

## **International Volunteers in Parks (IVIP) Frequently Asked Questions**

*Q: I'm from another country and I'm interested in working in one of your U.S. national parks. What short or long-term opportunities are available to me?*

A: Because the National Park Service is an agency of the United States government, it can only hire United States citizens. However, we do have opportunities for foreign nationals to volunteer and to participate in park training programs with us. Most programs are from several months to a maximum of 12 months in length. These programs usually have some type of benefits (in-depth training, free housing, free uniform, etc.), but you will not be able to earn a salary or wages.

*Q: What are the requirements for the NPS International in Parks Program?*

In order to be eligible to participate, you must be at least 18 years old, speak and understand English, be willing to train up to 40 hours per week and have the desire for fun! All trainees must be able to fund their travel costs (roundtrip ticket) and have health insurance coverage while in the U.S. Although our parks can often provide free housing and sometimes a small reimbursement for food, trainee participants may have to cover these costs themselves.

Volunteers must also submit a written report at the end of their program detailing what they did, learned, suggestions for improvements, etc. A digital photograph of the volunteer performing her duties should also be submitted. Samples of these reports can be found on the main NPS IVIP website.

You should be a college student or have a degree and/or have volunteer or work experience in a park related field such as natural or cultural resource management. Some examples of the backgrounds of previous volunteers include: biology, environmental science, ecology, historic preservation, communications or public speaking, archeology, history, or other similarly related fields. If you are not sure if your background qualifies you to participate, contact the NPS IVIP Coordinator, Linda Bennett, at 202-354-1806 or [Linda\\_Bennett@nps.gov](mailto:Linda_Bennett@nps.gov).

*Q: If I find a park that wants to accept me as an international volunteer, how do I know what type of visa to obtain?*

A: Most foreign nationals coming to volunteer in the U.S. for the NPS will need to obtain a J1 visa through the IVIP coordinator. The J1 Visa is a special entry visa issued by the United States Department of State International Exchange Visitor Program. The J1 Visa permits foreign visitors to volunteer and be reimbursed here in the United States. Please check with the IVIP coordinator before traveling to the U.S. to insure that you are not violating U.S. Immigrations statues and that all necessary paperwork has been completed.

*Q: I'm from another country but am currently living here in the U.S. What opportunities are available to me?*

A lot of it depends on what kind of visa you have. Since each visa type is issued for a particular purpose we will need to make sure yours is compatible to volunteering in one of our national parks.

If you already have a J1 visa in the category of training, we can usually assume sponsorship of your program, as long as your current sponsor approves the change.

Contact OIA for more information.

*Q: I'm a foreign college student with an F1 visa, studying in the U.S. Can I arrange an internship for this summer or complete one at the end of my program. Can I complete my practicum in one of your parks?*

A: It depends. Not all F1 students will qualify for an internship with NPS. Foreign students with F1 visas who are currently enrolled in accredited universities may be able to volunteer if they arrange an internship through their universities foreign student advisor and the NPS IVIP Coordinator. Specific conditions must be met, and it is very important that the proper paperwork be completed before beginning a volunteer internship. Contact the IVIP Coordinator and your university's foreign student advisor for more information.

*Q: I am living in the U.S. and am a permanent resident I already have my green card. Can I volunteer with a park or do I need to go through the whole visa process again?*

A: Yes, you may volunteer at a park as long as you present the proper documentation (Form 551 -green card) to the park volunteer coordinator or supervisor. Because you are a permanent resident, you can be treated as a regular NPS domestic volunteer and you will not need a J1 visa.

*Q: If I'm not a student and/or I do not have any direct experience in a park related field so I probably don't qualify for your J1 visa, but I'd still like to volunteer in one of your parks. Under what conditions may I volunteer with a tourist visa or with other types of visas?*

A: Most foreign nationals without J1 visas may not volunteer in national park units and offices. These individuals may only volunteer if they receive no reimbursements or housing from NPS units.

*Q: I really want to help the park but I do need room and board. Why can't a volunteer with a visitor visa or another visa type and be reimbursed?*

A: If foreign volunteers are reimbursed with housing and/or reimbursements, then Immigration classifies the activity as work. Thus, the main issue which determines which

type of visa is needed to participate in a volunteer program is whether the foreign national will be reimbursed. As a federal government agency, the NPS does not have permission to sponsor individuals for work permits. NPS may only reimburse foreign individuals if they have J1, exchange visitor visas or F1, student visas. (F1 students may only be reimbursed if they are in an approved internship coordinated through their universities.)

