



People's Porpoise Project

Mental health and well-being: the benefits of environmental volunteering



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Summary

A quarter of people in the UK will suffer from mental health issues. The Welsh government have made mental health a priority in recent years introducing new plans, strategies and the 'Wellbeing of future generations (Wales) Act', with the aim of getting organisations to think about and contribute to positively changing people's mental health. In April 2018, Sea Trust started the People's Porpoise Project funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund. The project is a community project which involves recruiting and training volunteers to conduct scientific porpoise photo ID surveys. One of the aims of the project was to increase the mental health and wellbeing of its volunteers. As part of the project Sea Trust aimed to identify the impacts volunteering on the People's Porpoise Project has on individuals mental health and wellbeing. In order to achieve this, volunteers completed three questionnaires. Two of these focused on wellbeing and were completed at the start and at the end of the project. The third was a general project feedback form that was completed halfway through the project. The results showed many increases to several measures of wellbeing from the start of the project to the end, suggesting the project was positively impacting individual wellbeing. The study also identified many positive effects, specifically those associated with volunteering on an environmental project. Results suggest that a connection to nature has a large positive impact on volunteers. The study proves the necessity for environmental volunteer projects in order to tackle nationwide issues of mental health and wellbeing.

Introduction

Sea Trust CIC

Sea Trust is a non-profit community interest company established in 2003, working to better understand and help protect local marine wildlife, and to raise awareness in the local community. The Trust had its genesis in the Sea Empress oil spill disaster off the coast of Pembrokeshire in 1996 when it became clear there was a need for local people to be empowered to deal with such situations and monitor their marine wildlife. The Trust aims to inspire people to care about their local marine wildlife by opening their eyes to the stunning diversity of wildlife around the Welsh coast and engaging them in its protection.

Sea Trust is committed to:

- Studying, raising awareness and caring for local marine wildlife.
- Inspiring people to care about their environment by opening their eyes to the stunning diversity of wildlife around the Welsh coast
- Engaging people in environmental protection

Sea Trust currently focuses much of its research on marine mammals, conducting land, ferry and small boat surveys. Much of this work has taken place at Strumble Head, Pembrokeshire, where it has become clear that this is a site of high harbour porpoise abundance. The research undertaken at Sea Trust is often citizen science based led by qualified marine biologists. The Trust recruits volunteers in order to complete these research projects. Sea Trust began as a volunteer organisation and having a large and diverse volunteer base has always been of highest importance. The Trust currently has over 30 volunteers from many different backgrounds, the majority of these volunteer on a weekly basis.

Definitions

In 2006, the UK Government stated that wellbeing is:

“a positive physical, social and mental state; it is not just the absence of pain, discomfort and incapacity. It requires that basic needs are met, that individuals have a sense of purpose, that they feel able to achieve important personal goals and participate in society. It is enhanced by conditions that include supportive personal relationships, strong and inclusive communities, good health, financial and personal security, rewarding employment, and a healthy attractive environment”

There are additional components of importance for the over 65's:

- Physical autonomy and confidence
- Social wellbeing, particularly in terms of social isolation

Wellbeing can be broken down into physical and mental wellbeing, although they are understood to be closely linked.

Mental wellbeing:

Feeling happy is a part of mental wellbeing. Feelings of contentment, enjoyment, confidence and engagement with the world are all a part of mental wellbeing. Self-esteem and self-confidence are, too. So is a feeling that you can do the things you want to do. And so are good relationships, which bring joy to you and those around you.

Physical wellbeing:

Physical health relates to the functioning of the physical body. There are many diseases, conditions and disabilities that can impair functioning. Being physically healthy is only part of physical wellbeing. A positive physical state, the ability to achieve goals and participate in society are also major factors.

Health:

Health is defined as a state of complete mental, physical and social wellbeing; not merely the absence of illness. (Our Health and Wellbeing Today, 2010)

Self-esteem:

Self-esteem is the opinion we have of ourselves. When we have healthy self-esteem, we tend to feel positive about ourselves and about life in general. It makes us able to deal with life's ups and downs better. (Wcva.org.uk, 2019)

Background

A quarter of people in the UK will suffer from mental health issues (NHS, 2007). In Wales alone 8723 people were admitted to mental health facilities in 2016-2017. Each year, 300 people die by suicide, 150,000 people admit to having suicidal thoughts and 6000 people are admitted to A&E with self harm related emergencies (Office for national statistics, 2018). According to the 2016-2017 National survey for Wales, 16% of people in Wales describe themselves as lonely, young adults (16-24) have the lowest mental well-being scores and feel the most lonely and a lack of community cohesion and women have lower average mental wellbeing scores than men, 53% of women have low level mental health problems.

The Welsh Government has made mental health a priority in recent years with its 'Together for Mental Health Delivery Plan, 10 year Strategy' and the 'Wellbeing of future generations (Wales) Act'. These aim to encourage public bodies to think about how they can contribute towards positive mental health attitudes in the future by working with people, communities and each other to understand the problems regarding mental health and prevent them.

In April 2017, Sea Trust piloted a porpoise photo ID project. The aim of this project was to see if it was possible to run a citizen science project, testing photo-ID methods on the harbour porpoise population in Pembrokeshire. Whilst undertaking this project it soon became very clear

that the volunteers were benefiting from the project in several ways, especially their mental health and wellbeing. Building on the success of the pilot project Sea Trust developed the 'People's Porpoise Project' in April 2018. This project had an element that focused purely on increasing the wellbeing of volunteers from the local community. It has been proven that volunteering can be very beneficial for wellbeing especially when it is environmental or involves being outdoors and/or with nature (Miller *et al.*, 2002). These benefits include:

- Developing new or existing skills
- Forming positive social relationships
- Reducing social isolation
- Taking part in physical activity
- Education and training within a non-academic environment
- Connecting to nature
- Gaining a connection to the project/organisation
- Feeling useful/valued
- Taking time away from stresses and problems
- Getting better sleep
- Having opportunities to talk about problems in an informal setting
- Being part of a community project
- Feeling calmer and more peaceful

The following report, describes the process designed to evaluate individual wellbeing, the results of the questionnaires and discusses the use of questionnaires within this project.

Aim

- To identify the impacts volunteering on the People's Porpoise Project has on individual mental health and wellbeing.

Method

Design

A methodology was developed with the aim of measuring and evaluating volunteer wellbeing, specifically mental health as a result of taking part in Sea Trust's People's Porpoise Project. Three questionnaires were designed to analyse volunteer wellbeing across two different time points; the start of the project and the end of the project. The third questionnaire (feedback questionnaire) was designed to be filled in by the volunteers at the halfway point, (6 months volunteering). This questionnaire has a separate set of questions which aim to analyse the volunteers motivation, enjoyment and connection to the project, all recognised measures of wellbeing.

Questionnaires were designed to encompass questions which analyse several measures of wellbeing including participants feelings of mental and physical health, perceptions of participation in the project, for example skills and knowledge gained, self-esteem, isolation, feelings of connection to the environment. Questions in all three questionnaires include an number of multiple choice questions, rating scales and open-ended questions. Questionnaires were anonymous and emailed to participants in order to increase the validity of the results

Participants

Participants included 36 People's Porpoise Project volunteers aged between 15 and 64. Volunteers joined and left the project at separate times for various reasons, 15 of the volunteers joined the project at its inception (April, 2018). Another 10 joined the project during its recruitment phase between April and June, 2018. 16 volunteers joined the project at separate times from June, 2018 to January, 2019. Participants were invited to complete the 1st of the two wellbeing questionnaires either at the start of the project or when they joined. The 2nd of the wellbeing questionnaires was completed in the last month of the project (March, 2019) or when volunteers left the project. The feedback questionnaire was distributed in December, for the majority of the volunteers this allowed enough time to pass for them to give sufficient feedback on the project.

