

# Reasons Behind the Attrition Rate of Volunteers at Reef Watch SA

**Claire Petherick, School of Geography, Population and Environmental management, Flinders University, South Australia.**

**Abstract:** *This research has sought to solicit feedback, thoughts and constructive criticism from Reef Watch volunteers who were believed to have discontinued involvement with the programme. It is part of an initiative by Reef Watch aimed at determining reasons behind the programme's high attrition rate and how the programme can be improved to maintain and encourage volunteer involvement. Questionnaires distributed to volunteers on the membership database revealed that a significant proportion of respondents consider themselves to still be active members and are generally satisfied with the programme. There are however, elements of the programme that need to be addressed to encourage the return of volunteers who have ceased involvement and to increase the commitment of current volunteers.*

## 1.0 Introduction

The Australian Bureau of Statistics (2002) defines a volunteer as 'someone who, in the last twelve months, willingly gave unpaid help in the form of time, services or skills through an organisation or group'. According to this definition, in the year 2000, some 4,395,600 adults (aged 18 years or over) or 32 percent of Australia's civilian population of the same age, contributed 704 million hours of voluntary work (ABS, 2002).

This research project examines volunteers in the context of a non-profit organisation and it is therefore important to acknowledge the value of volunteer contributions to such organisations. As Oppenheimer discusses (2000, p. 1), non-profit organisations play a crucial role in the delivery of services with many being reliant on the contribution of volunteers to continue operation. Thus volunteers are a vital resource for many non-profit organisations (Lyons et al, 1998, p. 15).

In addition to providing services and making a positive contribution to Australia's economy, volunteering also plays an important social role. Volunteering enables people of similar interests to share their enthusiasm, to affirm their values and to express their identity (Lyons, 1999). As Fitzgerald (2001, p.3) comments, volunteering 'helps us to refocus on what is important: participation in society, a sense of altruism and a willingness to be responsible for others within our community'.

Several studies have addressed volunteer attrition in non-profit organisations. Research undertaken by the Country Fire Authority Victoria (CFA) found that members left the service for three major reasons.

Firstly, people had moved residence, secondly, they found it difficult to manage a personal life with the additional commitment of volunteering (yet would resume if their personal circumstances were different), and thirdly, due to conflict related issues (Woodward, 2001, p.42).

Concern regarding volunteer decline also resulted in the Australian Sports Commission (ASC) conducting research into this problem. Grassroots level sport in Australia is dependent on volunteers and the ASC anticipated that unless a programme to 'gain, train, maintain and retain' volunteers was implemented, then the sports delivery system would suffer (Cowan, 2001, p.65). The research found that people's lifestyles are more demanding than they used to be with many people being income rich yet time poor, resulting in 'people becoming so absorbed with day-to-day living that there is less time to give to volunteering' (Cowan, 2001, p.65).

Reef Watch is another non-profit organisation that is dependent on its volunteer workforce. It is a community-run environmental monitoring programme coordinated by the Conservation Council of South Australia Inc. and funded by the Natural Heritage Trust and Coastcare. It is a unique program whereby recreational divers and snorkellers collect data about the health of South Australia's reef habitat and ocean (Reef Watch 2002).

The aim of Reef Watch is to “gather and disseminate information on the status of [South Australia’s] marine environment” (Reef Watch 2002). To do so, the services of recreational divers and snorkellers are fundamental. The information gathered by volunteers is used by Reef Watch to increase community awareness of marine environmental issues and is also made available to government bodies, research organisations and schools (Reef Watch 2002).

Reef Watch supply a training plan for volunteers so as to provide them with the skills necessary to gather information about the marine environment. The first stage of this training is an introductory training session. These sessions “provide divers and snorkellers with information on the monitoring techniques used by Reef Watch” (Reef Watch, 2002). They also introduce participants to some of the more common fish, invertebrates and algae likely to be found during monitoring dives.

