

Community participation in ecological restoration – generating “accidental” scientists?

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The participation of volunteers in conservation projects is a growing trend worldwide. In New Zealand, this trend has been “harnessed” by the Department of Conservation and other territorial authorities to develop strategies that aim for both greater engagement of the public in conservation activities. Over the last 20 years, community-based ecological restoration groups have proliferated in New Zealand. Over this period, the nature of participation of conservation volunteers has evolved from that of merely a labour force to now cover a range of activities that includes complex tasks associated with species management and ecological monitoring. Many of these tasks fall under the realm of “citizen science”.

The involvement of citizen scientists (avocational volunteers) in the measurement of ecological attributes of restoration, measures that are essentially an applied science focus, has implications for both achieving and measuring project outcomes. For many participants in restoration projects, social and recreational motivations may be as important as environmental stewardship. Their participation in ecological science, therefore, may be unintentional, and develop as a result of a project’s management requirements, and/or from a devolvement of management by governing agencies to communities.

We conducted a web-based audit of 50 community-led ecological restoration projects for northern New Zealand. We found great variation in the quality of information provided by the groups, few of which identified strategic milestones and progress towards them. We concluded that, at best, many group members are “accidental scientists” rather than citizen scientists, raising questions of the desire, and hence capacity, of community groups to engage in ecological science. This presentation will explore the concept of “accidental scientists, with reference to selected restoration projects.