About volunteering

More than one million New Zealanders are involved in some form of voluntary work in their communities. They make a huge contribution to New Zealand society in almost every type of activity: from sports, recreation, arts, culture and heritage to emergency and social services, health, education, conservation and the environment. Volunteers are vital if we are to maintain and develop sustainable and participatory communities.

The term 'volunteering' can mean different things to different people. There is a huge diversity of situations in which people do voluntary activities, and they may or may not define these actions as volunteering. While volunteering has been viewed historically as activity managed within voluntary agencies (often called formal volunteering), other volunteering occurs in informal ways, such as helping out a sick neighbour. Generally, (as discussed by Gaskin and Davis Smith 1997), work or activity is defined as volunteering in Western cultures if it meets three criteria:

- It is not undertaken for financial gain - (ie: unpaid). This does not exclude receiving reimbursement for expenses incurred while volunteering. However, there is a grey area when people receive honoraria and meeting fees for what could be classified as volunteer work. Honoraria and fees can range from payments that reflect market value hourly rates for their time spent to small token payments to cover expenses.
- It brings benefits to a third party. This allows for a broad interpretation of who or what may benefit – neighbours, the environment, society – but it is usually intended to exclude a volunteer's immediate family.
- It is undertaken of one's own free will. This distinguishes volunteering from situations of explicit external coercion, such as work experience carried out as part of a requirement for an academic programme or as part of a community-based sentence.