

“Why do people take part in practical conservation volunteering?”

Rosaline Singh MSc, Royal Holloway University of London, zhba026@live.rhul.ac.uk

A brief overview

I contacted 73 current, previous, and potential practical volunteers with **Surrey Wildlife Trust (SWT)**, hoping to understand volunteering behaviour. I used a behaviour change model called COM-B (usually used in clinical studies) to describe people’s **capability** to volunteer, their **opportunity** to volunteer, and their **motivations**. The most common motivations were *love of the outdoors*, *altruism*, *social interaction*, and *exercise*. A questionnaire suggested the following interventions might encourage more people to join or rejoin SWT’s volunteering:

- When advertising sessions, include information about:
 - site walking conditions and session physical strain
 - nearest public transport access to sites (consider organising a ride-share scheme)
 - site bathrooms or nearby facilities
- Cross-advertise SWT’s education/skill-building workshops to volunteers, as some volunteers want to build transferable skills.
- Run sessions tailored and advertised for newcomers, and shorter sessions if feasible.

More details on how I carried out the study

First, I attended 3 SWT practical conservation volunteer days in Spring 2023, where I recorded 24 five-minute interviews during tea breaks. I asked people why they began volunteering, what they found meaningful about it, and what hindered them. Then, I analysed the themes in their answers, and divided them into capabilities, opportunities and motivations (COM in the COM-B model). I used my findings to develop an online questionnaire, which was circulated in SWT volunteer emails. 30 current volunteers, 8 ex-volunteers and 8 aspiring volunteers responded. My overall findings are summarised in Figure 1.

