

# Family Volunteering in Environmental Stewardship Initiatives

**Research Report**

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Evergreen**

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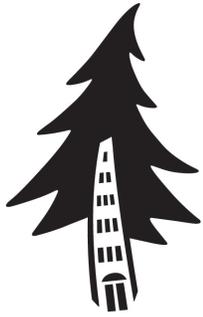
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The logo for Canada, featuring the word "Canada" in a serif font with a small maple leaf icon above the letter "a".

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## Acknowledgements

The *Best Practices for Family Volunteerism in Community Stewardship Initiatives* national research project was conducted by Evergreen, a national nonprofit environmental organization with a mandate to bring nature to our cities (for more information, see [www.evergreen.ca](http://www.evergreen.ca)). Support for data collection and analysis was provided by the Hitachi Survey Research Centre of the University of Toronto at Mississauga.

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# Family Volunteering in Environmental Stewardship Initiatives

## 1. Introduction

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The number of Canadians who volunteer for charitable and nonprofit organizations has declined in recent years. According to the 2000 *National Survey of Giving, Volunteering and Participating*, just over one in four (27%) Canadians aged 15 and over volunteered in 2000, down from 31% in 1997 (Hall, McKeown, & Roberts, 2001). In response to this decline, charitable and nonprofit organizations have shown increased interest in reaching out to new sectors of the population and in research into the status of – and potential for – engaging volunteers from groups such as seniors, youth, new Canadians, and people with disabilities (Volunteer Canada, 2004; and Volunteer Canada, 2001a and 2001b; Elliot, 2004). They have also shown an interest in involving family groups. This has prompted research into the status of family volunteerism, the potential for family engagement as a new focus for volunteer programs, and the benefits – to families, to the voluntary sector, and to communities at large – of involving families as volunteers.

There has been research into the status and potential of family volunteering, but to date there has been little work done on family volunteering as it relates to environmental stewardship organizations. Stewardship is generally defined as the care and enhancement of the land for the benefit of the

environment and future generations. Stewardship organizations in Canada engage in a range of activities, from restoring natural habitats and greening school grounds to managing invasive plant species. Stewardship organizations rely heavily on volunteer involvement.

In 2004, Evergreen, a national environmental organization with a mandate to bring nature to our cities, launched the *Best Practices for Family Volunteerism in Community Stewardship Initiatives* national research project to help fill this research gap. Conducted by Evergreen, and supported by the Knowledge Development Centre of Imagine Canada, this project sought to better understand :

- the status and potential of family volunteering in environmental stewardship organizations;
- how stewardship organizations can best support family volunteers in their activities; and
- the needs and interests of families who volunteer with stewardship organizations.

For the purposes of our research, the term family refers to any group of two or more people who consider themselves to be family. This could include spouses, parents, children, siblings, nieces and nephews, aunts and uncles, members of a common household, and other people who consider themselves to be part of a family.

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The research consisted of a review of the relevant literature, a national survey of stewardship organizations, interviews with volunteer coordinators in stewardship organizations, and a telephone survey of family volunteers participating in stewardship organizations. This report presents the findings from our research, draws lessons for stewardship organizations, and makes recommendations for further research on this topic.

## 2. Context

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Volunteer Canada's *Executive Summary of Family Volunteering: The Final Report*, based on 740 survey responses from voluntary organizations from across Canada, 10 focus groups in five Canadian cities, and eight telephone interviews with Quebec organizations, presents a comprehensive overview of the status of family volunteering in Canada today (Volunteer Canada, 2003). This report followed an initial Volunteer Canada paper, *Family Volunteering: A Discussion Paper*, which set the context and rationale for better understanding family volunteerism trends (Volunteer Canada, 2002). The *Executive Summary of Family Volunteering: The Final Report* concluded that family volunteers represent a vast pool of volunteer potential for Canada's nonprofit sector and that family volunteering offers rich benefits to both organizations and families. The benefits to organizations include a diversified and expanded volunteer base, an expanded range of services in the community, increased impact on the community, and an opportunity to instil values such as civic pride and participation in the younger generation (2003: 3). The benefits to families have also been explored: The Points of Light Foundation in the United States, for example, found that volunteering together gives family members an opportunity to share their values with

the rest of the family, spend quality time together, and communicate more openly with each other (Littlepage, Obergfell, & Zanin, 2005).

Evergreen's research into volunteer trends among environmental stewardship organizations and volunteers supports the idea that there is a need for volunteer management programs that are responsive to the interests of different groups of volunteers, including family volunteers. In 2001, Evergreen distributed a survey to 800 Ontario-based organizations, individuals and groups involved in environmental stewardship. The 2001 survey netted 160 responses, or a 20% response rate. It found that although 90% of organizations considered volunteers to be either "extremely crucial" or "crucial" to the work they do, the majority (79%) did not train their staff to work with volunteers, and the majority (72%) did not have paid volunteer management coordinators. Three quarters (75%) of those managing or coordinating green space projects indicated that they would benefit from training on how to work with volunteers.

These findings are perhaps not surprising, given that environmental organizations are relative newcomers to Canada's charitable and nonprofit sector, compared to more established organizations such as health, social services, and arts organizations, where volunteers have long played a recognized role. Because environmental organizations are so new, there has been little research, particularly at the national level, dedicated to better understanding the characteristics of environmental volunteers, their motivations, needs and interests, and the role that they are playing and can play in helping to build stronger environmental organizations. This is also true when it comes to family volunteering. Of the 740 voluntary organizations that participated

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Volunteer Canada's survey on family volunteering, only 15 (2%) were from the environmental sector. Therefore, although it seems clear that stewardship organizations could benefit from the support of family volunteers, there is a lack of information specifically addressing the status of volunteering in these organizations, the needs of these organizations, and their perceptions of family volunteering. As well, very little is known about family stewardship volunteers themselves.

### 3. Methodology

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The *Best Practices for Family Volunteerism in Stewardship Initiatives* project had two key objectives:

1. to better understand the motivations of families who volunteer for stewardship organizations and the barriers to their participation; and
2. to help stewardship organizations and design volunteer programs that will attract and retain more family volunteers.

