Media release
19 May 2011

Seniors play their part in preservation of the environment

A study of botanic gardens and the older volunteers who make them so popular, show passionate volunteers are providing wide-ranging benefits to visitors, the community and to the preservation of the environment.

The study set out to explore older people's engagement in volunteering at botanic gardens investigating the benefits for volunteers, for botanic gardens as organisations, and for the wider community.

The National Seniors Australia Productive Ageing Centre's report titled *Growing Plants, Growing People: Older volunteers in botanic gardens*, studied volunteers through focus groups, a questionnaire and through staff interviews.

National Seniors Australia chief executive Michael O'Neill said the report, designed to investigate examples of productive ageing, found more than just benefits to the individual volunteers.

"We looked at various volunteering opportunities and thought we'd take an unusual situation across the country and study everything impacted by the volunteering work,'' he said.

"We all know the personal benefits of volunteering but in this situation we found there was more to it than just personal benefits to the volunteers.

"There were huge benefits to the botanic gardens as organisations, to visitors who enjoy the gardens, staff, the wider public and most importantly, the environment."

More than 60 per cent of volunteers gave 80 hours or more to their botanic gardens in the past 12 months with the most common roles being a garden guide (42 per cent) and 25 per cent involved in hands-on gardening.

O'Neill said an interesting finding in the report was that 16 per cent of volunteers identified themselves as having a chronic illness or permanently disability and satisfaction in the volunteers' roles were very high.

"This suggests that volunteering at a place like the botanic gardens is relatively inclusive and accessible for the wider population,'' he said.

"Participants said that the benefits for volunteering in a calming place like the gardens were varied from enjoying the aesthetics of plants, making a contribution to a good cause and learning about plants and the natural environment.

"As a result people experienced a positive emotional state, enjoyed social interaction and friendships as well as mental stimulation. These are very important for seniors.

O'Neill said it acknowledged the important role volunteering in a positive place has on productive ageing.

"There is an opportunity for greater collaboration between researchers, social services and the environmental sector to help maximise the use of contact with nature in promoting population health, including seniors' health.

“This is particularly important in helping to reduce or avoid mental, behavioural and social health problems.”

The most popular retirement activities for Australians are travel, hobbies and volunteer work.

Michael O’Neill is available for interview on 0448 125 898.

Note to media: To discuss a photo opportunity in the botanic gardens, contact Casey-Ann Seaniger on 07 3233 9135.

With a quarter of a million members Australia-wide, National Seniors is the consumer lobby for the over-50s. It is the fourth largest organisation of its type in the world