Main Findings

Wellbeing Questionnaire- Under 25's Start of project

Volunteers listed the following as their main barrier/s to increasing their mental wellbeing:

- Negative comments
- Money
- Time
- Unsatisfying/demanding job

Those who were seeking further education/training or employment answered yes or maybe when questioned if they believed that joining the project would help them gain the skills they would need (Fig.1 & 2.). This suggests volunteers joined the project for their own personal development which may be linked to increasing wellbeing.

If seeking access to a course, qualification or further training: do you feel that this project will help you to gain ...e, needed for admittance to the course?

7 responses

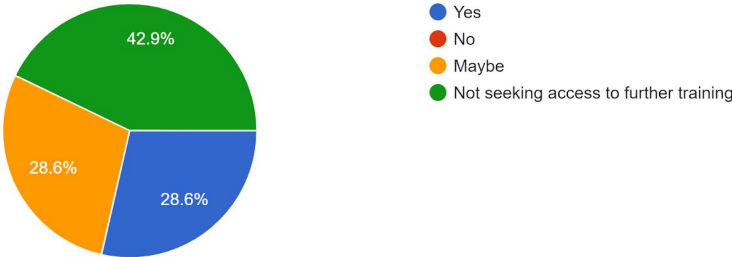


Figure 1. A pie chart showing, in percentage, the under 25's participants opinions on whether taking part in the project will allow them to gain skills needed to aid in further education.

If seeking employment: do you feel that this project will help you to gain certain skills or experience needed for gaining employment ?

6 responses

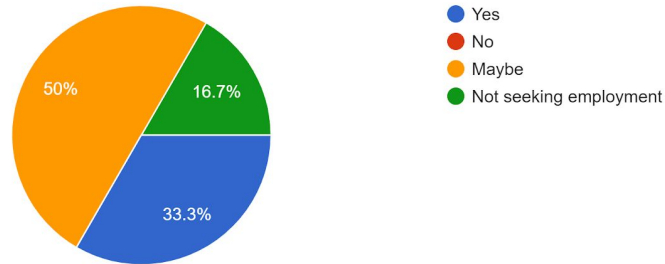


Figure 2. A pie chart showing, in percentage, the under 25's participants opinions on whether taking part in the project will allow them to gain skills needed to aid in gaining employment.

Under 25 volunteers listed the following skills they wished to gain as a result of taking part in the project:

- Transferable skills
- Conservation based training
- Species ID
- Practical experience
- Marine biology related training

When asked how they rate the importance of socialising with other generations 56% stated 'important' or 'very important' (Fig. 3.). This suggests that volunteers are aware that making connections with a diverse range of people including different age groups has a positive impact on them, whether that be enhancing social relationships, networking or learning from others. This can increase individual wellbeing.

How important is socialising with older age groups/ generations to you? (1 being least and 5 the most)

7 responses

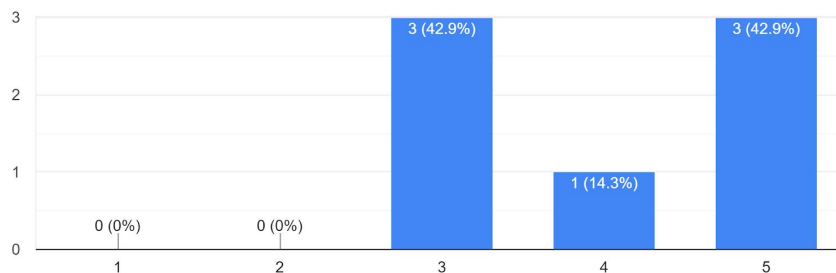


Figure 3. A bar chart showing, in percentage, how the under 25's participants rated the importance of socialising with other generations at the start of the project. 1 = Not at all important, 2 = Not that important, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Important, 5 = Very important.

In terms of importance of natural resources, the majority of participants identified that it was extremely important, whilst others said 'very' or 'reasonably' (Fig. 4.). Having a connection or an appreciation of nature has several positive effects on wellbeing.

How important are the local natural resources (such as the beaches, woodland, coastal park and walks) to you?

7 responses

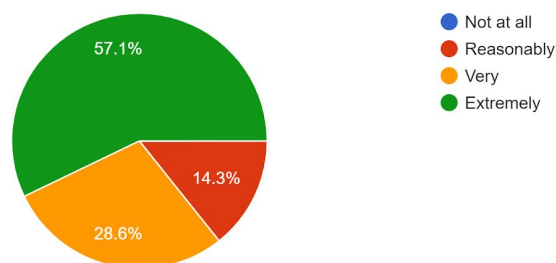


Figure 4. A pie chart showing, in percentage, the under 25's participant opinions of the importance of local natural resources at the start of the project.

The final question asked participants to describe their current understanding and knowledge of local marine life. All participants rated their understanding highly, answering either 'good', 'very good' or 'excellent' (Fig. 5.).

How would you rate your understanding/ knowledge of the local marine wildlife?

7 responses

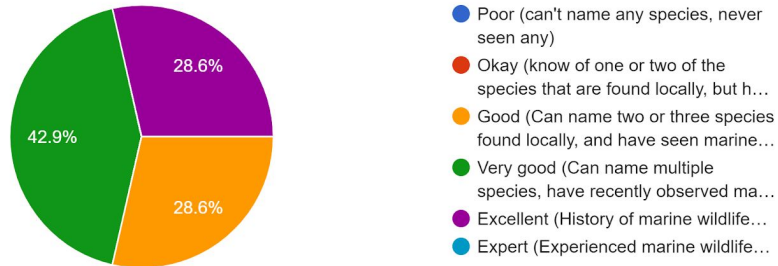


Figure 5. A pie chart showing, in percentage, the under 25's participants opinion of their own understanding and knowledge of local marine wildlife at the start of the project.

Wellbeing Questionnaire- Under 25's End of project

For the majority of the participants both mental and physical health increased as a result of taking part in the project (Fig. 6 & 7.). The majority of these answers were positive with a few answers of maybe. No one answered 'no' to either question. This suggests that the project is having a positive effect on volunteers wellbeing.

Do you feel that engaging with the local wildlife and nature as a result of this project has improved your mental ...cluding self-esteem, confidence etc.)?

6 responses

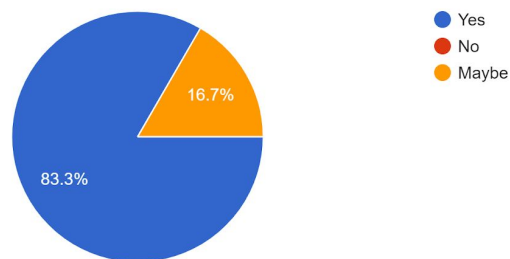


Figure 6. A pie chart showing, in percentage, the under 25's participants opinions of their mental health state as a result of taking part in the project.

Do you feel that engaging with the local wildlife and nature as a result of this project has improved your physical health?

6 responses

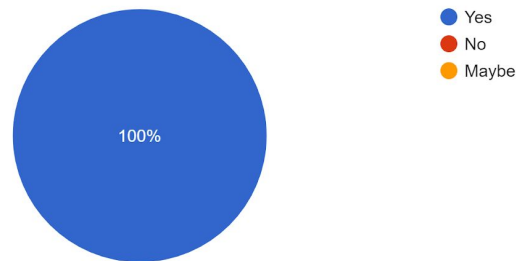


Figure 7. A pie chart showing, in percentage, the under 25's participants opinions of their physical health state as a result of taking part in the project.

Participants felt that the project had helped provide them with the relevant skills needed in order to access further education/training and/or employment (Fig. 8 & 9.).

These skills included:

- Higher confidence and knowledge of wildlife
- Species ID
- Scientific data collection
- Photography skills
- Social skills
- Team work skills
- Communication skills

As participants gain relevant skills needed to enhance their personal development, self-worth increases. It also reminds them that taking part in the project has been worthwhile for them increasing self-satisfaction levels, in turn increasing wellbeing.

Has this project helped you to gain relevant skills for accessing further training or education of any kind?

