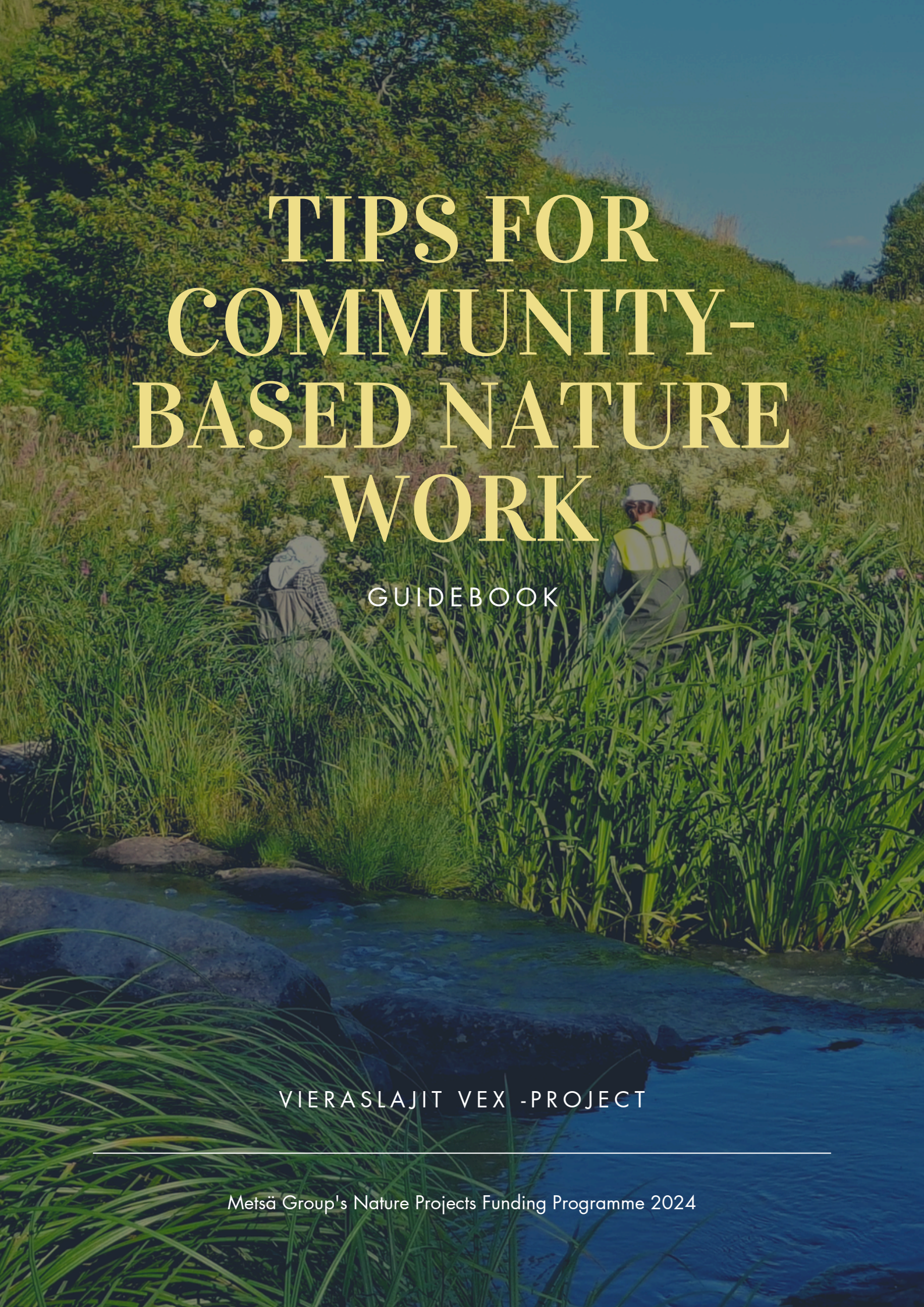


TIPS FOR COMMUNITY-BASED NATURE WORK

GUIDEBOOK

VIERASLAJIT VEX -PROJECT

Metsä Group's Nature Projects Funding Programme 2024

INTRODUCTION

This guidebook is intended for associations and other organisations that wish to organise volunteer nature work events within their communities.

