

# Volun-Hearing: How Young People Interpret and Prioritize Environmental Volunteering

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 Site: <https://ds.lclark.edu/envs/project/cora/>

**The Questions:** Why is environmental volunteering such a low priority in the United States? How do young people define environmental volunteering, and does this reflect why they do or do not engage in environmental volunteer work? Can reframing what constitutes "environmental" work lead to greater participation?

## What

I asked my 1st question because when I researched volunteering demographics, volunteering for environmental organizations made up only 2.2% of US volunteering (US Bureau of Labor Stats 2016). I wanted to understand from there what exactly is considered environmental volunteering, which brought me to Richard White's 'A Problem With Purity'. This text discussed that humans want to separate the environment from us, but not clearly defining it like that allows us to broaden our understanding and interest in our complex world (Richard White 1999). This idea led me to a journal about integrative/hybrid volunteering, which stated that volunteering is incredibly complex and should not be categorized (Hustinx 2010). I realized maybe by using these ideas of not clearly defining the environment or categorizing volunteering, people may be more drawn towards engaging in volunteer work that includes environmental issues.

## Who

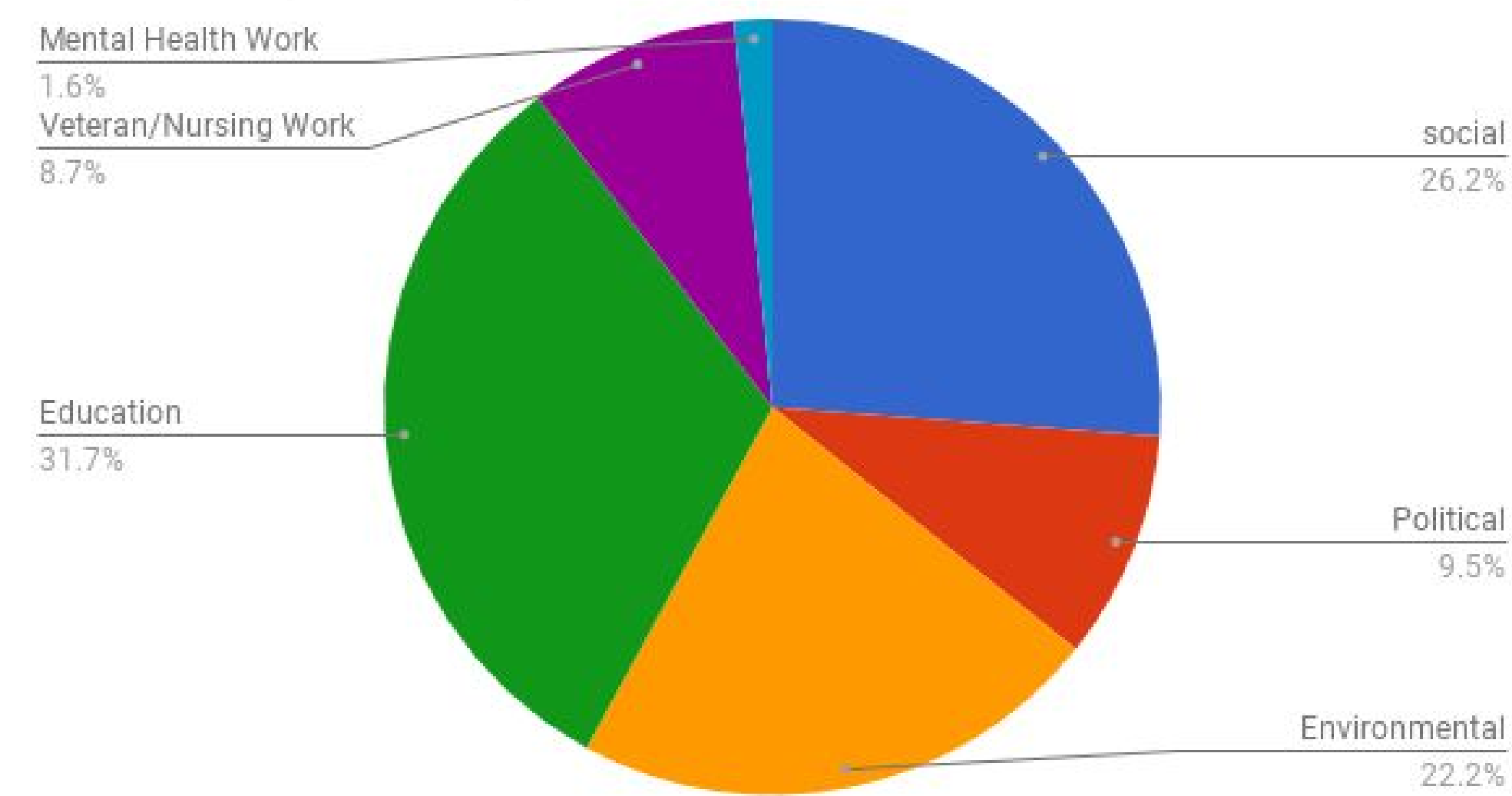
I engaged with young, college aged people, 18-24 years old, mostly at Lewis and Clark College. I wanted to understand why young people have the lowest volunteer rates in the country on top of the extremely low rates of environmental volunteer work in the states (US Bureau of Labor Statistics 2016). I engaged with a little under a hundred college aged students from mostly Oregon but also areas of the midwest and southwest. I have engaged with them through Facebook and around campus with an interactive exhibit.