6 responses

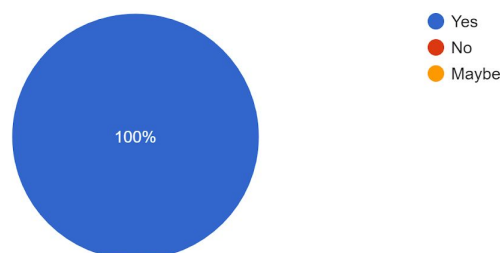


Figure 8. A pie chart showing, in percentage, the under 25's participants opinions on whether taking part in the project has allowed them to gain skills needed to aid in further education.

Has this project helped you to gain relevant skills for accessing employment of any kind?
6 responses

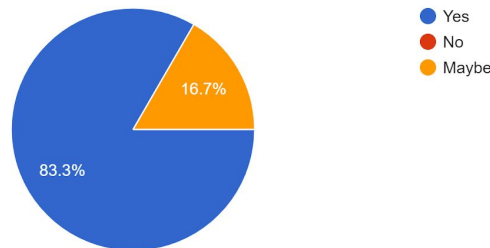


Figure 9. A pie chart showing, in percentage, the under 25's participants opinions on whether taking part in the project has allowed them to gain skills needed to aid in gaining employment.

Compared to at the start of the project, participants rating of importance of socialising with older generations increased (Fig. 10.), with 83% of volunteerings rating it as important or very important. This is an increase of 27% since the beginning of the project. This increase may be a result of the volunteers spending time socialising with other generations on the project and have therefore seen or experienced what benefits it has.

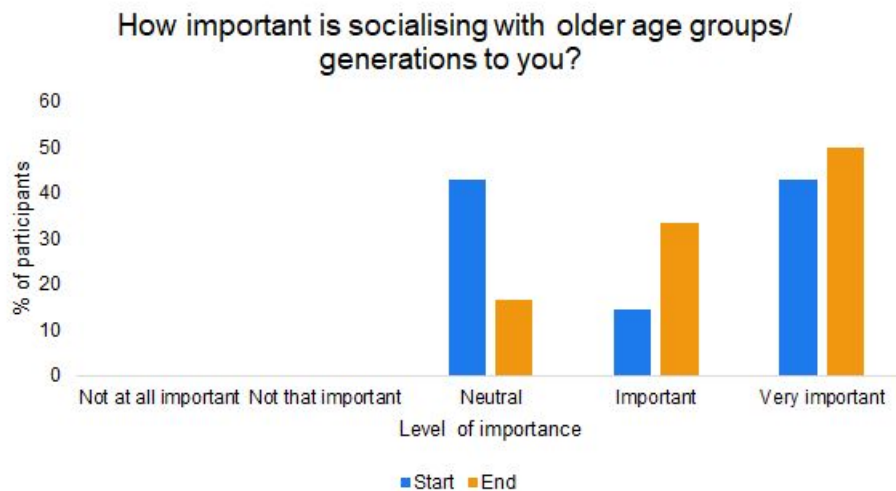


Figure 10. A bar chart comparing how the under 25's participants rated the importance of socialising with other generations between the start and end of the project.

Importance of natural resources also increased with the majority of participants (83%) claiming that natural resources are extremely important to them (Fig. 11.). This is an increase of 26%

compared to the start of the project (Fig 12.). This suggests that spending time on the project is affecting individual connections to nature which has increased individual appreciation of natural resources.

How important are the local natural resources (such as the beaches, woodland, coastal park and walks) to you?
6 responses

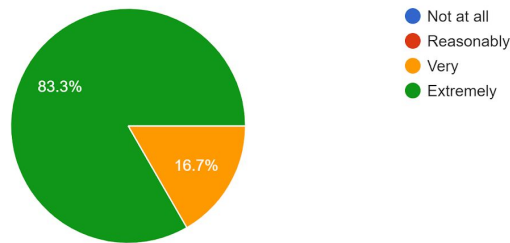


Figure 11. A pie chart showing, in percentage, the under 25's participant opinions of the importance of local natural resources at the end of the project.

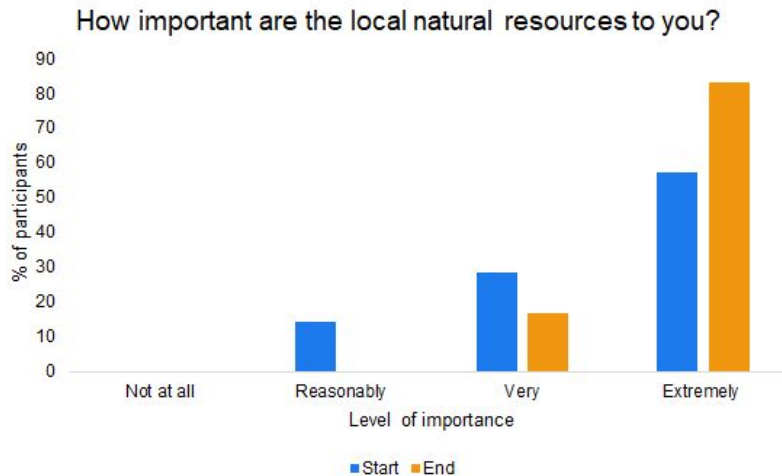


Figure 12. A bar chart comparing the under 25's participants opinions on the importance of local natural resources between the start and the end of the project.

Current knowledge and understanding of marine wildlife also improved compared to at the start of the project, with individuals describing their knowledge at expert level (Fig. 13.). There was also a 24% increase in those who describe their current knowledge and understanding as 'very good'. This proves that volunteering for the project increases individual knowledge and understanding of marine wildlife. This again increases personal development as well as self-esteem and confidence.

How would you rate your understanding/ knowledge of the local marine wildlife?

6 responses

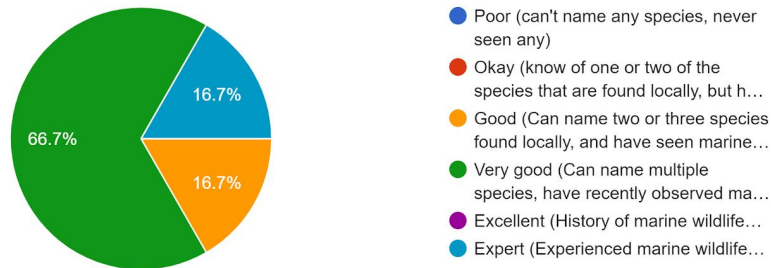


Figure 13. A pie chart showing, in percentage, the under 25's participants opinion of their own understanding and knowledge of local marine wildlife at the end of the project.

Finally when asked what participants felt they had gained from the project, results were extremely positive with increases in many measures of mental health (Fig. 14.). This suggests the project benefits mental health for under 25 volunteers. Gains included:

- Confidence
- Happiness after depression/anxiety
- Increased self esteem
- Lifelong friendships
- Connections
- Understanding of scientific data
- Valuable experiences and opportunities
- More knowledge of the local wildlife
- Skills required to further my career
- Social skills

Honestly I've become more of a confident person, Sea Trust has given me my happiness again after being diagnosed with anxiety and depression last year.

Lifelong friendships and the ability to understand scientific data.

I feel I have gained many valuable experiences and opportunities which I would have otherwise not have been able to have/do. And have met people with similar mindsets and intrests to mine; these people are also very knowledgeable so I feel like I have gained more knowledge about local marine life which could potentially help my future career.

I have gained a lot of my social skills while being part of this project and gained new friends

I have gained greater social skills and made a positive impact on my mental health. It has also helped my with my further education for a Masters in Conservation.

An opportunity to engage in activities I enjoy, and develop new skills. Volunteering at Sea Trust has increased my self-esteem and helps me to stay well.

Figure 14. A snapshot of the under 25's participants answers when asked what they felt the had gained from the project.

**Wellbeing Questionnaire- Over 25's
Start of project**

When asked to rate their mental wellbeing at the start of the project 53% of the participants stated 'good' or 'very good' (Fig. 15.). Physical wellbeing was slightly higher with 68% rating it as 'good' or 'very good' (Fig.16.).

