

# THE Green GUIDE

environmental change begins at home.

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## Local Heroes: Volunteering at Home

by Jemilah Magnusson

There's no end of environmental problems to be found in your community, state or country, but the trouble can be who to work with to solve them. As Chad Pregracke, founder of Living Lands and Waters knows, where others haven't yet stepped in, it's time to take the initiative. While diving for mussels in the Mississippi to pay his way through college, Pregracke despaired over the garbage piling up on the shoreline. With the verve of youth, Pregracke took it upon himself to clean up the Mississippi, starting with a flat-bottom skiff and building himself up to a fleet of barges and a host of paid staffers and interns. As Pregracke says, his organization has grown so large, "it's almost unmanageable now with all the balls up in the air." But that's not stopping him from planting 100,000 trees this fall and planning to dredge Sturgeon Bay, Illinois. (For more on Living Lands and Waters, see "[Earth Day Reading](#).")

For help starting your own project, the non-profit Do Something provides ideas, tools, and small grants for under 25s. "If something is making you mad, chances are it's making your friends mad also," says Nancy Lublin, CEO and "chief old person" for Do Something, adding, "Find those other kids, get just 4 or 5 students, and you can really make a significant difference." Pregracke's book, *From the Bottom Up* (National Geographic, 2007, \$26), also provides many valuable ideas about starting and financing a non-profit volunteer program and ends with an appendix of 13 tips to "start your own crusade." For more information about starting your own program (as well as joining others) see Youth Venture ([www.genv.net](http://www.genv.net)), which has an entrepreneurial focus, and Global Youth Action Network ([www.youthlink.org](http://www.youthlink.org)), which assists local and international volunteer groups to develop collaborative projects.

Of course, not everyone has the time or the drive for a crusade. To find local environmental organizations in need of volunteers, start with online databases (listed below), and see what opportunities your area has to offer. As with any job, however, networking is the most important thing to do. Friends and family, church and community groups, and your school's career center can provide you with some great contacts you

didn't even know they had. Non-profit organizations are notoriously understaffed and overworked, so often volunteer opportunities go unadvertised, and the follow-up process is up to you.

In choosing your job, think about what is really important and motivating to you, and be open with your supervisor about what work you most enjoy. Although larger organizations offer name recognition, you will likely have more of an opportunity for real work if you stick to smaller, locally-focused organizations.

### **Volunteering Databases**

**VolunteerMatch** is a good starting point to help you decide where to volunteer locally. Allows you to look up volunteer opportunities by zip code, interest, and duration with an extensive listing of environmentally-oriented tasks ([www.volunteermatch.org](http://www.volunteermatch.org)).

**Do Something** provides a volunteer database that allows searches for environmental opportunities by zip code, a useful FAQ, connections and ideas to start your own projects, and opportunities for small grants. Also contains an "old person" section for teachers and parents ([www.dosomething.org](http://www.dosomething.org)).

**Idealist.org** includes an extensive volunteer database, connections to local nonprofits, financial aid information, internships, and a kids and teens page ([www.idealist.org](http://www.idealist.org)).

### **Volunteer Programs**

**Heifer International** offers opportunities to learn about sustainable agriculture first hand at three Learning Centers in California, Arkansas and Massachusetts as well as education-oriented community outreach volunteer programs across the nation ([www.heifer.org](http://www.heifer.org)).

**Living Lands and Waters** accepts volunteers and has paid positions for cleanups along the Mississippi and Missouri rivers. See also their Adopt-a-River Mile program that gets local groups involved in cleaning the Mississippi and Illinois rivers ([www.livinglandsandwaters.org](http://www.livinglandsandwaters.org)).

**Sierra Club**, the oldest and largest environmental organization in the US, offers members opportunities to volunteer in public education campaigns, cleanups, and other activities through their local newsletters. For information on how to volunteer, see [www.sierraclub.org/101](http://www.sierraclub.org/101).

Another way to look for volunteer opportunities or job opportunities is to contact the state association of nonprofits in the area you are interested in working in. This also gives you a chance to verify that these organizations are legitimate, and the state association will be able to give you this information about any organization in its database. For help, see these organizations:

National Council of Non-Profit Associations, [nena.org](http://nena.org)  
Idealist.org's non-profit FAQ, [nonprofits.org](http://nonprofits.org)

And remember that volunteering isn't just about padding a resume or a college application. "It's important for young people to be involved now, and not just as training for when they're older," Lublin says, adding, "Young people are not just leaders of tomorrow, they are the leaders of today."