## How

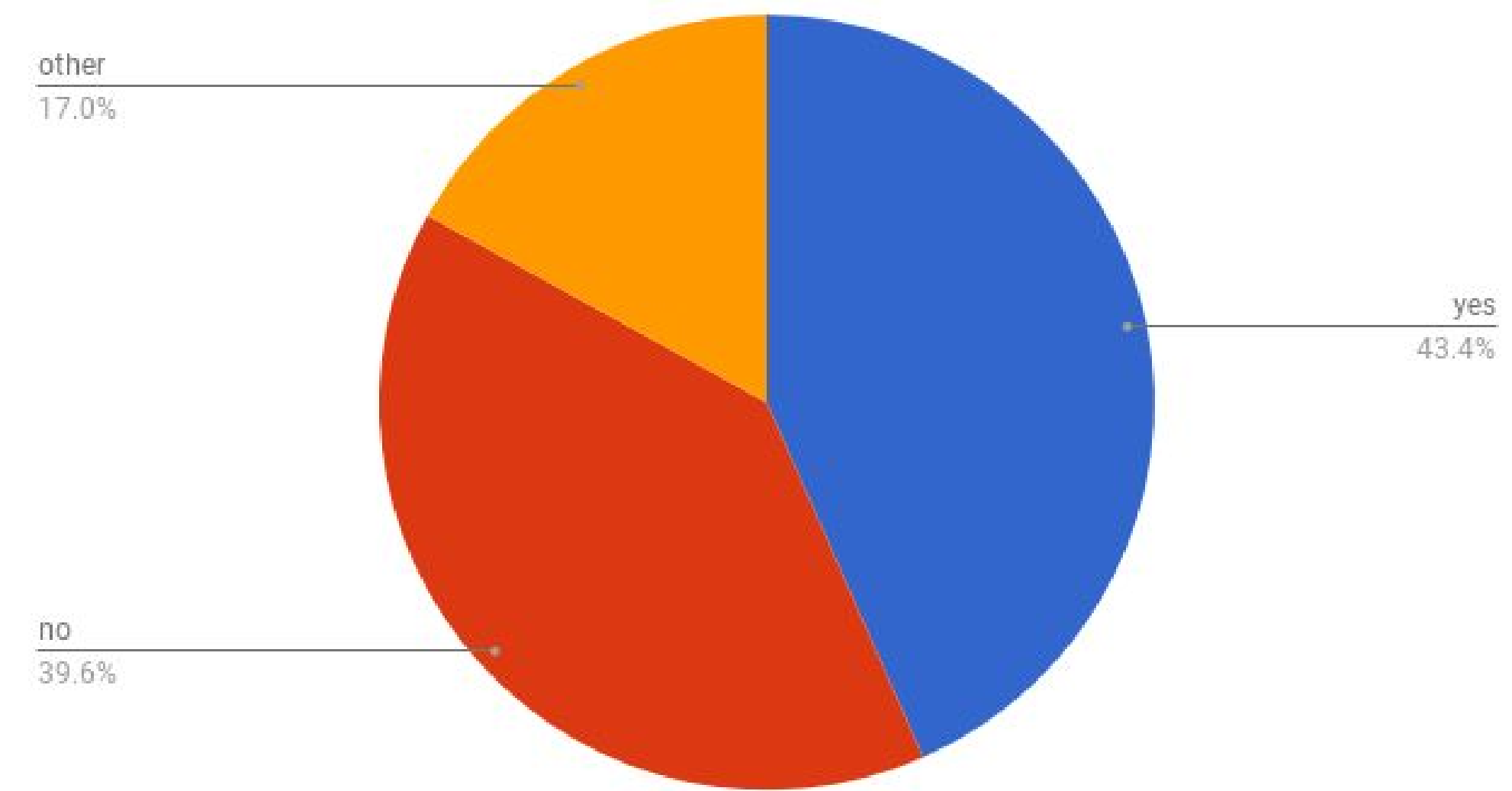
I made a survey, where I tried to understand people's priorities by asking them which types of organizations they have volunteered for, why they volunteered there, how they define environmental volunteering, and if they feel that environmental volunteering is important.

I then made an exhibit, based on the survey results, to understand where the line is drawn to define volunteer work as environmental, and where that line is prioritized. I asked people to mark which fake volunteer organizations they think are environmental, and which they would want to volunteer for. Some organizations are clearly environmental based on survey answers and some incorporate multiple categories of volunteering, such as educational and environmental action (hybrid volunteering).