The project used a combination of complementary quantitative and qualitative approaches comprising of three research instruments:

#### **1. National survey of stewardship organizations:**

Invitations to participate in a national online survey were e-mailed to 808 environmental stewardship organizations across Canada in March 2005. In addition, we sent three e-mail reminders to all non-respondents at one-week intervals. In the final week of survey administration, we telephoned non-respondents to encourage them to complete the survey either on-line or by telephone. In total, 346 organizations participated in the survey, for a response rate of 43%. This survey allowed

researchers to gather extensive quantitative information about the volunteer programs of stewardship organizations, current practice vis-à-vis family volunteering, and capacity-building needs.

The mailing list for the national survey of stewardship groups was compiled using Evergreen's extensive database, which includes organizations from across the country that have requested resources from Evergreen, participated in Evergreen workshops, applied for grants from Evergreen, or acted as local partners for program delivery. We supplemented the list by selectively including member organizations of prominent environmental umbrella groups, such as the Canadian Environmental Network, and organizations listed in the Organizations Directory on the Stewardship Canada Web site.<sup>1</sup> As such, the national survey sample can be considered to be a fair representation of stewardship organizations in Canada.<sup>2</sup>

#### **2. Follow-up telephone interviews with volunteer coordinators:**

These interviews were conducted in April and May 2005 with volunteer coordinators from 17 stewardship groups that had responded to the online survey and had agreed to be contacted. The purpose of these interviews was to supplement the online survey data by gathering in-depth and anecdotal information about organizations' successes, challenges, and opinions vis-à-vis family volunteering. Because these interviews were conducted during a busy season for stewardship organizations, arranging appointments

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<sup>1</sup> [www.stewardshipcanada.ca](http://www.stewardshipcanada.ca)

<sup>2</sup> In selecting potential survey respondents, researchers used Evergreen's working definition of stewardship as a guide, i.e., the direct care and enhancement of the land for the benefit of the environment and of future generations, often including the maintenance and restoration of habitat, biodiversity, and ecosystem health.

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proved to be a challenge. For this reason, we were able to conduct fewer interviews than we had hoped. Nonetheless, the qualitative and anecdotal information that these interviews yielded helped us to contextualize and deepen our understanding of the quantitative results of the national survey. In particular, insights from these interviews informed the development of, and were incorporated into, a brief best-practices guidebook for organizations that are interested in strengthening their engagement of family volunteers.

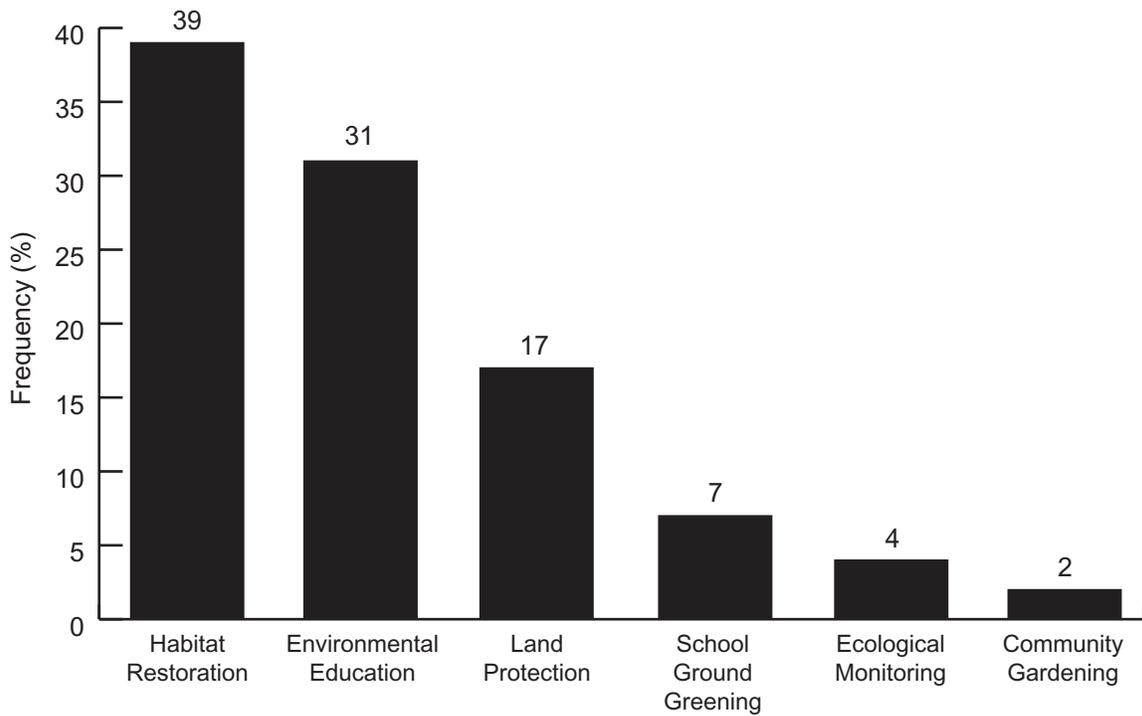
### **3. Telephone survey of family volunteers:**

In March and April 2005, we conducted telephone surveys with 42 family volunteers participating in stewardship activities across Canada. The purpose of this survey was to gain insight into why family volunteers get involved in local stewardship projects and to identify barriers to their participation. The sample of family volunteers was assembled using Evergreen's database of past and current volunteers and was supplemented by the volunteer databases of other stewardship organizations across Canada. It should be noted that, because this volunteer sample included only individuals who had volunteered together with family members, the results do not reflect the motivations and experiences of other volunteers who have never considered or had the opportunity for family volunteering.