Reef Watch believes that over 250 people have attended these introductory training sessions since the commencement of the program in 1997. Many of these people did not return after this initial session or dropped out of the programme after one or two monitoring dives or snorkels. According to the programme’s coordinator, Mr. Chris Ball, Reef Watch currently has a core group of approximately twelve divers (Ball, 2002, pers. comm.), a matter that is of great concern given the programme’s reliance on volunteers. The research set out in this paper was initiated on behalf of Reef Watch to obtain the opinions of volunteers who have attended the programme’s introductory session and have either failed to return or discontinued involvement soon after.

This research project takes significance in its examination of the reasons behind the high attrition rate of Reef Watch volunteers. The results show that while people’s lifestyles are a major reason for ceasing involvement, there are additional factors that are quite distinctive from other studies on volunteer decline. This research may provide other organisations with an insight into these reasons and ideas on ways in which their own programmes may be amended to minimize volunteer decline.

This project is also of importance as many reefs throughout the world suffer from poor health. In order to protect South Australia’s rocky reefs it

is vital that their health is monitored. Until recently the status of Australia’s rocky reefs was ‘unknown’. Reef Watch was then established to gather data on South Australia’s reefs (Ball, 2002, pers. comm.). Without this programme it is likely that the impacts from sources such as over fishing and pollution will not be as thoroughly monitored, resulting in this information not be made available to government bodies, research organisations and schools. It is therefore vital that the needs of Reef Watch’s volunteers are being met.

## 2.0 Methodology

This research was undertaken using both quantitative and qualitative research methods. The specific methods utilized to obtain data were:

- Review of related literature to determine the value of volunteers and volunteer decline in other organisations or programs.
- Questionnaires distributed to Reef Watch volunteers to ascertain their reasons for discontinued involvement.

The literature review examined material from journals such as the *International Journal on Volunteering*, volunteer manuals, the Australian Bureau of Statistics and information sourced from the Internet.

Questionnaires were chosen to collect primary data as face-to-face interviews and focus groups were likely to be too much of an imposition and therefore unsuccessful, given that some volunteers may have discontinued involvement with the program due to a lack of time or other commitments. Telephone interviews were not a viable option given my position as an undergraduate student and Flinders University’s policy against this.

The questionnaire was based on an adaptation of the Total Design Method (TDM) outlined by Dillman (1991, p. 233). Three mailings were sent to recipients, including a follow-up letter two weeks after the initial mailing, and a replacement questionnaire and cover letter notifying the recipient that the questionnaire was yet to be received four weeks after the original mailing. Reply-paid envelopes were included in the initial and replacement questionnaire mailings. A financial inducement in the form of a dinner for

two was also offered, as according to past research, their importance in improving response rates appears second only to the use of follow-ups (Dillman, 1991, p.234). Reef Watch provided financial support to cover the questionnaire and inducement costs.

Questionnaires were administered to Reef Watch members who were believed to have ceased involvement with the program (i.e. those who did not attend a monitoring session over the 2001- 2002 summer) and whose contact details included mailing addresses. Email addresses were not used as the questionnaire format was altered when responding, thus potentially frustrating respondents and appearing unprofessional. A total of 170 questionnaires were distributed with 61 replies at a response rate of 39.4%. The data was entered into SPSS (version 11.0) and Microsoft Excel for analysis.

### 3.0 Results

The results reveal that the attrition rate at Reef Watch is significantly less than was believed, with a variety of factors contributing to the decline experienced. Whilst the findings show that respondents are generally satisfied with the program, there are several areas that need to be addressed and improved. The results examine five key areas of the program:

- Reasons for discontinued volunteer involvement
- Introductory training sessions
- Snorkelling in the Reef Watch program
- Areas that caused participants' dissatisfaction
- Future volunteering