The guidebook was produced as part of the Aura River Foundation's Vieraslajit VEX project, which received funding from Metsä Group's Nature Projects Funding Programme 2024.

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TIPS FOR COMMUNITY-BASED NATURE WORK
October 2026

04 What is community-based nature work?

Community-based nature work aims to bring the benefits of spending time outdoors and working to improve the natural environment closer to local communities. It benefits both participants and the nature around them. Volunteering is a long-standing Finnish tradition of taking care of our communities and the environment around us, and at the Aura River Foundation, we want to keep this tradition alive. For us, community-based nature work is:

Local

- ✔ It takes place in nearby natural areas that are easy to reach, making participation possible for as many people as possible and encouraging greater interest in their local surroundings.

Open and free for everyone

- ✔ People of all ages are welcome to take part, and no prior experience or special skills are needed. The foundation provides guidance and aims to supply the equipment needed for the work.

Working together and socialising

- ✔ Volunteer activities provide an opportunity to be part of a community, work for the benefit of nature and meet like-minded people. At their best, volunteer events are an enjoyable hobby and a great way to meet new people.

Learning

- ✔ Volunteer activities can also include guidance on practical nature work, local species and how to identify them, as well as the environmental impacts of human activities.

Exercise with a purpose

- ✔ Depending on the type of activity, participants may get to improve their balance, mobility and muscle strength while working, as well as accumulate steps almost without noticing.

Making a difference for nature and people

- ✔ Volunteer work improves well-being for both nature and people. By working together, we can achieve more for the benefit of nature, and taking part in volunteer activities offers a concrete way to make a difference to the well-being of our local environment.

05 The importance of community-based nature work



For the community

As interest in local nature grows, so can people's sense of responsibility for their own living environment. Shared spaces and nearby natural areas are more likely to remain in good condition when the people who use them recognise the direct connection between their own actions and the well-being and functionality of these areas.

For individuals

Community-based nature work offers the opportunity to meet like-minded people and feel part of a community. Spending time in nature has also been shown to have positive effects on physical and mental health. Participants can learn new skills and gain confidence in exploring nearby natural areas and taking action to improve their local environment.

For the environment

Looking after the environment is more of a marathon than a sprint. The work often requires long-term commitment over several years. The more people get involved, the more likely it is that the work will continue and achieve tangible improvements in the well-being of the environment.

06 What does it take to organise a community-based nature work event?

Anyone can organise a community-based nature work event. At its simplest, it involves bringing two parties together: the organiser and the participants.

Before making detailed plans for the event, it is a good idea to clarify who or which organisation is responsible for organising the volunteer activity, and whether it has a specific target group – in other words, who the event is intended for and who might want to take part.



07 Making participation easier



If you hope to attract participants who are new to spending time in nature, volunteering or the event's theme, consider how to make participation easier for them. A lack of information about the event and what to expect may discourage people from taking part. The following are some things the Aura River Foundation considers important when organising events and aims to communicate clearly in event information.

No prior experience needed – guidance is provided

If participants will be guided through the tasks, it's worth mentioning this in advance. This can encourage people who are unfamiliar with the work to join in. It also helps reach new participants and gives everyone an opportunity to learn something new.

Work at your own pace and according to your abilities

Volunteering is based on each participant's willingness and ability, so everyone should work at their own pace. Offer regular breaks and, where possible, tasks suited to different physical abilities (e.g. hand-weeding or mowing, working in different types of terrain). The organiser should also check in with participants regularly to make sure they feel well and have the energy to continue.

Should participants register in advance?

Requiring advance registration may discourage people who are unsure about their energy levels or schedules from taking part. Allowing people to decide closer to the event can make participation more flexible and encourage these groups to join in.

On the other hand, advance registration can help ensure that participants actually show up. If you plan to provide specific equipment or more substantial refreshments, registration can help the organiser estimate what is needed and avoid wasting resources, such as food.

08 Choosing a location

When choosing a location, it's important to consider who the event is intended for. Can the target group get there, and is the terrain suitable for them? What kind of work is planned, and are any permits required?