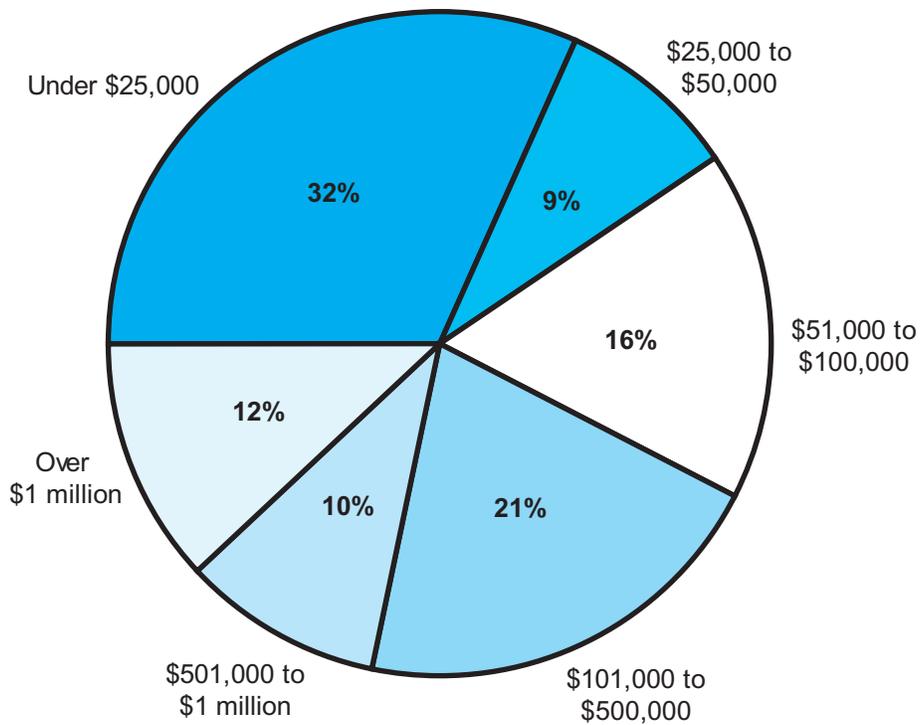
## **Profile of respondents to the national survey of stewardship organizations**

Three hundred and forty-six (346) stewardship organizations across Canada participated in the national survey. The overwhelming majority of respondents (86%) represented nonprofit organizations. School or parent-teacher groups and municipal stewardship programs accounted for the remainder. Survey respondents were involved in a variety of types of stewardship initiatives. The highest percentage (39%) was from groups that focus on ecological or habitat restoration (see Figure 1, p. 5). Nearly one third (31%) were involved in environmental education. The majority of organizations were small. More than half (58%) had annual budgets of \$100,000 or less, and nearly one third (32%) had budgets of less than \$25,000 (see Figure 2, p. 5). The majority of organizations (75%) employed 10 or fewer paid staff, and 39% employed none or only one staff person (see Figure 3, p. 6). The groups surveyed were, on the whole, quite well established: most had been active for at least 10 years (see Figure 4, p. 6). Most organizations (64%) reported engaging at least some family volunteers, and 18% of all respondents said that they had a family volunteer program in place (i.e., the organization had made an effort to specifically target, accommodate and recognize family volunteers).

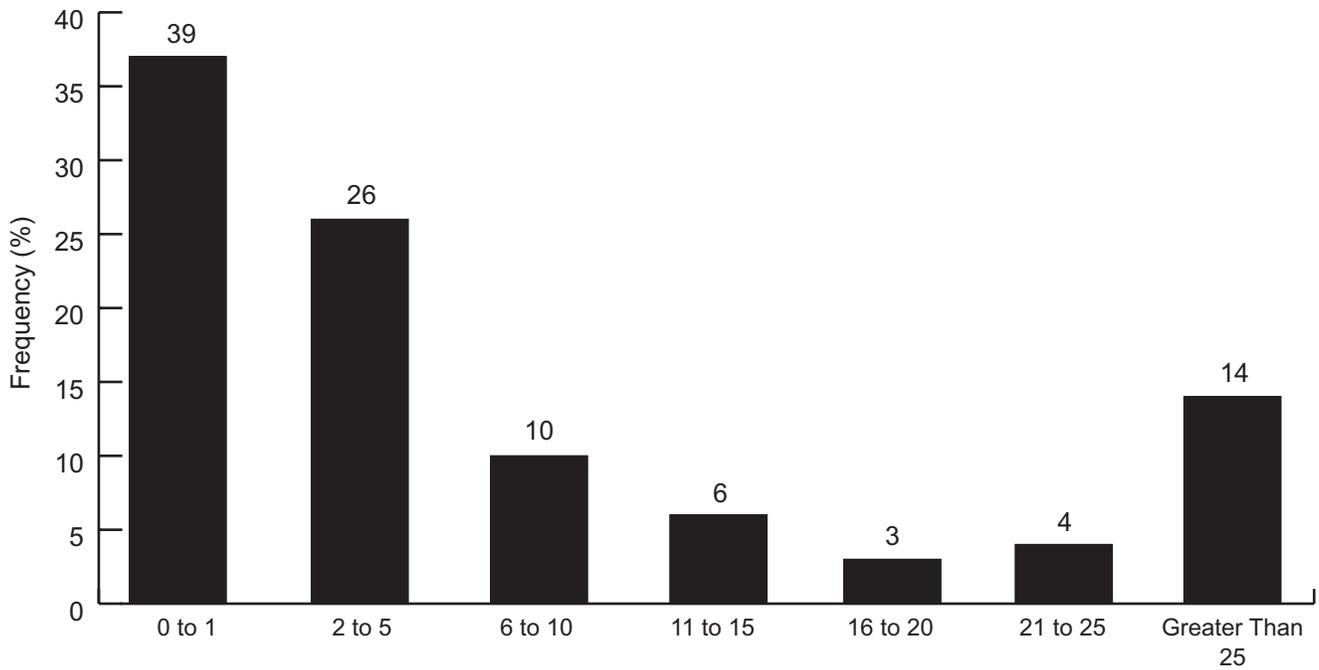
**Figure 1: Main focus of activity of respondent organizations**