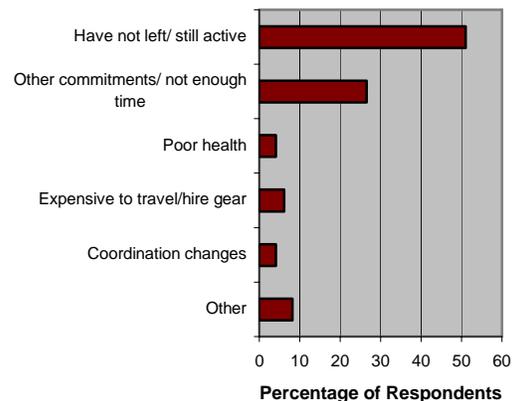
#### 3.1 Reasons for discontinued involvement

As Figure 1 shows, over half of the respondents consider that they have not left Reef Watch or are still active members. Several members remarked that they were shocked that it was believed that this was the case, with comments such as *'I'm still a member to the best of my knowledge!'* and *'I wasn't aware that I had left'*.

There are several reasons that can be attributed to this finding. Firstly, it appears that volunteers attend monitoring sessions sporadically. It was found that numerous volunteers who have not

participated for a several months believe they are still active members of Reef Watch. It must be taken into account that attending a monitoring session is a considerable time commitment and can also be an expensive activity for participants who have to hire gear or travel long distances. As one scuba diver stated, *'I haven't left Reef Watch... I'm very busy and find that I only scuba about two times a year'*.

**Figure 1: Main reasons for discontinuing involvement with Reef Watch**



Secondly, there have been several coordinator changes within the programme since it commenced in 1998. It appears that these changes have resulted in some volunteers not receiving information on Reef Watch activities. One scuba diver remarked, *'[I] just started receiving information again [and] have not quit. Haven't heard anything for one year! [I'm] still keen to do more training sessions and dives'*. These coordination changes can create a climate of unfamiliarity and with the spasmodic attendance of participants, it is likely that there are some participants who may mistakenly be perceived as having discontinued involvement. As one couple commented, *'we did not leave and were quite shocked that you believe we did! With coordinator changes we seem to have been omitted; our last snorkel survey was in February 2002'*.

Finally, several snorkellers commented that the 2001-2002-summer season has experienced unfavourable conditions for snorkelling: *'we haven't left- but this summer has been particularly poor for snorkelling Kingston Park Reef'*. As monitoring sessions are scheduled for specific days, poor conditions may result in volunteers not participating on the day.

Over one quarter of participants have discontinued involvement with the programme due to other commitments and a lack of time. One volunteer describes his situation *‘I am a third year ... student at Flinders University and I find [I do] not [have] enough time to study and participate’*. This was anticipated to be one of the major reasons for volunteer decline in the programme due to the demanding lifestyles led by people today.

It was found that expenses associated with travel and equipment hire were another reason respondents ceased their involvement. One respondent who lives in the country stated, *‘time required for travel and cost of travel’* were his main reasons for leaving while another stated that the *‘cost of hiring gear’* influenced her decision to leave the program. It is interesting to note a comment made by one volunteer: *‘I work with a lot of volunteers... where out of pocket expenses occur, volunteers are not required to incur them on their own. This was not a personal issue but for many Reef Watch associates it is’*.

Poor health was found to be another reason for discontinued volunteer involvement. It is vital that scuba divers are in good health as diving can be particularly dangerous if participants have medical problems. Divers are also advised to never dive while taking medicine unless their doctor has said it is safe. One respondent stated that she had discontinued involvement due to *‘serious illness [in] early 2000 [and am] still unable to dive at all but hope to return soon’* while another commented that medical and advancing age problems were his main reasons for leaving.

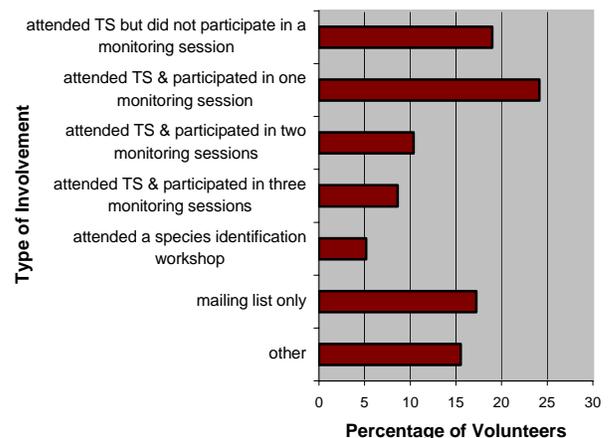
Finally, several respondents commented that issues associated with coordination caused them to cease involvement. One respondent believed that there were *‘too many changes’* while another felt there was a lack of coordination and not enough structure.

