

## Chapter - Volunteering Overseas

*We are grateful for VSO for producing this chapter.*

What could you achieve in two years? Could you set up an irrigation project in Guyana, become fluent in Zulu, contribute to devising the agricultural curriculum in Papua New Guinea, learn to love millet, help turn around the fortunes of a marine park in Indonesia, adapt to life in a developing country? If you answered yes to any of these questions, VSO could be for you.

### What is VSO?

VSO (Voluntary Service Overseas) is an international development charity that works through skilled, professional, experienced volunteers who live and work with local communities to share skills and knowledge. Since 1958 VSO has sent over 30,000 volunteers to work in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean and Pacific regions and Eastern Europe in response to requests from overseas partners.

VSO receives a small but steady flow of requests for placements in the water and environmental skills area. Examples of opportunities are:

- rural water supply and sanitation
- irrigation
- hydrology
- watershed management
- integrated land and water management
- lake resource development
- coastal resources management
- eco-tourism
- marine conservation
- fisheries
- ecology
- social forestry
- environmental education

Carol Hatchett, skills team manager for natural resources at VSO says: "We have a small number of natural resources positions but these are highly diverse, so that at any one time we may be looking for an agricultural business manager, a marine biologist, a coastal resources manager or an eco-tourism specialist. We look for applicants who can be flexible, and can adapt their skills. This is important because jobs may involve an element of training or community work which wouldn't normally be part of their regular job at home."

### Not just for the young

The average age of VSO volunteers is 38. Many people do VSO before settling down to family life in their late 20s and 30s. Conversely lots of volunteers apply when their children have grown up and left home, or when they have retired but don't want to stop working. VSO placements usually require a relevant qualification plus at least two years experience.

### How to apply

Before applying find out more about VSO and what VSO wants from you. There are regular Meet VSO evening events or Open Days around the country; visit the website [www.vso.org.uk](http://www.vso.org.uk) for dates and venues.

VSO Enquiries on 020 8780 7500 provides up-to-date information on current placements and advice on how your personal skills and experience could be used.

Once you're fully informed, complete an application form, available from [www.vso.org.uk](http://www.vso.org.uk). If successful you will then be invited to an Assessment Day. After your Assessment Day one of three things will happen: you'll either be accepted and be offered a placement within a couple of months; or you will be successful and placed on a register of suitable candidates until a relevant placement comes up; or you will be told that we are currently unable to use your skills.

Training is provided for accepted volunteers in the UK to help prepare for this big life change and explore development issues. Natural resources volunteers also receive specific skills training. Throughout the process there are many opportunities to meet and talk to other volunteers, both outgoing and returned, and to volunteers who have worked in the same country and, in some instances, for the same organisation.

When they first arrive overseas volunteers receive orientation training, lasting between two and six weeks. This might involve language lessons, cookery instruction and advice on health issues. A VSO office in every country that VSO works in provides support for volunteers whilst overseas.

On their return to the UK volunteers receive a small grant from VSO to help settle back in as well as financial, medical and careers advice. An extensive Local Groups network through the UK and abroad provides personal support for volunteers on their return and afterwards.

### **Financial Support**

VSO recognises the financial implications of volunteering overseas. Pensions, mortgages and loans plus other commitments must all be taken into consideration. Financial advice is provided to volunteers along with a comprehensive financial support package including National Insurance and pension contributions, return flights, grants and visas. Student loans can be deferred whilst on a VSO placement, as the Student Loan Company recognises VSO as valid voluntary work. Whilst overseas, volunteers receive a monthly allowance that is comparable to local colleagues' wages.

### **18-25? Try Youth for Development**

VSO's Youth for Development programme (YFD) is aimed at both undergraduates who have a long-term interest in international development and are available to go overseas between their second and third year of study; and young people from the UK aged between 18-25, with experience of volunteering or community work, who are interested in social welfare or international development.

The aims of the programme are to provide host organisations in developing countries with highly motivated and partly-trained assistants to carry out a specific piece of work, and to provide young people who are interested in development work with relevant work experience. YFD placements are one year long.

**Zoe Sheridan** did a YFD placement in the Philippines between 2001-2002.

"I saw a poster for YFD in my first year at university and it stuck with me; it's for people between second and third years, so during my second year I applied and was accepted. YFD encourage you to find your own placement so I contacted people in Indonesia and Philippines. It took a couple of months to find the right job.

"I worked on marine protected areas for a non-governmental organisation in the Philippines. The marine protected areas were set up to provide food security for local people but a lot are tourist diving bases as well, so there was often a conflict of interests between the two user groups. I worked with the rural fishing communities and tourist diver groups to manage the areas and hold stakeholders' workshops. I also did dive baseline surveys of the areas.

"In the Philippines I lived with a family, which was slightly uncomfortable at first because they wanted to treat me like a guest and not let me do any housework, but we got used to each other in the end. It was a very male dominated area of work so it was a challenging at times.