Accessibility

Consider whether the terrain might exclude certain groups of participants. If the terrain is difficult, this should be communicated in advance. If the event is aimed at children or older people, the terrain should be suitable for them.

Can participants get there without a car? Is the location accessible by bicycle or public transport? Locations that are easy to reach by public transport are likely to attract more participants.

Permits and landowners' wishes

For example, removing invasive species requires the landowner's permission. Landowners may also have specific wishes regarding the work to be carried out or access to the area.

The actual environmental impact of the work

If a site requires mechanical mowing or an excavator, hand-weeding or digging may leave both participants and organisers feeling frustrated, as the work may seem to have little impact on the situation. On the other hand, at a small site, there may not be enough work for everyone. When choosing a location, it's therefore important to consider how many participants are expected or hoped for, and whether the amount of work at the site is appropriate for that number.

Examples of suitable locations and types of nature management work

The best locations for volunteer activities have relatively even terrain, are accessible by public transport and allow participants to achieve visible results with the expected number of people.
Suitable themes for beginners may include removing certain invasive species, particularly those that are easy to pull out by hand, such as Himalayan balsam or lupin; litter picking in public natural areas; nature surveys; meadow restoration (removing branches, mowing and raking up cut vegetation); and planting.



09 Timing

Are volunteer events only for hot summer days?

Not at all! There are plenty of other times when you can work for the benefit of nature. For example, litter-picking events can be organised as early as spring, when the snow has melted but vegetation has not yet grown tall enough to hide the rubbish. The best time to remove invasive species is when the plants have grown large enough to be identified but have not yet flowered or produced seeds. Meadow restoration, on the other hand, is usually carried out towards the end of the growing season, once the plants have had time to set seed.

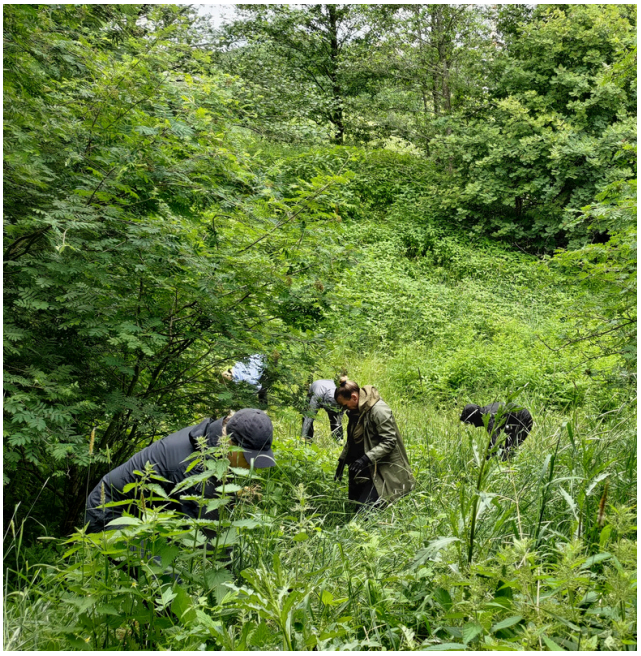
What about the time of day?

If you want to attract people who work during the day, organising an event on a weekday evening or at the weekend may be a good idea. Evenings are also generally cooler during the summer, making physical work more comfortable.

10 Working together or alone? Choosing partners

If an event is not specifically aimed at a particular group, or your community hopes to attract participants from outside its own members, partnering with another community or organisation can be beneficial.

For example, the Aura River Foundation does not have its own membership to organise volunteer events for, but we work with other organisations that can bring in interested participants. Sometimes events are aimed specifically at members of the community they are organised with. Other times, they are open to everyone, but working with several organisations helps reach more people when each partner shares information about the event through their own communication channels.





Municipalities may also offer support for organising volunteer events. Some municipalities, for example, provide equipment or other assistance, such as collecting cut vegetation or rubbish from the event site. Municipal environmental officers may also know of potential locations for volunteer activities.

11 What can a community-based nature work event include?

Here we demonstrate some of the steps and activities that could be included in a volunteer event. The Aura River Foundation often uses a similar structure for its own volunteer events. In this example, we have used an invasive species removal event as the basis.