### 3.2 Introductory Training Session

As Figure 2 shows, the majority of questionnaire respondents (62.1%) have attended an introductory training session with Reef Watch. Almost one quarter (24.1%) of the respondents attended a training session and participated in one monitoring dive or snorkel, while 19 % of

respondents attended the training session but did not participate in a monitoring activity. It is believed that nearly all members on the program’s database had attended the training session, yet as Figure 2 reveals, over one third of respondents (37.9 %) are on the mailing list only, or have attended other Reef Watch activities such as the Species Identification Workshops. This shows that the volunteer attrition rate after the training session is not as high as was initially considered as almost 40 % of respondents were not involved in one of the introductory training sessions. It would therefore be a reasonable assumption to make that a similar relationship would exist within the database.

**Figure 2: Volunteer Involvement with Reef Watch**



As previously mentioned, it was believed that the majority of volunteers had discontinued involvement after attending the training session. Reef Watch was concerned that these sessions were too long (lasting for a duration of approximately two hours) and that the information presented may have been too advanced, thus potentially overwhelming participants. However, as Figure 3 illustrates, the majority of respondents were satisfied with the training session, with 77.1 % feeling that the length of the session was “just right”. The level of information presented at the training session was also deemed to be “just right” by over half of the respondents. Positive feedback on the training session included comments such as *‘visuals [were] good. Small group interaction [was also] good. Being paired with an experienced monitoring diver [was] very helpful’*

and ‘keep up the good work- the workshop was terrific and professionally run’.

**Figure 3: Respondent's opinions on training session**

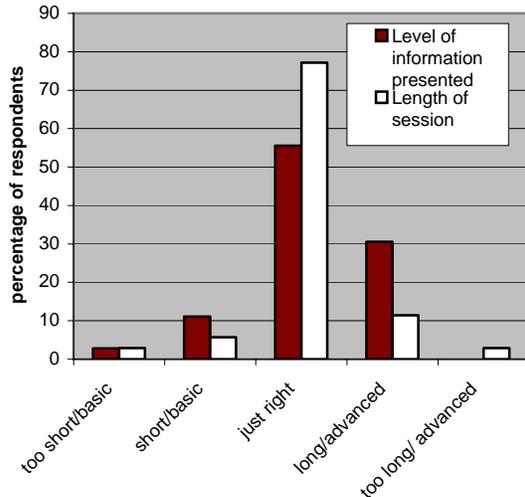


Table 1 further supports this finding. Questionnaire recipients who attended the training session were asked to indicate on a scale from one to seven, how organised, interesting, worthwhile and motivating they found the training session with one representing these descriptions and seven representing disorganized, boring, not worthwhile and uninspiring. As Table 1 illustrates, the mean values for all the descriptive factors were between 2.22 and 2.69. This shows that on the whole, respondents found the training session to be relatively well organised, interesting, worthwhile and motivating.

**Table 1: Mean results of respondents' opinions on the Training Session**

Description	Mean
Organised	2.69
Interesting	2.22
Worthwhile	2.44
Motivating	2.61

However, there is still room for improvement within the training session. As Figure 3 shows, 14.3% of respondents found the session to be “long” or “too long” and 30.6% found the level of information presented at the session to be

“advanced”. As one snorkeller commented, there was ‘quite a lot of information to absorb considering I was reasonably well informed already. [I] felt a bit daunted by the monitoring task’.

