

## Case Study

# River volunteers: emergent, popular and amusing water discoverers

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Received: 25 March 2024 / Accepted: 18 October 2024

Published online: 06 November 2024

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## Abstract

The paper aims to verify whether volunteering and environmentalism are two phenomena that overlap both conceptually and empirically. The actions for the protection and enhancement of rivers in Italy are taken as a testing ground. Two packages of literature are used to understand the overlap between volunteering and environmentalism, one on neo-institutionalism and the other on new social movements. The starting framework is a general typology of voluntary organisations, which is then adapted to the environmental movement. The hypothesis of growing disintermediation and light commitment by the new generations of volunteers finds original answers in river volunteering. Alongside classic environmentalist militancy, forms of popular action in favour of rivers are emerging that show detachment from politics and attraction to intrinsic benefits, such as the pleasure of recreation and collective memory recovery. This raises new questions about the role of organised civil society in maintaining democracy and helping the ecological transition.

**Keywords** Volunteering · Environmentalism · Rivers · Organisations · Recreation · Localism

## 1 Introduction

Environmental volunteering is a crucial social action for at least two reasons: (1) we are facing an unprecedented ecological crisis; and (2) the regulatory instruments of the state and the self-regulation of the market are not sufficient to address the titanic task of *democratically* safeguarding the planet's resources. Environmental volunteering with its *civiness* [1, 2] lends itself to being an exceptionally valuable test bench to understand if it is possible to address the environmental crisis with fair and competent tools [3]. In fact, river ecosystems are ambivalently experienced by citizens: an unequal dump of all sorts of waste [4], an attractive place for historical reminiscences and regenerative practices [5]. Are environmental volunteers able to overcome these ambivalences?

The answer to these challenging questions is provided thanks to a historical and systemic evaluation of the mobilizations in favor of rivers in Italy. The analysis makes use of a quanti-qualitative research of Italian organizations that in various ways deal with river basins [6]. The conceptual apparatus derives above all from neo-institutional approaches and from the studies of movements as social networks. Both belong to the social sciences, but have important interdisciplinary values: the natural sciences cannot do without institutional frames, while the network is a paradigm widely used in biology [7, 8]. The paper therefore positions itself on three methods of analysis: a review of the literature on volunteering and environmentalism, a comparison between a general typology of volunteering with that adapted to the specific conditions of ecological mobilisations (idealtypical methodology), and a conceptual refinement of a phenomenon (river volunteering) that up to now it has been treated in disparate ways.

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Thus, the article will consider the classic dimensions of studies on environmental volunteering (par. 2), compared with a more recent typology on general aspects of volunteering (par. 3). This typology will be adapted and applied to the specific case of river volunteering in Italy (par. 4), producing some original elements on a conceptual level and promising on a political level (par. 5).

## 2 Intersections between volunteering and environmentalism

Analyses of the *origins* of volunteering were pre-eminent during the explosive phase of the phenomenon at the end of the twentieth century, at which time two trends were clear: public welfare systems were limited or closed to the liveliest social forces of the civil community [9]; and civil society freed itself from catch-all political parties or from the hegemonies of religious and cultural bodies. These phenomena had a different resonance in Europe than in the United States, which is rightly or wrongly considered the cradle of associations, and different declinations between countries with a Catholic or Protestant majority because of the great weight that the works of the Church have had in the former [10, 11]. What is missing in these first structural analyses is Eastern Europe, which had just been freed from the Soviet yoke and had an enormous interest in civil society, seen as the great absentee. Environmental organisations then became the litmus test of a *revival* [12]. Another deficiency of that period is the thematisation of the environmental issue within the studies on volunteering, which also occurred because in the latter, the categories of mobilisation and protest were almost always privileged. Only a few, timid analyses on the forms of environmental volunteering emerged [13], thanks to the studies of movements based on the concept of *social network* [14]. At least on a theoretical level, this construct brought the action of the social volunteer closer to that of the militant environmentalist, both seeking or conditioned by interpersonal ties [15, 16].