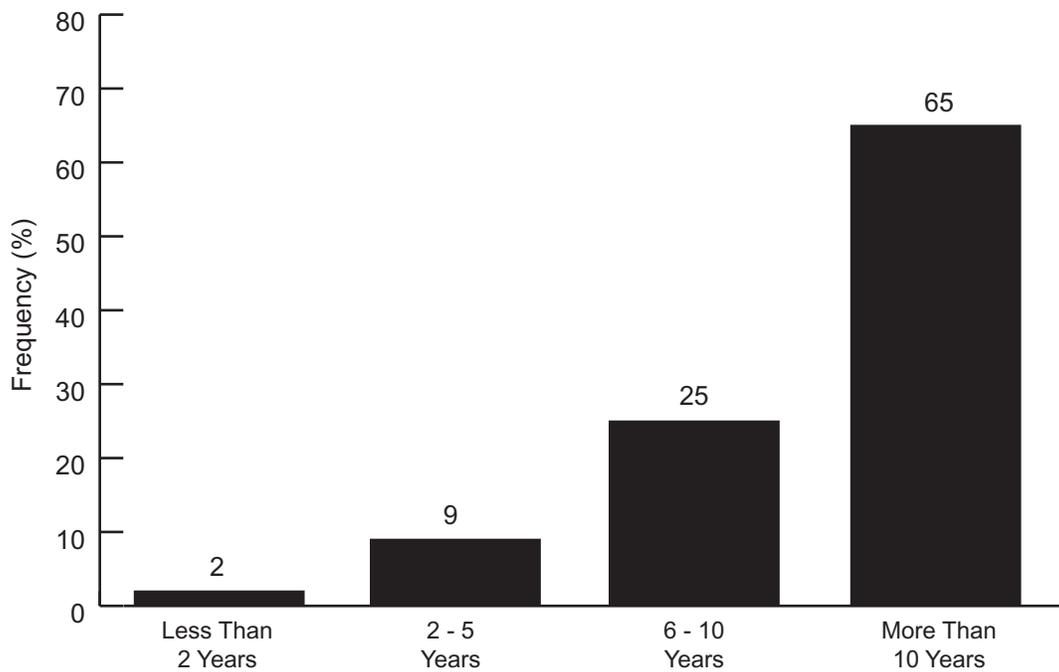
**Figure 2: Annual budget of respondent organizations**



**Figure 3: Number of paid staff employed by respondent organizations**



**Figure 4: Number of years respondent organizations have been active**

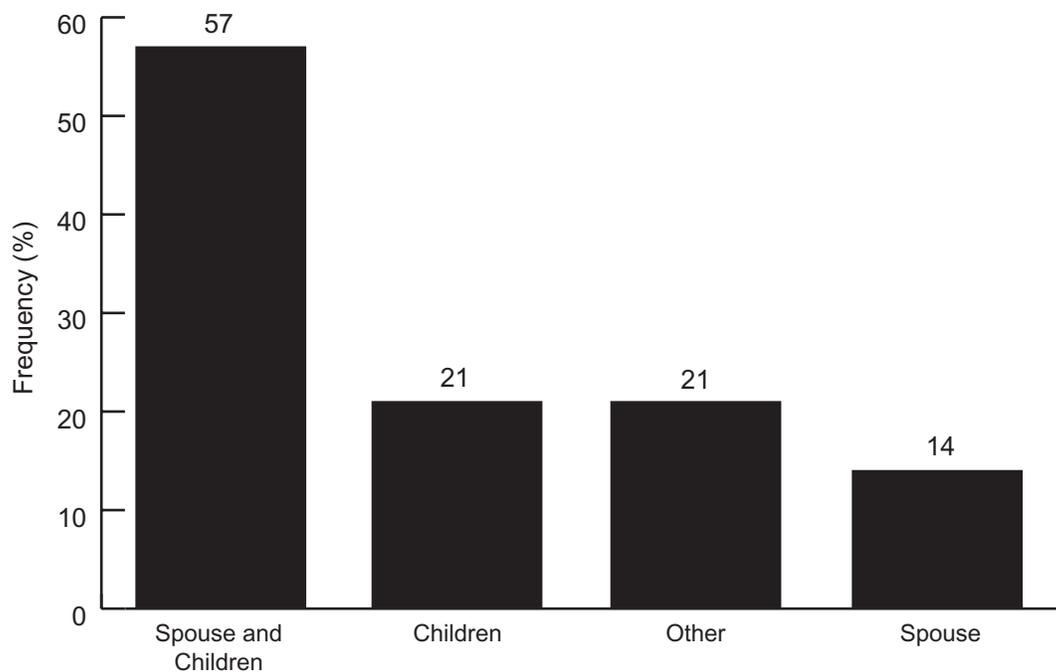


## Profile of respondents to the telephone survey of family volunteers

We conducted telephone surveys with 42 family volunteers from across Canada. The majority (74%) were female. Survey participants reported that in addition to volunteering for an environmental stewardship organization, they were volunteering for an average of three other organizations at the time of the survey, including predominantly educational or research (33% of respondents), health care (24%) and religious or faith-based organizations (26%).

The overwhelming majority (88%) of the volunteers we surveyed reported that they volunteered fewer than five hours per week specifically to a stewardship initiative, but nearly half (43%) said that they had been involved in such activities for three to five years. All respondents had volunteered for a stewardship initiative with at least one family member, and most had volunteered with more than one. The most common family grouping reported (57%) included the volunteer, a spouse, and one or more children (see Figure 5 below).

**Figure 5: Family members with whom respondents volunteer**



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## 4. Key Findings

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### 1. Families volunteer for stewardship organizations out of passion for the environment.

