

Is citizen science free? New research says the hidden costs need funding too

Citizen science delivers enormous value to Australian science, conservation and public health but a new peer-reviewed paper warns that the sector is running on the goodwill of unpaid volunteers and under-resourced coordinators, and that this is not sustainable.

The Australian Citizen Science Association (ACSA) is calling for increased, longer-term funding for the organisational backbone of citizen science: the communication, coordination, project management, evaluation, ethics support, training and knowledge management that make projects possible, but which rarely attract funding of their own.

The call follows the release of a co-produced [research paper](#), developed with citizen science practitioners, researchers and volunteers from Australia and around the world, and helps to answer a deceptively simple question: is citizen science really free?

The findings - volunteers carry the load

The research, based on surveys and case studies involving citizen science experts across health, environmental and education sectors, found that while many people are willing to volunteer their time for tasks like data collection, other work is consistently under-resourced and rarely paid.

There was strong support for the ongoing work that keeps citizen science projects running safely, ethically and effectively. Similarly, participants also pointed to a lack of centralised support structures, including technical infrastructures.

Crucially, the research also found that resourcing, including funding, staff time and infrastructure, from governments, universities and other institutions needs to be increased and made longer-term, rather than reliant on short-term or project-by-project grants. ACSA Chair Stephanie von Gavel said “This is not a new problem for the sector. Even when funding was available through the very welcomed Australian Government, Inspiring Australia Citizen Science Grants program in 2017 - 2020, the demand vastly outstripped what was on offer. The program has not been repeated since, leaving a significant gap in dedicated national funding for citizen science”. Calls for greater science investment more generally are also echoed by the Australian Academy of Science “[Restore Science](#)” campaign.

We are more than data: the case for investing in the backbone

The ACSA Chair is advocating for funding the “invisible” work behind citizen science and said that “properly resourced organisational support for citizen science is not simply an operational nicety, it is central to citizen science mobilising a diverse and caring community and delivering on some of Australia’s most pressing challenges”.

She believes that citizen science brings people and communities together across age groups, backgrounds and places around a shared purpose, building exactly the kind of social connection and community trust that strengthens social cohesion, particularly in regional and remote areas where other forms of civic participation are in decline.

Why this matters for Australia

Citizen science already underpins major Australian environmental and health monitoring efforts, from coral reef surveys to wildlife and invasive species tracking and community health

research. But the paper's authors warn that without sustained investment in the "invisible" organisational work behind these projects, participant retention, data quality and public trust are all put at risk. Similarly, the paper highlights the need for investment in standardised data about citizen science so we can start to move towards evidence-informed methods to understand the environmental, social and economic benefits of citizen science.

ACSA supports the paper's recommendations and is urging funders, universities and government agencies to recognise that citizen science organisations need more than project grants, they need sustained investment in the people and systems that hold projects together - the communication, project coordination, knowledge management, training, monitoring and evaluation and ethical oversight.

ACSA will continue working with researchers, practitioners and government to advocate for funding models that properly value this organisational support, ensuring citizen science in Australia remains inclusive, high-quality and sustainable for the long term and realises its potential to operate at scale.

About the research

The project was led by Science for All, supported by ACSA with funding from the Australian Academy of Science Theo Murphy Initiative. The paper draws on two rounds of surveys and 20 collaborative meetings with 46 citizen science practitioners and researchers, most based in Australia, alongside nine detailed case studies of citizen science initiatives spanning environmental, health and education fields. It outlines 10 key recommendations for the strengthening the future of citizen science. It was co-authored using a participatory action research approach, in line with the [Ten Principles of Citizen Science](#) developed by ACSA and the European Citizen Science Association. The full paper is available open access here: <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0331161>

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About ACSA: The Australian Citizen Science Association is the peak body supporting and promoting citizen science across Australia, connecting practitioners, researchers, educators and community members to advance the practice and impact of public participation in science. <https://citizenscience.org.au/>

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