In more recent times, studies on environmental volunteering that follow *the evolutionary approach* à la Salamon and Sokolowski [9] have been less frequent. In the environmental field, micro sociological approaches have been favoured, such as the study of public participation activities in scientific research [17]. The form of environmental volunteering that is now expressed in citizen science still seems to be interpretable with an evolutionary key: an increase in skills, fields of study and organisational complexity [18].

The evolutionary approach is even better suited to 'case studies', to analyses of large and historical environmental associations like the World Wildlife Fund and Friends of the Earth [19]. This type of organisation is generally born on a voluntary basis, and volunteering becomes a *segment* of their activity, usually piloted by a professional staff [20]. Volunteer actions then concern the 'call' to protest demonstrations and local participation in *awareness campaigns* and *work camps*. The latter become useful communication tools and sources of income for associations that are always struggling to find funds.

The oldest non-governmental organizations with the largest number of volunteers are active in the field of *nature conservation*, albeit with different national traditions [21]. In these, participation is linked both to a genuine interest in nature and to the pleasure of outdoor activities. Conservationist or naturalist organisations arose around the second half of the nineteenth century, when liberal society, the industrial revolution and a romantic attitude for wilderness took hold [22, 23]. Organisations of this type later joined a more militant environmentalism, less interested in rural amenities and more focused on political and economic targets, such as pollution by industrial complexes and suburban inequalities [24].

These last considerations introduce us to the theme of *styles of action and organisational formulas*. In this case, too, there is an evolutionary reference that has already been mentioned: environmental associations and movements have shifted from voluntary militancy to centralised structures equipped with a professional staff as well as volunteers who generally are present in peripheral circles and/or are hired from time to time for the campaigns. Scholars and social critics have noted 'the increasing emphasis on professionalism as a discursive and normative referent in the organization of work structures, practices and identities in volunteer contexts' [25: 153]. Others authors rightly speak of a tension between the two poles that is never resolved and is often a harbinger of effective and innovative actions compared to those of associations formed exclusively by volunteers or professionals [26].

The centralisation of the staff or a more reticular structure, even if not a federal one [13], is an important criterion not only from the point of view of organisational efficiency but also from the political-symbolic viewpoint. For a long time, the dichotomy of the availability of material and organisational resources [27] has been used as opposed to the strength of social networks [14]. Both profiles then concern the strategies of action or repertoires or, again, the plots in a dramaturgical vision of environmental action [28]. This criterion was widely used in the study of social movements, but it also becomes crucial for understanding environmental volunteering within organisations of various shapes, sizes

and styles of intervention. In Italy, the first environmental organisation to understand the potential of volunteering was Legambiente, which first created its own 'volunteering' section and then pushed its clubs to legally equip themselves with the status of 'voluntary association'.

The literature is very rich in showing the 'usefulness' of volunteering within organisations [29]. It is less easy to understand if and how support for voluntary actions is part of a strategy of environmental organisations. There is a risk that the call for volunteering will be reduced to the search for visibility and consensus or even for cheap labour to carry out environmental services within an association unable to reach the standards of regularly paid staff [30]. It is also likely that the risk of an instrumental approach to environmental volunteering is applied not only by NGOs but also by public institutions and research centres.

In the literature, this intermediate level of analysis – organisational strategies – is not very frequent. The preferences go to surveys of environmental volunteers, thus bringing the question to the individual level, for example, motivational level. An exemplary study compared motivation to environmental volunteering in Austria and Great Britain and grasped marked differences:

The respondents in Great Britain are strongly motivated by career opportunities and the learning experience, while the Austrian respondents are mainly attracted by value and esteem. The discussion shows that according to the literature, these differences are likely to be determined by different cultural values in the respective countries [31: 158].

