

5. Health & Safety for Volunteers

5.1 Background

Conservation work can be dangerous. There are plenty of ways in which accidents can happen. It is in everyone's interest that your work is done as safely as possible. Safe work is good work, and vice versa, and the key to working safely is to make sure that everyone takes responsibility for creating a safe working environment.

Accidents usually result from one of two things – bad planning or bad working practice. Bad working practice is, in too many cases, the result of insufficient training. If a new volunteer cuts his or her hand with a saw, it is probably not the person's fault. Training, in turn, is linked to planning and most accidents can be avoided if you plan properly. Planning for safety is based on effective risk assessment.

5.2 Risk assessment

Risk assessment is about assessing what things may go wrong (the hazards), how likely they are to go wrong (the risks) and how serious the consequences would be. This process should lead to taking action to control or reduce those risks.

To assess the risks in any project ask six questions:

1. What are the things that can go wrong (the hazards)?
2. How likely is it that something will go wrong (the risk)?
3. How often does a specific risk arise – daily, every time a particular tool is used, or annually?
4. How many people are at risk? (See below)
5. Are the effects immediate or chronic? A cut arm is immediate, while chemical poisoning may be chronic, meaning long term and persistent.
6. What does the law dictate, i.e. are there regulations covering this hazard?

It is important during any voluntary work that you are working safely and are mindful of others. Risk assessments are completed before all volunteer activities and you should be aware of the risks associated with your task. Site-specific hazards will be highlighted to you by the work session leader.

New volunteers will be instructed in the safe use of tools and safe working practice. If you are unsure about using a particular tool, please request further instruction. Always ensure you are at a safe working distance from others and that when not in use, tools are put in a safe and visible place.

Personal protective equipment such as gloves, goggles and hard hats will be provided. You will not be able to carry out certain practical tasks without the appropriate safety-wear.

Every conservation group will have at least one first-aider on site who should identify themselves to you. There will also be a first-aid kit available.

5.3 Planning for Safety

This requires simple forethought. Firstly, you need to know where the inherent hazards are and make sure that everyone knows how to avoid them. Secondly, you need to train people to minimise the created hazards. The role of a leader is critical here, not in being a worried 'mother hen', but in setting a good example and never taking short cuts in working practices that may increase risks. There are certain basic principles that should apply to anyone doing conservation work, but key points are:

- Only carry as many tools as you can comfortably manage.
- Always carry tools at your side, never over your shoulder, with the "business end" pointing forward and with points or blades facing the ground.
- Lay tools that are not in use flat on the ground, or with their points downward.
- Tie back long hair.
- Never use damaged tools.
- Always wear strong boots, preferably with steel toecaps.
- Always wear a hard hat when working in woodlands.
- Always wear goggles or eye protection when dealing with thorn scrub.
- Never wear gloves when using swinging tools and never use them in the wet.
- Never continue work when you are tired.

5.4 Tools and safety talks for project volunteers

It is essential for a safety talk to be given to all volunteers at the start of any task activity session. First aid and the safe use of tools should form an integral part of this talk. Every Group should have someone on every project who has had some first aid training and if power tools are being used, there should be a qualified first aider. This person should be clearly identified in the talk if they are not giving it. The talk should clearly identify all inherent hazards and highlight the hazards that may be created by the work that is being done. This should be done as a matter of course but should be kept interesting, without cutting corners.

Talks can remind regular volunteers of key points and also give new volunteers a chance to ask questions. This should be encouraged and you should create an atmosphere where even the simplest of questions can be answered and perhaps discussed with Group members. If you have a number of new volunteers joining an existing project, it may be worth putting some time aside to give them a more thorough grounding.

5.5 First aid and welfare kits

No matter how good your risk avoidance, sooner or later someone will hurt themselves. A first aid kit must be available and everyone should know where it is and who can help. See Appendix C for details of a standard first aid kit which would be sufficient for a group of 10-12 people. If your work results in a greater than usual need for first aid, e.g. because of clearing thorny undergrowth or working on two areas within a site, then have extra kits available.

Groups may also wish to maintain a welfare kit. This must not contain any form of medication like aspirin but can include handy items such as scissors, tweezers, wet wipes, creams. Volunteers could bring these to work sessions themselves, if they think they might need them. Appendix C contains a more detailed list of suggested items that could make up a welfare kit.

5.6 First aid training

First aid training should be an integral part of group development, and it is good practise to keep a record of how many active volunteers have received training and to what level. All work sessions should include a volunteer member who has received at least basic first aid training and holds a current certificate of competence. For low-risk work, a volunteer who has done a one-day basic course may provide suitable cover. For more hazardous projects, such as those using power tools, there should be one or more qualified first aiders on site who have taken a "first aid at work" course.

The Friends Forum organises a one-day Emergency First Aid course from time to time and Group members will be able to attend this at no cost to themselves. Details of the dates of these courses will be published in sufficient advance and Group members will need to express an interest in attending if they have not previously done so. Where courses are over subscribed their names will be added to the waiting list for the next available course.

Information about more detailed courses in health and safety and first aid in general is available from your local St. John's Ambulance or Red Cross. You may also find that a local college or school runs approved first aid courses in the evenings.

5.7 Volunteer health, safety and environment handbook

idverde has produced a volunteer health, safety and environment handbook which is free to all park volunteers. If you need a copy please contact your *idverde* Community Manager.

The handbook is intended to summarise the main hazards and risks associated with working in both urban and countryside parks, along with what should be done to deal with the hazards by both *idverde* and volunteers. Also included are the practical steps we can all take to reduce negative environmental impacts of what we do every day.

There will be a wealth of information and documentation that is used in the management of Health and Safety within your Group. The handbook should not be used in isolation and must be read with due regard for that information, rules and procedures that you hold locally in particular with your group's committee members, that relate to both what work you are doing and specifically where you are working.

5.8 Health & Safety Policy Statement

Each Friends Group needs to develop its own Health & Safety Policy Statement. This is a simple one or two page document that defines the roles and responsibilities towards health and safety matters of its executive committee members. Typically the chairman will take overall responsibility but roles, such as chief first aider or equipment supervisor may be delegated out to other key volunteers. A sample statement is provided in Appendix M and this can be used to formulate your Group's policy. Please note the existence of a H&S Policy Statement is most likely a requirement of any insurance policy that your Group signs up to.