There were numerous suggestions made on how the training session could be improved. These included:

- More than one session to expand on information
- Use a video of a snorkeller/ diver undertaking the monitoring
- Have a member report on the last dive day activities and results at the start of the training session
- Learn individuals’ strengths and weaknesses and make better use of these skills
- Include more positive feedback on environmental gains

### 3.3 Snorkelling

There was some concern within Reef Watch that there was not enough emphasis on snorkelling in both the training session and the programme itself. However, this research found that some 83.3 % of snorkeller respondents found the training session to be of value (see Table 2). Reasons for this included that the training session:

- Enabled participants to improve species identification
- Increased participants’ awareness of reef ecology and the marine environment
- Was a useful introduction to the Reef Watch Program
- Information was applicable to both snorkellers and divers

**Table 2: Respondents' opinions on snorkelling in the Reef Watch Program**

Statement	Yes	No
	%	
Training Session of value as a snorkeller	83.3	16.7

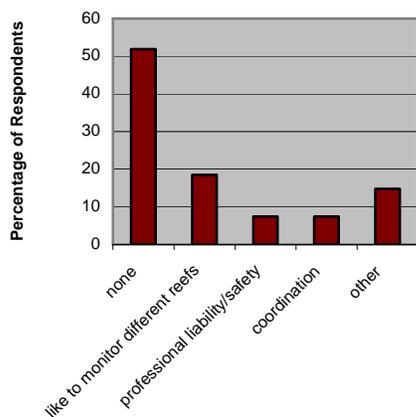
Enough emphasis on snorkelling at Reef Watch	40.9	59.1
--	------	------

However, it is interesting to note that almost 60 % of snorkellers at Reef Watch do not consider that there is enough emphasis on snorkelling in the program. This is an important point to regard as 40.9 % of total respondents had participated in or were interested in snorkelling monitoring sessions while 20.5 % of respondents were interested in both snorkelling and scuba diving (see Table 2). Therefore there is a substantial demand for snorkelling and it in order to maximize volunteer participation, it is essential that more emphasis be placed on the role of snorkellers within the program.

### 3.4 Areas that caused dissatisfaction

As Figure 4 shows, over half of respondents stated there were no areas within the Reef Watch programme that caused them dissatisfaction. As one volunteer remarked, *'no, it seemed fine. I really enjoyed the monitoring dive I did'*. Another commented that *'it wasn't personal dissatisfaction that caused me to stop involvement. I never really got involved; I attended a couple of workshops for personal knowledge and never really found the time to do more'*.

**Figure 4: Areas of the Reef Watch program that caused volunteers dissatisfaction**



Those who felt that there were aspects that caused them dissatisfaction highlighted three distinctive areas: a desire to monitor different

reefs, professional liability and safety, and programme coordination.

With regard to the desire to monitor different reefs, 18.5% of respondents commented that they would like to survey both intrastate and alternative reefs along the Adelaide metropolitan coastline. A non-metropolitan respondent commented that *'I have never been involved with an actual survey, although I would love to have done something here in my own area on Yorke Peninsula, but have not heard of any persons doing this with Reef Watch at present. Including other reef areas in South Australia [is] a must do'*.

Professional liability and safety accounted for 7.4 % responses. One of these respondents was concerned that *'some of the other scuba divers were using equipment that was not fully serviceable'* while another was concerned about Occupation Health and Safety issues and professional liability.

Coordination also accounted for 7.4 % of responses, with one respondent commenting that *'perhaps monitoring days should have been more clearly defined and followed up'*. Another respondent felt that *'coordination was lacking [and] I [did] not know exactly what was expected of me'*.