The quotation introduces us to the topic of the status and motivational characteristics of the environmental volunteer. A study that has led the way is that of Bruyere and Rappe [32], who identified eight motivational areas: helping the environment, improving a career, practicing places of interest, learning, socialising with many different people, being part of a well-organised project, expressing personal values and esteem, and health and wellbeing. The motivational areas are then translated into dimensions and transformed into a set of questions according to a well-tested methodology. In general, *helping the environment* is the most selected motivation; this is dominated by a distinction between 'nature' and 'environment' that we have already encountered; the former being a reference to natural areas to be protected, while the latter concerns balance to be achieved even in highly inhabited contexts characterised by social disparities.

It is not surprising that the category 'career' and 'learning' are highly relevant given that environmental volunteering has a broad and complex scientific basis, as we have seen in citizen science. The free practice of guardianship is seen as a sort of apprenticeship for young people and an enrichment of knowledge for those less young. This should not be stigmatised in terms of 'ingenuine action'. Volunteering used to be a common custom for access to the medical and academic professions, and it has now also become so for social welfare professions.

In the research of Sloane and Pröbstl-Haider [31], the relevance in the Austrian context of the motivation 'values and esteem' deserves comment. In that country as well as in southern Europe, volunteering – especially environmental volunteering – carries a strong meaning of civic duty from which social esteem arises. In Anglo-Saxon contexts, this feeling is not absent but surpassed by a sense of responsibility towards an individual's profession. This could be traced back to more communitarian attitudes rather than the more liberal ones present in the Anglo-Saxon and northern European world.

Organisational motivations (as part of a beautiful project, carried out with care) seem to have less relevance. Nevertheless, they are present among volunteers [29]. There is evidence that positive experiences in the past strengthen the motivation to continue voluntary service, a sort of *past dependency* of the volunteer [33]. Psychologists place a great deal of importance on the sense of efficacy of voluntary action. This can be expressed in two ways<sup>1</sup>: a sense of wellbeing for being able to carry out a task (self-fulfilment [34]) and satisfaction that the efforts invested have produced a tangible result in favour of the environment. The second modality has been brought into focus in models of planned rationality and functional analysis [35]. In both models, individuals are assumed to be rational and to engage in behaviours when they think (cognition) that their action produces beneficial effects, that is, is effective [36].

In the model of planned rationality, a lot of importance is given to an individual's *Perceived Behavioural Control*, while in functional analysis, we insist on the adherence of voluntary action to a series of individual needs, such as a reduction in stress, an increase in sociability, adherence to altruistic values or the chance that the behaviour will be understood by third parties [37].

<sup>1</sup> 'Past research suggests that two types of efficacy may be relevant to environmental volunteering leadership and participation behaviors. The first of these is self-efficacy [...] which refers to individuals' confidence in their ability to engage in a behavior, with higher self-efficacy perceptions related to stronger intentions to undertake that behavior. [...]. The second type of efficacy is collective efficacy which refers to individuals' beliefs that their collective volunteer activities will contribute to successful environmental outcomes [...]' [39: 4].

Greenslade and White concluded their study by arguing that

some support for the utility of both the theory of planned behavior and the functional approach as approaches to understanding the determinants of above-average participation in self-reported volunteerism. In the present study, we also found that the theory of planned behavior displayed greater predictive efficacy than did the functional approach regarding above-average participation in volunteerism [35: 168].

In general, these models always give positive results in the sense that they predict a correlation between individual cognitions based on rational assumptions and pro-environmental intentions. Nonetheless, there are so many variations in intensity and methodology adopted by each individual group of researchers that it becomes very difficult to accumulate knowledge about these models [38]. The study by Gulliver et al. [39] is emblematic because it considers not only responses to tested items but also answers to free questions, such as combining quantitative and qualitative analysis. The authors also expanded the Theory of Planned Behaviour by introducing a series of questions about the organisation and organisational climate of the environmental volunteer group.

Therefore, alongside the powerful and broad dimension of self-efficacy, it is necessary to introduce other levels of analysis: the position and intention of the subject within the voluntary organisation (the theme of leadership and career), the identity of the environmental group,<sup>2</sup> the organisational climate and strategic choices of the environmental association and finally the socio-institutional context, that is, an analysis of *political opportunities* that unite the scholars of the movements and voluntary movements [9]. This prefigures a multilevel analysis, in which particular attention should be paid to the role of intermediate or organisational levels.