How would you rate your current mental well being? (1 worst possible to 5 best possible)
13 responses

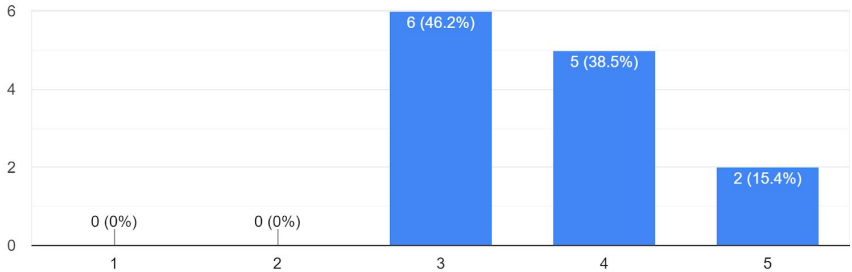


Figure 15. A bar chart showing, in percentage, how the over 25's participants rated their mental wellbeing at the start of the project. 1 = Not at all important, 2 = Not that important, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Important, 5 = Very important.

How would you rate your current physical well being? (1 worst possible to 5 best possible)

13 responses

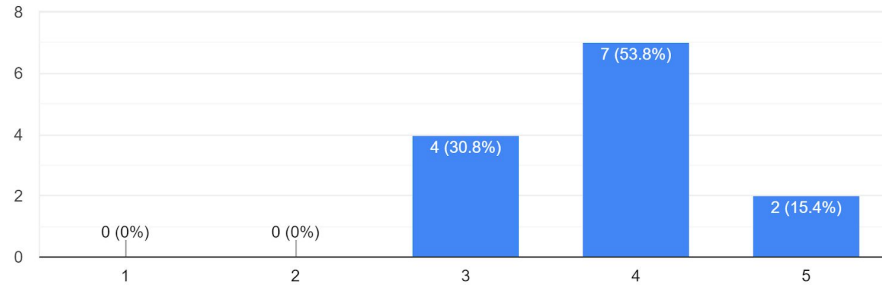


Figure 16. A bar chart showing, in percentage, how the over 25's participants rated their physical wellbeing at the start of the project. 1 = Not at all important, 2 = Not that important, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Important, 5 = Very important.

Main barriers to wellbeing included:

- No routine
- Time
- Money
- Lack of motivation
- Working away from home
- Medical issues
- Working inside/at a computer all day

When asked to rate the importance of socialising with other generations, 69% of participants rated it as 'important' or 'very important' (Fig. 17.). 46% of participants felt that there were not enough opportunities to socialise with other generations (Fig. 18.). These results show that are aware of the potential benefits that can come from spending time with other generations.

How important is socialising with other age groups/ generations to you? (1 being worst possible to 5 best possible)

13 responses

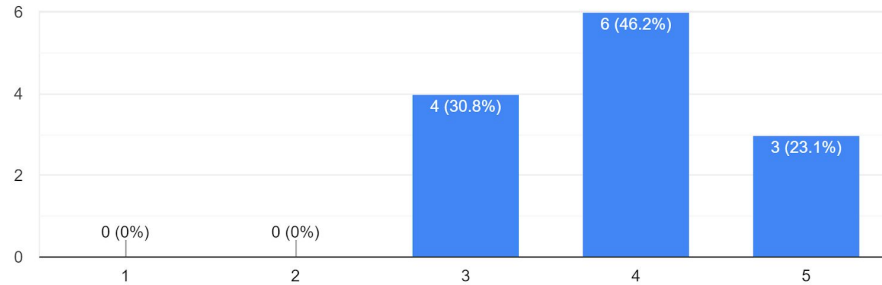


Figure 17. A bar chart showing, in percentage, how the over 25's participants rated the importance of socialising with other generations at the start of the project. 1 = Not at all important, 2 = Not that important, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Important, 5 = Very important.

Do you feel you have enough opportunity to socialise with people from other age groups/ generations?

13 responses

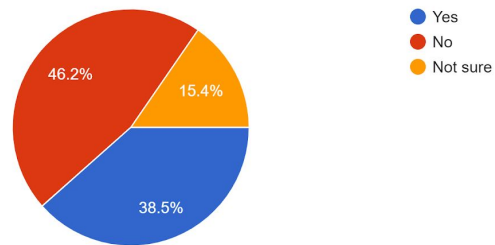


Figure 18. A pie chart showing, in percentage, the over 25's participants opinion on the opportunities to socialise with other generations at the start of the project.

All participants stated that natural resources are either 'extremely' or 'very important' to them (Fig. 19.).

How important are the local natural resources (such as the beaches, woodland, coastal park and walks) to you?

13 responses

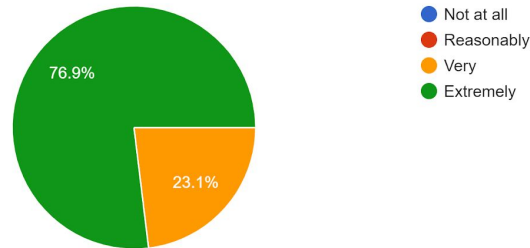


Figure 19. A pie chart showing, in percentage, the over 25's participant opinions of the importance of local natural resources at the start of the project.

When asked to describe their current knowledge and understanding of marine wildlife, participants rated themselves from 'Ok' to 'very good' (Fig. 20.). No one described themselves as excellent or expert level.

How would you rate your understanding/ knowledge of the local marine wildlife?

13 responses

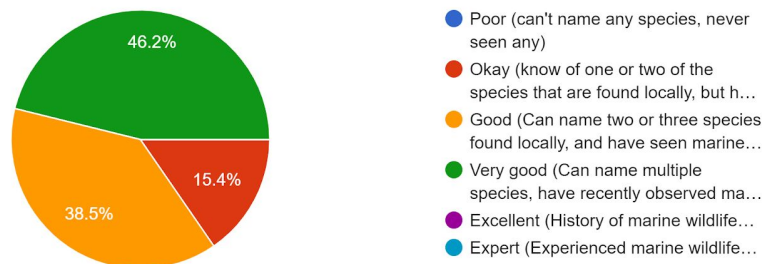


Figure 20. A pie chart showing, in percentage, the over 25's participants opinion of their own understanding and knowledge of local marine wildlife at the start of the project.

Wellbeing Questionnaire- Over 25's End of project

Overall self-rated mental health and physical health scores increased compared to the start of the project. 90% of participants rated their mental health as 'good' or 'very good' (Fig. 21.) this was a 37% increase compared to the start of the project. 81% of participants rated their physical health as 'good' or 'very good' (Fig. 22.), this was a 13% increase since the start of the project. These results suggest that volunteering for the project can have positive effects on wellbeing.

How would you rate your current mental wellbeing? (1 worst possible to 5 best possible)

11 responses

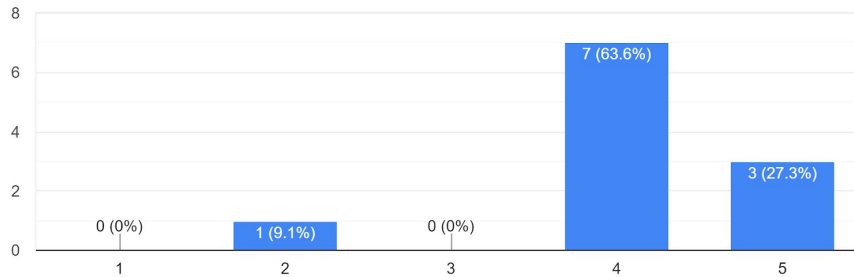


Figure 21. A bar chart showing, in percentage, how the over 25's participants rated their mental wellbeing at the end of the project. 1 = Not at all important, 2 = Not that important, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Important, 5 = Very important.