Respondents offered numerous suggestions on ways the Reef Watch programme could be improved. These included:

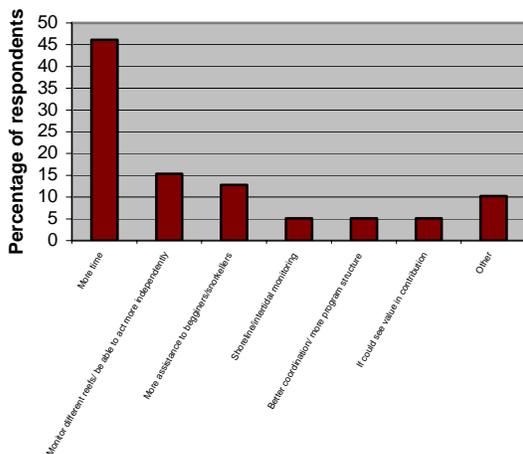
- More focus on the inter-tidal region
- Increase the program's public profile and attract corporate sponsors
- Increase support for people to operate independently
- Increase networking and integration with other groups
- Enter data via the Internet and more information on the website
- More beginner and new member assistance
- More social gatherings and informal meetings to meet other members and discuss ideas

### 3.5 Future volunteering with Reef Watch

When questioned on whether they would consider volunteering for Reef Watch again, some 96.1% of respondents replied ‘yes’. It appears that volunteers who consider themselves as current or active members also answered this question as 51% of respondents previously identified themselves as being in this status (refer to Figure 1) and yet 86.4 % of total respondents answered this question. Respondents that replied ‘yes’ were then asked under what circumstances they would consider volunteering for Reef Watch again. Once again the conclusion can be drawn that current or active members also answered this question as 66.1% of total respondents replied. It appears that numerous active members interpreted the question as ‘under what circumstances would you *increase or continue* your involvement with Reef Watch’, as replies included comments such as ‘*we haven’t left*’ followed by a ‘yes’ response to doing voluntary work for Reef Watch again, with a variety of circumstances then being specified.

Figure 5 takes into account all responses submitted as this helps to provides a clearer picture on not only ways to encourage the return of volunteers, but also how to increase the involvement and commitment of current members.

**Figure 5: Circumstances respondents will volunteer for Reef Watch again/ increase commitment**



As other studies have found (Woodward 2001

and Cowan 2001), volunteers at Reef watch are willing to return to volunteering work with the programme (or increase their commitment) when they have more time to give. Statements such as ‘*when I get more free time*’ and ‘*if my work commitments change*’ were common responses. Many volunteers were quick to add that they were interested in resuming volunteer work when their personal circumstances changed. One volunteer describes her situation, ‘*regrettably work and family life keeps me pretty busy. I do fully endorse Reef Watch activities and hope to be more involved in the future*’. While these statements show respondents are not dissatisfied with the program and would consider returning if their personal circumstances were different, this does not mean that anything will necessarily change in the future.

In addition to this, 15.4% of volunteers replied that they would consider volunteering for Reef Watch again (or increase their involvement) if they were able to monitor different reefs and act more independently. There was significant demand to begin monitoring programmes on the Yorke and Eyre Peninsulas, with comments such as ‘*seriously, if there is interest in Lower Yorke Peninsula snorkeller accessible sites, I would re-activate my interest*’. There was also a demand to monitor more Adelaide metropolitan reefs. Circumstances stated included ‘*observe an immediate reef at Kingston Park*’ and ‘*monitoring of reefs in the Marion council area*’.

With regard to enabling volunteers to act more independently, one respondent keen on increasing his involvement by establishing a monitoring programme on Yorke Peninsula commented that ‘*A little more support for people who may have to operate independently could help*’. Another active volunteer suggested that ‘*one or more people be assigned to their [own] reef [where they can] work together, independent of other monitoring*’ and that volunteers be given more ‘*freedom to choose the day for monitoring for clear conditions*’.

A total of 12.8% of respondents would consider volunteering again or increasing their involvement if more assistance to be given to beginner members and snorkellers. For example, one respondent left Reef Watch as she found it difficult to use snorkelling equipment and commented that she would contemplate doing voluntary work again if ‘*more time [was] spent teaching us about snorkelling techniques to get*

*the feel... of it before going on a monitoring dive*'.