'Indeed, organizational and/or situational variables are argued to better predict volunteering activity than individual motivations or attitudes (...), and incorporating their analysis into studies on volunteering behavior is a common theme in the literature (...)' [39: 5].

An organisational approach to environmental volunteering cannot be separated from studies on the environmental movement and the numerous references to social networks as a specific way of being in this field. Volunteering in general 'can be compared to other contemporary forms of collective action, such as environmental movements, movements based on ethnic and religious bases, and localistic instances. With these forms of collective mobilization, voluntary action shares several characteristics: the fact that it is placed in an ethical-cultural perspective rather than a political one (...), the predilection for the small group and a polycentric and reticular organizational structure (...), the promotion of new forms of solidarity based on gift and symbolic exchange' [40, *my translation*].

The study of environmental organisations through the network parameter runs the double risk of a spatial and temporal abstraction. An article by Ju and Tang [41] focused on these risks and showed that the different waves of development of *Environmental Non-Governmental Organisations* (ENGOS) in South Korea have largely depended on windows of national change due to regime changes and political coalitions and on typical institutional dynamics, generally characterised by incrementalism, internalisation of change and isomorphism. The merit of their analysis is that it combines a typical interpretation (evolution of the Korean political world) with one that refers to universal theoretical models, such as historical institutionalism. The counterpart is evident: the loss of attention on the strategies of the individual ENGOS as deliberative and cultural processes in favour of processes in which the individual association and, even more so, the individual volunteer disappear from the scene. Nevertheless, the call of Ju and Tang [41] to de-Westernize the analysis of ENGOS is very pertinent and, overall, to the advantage of 'local' analytical perspectives.<sup>3</sup>

A typology that seeks to encompass general and local as well as the context and agency of ENGOS is found in Greenspan et al. [42]. These authors identified four types of ENGOS: *entrepreneurs* (advocacy model), *service providers* (social provision model), *partners* (social movement model) and *enablers* (community development model) according to two interpretative axes, the proactive or reactive tendency of the environmental association and tendency of the community or government. Their theoretical target was participatory processes rather than the full range of environmental actions. Remarkably, their typology was wide enough to include countries in the south of the world in their case histories.

The criteria for cataloguing ENGOS have changed over time because ENGOS have had a similar evolution. For example, almost all of them have a permanent, centralised, professional staff and many volunteers scattered throughout the

<sup>2</sup> In response to Olson's [65] theory on self-interested participation in collective actions, the acquisition of a common identity was invoked [66, 67]; the same argument was later proposed for volunteering [39, 68].

<sup>3</sup> National or non-Western variants of environmental volunteering, as well as the presence of social prejudices within countries, have not been further developed, but are topics that are starting to emerge especially in multi-ethnic countries [69]. Various approaches address this problem: risk cultures [70], urban studies [23] and above all, environmental justice [71]. The only paper found for Italy is [72].

territory, who are occasionally mobilised and sometimes not even associated. This has repercussions on the democratic life of an ENGO itself, with the formation of internal elites that tend to remain in the face of external volunteers with high turnover. This binary structure does not seem to affect the modes of action (the scripts). For example, all ENGOS conduct both protest and awareness-raising actions, placing themselves in front of public authorities in a fluctuating manner. In this sense, the distinction between volunteer and militant tends to blur [43].

So what are the factors that can distinguish ENGOS? A discriminating feature appears to be the spatial range of action of the group/association/organisation. This can be exclusively local or transcend this dimension by becoming a national or even international issue [44]. There could be three situations: exclusively local; national branched out into individual localities according to a top-down process; or the local issue that manages to rise to supralocal relevance (upscaling). A fourth situation of reduction to the local scale (downscaling) is not excluded from the list but is highly unlikely to be practiced by ENGOS. It can be kept as a school hypothesis. Rather, it seems discriminatory whether there is a supralocal network organisation (federation) or whether the upscaling is the result of a politically-marked national ENGO.