How would you rate your current physical wellbeing? (1 worst possible to 5 best possible)

11 responses

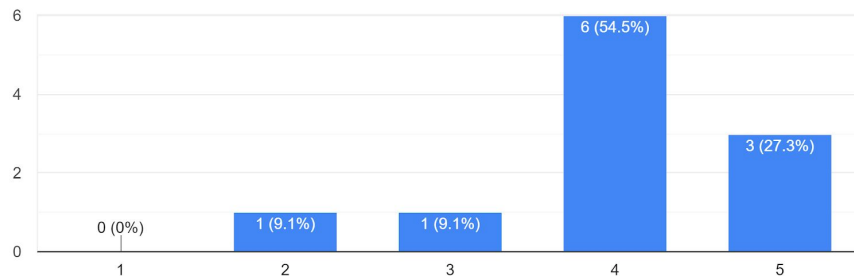


Figure 22. A bar chart showing, in percentage, how the over 25's participants rated their physical wellbeing at the end of the project. 1 = Not at all important, 2 = Not that important, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Important, 5 = Very important.

Retired volunteers were asked questions related to how mental wellbeing can be affected by retirement. When asked if volunteers felt a degree of isolation since retiring, 40% of retired participants said 'a lot' and 40% said 'a little'. Retired volunteers also feel their self-esteem has decreased since retiring, with 40% suggesting their self-esteem has decreased 'a fair bit' and 20% suggesting it had decreased 'a little'. Taking part in the project has decreased isolation and increased self-esteem for all participants over the age of 25 (Fig. 23. & 24.). These results suggest that volunteering on the project can help reduce or overcome several of mental health measures associated with wellbeing, especially for those who have retired.

Do you feel this project has helped to decrease your isolation?

11 responses

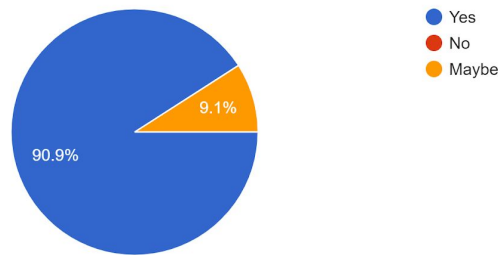


Figure 23. A pie chart showing, in percentage, the over 25's participants opinion on their feelings of isolation as a result of taking part in the project.

Do you feel that this project has helped to increase your self esteem?

11 responses

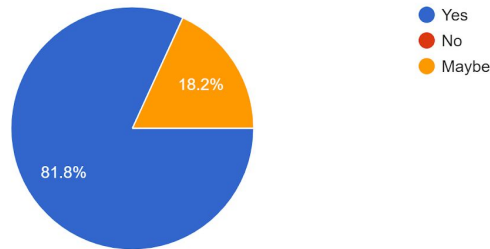


Figure 24. A pie chart showing, in percentage, the over 25's participants opinion on their self-esteem as a result of taking part in the project.

Once reminded of the main barriers volunteers faced when increasing wellbeing, 55% of participants stated that taking part in the project has helped reduce or overcome these barriers (Fig. 25.). This shows that volunteering on the project helps tackle several main barriers to individual wellbeing.

Has this project helped to address, reduce or overcome these barriers?

11 responses

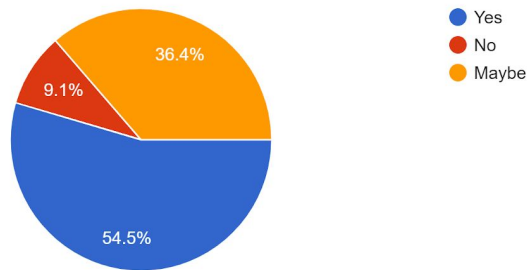


Figure 25. A pie chart showing, in percentage, the over 25's participants opinion on whether taking part in the project has reduced or overcome their main barriers to their mental health.

The importance of socialising with other generations increased since the start of the project with 90% of participants rating it as 'important or 'very important (Fig. 26.). Participants also believe there are more opportunities to socialise with other generations since joining the project (Fig. 27.). This increase may be a result of the volunteers spending time socialising with other generations on the project and have therefore seen or experienced what benefits it has. This also suggests that volunteering on this project is a good way to increase socialisation with other generations because of the opportunity it provides.

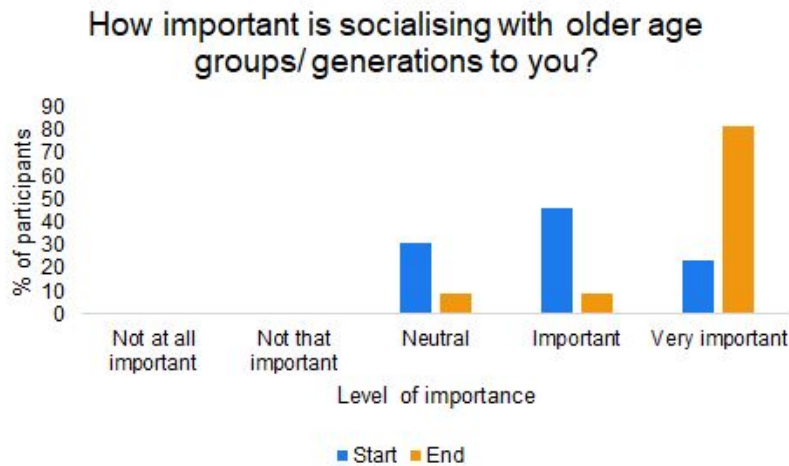


Figure 26. A bar chart comparing how the over 25's participants rated the importance of socialising with other generations between the start and end of the project.

Has this project increased your opportunities to socialise with other age groups?

11 responses

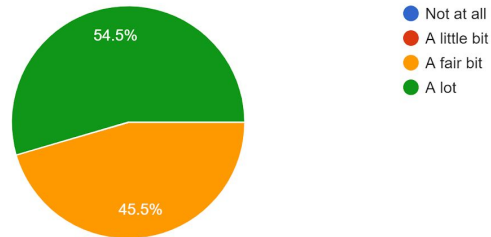


Figure 27. A pie chart showing, in percentage, the over 25's participants opinion on the opportunities to socialise with other generations at the end of the project.

Importance of natural resources has increased since the start of the project with 100% of participants stating that natural resources are 'extremely important' to them (Fig. 28.). This suggests that spending time on the project and connecting to nature increases individual appreciation of natural resources. This in turn increases wellbeing as a connection to nature has several benefits to wellbeing.

How important are the local natural resources (such as the beaches, woodland, coastal park and walks) to you?

11 responses

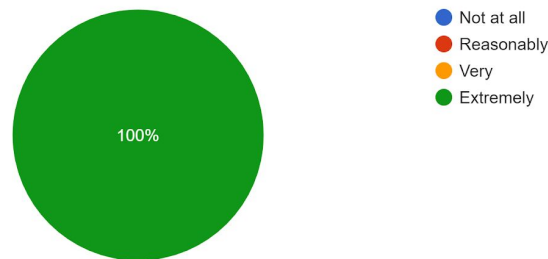


Figure 28. A pie chart showing, in percentage, the over 25's participant opinions of the importance of local natural resources at the end of the project.

Knowledge and understanding of marine wildlife has also increased since the start of the project. Everyone stated that their knowledge and understanding was above 'ok' level, one volunteer rated their knowledge and understanding level as 'expert' (Fig. 29.). This results proves the learning element to volunteering on the project works well. Volunteers are aware that they are learning and therefore experience high satisfaction levels as a result of volunteering on the project.

How would you rate your understanding/ knowledge of the local marine wildlife?

11 responses

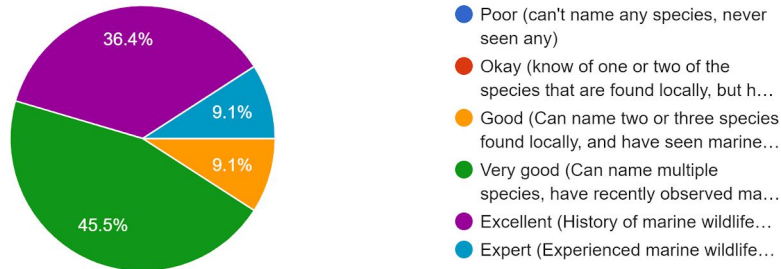


Figure 29. A pie chart showing, in percentage, the over 25's participants opinion of their own understanding and knowledge of local marine wildlife at the end of the project.

