

Earthwatch: A Source Of Funds, Labor For Park Scientists

The National Park Service and Earthwatch recently have agreed to co-sponsor field research in the National Park System. Founded in 1971, Earthwatch is now the third largest private funder of scientific field research in the U.S. – after the National Geographic Society and the World Wildlife Fund. To date Earthwatch has mobilized 1,085 field seasons of 716 projects (15 in the national parks) in 85 countries, providing researchers with 21,900 volunteers and more than \$14 million in funds and equipment. Its unique formula requires public, hands-on participation in field research. Volunteers contribute both funds and labor to launch expeditions in a series of one-to-four-week teams; the principal investigator thus receives both a grant and manpower. The formula works well: annually Earthwatch now fields over 100 projects worldwide; roughly a third of the volunteers each year are past participants; and half the projects receive funding for more than one year.

For the past two summers, for example, Dr. Rolf Peterson of Michigan Technological University has used more than 100 volunteers, who have contributed over \$36,000 to track the survival of annual cohorts of moose and reconstruct the age structure of the population on Isle Royale. His assistants are non-scientists, lay people who vary in age, perspective, and training – cooks, bankers, school teachers, businessmen, stewardesses, students. Most have college diplomas; many have advanced degrees. Equipped with rations for six days at a time, volunteers scour the island for moose remains, collect the skeletons, examine wolf scats for clues to diet, and note the frequency of other species, such as snowshoe hare. The volunteers “proved a tremendous aid in increasing coverage of the island,” says Peterson, in 1988 more than doubling the miles hiked to search for moose remains and collecting parts of 96 skeletons.

For a project to make use of the Earthwatch formula successfully usually requires dividing its objectives into bite-sized tasks, which volunteers can learn easily and quickly in the field. Earthwatch teams are ideal for inventories and surveys (e.g. vegetative plot sampling, capture/recapture census, migratory bird counts, food sampling); radio-tracking animals; simultaneous behavioral observations of various animals; paleontological and archaeological excavations; and long-term research.

The Center for Field Research – the arm of Earthwatch that solicits and reviews proposals – is now inviting proposals for work by scientists or by those working in the park system. Please allow 10 to 12 months between proposal submission and first date in

the field. For information, write The Center for Field Research, Box 403, Watertown, MA 02272; or call (617) 926-8200; FAX: 6179268532.