A second discriminating factor is probably the ability of ENGOS to develop projects and learning processes. A decisive point could be the distinction between pure advocacy organisations and those that enter a logic of permanent service, that is, participation in public tenders, management of protected areas or monitoring of the environment. This protest–service dualism [13] applies to social welfare NGOs [45, 46] and cuts across some important international ENGOS. For example, Greenpeace has long maintained a protest ENGO profile, while WWF manages dozens of wildlife oases around the world.

Some scholars dispute this distinction, starting with the work of Debra Minkoff [47], which speaks of organisations capable of providing both services and carrying out incisive political action. The research by Dana Fisher and Anya Galli [48] implies that there may be *organisational trade-offs*: for the same type of initiative – planting trees in cities – the organisational structure makes the difference. Some very large organisations with a centralised staff recruit many people from different walks of life for their first and perhaps only experience; other smaller organisations, mainly made up of volunteers, have fewer newcomers and more people with longer experience who are socially more homogeneous and able to dialogue with local communities. Above all, the former produce significant experiences, while the latter produce ecological knowledge. Citizen science could also fall into this dichotomy: there are those who do it on a one-off basis under external pressure and those who instead produce a long and content-dense learning path [18].

### 3 A typology-based framework for volunteering

River volunteering can be framed within environmental volunteering, the specificity of which it reflects. In fact, the free pro-environment action has three peculiarities: It requires a high degree of scientific knowledge and motivation; it necessarily has a close integration with public agencies of regulation and environmental protection; and reciprocity with other volunteers or with users of environmental services is marginal. All this almost produces an expulsion of the environmentalist commitment from the sphere of social volunteering, which is aimed at people in need [49]. Environmental activists themselves often say they do not belong to the world of volunteers. Yet, the challenge consists in maintaining this kind of commitment *within* the phenomenon of volunteering both for empirical considerations – some large environmental NGOs have deliberately framed their activists within it – and for speculative reasons: Environmental volunteering could be the vanguard of a new way of engaging with third parties.

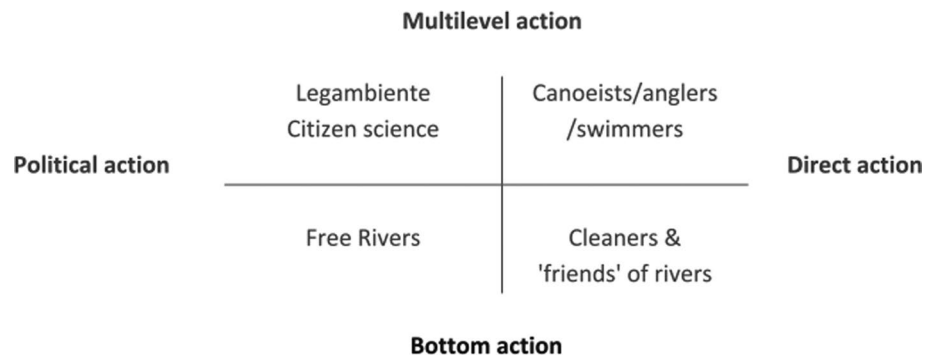
For this set of reasons, the initial framework that will be used here is taken from the mainstream of European volunteering [33]. Guidi's scheme starts from the assumption that the approach that he defines as 'second modernity' – evolution towards forms of light volunteering, self-centred on the needs of the volunteer, discontinuous and all-in-all declining – does not satisfy the reality of, at least, Western countries, particularly Italy. Instead of a unilinear approach, Guidi suggests a typology with four 'traditions' in which weight is given to organisational, institutional and strategic variables. The four types he identifies are: active membership, direct–without intermediation, program-based and organise-it-yourself.