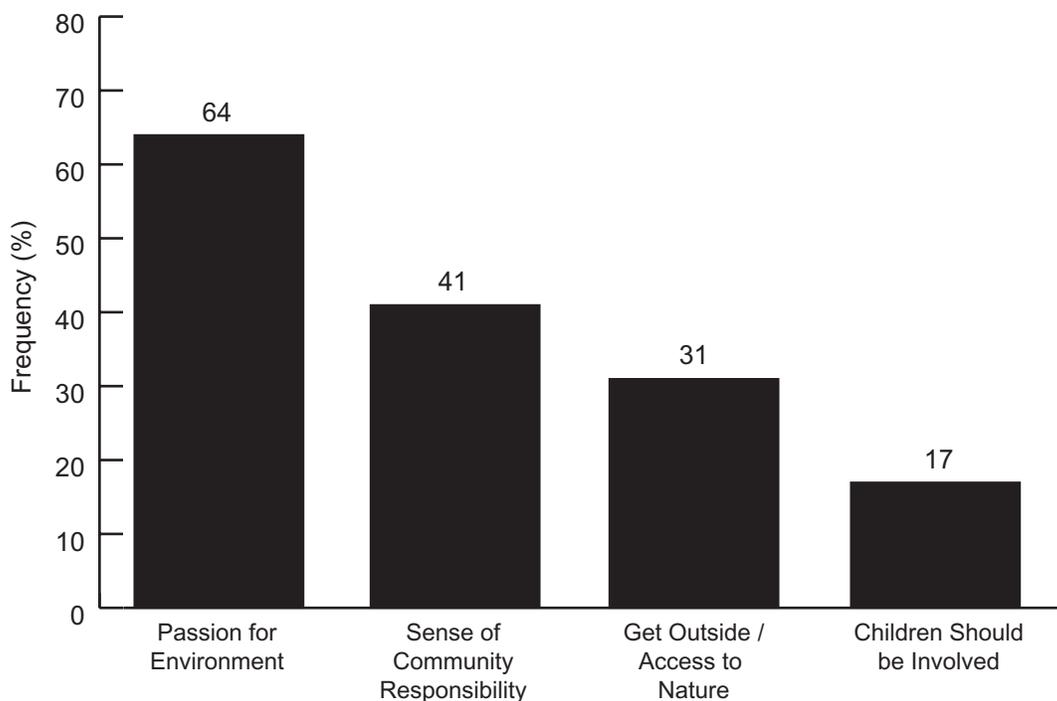
Results of the telephone survey of family volunteers suggest that most respondents (64%) got involved in stewardship projects out of a passionate desire to help improve the environment (see Figure 6 below). Other strong, and related, motivators included a sense of responsibility for the local community (41%), a desire to get outside and have access to nature (31%), and a belief that children should be involved in environmental work (17%).

### 2. Instilling environmental and community values in children is the number one reason why volunteers contribute time together with family.

The overwhelming majority (86%) of those interviewed in the telephone survey of family

volunteers said that one of their key reasons for volunteering with family was to nurture their children's sense of environmental responsibility and to show them the importance of giving back to the community. Respondents also volunteered with family members because volunteering as a family is a good way to spend quality time together (mentioned by 45% of respondents); because it provides a learning experience for children and the whole family (14%); and because it is more convenient to bring children along than it is to have to find childcare for them (14%). Fifteen percent of respondents to the national survey of stewardship organizations also mentioned instilling environmental values in the next generation as a key benefit of family volunteering. This was also a prominent theme in the follow-up interviews with volunteer coordinators.

**Figure 6: Top 4 motivators for family volunteers to do stewardship work\***



\*Note: Percentages add up to greater than 100 due to multiple responses.

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### **3. Family volunteering offers benefits to organizations and to families.**

Organizations that had initiated a family volunteer program (18% of all respondents) cited a broad range of benefits to the organization. The most frequently mentioned benefits were:

- An increased ability to get the job done or to achieve the organization's environmental goals. More than one quarter (27%) of organizations that had family volunteer programs cited this benefit. An additional 19% reported that family volunteering had added to their volunteer base, and 13% noted that family participation lends continuity to a project because families tend to be loyal and committed volunteers.
- Increased community profile for the organization's cause and for environmental issues generally. More than one quarter (26%) of respondents that had family volunteer programs noted that family volunteering promotes a greater understanding and appreciation of local environmental issues among people of all ages.
- Community building. Nearly one quarter (24%) of organizations that had family volunteer programs reported benefits to the broader community, including an increased sense of community pride and cohesiveness.

The benefits reported by stewardship organizations were consistent with those reported by volunteers themselves in the telephone survey of family volunteers. Among the 42 volunteers we interviewed, the most frequently cited benefit that families receive from volunteering together was a strong sense of pride or accomplishment and connection to the community (mentioned by 74% of respondents).

The second most frequently mentioned benefit was quality time spent together as a family in a healthy, natural setting (48%). One third of respondents (33%) cited as a benefit the opportunity for children to learn about environmental and community values, and 21% noted that volunteering together allowed the family to connect with neighbours, meet new people, and make friends as a family.

### **4. Volunteers believe that offering family-friendly opportunities is the most important first step in encouraging family stewardship volunteering, while organizations emphasize program development as a key factor.**

In both the national survey of stewardship organizations and the telephone survey of family volunteers, we asked respondents what organizations should be doing to encourage more family volunteering or to better meet families' needs. Volunteers were far more likely than organizations were to offer specific suggestions about how to create family-friendly volunteer opportunities (see Figure 7, p. 10). Although 28% of organizations' suggestions did relate to making volunteer opportunities more family-friendly, 17% of those responses (i.e., 17% of the suggestions regarding volunteer opportunities) were very general (e.g., "events should be family-friendly"). The volunteers' emphasis on improving volunteer opportunities is perhaps not surprising given that a volunteer's understanding of an organization's program is likely to be based largely on the volunteer experience itself, rather than on 'behind-the-scenes' management issues. Organizations' lack of specific suggestions for enhanced volunteer opportunities seems to suggest that many organizations do not have a clear idea of how to tailor opportunities to meet families' needs. The organizations' emphasis on program management over improved