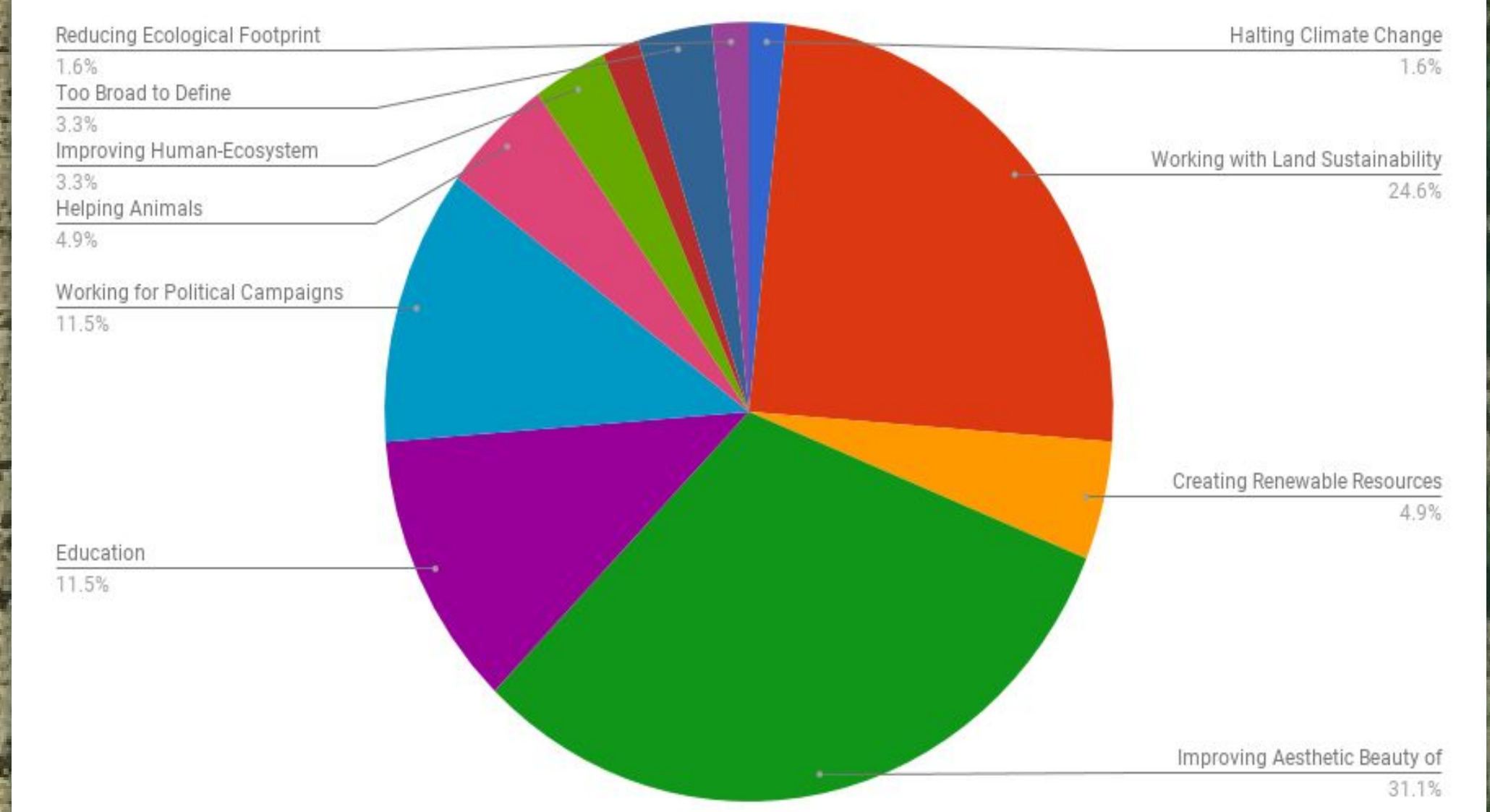
What Categories Do you Volunteer for Most?



Is Volunteering a Priority in your Life?



How Do You Define Environmental Volunteering?



## The Results

**The Survey-** See a few survey Q&A's above. Definitions of environmental volunteering were similar, but many fit into multiple categories identified in the survey (hybrid volunteering). About half claimed to prioritize volunteering in their lives, and more than 1/3 said environmental volunteering was something they enjoyed.

**The Exhibit-** Everyone chose the organization with the word environment or ecosystem as environmental volunteering, but with the rest there was more discrepancy. However, all hybrid organizations were voted as environmental at least once. Organization interest varied based on *only* past experience and major/passion.

## The Success

I based my success on how I changed and how I made others think about environmental volunteering. I know my ideas have shifted to believing that environmental volunteering can encompass almost any volunteer org. I truly believe that I got people to think about their ideas of what it means for volunteering to be environmental, however I don't know if this will make them participate in it more. To quote an exhibit participant, "Environmental volunteering can mean different things to different people depending on their experiences with it, so why define it?" -Anon

## References

- White, Richard. *The Problem With Purity*. University of California, Davis, 1999.
- Hustinx, Lesley, et al. "Navigating Theories of Volunteering: A Hybrid Map for Complex Phenomenon." *Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior*, 2010.
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- Lill, Alexandra, and Sarah Graber. *Human-Environmental Interactions*. Ecology Centre Kiel, 2006
- "Youth and the Environment." *World Youth Report*, 2003.