In the first, 'volunteers belong to formally (pre-)established nonprofit organizations whose basic characteristics are regulated by legislation; core values and mission are shaped by founders; strategies, activities and instruments are defined by current members ... Particularly relevant to environmentalism is that in this tradition "organizations often have a multilevel structure" and are intended as "mediating institutions between individual member and the national political system"' [33: 754].

In the tradition of direct volunteering, 'people act without any organizational intermediation [...]. Volunteers' actions are neither regulated by law or included in governance processes, nor coordinated, but they are not necessarily



**Fig. 1** Reformulation of the typology of volunteering traditions [33] on more general interpretative axes and placement of river protection cases in each quadrant



extemporaneous' [33]. Guidi mentions forms of mutual aid in the southern hemisphere; this is a widespread, constant and robust practice, which is partly reflected in the environmental field after disasters.

The third tradition is called *program-based* volunteering. It is characterised by 'episodic, short-term and spatially circumscribed volunteering experiences provided by different organizations for the general public or specific targets. This voluntary action is usually top-down and highly regulated by the organizer' [33]. As a top-down practice, the political and communicative strategy of the organiser is of great importance as it is used to try to capture an extemporaneous and individualised willingness to free commitment, which fits well with some experiences of environmental citizen science [50, 51].

The fourth tradition is called *organise-it-yourself*. 'It includes those citizens' voluntary actions directly faced with an emergent problem which is not tackled enough by institutions, market or existing civil society organizations' [33: 755]. It is easy to see how well this fits the classic idea of social movement: protest for those who do not have institutional channels of representation. 'Voluntary action is here highly spontaneous and informal, but not disorganized'. This, too, recalls a topic of environmentalism: the network organisations, in any case, in need of external material and intellectual resources.

#### 4 Adaptation and embodiment of the framework to river volunteering

The typology proposed by Guidi makes it possible to pigeonhole the meaning of the individual's action within heterogeneous organisational contexts. His approach is predominantly organisational, therefore suitable for framing case studies. Moreover, the neo-institutionalism (perception of rules), which Guidi expressly inspires, gives a certain space to the subjectivities of the volunteers who populate and make active the river protection organisation. Nevertheless, the typology needs to be adapted to the specific context of rivers using categories that are quite common in the analysis of social movements. This will be done with emblematic examples referring to cases of Italian river volunteering.

The 'active membership' type corresponds to the classic political lobbying action of environmental associations; in other words, intermediation between institutions and citizens alongside or in place of parties. It copes, more logically than practically, with 'direct action without intermediation' (second type of Guidi). The latter is rare in the environmental field, given the high public regulation of the good. Emblematic cases could be the cleaning of the banks and riverbeds which, in principle, must be done by the authorities in charge or following their specific authorisation. Thus, lobbying and direct action are at the poles of a theoretical axis of demands on the institutions (Fig. 1).

The programme-based action concerns large environmental organisations that promote sustainability for a variety of reasons: propaganda, greenwashing, citizen involvement or accompaniment to cultural initiatives. It is placed at the apex of an axis that we could call 'territorial' in reference to the cleavages of Lipset and Rokkan [52]. These are top-down initiatives that also have a spatial connotation: a centre that acts towards the peripheries. On the other hand, we have initiatives that arise at the margins of systems, organised in a network pattern. If we want to give a name to the poles of this territorial axis, we will call them 'top-down or multilevel action' and 'reticular action', corresponding, respectively, to Guidi's programme-based and organise-it-yourself traditions.

River volunteering can then be placed in a broad conceptual space (Fig. 1), that goes beyond political environmentalism and voluntary action by third parties. To demonstrate this, we can identify, thanks to previous research,<sup>4</sup> emblematic cases to be placed in each square that emerges from the intersection of the two analytical axes. Let us start with *Legambiente*, an association with a long national history (it was born from the civil organisations of the Italian Communist Party) and without an international profile. This was placed at the intersection of political and institutional action because it was born as a protest association that was then integrated with public and private institutions that supported its monitoring campaigns. In the Guidi scheme, it could easily be in the 'program-based' pole, but its critical vein places it towards the typical action of pressure, lobbying and advocacy.