Guidance on the tasks

Demonstrate how the work is done, for example how to identify the plant being removed, how to remove it and how to handle the resulting waste.



Equipment and safety instructions

Explain who to contact in an emergency, who has the first aid kit, what accidents or injuries may occur, and what to watch out for (e.g. ticks, wasps and uneven terrain).



Why is the work being done?

At the start of the event, explain why the work matters (e.g. the harmful impacts of invasive species). This is especially important when the topic is unfamiliar to participants.



Support and guidance

The organiser takes part in the work and provides guidance whenever needed.



Waste disposal

Agree in advance how any waste generated during the event will be handled and where it will be taken.



Refreshments and thanks

Arrange refreshments for participants if needed, and remember to thank everyone for their contribution.

12 SAFETY

1. ANTICIPATING RISKS

Before organising an event, it is a good idea to consider the risks associated with the planned work and how they can be prevented.

2. VOLUNTEER ACCIDENT INSURANCE

Taking out insurance for volunteers is advisable, as accidents can still happen despite careful preparation.

3. SAFETY BRIEFING

At the beginning of the event, go through instructions for the work, safety information and what to do in the event of an accident.

4. TOOLS AND PROTECTIVE EQUIPMENT

Tools and protective equipment can help prevent accidents and make working more comfortable. For example, the Aura River Foundation provides protective gloves for participants at invasive species removal events, making hand-weeding more comfortable.

5. FIRST AID SUPPLIES

Someone at the event should be responsible for bringing and having access to a first aid kit.

6. DRINKING WATER AND BREAKS FOR HYDRATION

In hot weather, ensure there is enough drinking water and encourage regular drinking breaks. Ask participants to bring their own water bottles, but consider providing drinks as well.

7. WEATHER CONDITIONS

If weather conditions could prevent the event from going ahead, mention this in the event information. Rain may not necessarily be a problem in some cases, but on clay soil or other difficult terrain, it can increase the risk of injury.

8. TAKING BREAKS

If the work is physically demanding, the organiser should make sure that participants take regular breaks.

13 Communication

When planning communication, it is important to consider who the event is intended for and what information people need in order to decide whether to take part.



Target audience and communication channels

Who do you want to reach with your event promotion? Which communication channels are best suited to reaching your target audience?

Options include social media, local media, collaboration with other associations or communities, city or municipal websites, and flyers displayed in places such as libraries and local shops.

What can event information include?

Basic information

The theme, time and location of the event.

Directions

Meeting points in natural areas can often be difficult to describe in words. A map is a great way to make the location clear!

What to bring

Do participants need to bring their own equipment? What clothing is best for the event? Are wellington boots, a sun hat or clothing suitable for working in tall vegetation needed?
Should participants prepare for rain, or is the event weather-dependent?

> Any information that helps participants understand what to expect and makes it easier to take part is a plus. For example, are there parking spaces, somewhere to leave a bicycle, or nearby bus services?

Collecting feedback

If you want to continue and improve your volunteer activities, it is a good idea to collect feedback from participants. For example, ask where they heard about the event. This helps you identify which communication channels have been effective and which may not be worth investing in, such as social media versus printed flyers.

14 Volunteer Event Organiser's Checklist

- [ ] Define the goal: what will be done and why?
- [ ] Choose a location
- [ ] Check permits and obtain landowner permission
- [ ] Assess safety
- [ ] Appoint an event leader / people in charge
- [ ] Plan communication
- [ ] Arrange the necessary insurance for participants
- [ ] Ensure tools and protective equipment are available
- [ ] Arrange any refreshments
- [ ] Give an introduction and guidance
- [ ] Ensure proper waste handling
- [ ] Collect feedback and document the results

CLOSING WORDS

Community-based nature work is an excellent way to get to know both local nature and new people. Working together for the benefit of nature benefits individuals, communities and the environment alike. We hope this guidebook will inspire new groups and organisations to get involved in community-based nature work and organise volunteer events. Together, we can make a real difference!

This guidebook was produced as part of the Aura River Foundation's Vieraslajit VEX project, funded by Metsä Group's Nature Projects Funding Programme 2024.

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www.aurajoki.net

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