Take a trip. Roll up your sleeves. Have some fun.

Rain forests and tundra, deserts and savannas, mountaintops and undersea reefs. No spot on the planet is too remote for the movement that has changed the face of leisure travel. Ecotourism, in all its various guises—green tourism, sustainable tourism, adventure travel—has gained traction as enthusiasts seek to experience the earth’s wonders while treading lightly on them.

Lately a new subset of this boom has emerged. “Voluntourism” ramps the ecological impulse up a notch, providing ways for vacationers to help save the world’s sustainable resources. The trend has been described as a kind of mini version of the Peace Corps. Depending on your interests, you could find yourself repairing trails leading to Old Faithful, tracking sharks in the Atlantic, or mixing cement for housing in the Andes. Voluntourism is becoming a significant growth sector of the travel industry. Online trip planner Travelocity, for example, now partners with tour operators such as GlobeAware, Cross-Cultural Solutions and Take Pride in America, which specialize in launching voluntourists on service-oriented vacations.

One organization, the Massachusetts-based Earthwatch Institute, places travelers in cutting-edge field research projects around the globe. During these stints, most lasting one to two weeks, volunteers work alongside professional, peer-reviewed scientists, all authorities in their disciplines and all expecting meticulous performance and dedication from their newfound assistants. This arrangement is probably the ne plus ultra of the voluntourist experience, and Earthwatch is the acknowledged arranger. Here are three expeditions that offer natural beauty, enjoyment and meaningful participation.
Easter Island (Rapa Nui) is a lonely little triangle of mid-Pacific volcanic rock. Two thousand miles from either of its nearest populated neighbors, Tahiti and Chile, the island is generally regarded as the world’s most remote inhabited site. Despite the isolation, it was once home to a vibrant civilization that left behind, among other relics, the familiar Moai, the gigantic stone heads that have become the island’s signature icons. The resonance between Rapa Nui’s culture and its rocky, wind-whipped terrain have made it an important ongoing venue for scientific inquiry.

Archaeologist Christopher Stevenson, a longtime Earthwatch associate, oversees much of this scrutiny. Three times a year he musters teams of paying volunteers for 14-day tours as researchers to probe the mysteries of Easter Island. Much of the work is archaeological, but it’s not just a search for pottery shards or petroglyphs. Stevenson is fascinated with the decline of Easter Island’s civilization and the islanders’ failure to maintain sustainable agriculture. He focuses primarily on the fragile balance between farming in arid, inhospitable soil and the powerful infrastructure that plundered labor and resources to build temples and the monumental Moai. Easter Island is a “model planet Earth,” Stevenson says. It demonstrates the negative pressures that sociocultural demands—political power and religion included—can exert on the sustainability of a delicate ecosystem.

Stevenson’s volunteers extract and analyze soil from ancient gardens and small farms around the island. Directed by his fellow scientist Sonia Haoa, they also conduct plot surveys and collect artifacts at promising archaeological sites—data crucial to the ongoing study. The value to the volunteers themselves, aside from an extreme version of “getting away from the office,” is multifold. “They learn about being part of a research team,” Stevenson says. “They acquire important skills required for field investigation, including adapting quickly to a new culture. To a large degree, they’re learning what actual science is all about.”

Kathi Merritt, an Oregon schoolteacher and veteran of several Earthwatch expeditions, reports that she loved the feeling of working in the shadow of the legendary Moai—“a definite ‘wow!’”—surrounded by Rapa Nui’s stark terrain. “It has a barrenness that’s beautiful,” she says. “There are lava flows and gentle swales of volcanic rock. Occasionally a few of the island’s wild horses would wander past.” As to the work, “your feet get sore,” Merritt says. “You’re hot and sweaty, tramping around the Hiva-Hiva cone area, digging up soil, sifting for carbon flakes and obsidian, taking detailed field notes—the depth of your samples, size of the layers, things like that. Then you fill in that hole and move on to the next site.” Between bouts of labor, volunteers can enjoy swims at Easter Island’s secluded beaches and horseback riding over headlands that afford panoramic views of the Pacific. For incurable archaeology buffs, scores of caves and ceremonial sites unrelated to Stevenson’s project can be explored. But to most voluntourists, the research is their main recreation. Is it that enjoyable? “Yes,” Merritt says, “it’s amazing. I’m going back for more.”

**Want to Go?**

[www.earthwatch.org/expeditions/stevenson.html](http://www.earthwatch.org/expeditions/stevenson.html)

**Cost:** $3,746*

**Upcoming expeditions:**

- March 22–April 4, 2009
- April 7–April 20, 2009
- April 22–May 5, 2009

*Includes room, meals, fees (all or most are U.S. tax deductible); excludes airfare
Conservation biologist Bill Newmark heads Earthwatch programs in the East African nation of Tanzania. His work had a profound effect on one of his voluntourists. Former schoolteacher Alvin Helden joined Newmark for an expedition a couple of years ago and was powerfully affected by tropical Africa’s dazzling biodiversity. He became determined “to change the direction of my career.” Helden returned to academia as a researcher in biology and now lectures full-time at Anglia Ruskin University in Cambridge, England.

