.bcha.org/volunteering/>

- Consider that pointing out the new visitor in a loud and targeted manner may be off-putting to shy or introverted people - not everyone enjoys being called out in this way. Instead, we should engage and ask if they wish to be introduced publicly or take time to introduce them to other members individually.
- Follow-up with new/interested individuals with a welcome email or packet - something that outlines what BCH does and how we add value to our community and outdoor recreation. Highlight specific [awesome] projects pertinent to our GV chapter (e.g. week-long cabin projects, weekly work days on a variety of trails). Include contact information of people willing to talk with new members. Include small GVBCH-logo item (such as a sticker or small keychain).
- Be patient and accepting of new members so they continue to return and can grow both their horse and backcountry skills under the guidance of our experienced members.
- Recognize not every person can be a dedicated core member, but do understand that those peripheral volunteers can grow into core members over time and/or that their skills and time available can be utilized for the BCH mission.

Potential Action Items for Engaging Volunteers

- Incorporate a “Volunteer Engagement” position into board membership or officer positions.
- Give token BCH-logo awards for members after 1, 2, 5, 10 (etc.) years of service. This could include mugs, caps, patches, jackets, etc.
- Use year-end awards to show our volunteers how much they are appreciated - (e.g. tenderfoot award for first volunteer trip, most hours worked, most trail miles, most driven miles, etc.). We already log this information,⁷ so using it after it’s compiled should be straightforward. Indeed, awards may help with volunteer hours-reporting compliance.
- Helping volunteers learn new skills is a major way to engage with them - this happens through our horse safety, sawyer, and first-aid classes, but we can step it up with one-on-one packing lessons or other informative sessions.

More volunteer engagement information can be found at:

<https://www.volunteerhub.com/blog/volunteer-engagement-strategy/>

<https://www.aspirerresearchgroup.com/6-creative-volunteer-engagement-ideas-for-nonprofits/>

<https://www.galaxydigital.com/blog/volunteer-retention>

⁷ <https://www.bcha.org/volunteering/hours/>