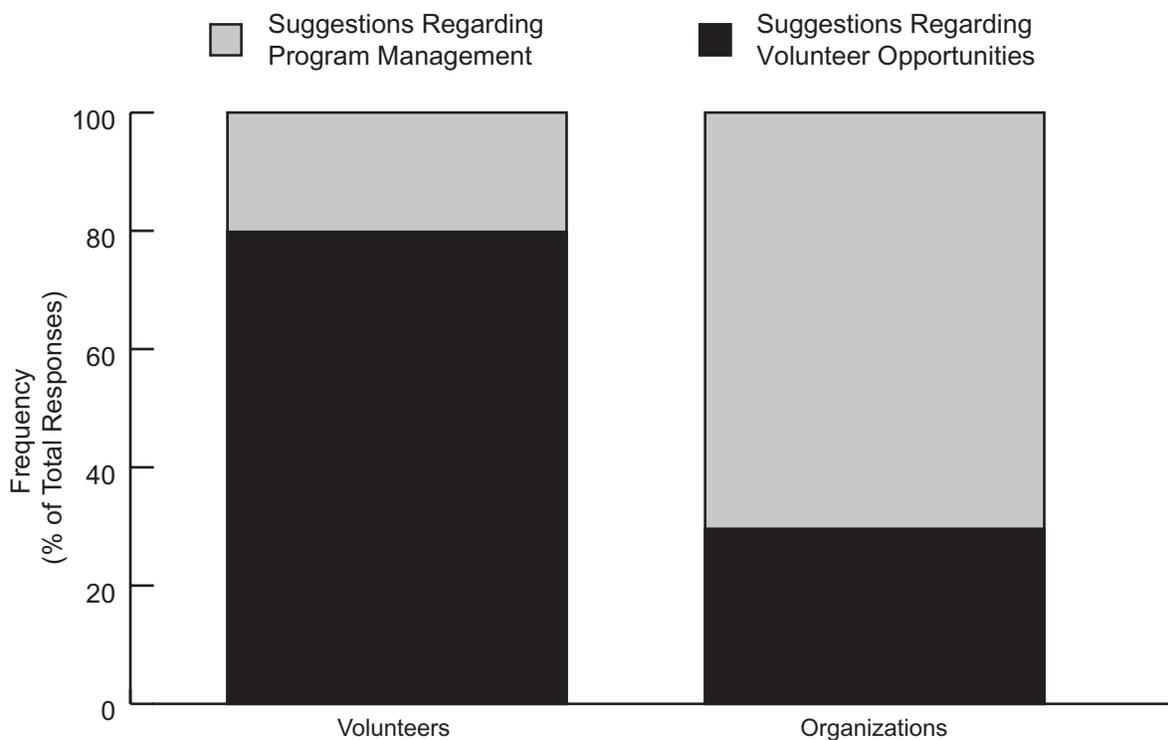
volunteer opportunities may also reflect the fact that organizations often feel that their volunteer management resources are already stretched to the limit, and that a new focus on families could require costly program enhancements – a sentiment that was expressed by most volunteer coordinators during follow-up interviews.

The majority (81%) of volunteers surveyed had suggestions on ways to improve family engagement. The most frequently mentioned (by 47% of respondents) was to be more flexible in the timing and scheduling of volunteer opportunities to accommodate busy families (see Figure 8, p. 11). Other frequently mentioned suggestions were that organizations should offer childcare and/or children’s activities at events (mentioned by 38% of respondents), that events should be fun, festive and social (24%), and

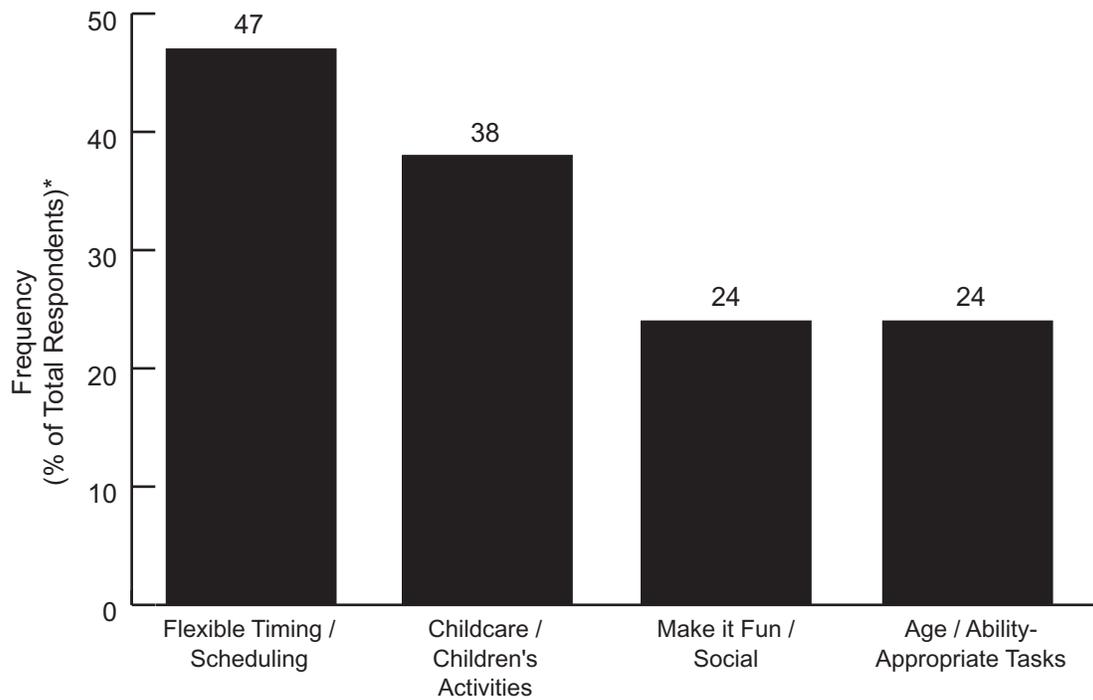
that a range of tasks should be offered to suit a variety of ages and skill levels (24%).

Among organizations, the most common suggestions for more effective family volunteer engagement focused on overall program management. The most frequently mentioned suggestion (cited by 28% of organization representatives) was that organizations should adopt a more family-focused recognition strategy (see Figure 9, p. 11). This was followed closely by the idea that organizations should try to increase overall public awareness of stewardship family volunteering (24%), and that organizations could do a better job of recruiting families as volunteers in the first place (23%). Finally, 19% of respondents said that organizations simply need more funding directed at volunteer programs.