*Free Rivers* is similarly close to political action but with radical veins and a typical network structure, which is formed by groups, committees and associations linked together without a precise hierarchy. In fact, they also call themselves a 'federation'. One thing they have in common is the fight against mini-hydroelectric power, particularly in the Alps, or irrigation diversions obtained with weirs and penstocks [53]. In this sense, they also have contacts and collaborations throughout Europe, reproducing the network or federal organisation at that level as well [54].

At the intersection of reticular and direct action, we find the real novelties of the environmentalist phenomenon, that is, those groups with a local range of action that are detached not only from national organisations but also from local political ones and that aim to carry out practical things of immediate effect. The cleaning of the banks of the river lends itself well to this *here-and-now* vocation. Although this action is often undertaken with the agreement of the local authorities, it is conceived as a result of autonomous choices. Rather, there is a claim to local identity: The cleaning action allows us to better identify with a territorial symbol of immense value such as the river. The *Friends of the River* have also been placed in this quadrant, despite having different stories and compositions in these groups. The label of 'friends' unites scattered groups that have no relation to each other but consider themselves de-ideologised. Environmental protection would be impartial. Looking at the way they act or their utterances in social media, we can see that they often have their own ideology that we could define as populist, but with anti-system veins.

Finally, the position of citizen science, canoeists and sport anglers remains to be explained. While citizen scientists are temporary groups that are generally hired by large environmental organisations or research centres, such as universities, the sport players form a galaxy of compact and fierce organisations. The placement of the latter within the river volunteers is dictated by the fact that they show a high level of dedication to rivers and participate in collective protection initiatives, a sort of *water advocacy coalition* [55]. Therefore, they should also be included in political action. But their participation in coalitions is occasional, if not instrumental, while the relationship with both the institutions within their world (sports federations) and with the water institutions to obtain permits or establish agreements is more regular. However, it is pertinent to include sports and recreational organisations within the typology both for their active presence at the discussion tables, for example, the River Contracts [56], and for the number of practitioners, which is much higher than that of environmental organisations.<sup>5</sup>

Having made this location, which shows how varied the archipelago of river volunteering is, it remains to be seen whether any group or trend stays on the margins of the typology, given as well the organisational and strategic imprint impressed by Guidi [33]. Perhaps the quadrants of the typology miss that variegated world of those who protect the historical and cultural aspects of the river, the so-called heritage. The primary purpose of these volunteers is not the knowledge of water quality nor demands for greater environmental justice and even less the recreational-sporting uses of rivers and banks. These are driven by the desire to recover the historical memory of the river, generally through the setting up of eco-museums, the publication of research and the education of school groups. From field reconnaissance, river volunteering with a cultural imprint is quite widespread in Italy, but it is mixed with recreational activities along the river, such as hiking, cycling and participation in literature and film festivals. In Italy, the prototype of this type of volunteering between culture and the environment was *Italia Nostra*. The reason for the lack of adherence to Guidi's typology, albeit adapted, lies in the political-organisational inclination of the model. It is all unbalanced on the relationships between individual volunteers, organisations and society. In reality, cultural volunteers are focused on the intrinsic pleasure deriving from the recovery of historical memory and its transmission to their fellow citizens. In a different way than river cleaners, they reject the politicisation of the water issue, but typically have good relations with public

<sup>4</sup> Most of the information to build this typology comes from a research carried out in three phases starting from 2020: census of all Italian organizations that have internal voluntary actions in favor of rivers, self-compiled questionnaire aimed at a sample of river volunteers, in-depth analysis with emblematic case studies [73]. The results of these investigations are mainly in papers written in Italian [6, 74].

<sup>5</sup> It is estimated that there are about two million sport fishermen in Italy and those permanently associated with a few hundred thousand [75].

administrations from which they may receive material support and recognition. Very often, river museums are in public spaces, and there are individual volunteers who serve in them.