It would be difficult to remain unmoved by the spectacular venue. The sprawling grasslands of Tarangire National Park are an immensely rich biosphere, home to the world’s largest, most diverse population of migratory ungulates—hoofed mammals—such as wildebeests, zebras, giraffes, buffalo, gazelles and eland. Migration is vital to maintaining the populations of these large prey animals, and some species are in serious decline. Newmark’s Saving the Tarangire Migration mission is to determine the “why” of this decline. “Wildebeest herds, for example, have been decimated, on the order of an 88 percent loss since 2001,” Newmark says. “We’re trying to get at the cause.”

Using simple GPS units and digital cameras, volunteers locate herds, marking their geographic coordinates, numbers, and the distribution of their members by age and sex. Forage samples are taken and kill sites are recorded for later analysis. Because each of these creatures has distinctive morphological characteristics—size, coloration, hide patterns and sometimes horn shape—they are exhaustively photographed, and the pictures are entered into a database at the expedition’s base camp. This “photographic capture and recapture” enables Newmark to track the movements of herds and specific individuals from year to year. The whole process is labor-intensive, and he and his colleagues rely heavily on their volunteers, both in the field and at computer terminals in camp.

For the voluntourist, doing valuable fieldwork to prevent what Newmark calls “losing this part of our natural heritage” is immensely satisfying. There’s also a romantic component: consorting with fabulous wild creatures by day and relaxing to a chorus of exotic birds under a starlit African night.

**East Africa**

**Saving the Tarangire Migration**

Want to Go?

[www.earthwatch.org/expeditions/newmark.html](http://www.earthwatch.org/expeditions/newmark.html)

Cost: $3,846*

Upcoming expeditions:

- Sept. 17–Sept. 27, 2008
- Nov. 15–Nov. 25, 2008

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*Cost includes airfare to and from Tanzania.**
Arctic’s Edge
Tracking the Demon

Peter Kershaw’s expeditions to Arctic fringes in northern Canada insert volunteers into some of the most important science surrounding the demonic issue of our time: global warming. The peat-covered zone that circles the globe just below the Arctic is a greenhouse gas time bomb; if this permafrost thaws, it will release vast quantities of methane, impacting the entire planet. Kershaw’s volunteers can work in one of two rugged and spectacular locations: either the vast tundra of northern Manitoba or 1,700 meters above sea level in the challenging alpine wilderness of the Mackenzie Mountains. Teams stay for 11 days, collecting data with ground-penetrating radar, soil coring and live trapping of small mammals. Accommodations are cozy, but hardy winter volunteers sometimes try their hands at building and sleeping in igloos, which offer ideal protection from small mammals. Accommodations are cozy, but hardy winter volunteers sometimes try their hands at building and sleeping in igloos, which offer ideal protection from small mammals. Accommodations are cozy, but hardy winter volunteers sometimes try their hands at building and sleeping in igloos, which offer ideal protection from small mammals.

Colorado native Will Mahoney, who returned from a recent expedition, has a long-standing interest in earth science and in the Arctic in particular. He enjoyed the long runs of sunlight and quirky warm temperatures of Arctic summer days. Mahoney was also fascinated by his team’s diverse makeup. “We had some scientists,” he notes, “but there were mostly laypeople—a British barrister, a Washington, D.C., schoolteacher—drawn by their personal commitment to sustainable development.”

Another volunteer, Rob Crooks, worked on the Arctic Edge project alongside an ex-president of Costa Rica and the former CEO of the World Economic Forum. To Mahoney, the variety among volunteers sends an important signal: “It suggests that we’re all moving in a direction that might be more positive for Mother Earth.”

Jim Cornfield is a veteran freelance writer and commercial photographer based in Malibu Canyon, Calif.

Want to Go?
www.earthwatch.org/expeditions/kershaw.html
Cost: $2,946*
Upcoming expeditions:
Feb. 15–Feb. 25, 2009
Feb. 28–March 10, 2009

Other Options for Voluntourists

Shark Research Institute
www.sharks.org/expeditions.htm
Intermediate diving skills required. If an adrenaline rush appeals to you, the institute offers ongoing projects aimed to protect all species of this endangered marine predator. Among them: Sandtiger Shark Expeditions, North Carolina coast. Volunteers assist veteran research diver Dean Fessler in data collection, photography and tagging. These sharks prefer to dwell among the shipwrecks along this shoreline. Also, Cocos Island Expedition, Costa Rica. Live onboard a state-of-the-art dive vessel and assist renowned expert Alex Antoniou in his study of the scalloped hammerhead shark by tagging specimens with acoustic telemetry and processing tissue samples.

GlobeAware
www.globeaware.org
“Cultural awareness and sustainability” is the mission. Volunteers take weeklong vacations and participate in projects ranging from planting trees to lining a road with oil lamps in Costa Rica to constructing water systems and improving orphanages in Ghana. Other destinations include Cuba, Jamaica, Mexico, Peru, Brazil, Romania, Nepal, China, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam. GlobeAware ensures that its helpers enjoy each locale’s leisure activities, too.

Take Pride in America
www.takepride.gov
This U.S. Department of the Interior program aims to “help maintain and enhance our shared spaces.” An individual can peruse the program’s Web site and select the state where he or she wants to travel. Volunteers can serve as a tour guide for bird-watchers at Point Reyes, Calif., a campground host in the Santa Fe National Forest in New Mexico, or a worker repairing trails in Yellowstone National Park.

—J.C.