**Figure 7: Volunteers’ and organizations’ suggestions for improved family engagement**

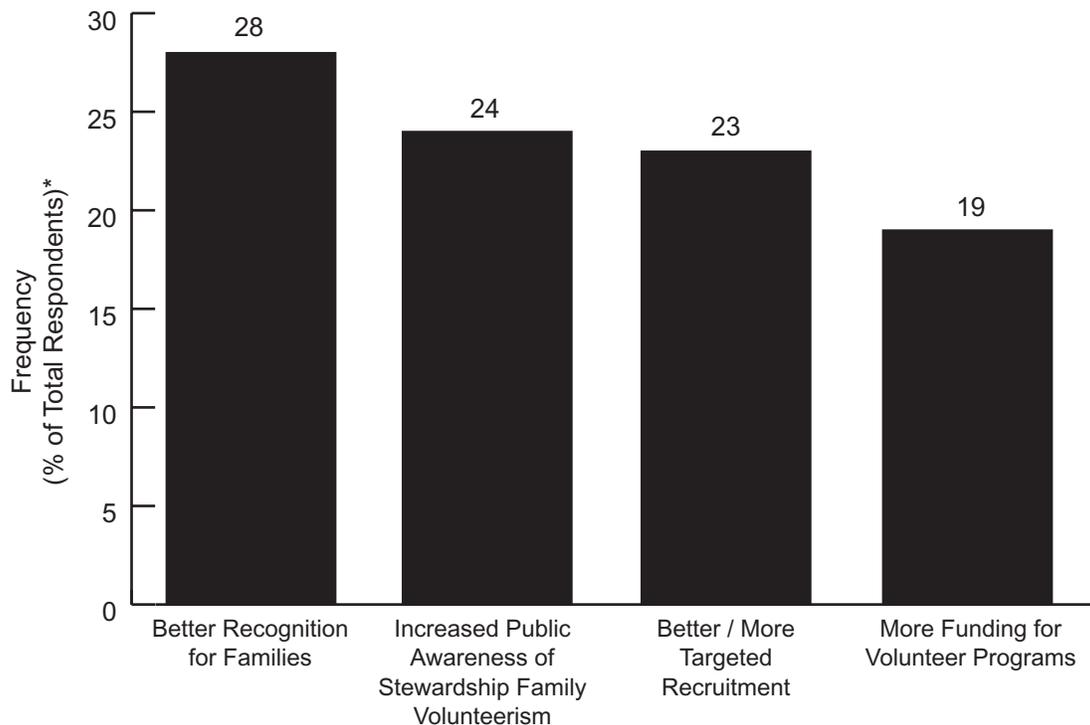


**Figure 8: Volunteers' top four suggestions for better engaging families**



**\*Note:** Frequency percentages calculated from a total of 34 respondents who offered suggestions.

**Figure 9: Organizations' top four suggestions for better engaging families**



**\*Note:** Frequency percentages calculated from a total of 328 respondents who offered suggestions.

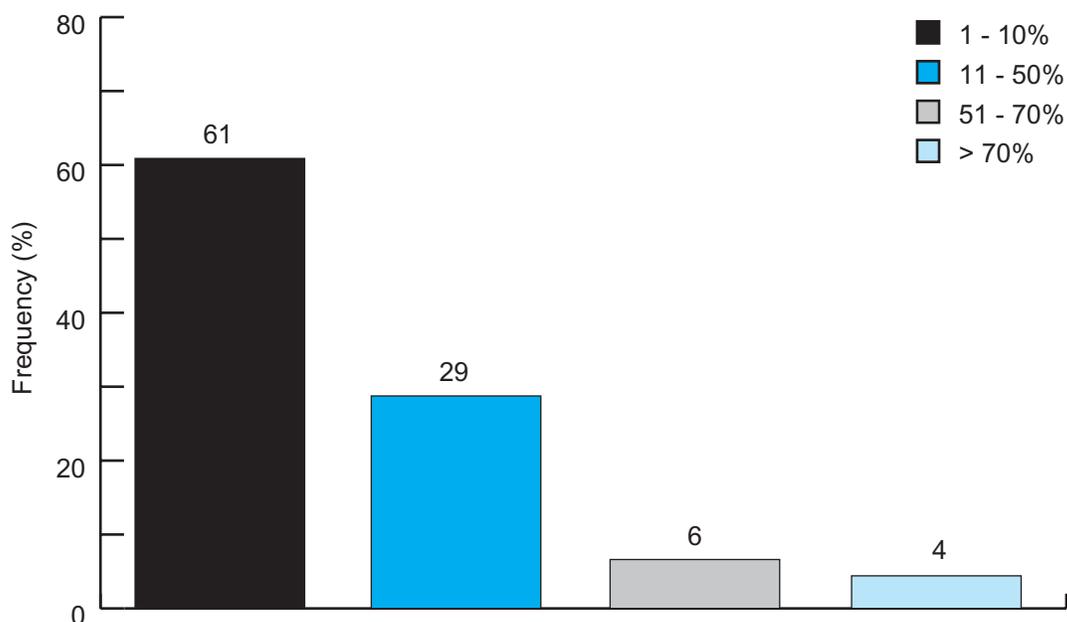
## 5. Family participation is widespread in Canada's stewardship organizations, but families are not widely recognized as a key target group for volunteer recruitment.

The results of the national survey of stewardship organizations suggest that family volunteering is common among stewardship organizations. Nearly two thirds (64%) of all respondent organizations reported that they had at least some family volunteers. However, among those organizations, only 4% reported that family volunteers accounted for over 70% of their volunteers, with another 6% reporting that family volunteers made up 51% to 70% of their volunteer base. Most of the organizations engaging family volunteers reported that families account for a low percentage (from 1 to 10%) of total volunteers (see Figure 10 below). This trend held true across

the spectrum of organization types: in each category of organizational focus, more respondents said they had family volunteers than said they did not. Although the association between organization type and the presence of family volunteers was not statistically significant, the highest percentage of respondents *with* family volunteers was found among organizations that focus on ecological restoration and habitat enhancement.

Although many stewardship organizations involve family volunteers on an *ad hoc* basis (i.e., they had family volunteers, but these volunteers were not specifically recruited as families), these organizations do not appear to recognize family volunteering as an important program area. Only 18% of all respondent organizations had taken any steps, such as tailoring

**Figure 10: Family volunteers as a percentage of total volunteers<sup>3</sup>**



<sup>3</sup> Among the 222 organizations that engage family volunteers (64% of total respondents)

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recruitment material, recognition strategies or volunteer opportunities to the needs of families, to intentionally encourage or accommodate family volunteering.