Finally when asked what participants felt they had gained from the project results were extremely positive, with increases in many measures of mental health, suggesting the project benefits mental health for volunteers aged 25 and over (Fig. 30.). Gains included:

- Increased knowledge
- Increased appreciation of natural resources
- Companionship
- Engagement with people in different age groups
- Increased confidence
- Decreased anxiety
- Scientific survey training
- Felt useful and valued
- Doing something enjoyable
- Increased social life
- Helped with a positive transition from working to retirement
- Provides light exercise
- Gets me out into the fresh air
- Mental stimulation
- Be part of conservation project
- Informal counselling
- Increased self-esteem
- Increased feeling of community
- Increased connection to nature
- Increased feelings of happiness

| |
|--|
| A knowledge and appreciation of the local wildlife of Pembrokeshire as well as meeting some lovely people and enjoying their company. |
| engagement with nature and people of different ages and social classes |
| Learning about the local marine life and meeting like minded people |
| Companionship. The knowledge that I am helping in some way. |
| Confidence in myself which has helped in decreasing my anxiety |
| I have increased my knowledge and understanding of local marine life. I have learned more about the scientific methodology used to collate data and support the aims of the project. I have felt useful and valued as a volunteer. I have enjoyed collecting data and supporting the project. I have met and socialised with a diverse group of interesting people (volunteers and Project staff) and also helped to communicate what we are doing with the public we meet when conducting the surveys. The project has helped me to make a positive transition from working to retirement. I still feel useful, I am learning something new. The exercise, fresh air and beautiful environment is making me feel better at a time of my life when I could be feeling quite sad and redundant. |
| A renewal of Denver of worth and mental stimulation |
| Meeting people. Being able to make an impact and difference to help wildlife |
| Wonderful to be part of something that protects our environment and builds peoples confidence. Meeting enthusiastic persons and uniting with people that have similar personal issues, in defence of a common cause. Makes the usual 'Group Therapy' look lame; we all get cold and wet but we are the best at supporting each other. |
| Self esteem, lots of new like-minded friends of all ages, some physical but lots of mental well-being. A feeling of community. A much wider and deeper understanding and appreciation of our local wildlife, how to help conserve it and the importance of doing so. |
| Better understanding of the marine wildlife in the area and their patterns and learning to record and help conserve. Doing something I enjoy and where I feel I can make a contribution. Feeling of happiness being outside with nature. Formed great friendships and relationships with people of all ages. |

Figure 30. A snapshot of the over 25's participants answers when asked what they felt the had gained from the project.

Feedback questionnaire- Halfway point

Volunteers signed up to the project for multiple reasons, the majority had an interest in wildlife initially (Fig. 31.). This shows that the project appeals to volunteers for more than one reason.

Why did you originally sign up to volunteer? (16 responses)

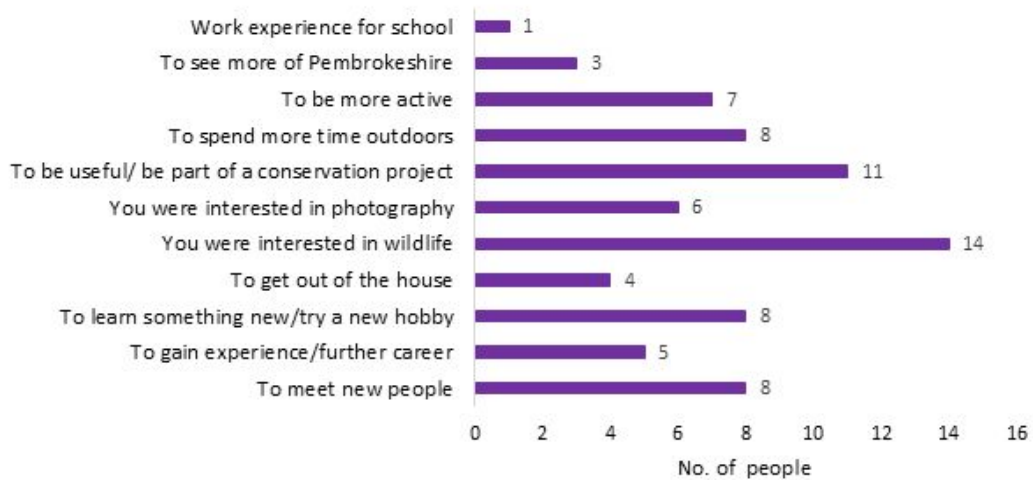


Figure 31. A bar chart showing the reasons why the volunteers signed up to take part in the project. Questionnaire participants choose the options most suited to them, participants were allowed to pick more than one option.

When asked why they keep returning, volunteers again had several reasons, with the majority stating that ‘they enjoyed spotting marine wildlife’ and that they like ‘spending time with other people on the project’ (Fig. 32.). The options available for this question are all indicators of positive wellbeing, as several participants selected multiple options, this shows that the project is increasing well being in a number of ways.

Why do you keep coming back? (16 responses)

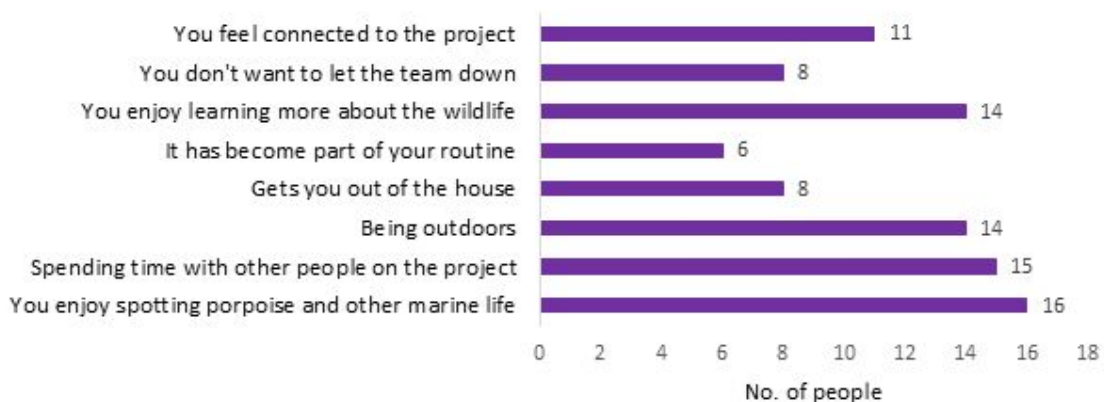


Figure 32. A bar chart showing the reasons why the volunteers remained volunteering on the project. Questionnaire participants choose the options most suited to them, participants were allowed to pick more than one option.

Volunteers stated that volunteering on the project has benefitted at least one area of their lives, with no one claiming that the project has had no positive benefits (Fig. 33.). The majority of volunteers believed that volunteering for the project had benefited their social life. Mental health also benefited with 62.5% of the volunteers choosing this option. This proves that the project does work as a tool for increasing individual wellbeing.

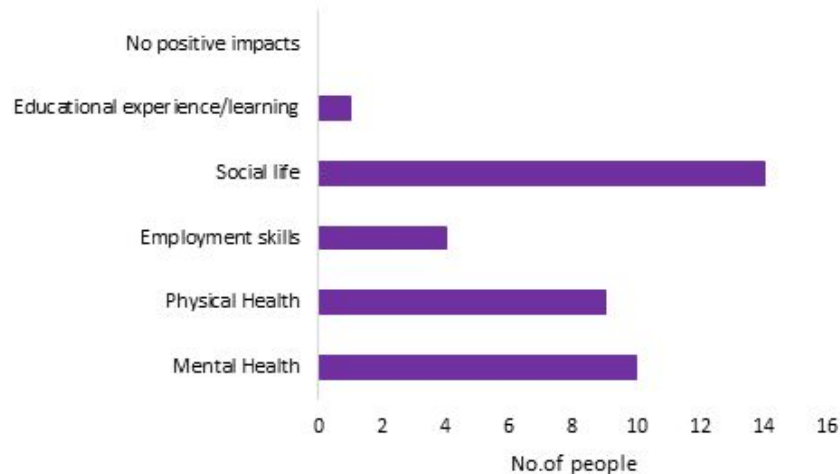


Figure 33. A bar chart showing what areas of the volunteers lives have been positively affected because of their involvement in the project. Questionnaire participants choose the options most suited to them, participants were allowed to pick more than one option.