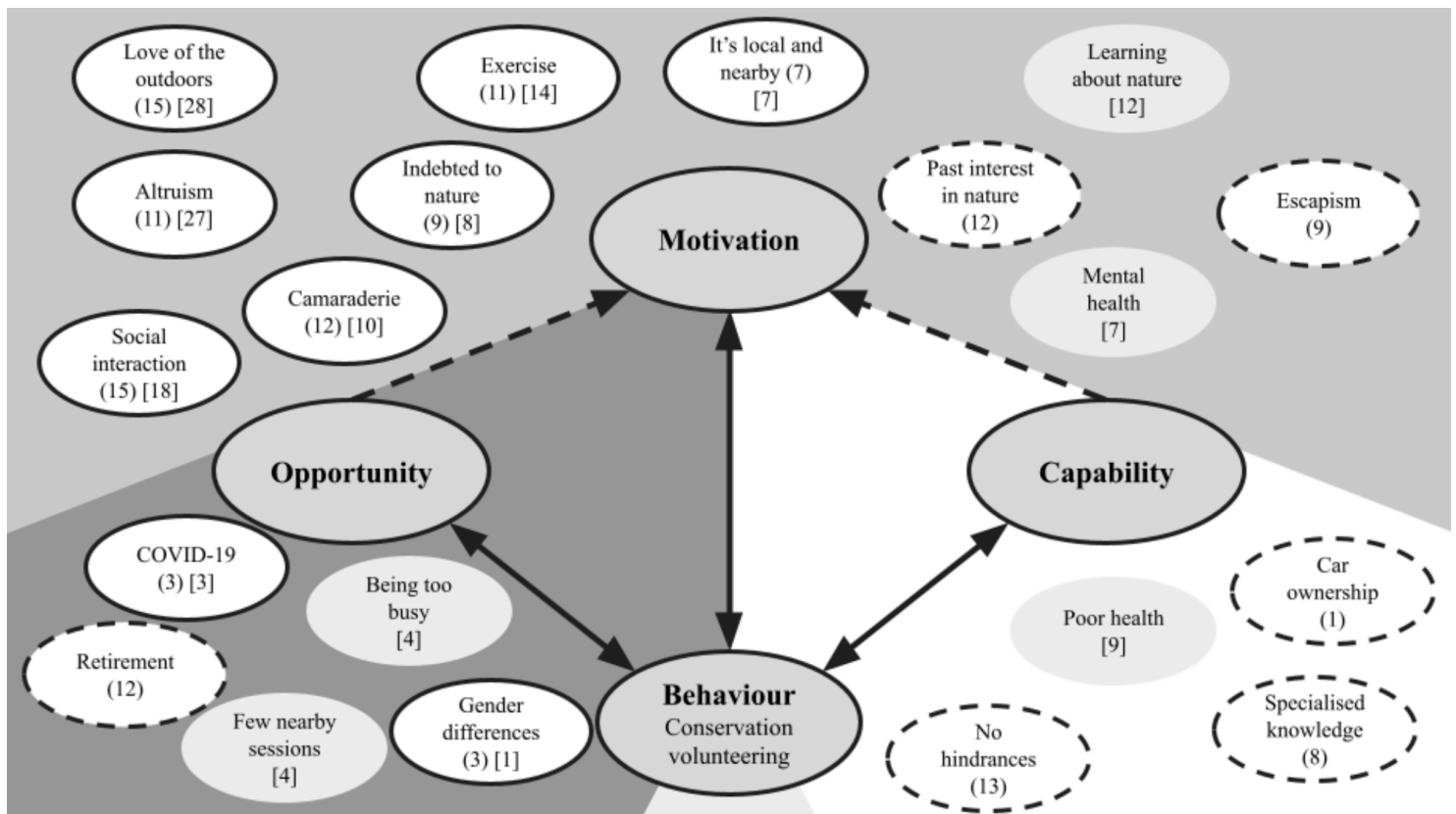


Figure 1. A web diagram of all the themes mentioned in the study as a whole. Each theme is grouped under Capability, Opportunity or Motivation. Interview mentions are in parentheses () and questionnaire mentions are in brackets []. Themes present only in the interviews are in dashed ovals, themes present only in the questionnaire are in grey ovals, and themes from both are in bold white ovals. The arrows represent the interrelation between COM-B’s factors.

I wanted to identify perceived barriers to volunteering in the online questionnaire, so I also asked people what they thought would encourage more volunteering. I gave a list of possible interventions and asked people for suggestions. The results are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Possible interventions, and how many respondents selected each one. Blue highlighted interventions were written in by respondents, rather than pre-selected by me.

Intervention	Number of respondents
Include information on who physically strenuous a session will be	17
Run sessions targeted towards those new to volunteering	16
Run 'lift-share' schemes from nearby train stations or bus stops	12
Run sessions with a focus on developing transferable skills	11
Include information on whether a session is accessible without the use of a car	10
Run shorter sessions	9
Include information on whether sessions are at sites with nearby bathroom facilities	8
Run sessions specifically for young adults	7
Run sessions specifically for women	4
Run sessions in overlooked or under-visited areas	4
Run sessions at more accessible sites for those with disabilities	4
Run more weekend sessions	3
Run sessions tailored for parents and their children	3
Run sessions specifically for LGBTQ people	2
Provide training on species identification	1
Don't have the same site be the same weekday every week	1
Give longer notice about sessions	1
Run session specifically for people of colour	1

The findings above are a very brief summary of a much larger project, so if you'd like to know more, please let me know – my email is at the top of this document. I'd be happy to share my full thesis with you - it contains this project, preceded by an extensive literature review which is a thorough deep dive on *why people like and dislike certain animals, plants, and landscapes*. The full thesis also includes demographic statistics from the respondents, such as age, gender, ethnicity, and it explores the shortcomings of my project.

Next steps

This project investigates volunteer perceptions of practical volunteering with SWT, and interventions that volunteers believe would encourage more volunteering. One drawback of this study is that I didn't reach '*data saturation*' (the point when new responses don't generate new information) and the group of volunteers who participated were quite homogenous – they were mostly older, white, and well-off. So, I hope to expand the scope of this study, and share the questionnaire with more diverse volunteers from other Wildlife Trusts across the UK. Hopefully, I can then gain a more *comprehensive* understanding of volunteering, and how we can encourage more volunteers! I hope this was insightful!

Thank you for reading, and I'd love to chat about this research or hear your thoughts if you have any - please drop me an email, even if just to say you enjoyed it! - Rosa