Making an effort to involve family volunteers does seem to pay off. Not only were organizations with family volunteer programs more likely to have at least some family volunteers, we also found that organizations that put more effort into attracting families had higher numbers of family volunteers. We posed three statements to organizations to verify that increasing effort to attract family volunteers did lead to more families engaging in voluntary activities. These statements were:

1. Our volunteer recruitment materials target families.
2. Our volunteer opportunities are tailored to families' needs.
3. Our recognition programs and/or materials are tailored to families' needs.

From the level of an organization's agreement with each of these statements, we were able to judge the effort that they put into recruiting family volunteers. We found that where families formed more than 70% of the total volunteers in an organization, that organization's effort to attract family volunteers was very high. For only organizations where family volunteers comprised only between 1 and 10% of the volunteer recruits, effort to attract families was significantly lower than for those organizations with high numbers of family volunteers (i.e., over 50% family volunteers).

## **6. Time constraints and scheduling restrictions are the most significant overall challenges to families volunteering for stewardship organizations.**

Half (50%) of respondents to the telephone survey of family volunteers cited busy family schedules and competing time commitments as the most significant challenges to family volunteering. An additional 19% of volunteers noted that the inconvenient or inflexible timing of stewardship events often prevented their family's participation. However, this same challenge was cited by only 18% of respondents to the national survey of stewardship organizations that target families, which suggests that organizations do not perceive time constraints and scheduling restrictions to be as serious a barrier as volunteers themselves do.

A broad range of other challenges was also mentioned. Eleven percent of volunteers said that stewardship activities are often not appropriate for children or for all age groups. Twenty-six percent of organizations said that limited funds and a lack of overall volunteer management capacity were among the most significant challenges to a successful family volunteer program. An additional 10% of organizations cited limited human resources or time as a key constraint.

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## 5. Conclusions

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*The Best Practices for Family Volunteerism in Stewardship Initiatives* project has provided a useful ‘snapshot’ of the current state of family volunteering in Canadian stewardship organizations and insight into volunteer motivations and perceptions of stewardship family volunteers. Based on this research, we can draw several important lessons for stewardship organizations and make recommendations for further research on this topic.

### Lessons for stewardship organizations

The national survey of stewardship organizations and the telephone survey of family volunteers, as well as our follow-up conversations with volunteer managers, suggest that family volunteering is a ‘natural’ for stewardship organizations. Stewardship activities such as planting trees or getting involved in a community garden offer families an opportunity to get outside, to contribute to their local community and environment, and to instil a sense of responsibility for the natural world in children and youth. For organizations across Canada, particularly those in the stewardship sector, several clear lessons emerge from this research:

#### 1. Families represent vast volunteer potential.

Despite their already busy schedules, many families are looking for new ways to spend quality time together. Organizations now have an opportunity to tap into this potential by promoting stewardship as a healthy free family activity and by tailoring volunteer opportunities to families’ needs.

#### 2. Family volunteerism does not have to be costly for an organization.

Although there is a clear need for capacity-building support, and organizations appear to need some guidance in how to attract and retain family volunteers, there are many simple, low-cost ways to incorporate a family focus into current volunteer programs. Improving the volunteer experience itself – by, for example, ensuring that time requirements are flexible, and children are accommodated at meetings and events, as suggested by many of the volunteers interviewed in this study – could help organizations make their programs significantly more “family-friendly” without having to hire new staff or increase project budgets.

#### 3. Involving families can enhance organizations’ programs.

By involving families, organizations stand to benefit from a larger pool of volunteers, an increased capacity to deliver programming, and an enhanced ability to raise public awareness of their cause and of environmental issues in general. Moreover, the opportunity to reach the younger generation through family engagement should not be overlooked: improving family volunteer programs can be considered a long-term investment in cultivating future volunteers, supporters, and environmental citizens.

In order to apply these lessons and to tap into the vast volunteer potential that families represent, stewardship organizations need:

1. Training materials and best-practices information on establishing a family volunteer program, with an emphasis on simple, low-cost ways of recruiting and supporting families.

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2. Information on the benefits and challenges of family volunteering to help educate and promote the idea of family stewardship volunteerism in their communities.
  3. Funding and capacity-building support for their volunteer management programs.

As a first step in responding to these needs, the *Best Practices for Family Volunteerism in Community Stewardship Initiatives* project has produced a new guidebook for stewardship organizations: *Family Volunteering: A Natural for Environmental Stewardship Organizations*. It includes many insights, helpful statistics, quotations, and case studies from the family volunteerism project's surveys and interviews and provides practical, low-cost ways to get stewardship organizations started on a family volunteering program. *Family Volunteering: A Natural for Environmental Stewardship Organizations* is available from Imagine Canada at [www.imaginecanada.ca](http://www.imaginecanada.ca) or from Evergreen's website at [www.evergreen.ca](http://www.evergreen.ca).

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## 6. Recommendations for Further Research

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Our research also raised further questions and forms the foundation for more extensive and in-depth research on the subject. In particular, the following research needs have been identified:

1. **Research that would help organizations to understand the motivations and needs of current and potential family volunteers.** Our study addressed the motivations and attitudes of current family volunteers in the stewardship sector, but there is a need to better understand the needs and motivations of families more broadly, including non-volunteering families and/or families who have no connection to the stewardship sector.
2. **Research that would document the impact of family volunteering.** Our study revealed that families believe that stewardship volunteering provides a range of benefits, from opportunities for quality family time and exercise to teaching children about the environment. There is a need, however, to understand these and other effects more fully. Future research could focus on the impact of family stewardship volunteering on families, including family dynamics, future volunteering, communication, conflict, learning, environmental perceptions and attitudes, and environmental behaviours outside of volunteer time, as well as on organizations' overall effectiveness.

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**3. Research that would investigate family volunteering in specific sectors of the population.** Our study did not attempt to distinguish among family volunteers in various sectors of the population; however, it is possible that family volunteering affects different families differently. For example, in-depth studies could focus on how the benefits of stewardship volunteerism accrue to new Canadian families, low vs. high-income families, families that include at-risk youth, urban vs. rural families, and single-parent families, among others.

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## Notes



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