The majority of volunteers (94%) felt like their volunteering was positively impacting the project, suggesting they feel useful and appreciated which is a measure of individual well-being (Fig. 34.).

My volunteering positively impacts the project. (Tick one)

16 responses

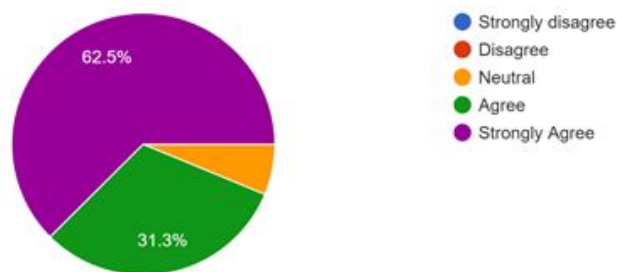


Figure 34. A pie chart showing, in percentage, how volunteers rated how much they felt their volunteering was having a positive impact on the project.

The feedback questionnaire also asked volunteers if they would recommend volunteering on the project, 100% of the respondents said 'yes' (Fig. 35.). This shows that the volunteers think highly of the project, this may be a direct result of the fact that the project benefits them in several ways. These results are also strengthened by the last question of the questionnaire which asked for any extra feedback (Fig. 36.).

How likely are you to recommend volunteering with Sea Trust. (Tick one)

16 responses



Figure 35. A pie chart showing, in percentage, how likely the volunteers are to recommend volunteering with Sea Trust to others.

Is there any other feedback that you would like to give?

8 responses

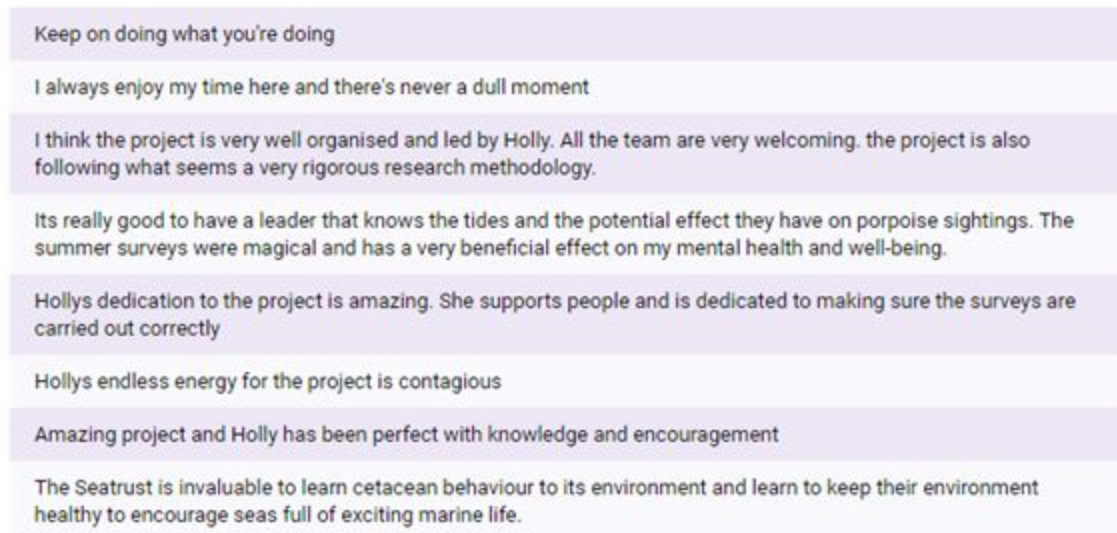


Figure 36. A snapshot of volunteers answers when asked for general feedback at the end of the feedback questionnaire.

Discussion

Professional development

The majority of volunteers, especially young volunteers joined the project for their professional development. Some were seeking further education others were looking to gain employment and enhance their CV. By strengthening this part of their lives, volunteers increase several measures of wellbeing for example, self-worth, self-esteem and confidence (Grese *at el.*, 2000). The results from the under 25's questionnaire showed that all participants gained relevant skills which they believe will help them further their career be that through further education or employment. All gained skills listed by volunteers will enhance CV's and prepare people for future professional development. This allows for feelings of fulfilment, satisfaction and increased confidence when stepping out into the professional world. Volunteers over the age of 25 claimed their self-esteem had increased since joining the project, this can also aid in professional development, helping people feel stronger in themselves when applying for jobs and/or attending interviews. Feeling prepared and skilled will inevitably increase mental health both short and long-term.



Figure 37. Volunteers participating in our accredited Wildlife Observer Training (WOT) course in June 2018.

Socialising with other generations

Creating connections and/or friendships is often associated with positive mental health. Connecting with diverse groups of people especially inter-generational groups can be extremely beneficial (Musick and Wilson., 2003, Thang and Kaplan., 2013). For younger generations, talking to older people increases their knowledge base and introduces them to different ways of thinking and making opinions, often on subjects that are not part of their usual day to day conversation. They begin to understand different mindsets and form opinions based on a wider knowledge/perspective basis.

The same can be said for the older generations. From informal feedback throughout the project some older volunteers have learnt new skills from the younger volunteers including computer

and technology skills. One example from this project involves a time when a retired volunteer was moving house, a younger volunteer offered to help. The older volunteer benefitted from the help of moving large, heavy furniture and the younger volunteer learnt things about fitting light bulbs, curtain rails and more. Something he had never been shown or taught before. Both came away feeling highly satisfied and content. This study revealed that volunteers seemed to understand the importance of socialising with other generations, however levels of importance still increased at the end of the project. This means that after spending time on the project socialising with other generations, the volunteers have experienced its benefits first hand and realised its importance to their mental health and wellbeing.

“I have been volunteering with the Sea Trust in Pembrokeshire since September. And in that short time I’ve been welcomed as part of the team, met some really lovely people, learned so much about marine mammals and had some amazing sightings. It’s been an amazing experience so far, and such a warm friendly environment to work in.” - Porpoise Photo ID volunteer Ben Hughes

Spending time with people often decreases loneliness (Musick and Wilson., 2003), something that is considered a problem in Wales, specifically in rural areas where isolation is more common (Office for national statistics, 2018). Isolation and loneliness is a large indicator of decreased or poor mental health as it is often associated with depression (Cornwell and Waite., 2009). Answers from the over 25’s questionnaire suggest that the project serves as an opportunity to socialise with other generations. These results also reveal that volunteers felt less isolated since joining the project. The project gives people of all ages an opportunity to socialise and to work together on a community project. This allows for friendships to be built, it also creates a connection for the community increasing community cohesion which would not have been there otherwise. The connections and friendships made on the project often go beyond the one day a week of volunteering. Several volunteers and Sea Trust staff spend time with each other outside of the project. For example a couple of volunteers have joined a local pub quiz team that meets every week. Others have joined an open-water swimming group, a connection that has formed as a result of a shared interest in the sea and the project.



Figure 38. A photo of some of the projects volunteers.

Connection with the environment

A connection to nature has been proven to have positive effects on wellbeing (Capaldi *et al.*, 2015). Getting out into the fresh air may often require light physical activity which in itself has multiple health and wellbeing benefits (Thompson Coon *et al.*, 2011). Increasing people's understanding of wildlife and human impacts on nature creates new perspectives on their own lives and the surrounding environment (Capaldi *et al.*, 2015). The People's Porpoise Project gets volunteers out onto the Pembrokeshire coastal path on a weekly basis. The volunteers are constantly learning about the local marine wildlife and learning the latest science to do with harbour porpoises. This gives them a connection to the local population of porpoises and their surrounding environment. This study revealed that the importance of natural resources to the volunteers increased as the project progressed. This shows that the project is enhancing a connection to nature and increasing appreciation of nature.