## 5 Conclusions

The conclusions can be drawn along the lines of the two questions posed in the introduction:

1. Are river volunteers a novelty in the more general landscape of free civic action? Or is eco-volunteering in crisis, light and a symbol of the second modernity?
2. What does river volunteering represent from a political point of view? Is it a new expression of democratic participation in a country gripped by populist impulses and facing a serious environmental crisis?

Unfortunately, the answer to the first question is equivocal, since in environmental volunteering, there are clear elements of second modernity or, as Ulrich Beck et al. [57] put it, of *reflexive modernisation*. They are based on individualization (choice, knowledge, biographical narrative) and, unexpectedly, on reciprocity [58], two social processes apparently opposed, but combined somehow in modern river volunteers, a result not far from what emerged in the initial research [6]. This recalls another dimension not grasped by the German sociologist: the competitive component. This indicates both a playful relationship with the river environment, which eschews an instrumental use of it, and a *cognitive agonism* [59]. Both put organisation in the background and enhance the direct, personal relationship with the natural environment. An attitude or way of doing things that is usually accused of individualism but in actuality refers to a primordial relationship with nature that has been lost and that we want to recreate [60]. We know that the ludic component – not only water sports but also recreational activities on the banks – is of high frequency and fairly high correlation indices with communitarian motivations of river volunteering [6]. It seems to be a distancing from an environmentalism that is considered, rightly or wrongly, elitist and ideological in favour of a more popular commitment [23, 61, 62].

In short, this could be the real dualism within river volunteering: a strong and clear commitment to environmental justice with a high intermediation by an organised group – civism – in contrast to a jumble of motivations for the pro-river commitment based on playful, emotional aspects and identification with the local community [63]. In this case, the intermediation of the organised group would be experienced in an ambivalent way, useful to reach the goal – illuminating, life-giving and agonist contact with water – but not too intrusive. If this stylisation has a foundation, the new type of river volunteer is closer to that *direct action*, little intermediated, with high reciprocity, which Guidi [33], above all, identifies in the countries of the southern hemisphere. Reciprocity in this case would be with the river!

The second question concerns the mediating role that river volunteering plays with civil society and with public institutions. It is not a 'third way' between the state and the market, an excessive role for the slender shoulders of river volunteers. Rather, it happily embodies universal values of justice and fraternity. There are also different visions for how these ideals become concrete practices: relations with politics and institutions remain various and problematic, if not conflictual. The different visions of hydraulic security weigh heavily, as does a naïve claim to neutrality of volunteers. In addition, national and international players always run the risk of exploiting volunteers' affection for the river for purposes of self-legitimation [64]. These centre-periphery tensions also emerge within the voluntary groups themselves and raise a fundamental issue related to the *territorial scale of intervention* that is preferable. Rivers are typically trans local, but volunteer groups rarely move at that scale, while their national referents are on too large a scale.

In short, a 'meso level' emerges that is expressed both in an organisational sense with 'federations', which protect the diversity of each group, and in a spatial sense with actions at a watershed or district level. In this sense, the river has not helped much to get out of classic centre-periphery contrasts or corporatist drifts, which are also diffused among third-sector organisations. The river contracts themselves, more than 200 throughout Italy, seem to be prisoners of this difficulty of connecting territorial levels of action. However, it is also risky to draw definitive conclusions. The alternation of extreme events, such as drought and floods, creates a new game between cities and hinterland/countryside with respect to which river volunteers seem particularly equipped to understand and react. They have at their disposal remarkable cognitive and organisational tools for recruiting new followers for the environmental cause and for democracy's resilience.

**Acknowledgements** I am grateful to Fellow Researcher Eleonora Bordon and Assistant Professor Paolo Giardullo of the University of Padua for supporting the research that gave rise to this article. Funding: Centro Servizi Volontariato of the Province of Padua (2020-21)



**Author contributions** The author is only one and wrote the entire paper.

**Data availability** I do not analyse or generate any datasets, because my work proceeds within a theoretical and typological approach.

## Declarations

**Competing Interests** The authors declare no competing interests.

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