"The placement has given me adaptable skills and appreciation of another way of living. Before I had an idealist view of saving the world, and how to make everything right. Now I've seen the link to where the problems stem from, which is often the West. Because of that when I finish university I would like to go into education and awareness raising of developing countries in the UK, where I think I will have more impact."

More information on VSO's Youth for Development programme can be found at [www.vso.org.uk/yfd](http://www.vso.org.uk/yfd).

### **VSO as professional development**

Many employers now see career breaks as a positive element of professional development. Research supports this: Demos, an independent think-tank, conducted a survey in 2001 that showed professional volunteering directly enhanced and developed skills much sought after in the workplace such as adaptability, problem solving, strategic thinking, handling responsibility, stress management and self-assurance.

Working overseas can bring personal gains. Responding to new professional challenges in a very different environment is a revitalising and rewarding experience and can reveal capabilities you never knew you had. At the end of their time away many volunteers return saying they have learned as much as they have passed on.

### **Personal profiles**

#### **Nick Macrae worked in Nigeria between 2000 and 2002.**

"I first heard about VSO whilst studying Engineering Design and Appropriate Technology at Warwick University. After graduating I worked as a project engineer for an engineering consultancy on hydro-electric schemes around the UK. I then moved into planned maintenance systems in the pharmaceutical industry. Having gained some experience in industry I applied to VSO in 1999.

"When I was accepted as a volunteer VSO offered me a placement as technical manager within the Enugu State Water Corporation in Nigeria. The Water Corporation is a government parastatal organisation operating and maintaining 92 water schemes across Enugu state, serving a population of about two million.

"The job description I was given at the start of the placement was very broad and I was given the freedom to focus on areas where I felt my input would be of most benefit. On a day-to-day basis the position involved coordinating activities of various teams within the department. Most of my time was split between a supervisory/coaching role within the department and working on broader organisational development issues.

“Urban water supply was the organisation's biggest problem; this was one of my main areas of focus. Through a combination of measures we were able to significantly improve bulk water production at the main treatment works.

“While I was at the Water Corporation the shortage of resources was a continual problem. For this reason I tried to focus on initiatives that required minimal funding and that would be of value to both individuals and the water corporation in the long term. One of the final exercises I undertook before leaving was organising a two-day workshop on report writing. This focused on financial analysis within technical reports, an area that would help to improve my colleagues' and the department's performance.

“My colleagues' feedback during and at the end of my placement suggested that it was in the area of general management where my impact was felt the most. Working together demonstrated how good communication, planning, using peoples' strengths and a certain amount of flexibility could improve the department's work. My colleagues were highly qualified, skilled, experienced engineers, and through this process we were able to improve work practices and increase people's confidence in their ability.

“Away from my professional working life the experience was very rewarding for me personally and socially. I made many friends and had a unique opportunity to live and be welcomed into another culture. I had some amazing experiences and adventures that I don't think I would have had working overseas with another organisation.

“My experience was challenging but positive. Personally I gained and learnt a great deal from the experience, I am now more focused, determined and confident.

“I am now working as a project manager for an international engineering consultancy on hydro-electric power projects.”

### **Daniel Foster volunteered three times for VSO in forestry roles**

“I finished university in 1989, and applied for VSO but didn't get a placement straightaway. I decided to work for a year on a farm scheme in Australia and when I returned to the UK a letter came from VSO with an offer for a placement in Malawi.

“The placement was working on agro-forestry and soil conservation which is what my degree was in. I worked with the Ministry of Agriculture promoting agro-forestry. There wasn't much participation with communities at the time so we were trying to involve people with the projects, as technical solutions aren't always the most practical solutions for communities to use in the long term.

“I got my second placement in Nepal almost as soon as I returned from Malawi. The placement there focused on promoting national policy on forestry and residents' rights to access the forest. We were putting the theory of the policy into practice. We used natural forest management training, moving away from plantations towards making forests suitable places for firewood or medicinal herbs.

“From Nepal I went to China as a participatory trainer, training forestry staff and government leaders. Previously there had been very top-down policies and the idea of the placement was to promote the inclusion of local communities in forestry projects. It was fascinating to see the projects, some in very isolated areas which had been devastated by years of political turmoil. Natural resources have really suffered in China

so it was very pleasing to be able to start to put right mistakes made there. The people were very interested to learn techniques and what had worked in other countries.

"The greatest challenge and achievements for me during the placements were the relationships with my colleagues. Working so closely with people it is nice to feel part of the team and they then give you a window into the culture, and help you understand the system and figure out what's going on. Also the sense of achievement when you bring two groups together and they realise that problems can be solved and things can be done was satisfying.

"I am now a trainer for VSO and its good to keep in touch with the organisation. I learnt from my colleagues it is possible to have lots of projects on the go, so now I also do property development work with my wife who was a VSO volunteer in China as well. We would like to go back to China, when the time is right for us, and carry on with forestry work there.

"Seeing so much of the world has helped me to understand it, I can now relate to how things work in a large part of the world. It's made me realise what's important in life."

### **Contacts**

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