Figure 39. Volunteers enjoying the sunshine during a photo ID survey at Strumble Head.

All volunteers believed that their knowledge and understanding of marine wildlife increased after spending time on the project. This increases confidence working on the project in the future, helps them understand the rationale for the project enhancing their connection to both the project and the wildlife. The increased knowledge and understanding also increases confidence within themselves and self-esteem. Often the project volunteers will speak to the public about surveys and the porpoises, it is obvious that after these interactions volunteers gain a real sense of achievement. “I get a real buzz telling people about our work” (quote from volunteer Ken Barnett). The more they know about the subject the happier they are to talk about it to the public, either in front of large audiences at talks or events or just to a couple of walkers on the coast paths during surveys. A connection to nature is something that will stay with someone, it is something they can take with them even once their volunteering ends. This project gives volunteers the tools to connect with nature increasing positive wellbeing during the project and beyond.

“Being accepted as a volunteer has given me a means to reconnect with the marine side of the natural world. I’ve learned quite a bit about cetaceans and other ocean creatures as well as enjoying the benefits (both physical and mental) of being out on the coast in the fresh air. Through meeting and working/socialising with other volunteers and staff I feel more part of the local community.” - Porpoise Photo ID volunteer Marion Tyrrell

The fact that the majority of the volunteers joined the project because of their interest in wildlife and because they wanted to be part of a conservation project and because they wanted to

spend time outdoors and the fact that the majority of the volunteers continue to take part in the project because they enjoy spotting and learning more about the wildlife and being outdoors highlights the importance of the environmental aspect of this project. These results would suggest that the environmental aspect is the most important element of this project. It can also be considered that had it not been for the environmental aspect of this project many of the volunteers would not have been interested in volunteering. The connection to nature is not only the biggest pull for most volunteers but the reason they continue to volunteer.

It is this aspect of the project that creates feelings of happiness and brings the most enjoyment to volunteers. Many comment that being out in the fresh air reduces their stress and/or anxiety (Thompson Coon *et al.*, 2011). Often volunteers comment on how volunteering on the project also helps them sleep. It is believed that exposure to fresh air, especially sea air, helps many get a good night sleep (Hahn *et al.*, 2011). Often those struggling with mental health issues such as stress and anxiety struggle to sleep (Lane *et al.*, 2014). This project helps to reduce some stressors, relaxes the mind and the fresh air encourages physical feelings of fatigue aiding a good night's sleep. It has been well documented that getting a good night's sleep can positively impact health and wellbeing in numerous ways (Lane *et al.*, 2014).



Figure 40. Two photos of the team embracing the nature/environmental aspect of the project. Left: Volunteers at Ramsey Sound during a photo ID survey. Right: Volunteer Heather making the most of the wild ponies at Strumble Head.

The conservation element of the project is something that many of the volunteers have commented on. They feel like they are making a difference and being part of the solution to the issues surrounding porpoises and the surrounding marine life. "It's great to do my bit" (quote from volunteer Amanda Davey). Volunteers often feel higher levels of contentment and

satisfaction as a result of this aspect. This study has made it clear that the environmental element to this project is the most important part to the volunteers. It is obvious that this element is having a large positive effect on the volunteers mental health and wellbeing. Environmental projects are no longer just a tool to help conserve nature, it is a opportunity to increase individual and community wellbeing. This should be considered when looking to tackle local and national problems with mental health issues.

“I volunteered as I’m interested in Marine life and conservation and wanted to ‘give back’ something into the community in which I grew up. The Project has brought me into contact with various groups of people who I clearly would not have met otherwise, including many people who stop and talk at the strumble head survey point. We are able to spread the word to these people about how important the area is and how, with a bit of knowledge, anyone can watch the marine life on show there. I find it extremely rewarding to be able to volunteer and give something to the community, the sea trust itself and the more general population who we are able to engage with. It’s also great to engage with people of all ages and backgrounds, not just those in my peer group.” -Porpoise Photo ID volunteer Adrian Tyrrell

Other impacts

Volunteers were asked if they believed their volunteering positively impacts the project. This question was asked in order to gauge if the volunteers felt appreciated, useful, they were contributing, making a difference and if they understood the importance of their role as a volunteer. The majority of volunteers ‘strongly agreed’ or ‘agreed’ that they were positively impacting the project. Showing that the volunteers do feel useful, needed, important to the project. Feelings of usefulness, being needed and appreciated for the time and resources they are using in order to volunteer on the project all go towards increasing mental wellbeing.

All volunteers would recommend volunteering on the project to others. This would not be the case if the project was not positively impacting volunteer health and wellbeing. This shows that the volunteers are experiencing higher levels of contentment, happiness, enjoyment and other positive benefits as a direct result of the project. These results are only strengthened by other volunteer feedback, including formal statements and informal comments.

Finally the list of gains from the volunteers all help to improve health and wellbeing in some way. Some may have only benefitted in one or two ways or only in one area of their life, for example social life, but no volunteers who took part in this study experienced ‘no positive impacts’. This would suggest that all volunteers have had positive experiences and benefited from taking part in the People’s Porpoise Project.

“It has increased my knowledge of and interest in the wildlife, particularly cetaceans, that are to be found off our coast. I have met a lot of nice people. Regular attendance has given a structure to my week. I feel that I am contributing to a useful and worthwhile project.” -Porpoise Photo ID volunteer Sean Murphy

Limitations

Questionnaires are commonly used when evaluating individual health and wellbeing, however there are still many challenges (McDowell., 2006). The first of these is relying on participants. Researchers have to rely on participants not only to fill in the questionnaire but to answer honestly. There is little that can be done when working with volunteers if they refuse to take part. In order to achieve honest answers questionnaires are often anonymous, however this can still be an issue when analysing qualitative data such as an individual's mental health and wellbeing. Asking emotive questions can be difficult as opinions, feelings, emotions, perspectives and moods can change so quickly. Answers on a questionnaire about a participant's mental state may change depending on whether they are having a 'good' or 'bad' day. Feelings and emotions can be hard to quantify and explain for both researchers and participants. These are all things that must be considered when designing a questionnaire.

This study aimed to evaluate volunteer wellbeing as a result of taking part in a project. The biggest challenge in this case was the fact that participants would join and leave the project at different times throughout the projects duration. This meant that some volunteers had a year between the start and end questionnaire and some only a couple of months. Those who have been with the project for longer may have experienced more impacts of the project than those that had less time between questionnaires. It may be that a couple of months is not enough to make a impact on an individual.

Another challenge faced was that not all volunteers filled in the questionnaires, therefore it was possible that some volunteers filled in start of project questionnaires but not end of project questionnaires or vice versa. This could make the comparison between start and end questionnaires unreliable or at least not a true representation of an individual's progress on the project. The final challenge faced was the lack of expertise and training when evaluating wellbeing. With the Sea Trust team being made up of mostly environmental scientists, there is a lack of psychology experience, especially when handling and analysing qualitative data. However due to this process many lessons have been learnt on the best ways to evaluate wellbeing and the best methods to use.

Conclusion

This study has revealed that there are several health and wellbeing benefits to volunteering on the People's Porpoise Project, especially the environmental aspect. It has proven that an environmental project attracts a wider range of volunteers and helps develop stronger connections for nature, benefiting individuals and communities. This study proves the necessity for environmental volunteer projects in order to tackle nationwide issues with mental health and wellbeing. The project has shown to benefit volunteers in numerous ways and within several aspects of their lives. Volunteers have developed both in their personal and professional lives as a result of the project. They have built strong social relationships, become part of both a community and a conservation project, they have learnt a lot and most importantly enjoyed themselves. Although evaluating wellbeing is seen as challenging, before and after questionnaires seem to be a simple and effective method which can be used by most organisations. Care should be taken in future studies when wording questions and methods of analysis should be decided prior to questionnaire design.

Acknowledgements

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