Several respondents also commented that that if they could see the value of their contribution they would consider volunteering for Reef Watch again. One respondent commented that she would consider participating again if she *'could see that my time was well spent and valuable'*, while another would contemplate volunteering again if she thought she could contribute. This finding is further supported by the following comment made by a participant when asked how the training session could have been improved; *'[there is too much focus] on how to DO Reef Watch. What is more important is WHY do Reef Watch. People need to know the importance of what they are doing'*. It is vital that volunteers are fully aware of the significance of the Reef Watch program and how their contribution makes a difference. It is also important that they are aware that their contribution is valued.

There was also some demand for shoreline and intertidal monitoring in the program. Several respondents commented that they would consider volunteering for Reef Watch again (or more frequently) if there was *'more involvement related to the study of intertidal regions'* and if Reef Watch was to *'add/include a programme for non-divers and snorkellers- beach walkers!'*.

## 4.0 Conclusion

The results of this research reveal that volunteer attrition at Reef Watch is not as high as was initially believed. There is still room for improvement though.

There is the need for a greater focus within coordination to develop an increased familiarity with the membership base. This will be achieved in time with more stability in the coordinator position. Should there be changes in the personnel, the transition process needs to be considered carefully so that there is minimal impact on the members.

It is also important to consider developing a more socially interactive environment to help members develop a sense of ownership of the programme, hence a more stable and supportive programme core.

The aspect of the pressures of current lifestyles and time commitments is unfortunately one area which is hard to counteract, but the issue of more flexibility with monitoring areas and days monitoring sessions are undertaken could help to address this problem. A greater emphasis on snorkelling also needs to be considered.

The introductory training session was well run, with the majority participants being satisfied with this aspect of the programme. There are however, elements that could be addressed in this introductory phase to further enhance the Reef Watch's participation rate. These include:

- Providing opportunities for new members to expand on information given
- Using visual demonstrations of the monitoring process
- Actively promoting environmental gains from the programme

While there will doubtless be some budget restraints, some of these issues could readily be addressed without being a financial burden.

Overall, Reef Watch volunteers are pleased with the programme but there are several adjustments that could be made to improve the participation rate.

## References

- Australian Bureau of Statistics (2002) *Income and Welfare: Voluntary Work in 2000*, [Accessed Online 9<sup>th</sup> May 2002] Available at:  
<http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/0/04498995361C4A11CA256B3500140434?Open&Highlight=0,Volunteers>
- Ball, Chris (2002) Reef Watch Coordinator, Personal communication, 4<sup>th</sup> February
- Cowan, D (2001) 'Strategies for Sport', in *Volunteering Visions*, eds. Noble, J. and Johnston, F., The Federation Press, Sydney.
- Dillman, D.A. (1991) 'The Design and Administration of Mail Surveys', in *Annual Sociology Review*, 17:233-4, 236.
- Fitzgerald (2001) 'Community Advocacy' in *Volunteering Visions*, eds. Noble, J. and Johnston, F., The Federation Press, Sydney.
- Lyons, M (1999) *Service Industries: Australia's Nonprofit Sector* [Accessed Online 23<sup>rd</sup> May 2002] URL:<http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/0/5EBE1496169C5D31CA2569DE002842B6?Open&Highlight=0,Volunteering>
- Lyons, M. and Fabiansson, C. (1998) 'Is volunteering declining in Australia?' *Australian Journal on Volunteering*.

Adelaide: Centre on Volunteering South Australia, v. 3, no. 2, p. 15- 21.

Oppenheimer, M and Warburton, J. (2000) 'Introduction' in Volunteers and Volunteering, eds. J. Warburton and M. Oppenheimer, The Federation Press.

Patton, M.Q. (1990) Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods, Sage Publications, Newbury Park, C.A.

Reef Watch, 2002, *About Reef Watch*, [Online, accessed 23<sup>rd</sup> March, 2002]. URL: <http://www.Reefwatch.asn.au>

Woodward, A (2001) 'Protecting Communities' in Volunteering Visions, eds. Noble, J. and Johnston, F., The Federation Press, Sydney.