*Q: How can I start the process to find a park to volunteer in if I will not be reimbursed or receive housing and I don't have a J1 or F1 visa?*

A: If you are interested in volunteering in one of our parks, the easiest place to start is at the National Park Service website: <http://data2.itc.nps.gov/vips/opportunities.cfm>. At this site you will see all the currently available National Park Service volunteer openings. (Other Federal agencies may list their volunteer openings as well on this website, but some may not be able to accept foreign volunteers.)

If you see an NPS volunteer position of interest, contact the park volunteer coordinator directly to see if your skills match their needs. If they offer you a volunteer position, have the park contact our office and we'll work with you and the park to insure that you fall within Immigration regulations.

*Q: I am a student, but I am attending a college/university in another country other than my own (not in the U.S.). Can I still participate in your program or will I have to return home so that I can receive my visa?*

A: If you are selected to participate in our program, in most cases you can receive your J1 visa at the nearest U.S. Consulate where you are currently living.

*Q: Can I choose the program that I want to participate in?*

The NPS IVIP program is training based. We will work with you and the park to structure a specific training program based on your background, interest and needs. Since most of our volunteers are college students, we typically base a training program on the student's major.

*Q. How good do my English language skills have to be?*

You must be able to speak and understand English, though you need not be fluent; however, you should be able to converse in English and understand directions. We understand that your English skills will undoubtedly improve once you've been in the program for several weeks.

*Q. Do I have to return home right after my program ends or can I stay for a little while and tour the United States?*

If you have a J1 visa, you are allowed to remain in the United States an extra 30 days past the date on your DS: 2019 form (This is usually attached to your visa.) You may not remain in the park or continue to volunteer. The extra time can be used for sightseeing or for making arrangements to return home. If you have another visa type, you should check with Immigration for specific policies.

*Q. Are there any scholarship funds available to help pay for my participation?*

Unfortunately, the NPS does not have funds available for use as scholarships. If you are a college/university student, you may want to contact the U.S. Student Conservation Association (<http://www.thesca.org/>). Their program does occasionally provide limited support to volunteers that participate in our program.

*Q. I want to participate with my friend. Is this possible?*

It is rare for a national park unit to host two international volunteers at the same time. In the unlikely event that this occurs, both individuals must be committed to working on the tasks assigned to them. Our program should not be looked at as a working vacation – although we want you to have fun – you are participating because you want to learn, not because you want to have a fun time with your friend.

*Q. What kind of volunteer work will I be doing?*

Our volunteers have received training in many different fields of park management. Volunteers have completed programs in: visitor services; interpretive programs; search & rescue; invasive species management; trail design and development; wildlife management; botany; hydrology; museum management and many other fields.

On the main IVIP web page there are links to descriptions of what some of our past volunteers have done during their programs.

*Q. What are the housing accommodations like? Will I be sharing a room with someone?*

If the hosting park provides free accommodations, more than likely you will stay in park housing. Though it can vary from park to park, usually you will be in a dorm room, possibly with a roommate, with shared kitchen and bathroom facilities. Also, keep in mind that most parks are in very remote locations of the United States. The nearest small town may be over an hour or more away.

On occasion, as part of your program, you may be asked to do field work which might require sleeping in a tent.

*Q. In my spare time, can I find a part-time job to earn some money?*

No. The J1 Visa does not allow you to work with NPS or employers in any circumstances for a salary, even during your weekends or time off from your regular volunteer program.

Failure to follow this guideline may cause a termination of your visa and harm your permanent Immigration record with the United States

*Q. What do I need to bring with me when I go to my park?*

The park that sponsors you for your program should send you a list of what you'll probably need. Most parks will provide you with some type of uniform that you'll wear during your work hours. Off duty, you should bring casual type clothing that suits the climate where you'll be.

*Q. Will it cost me anything to get the J1 Visa?*

Because you are being sponsored by the U.S. Government for your visa, you are not supposed to have to pay a fee for the issuance of your visa. However, in our experience, many volunteers are being charged, either for their visa, an appointment, or both. Contact the IVIP Coordinator for additional information.

*Q: I've never been to the United States before. Where can I go to learn more about the area where I will volunteer?*

Each park has its own website. To find out about the park where you'll be going, visit this website and then find your park: <http://www.nps.gov>.

Another good resource for information is state tourism offices. For a listing of all state tourism offices, see: <http://www.july15.com/julia/statetravel.htm>.