

## **Volunteer Monitoring: Citizens Working for Healthy Watersheds**

Volunteer monitoring is a powerful way to involve local citizens and groups while gathering useful information about their home territory. This can foster personal commitments of time, money, and political support for protecting and repairing local aquatic systems and supporting the land use decisions that will ensure long-term success.



Regulations and enforcement to protect water quality are ineffective tools if public understanding and support for these regulations are lacking. The ongoing destruction of shoreland habitat despite state and local regulations is a prime example of this problem. On the other hand, the success of programs aimed at restoring lakeshore habitat is a testament to what can be accomplished if citizens understand the reasons underlying these regulations. These programs have demonstrated that people are willing to go way beyond what is required, if they understand the need, and the benefits, and can apply it close to home.

What are the current needs that a volunteer watershed monitoring network could fulfill?

### ***Needs***

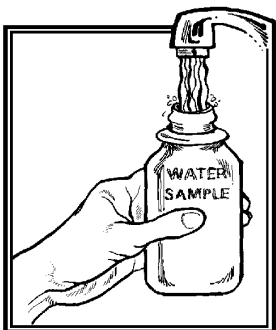
- **Data:** The DNR does not have the staff or funding to gather needed baseline information to target sites needing protection or remediation in our basins.
- **Coordination:** At present there are a number of monitoring programs that interact very little, or not at all. Examples include, Water Action volunteers, the Self-help Lake Monitoring Program, DNR Frog & Toad Survey, Audubon Bird counts, etc. If this information was put together we might get a much clearer, more complete, picture of watershed health.
- **Timing and Format:** Professional or volunteer data often never reaches the public, or community decision makers in an appropriate, timely, user-friendly format.
- **Counties need help.** The new Wisconsin Nonpoint Pollution Control Program requires that counties include monitoring in their Land and Water Resource Management plans, but few have the resources or technical support to do this effectively. Without monitoring, counties cannot effectively target sites and evaluate results for this key water quality program.

### ***Program Guideline Ideas for building a Volunteer Watershed Monitoring Network***

- There should be a citizen volunteer watershed monitoring network for each River Basin (GMU), and a full time monitoring coordinator.
- Monitors can include students, families, seniors, individuals, outing clubs, local organizations – any person or group with a sincere interest, and the time and ability to participate.
- To the extent possible, a local group should sponsor monitors in each Basin topic area. (Audubon Society, lake and river organizations, school districts, nature centers, fishing clubs, etc. Existing programs should be included in the network.

- Monitoring Equipment and supplies, when possible, should be standardized and procured at the state level, but paid for by local organizations, municipalities, or interested individuals. If they have a vested interest in the reports, they are more likely to use the data collected to make effective local management decisions.
- Monitoring may include any needed indicators of ecosystem health – including human health - water quality, bird counts, frog counts, habitat surveys, construction erosion compliance, forestry BMP monitoring, river critter surveys, urban sprawl surveys, well water screening, cancer clusters, - whatever people want to monitor, and whatever information is needed.
- The coordinator should put together a yearly watershed fair, seminar, or some event that will facilitate each monitoring subject's sharing with all the other monitors. The goal will be a watershed health, quality of life, and sustainability snapshot for the year - presented and preserved in a user-friendly manner - with fun and enlightenment being key elements. This information shall also be readily accessible on a Basin Web page.
- The watershed coordinator should work with counties, other basin coordinators and the state staff to facilitate expanding this local knowledge to see how it fits into a bigger picture - regional, state, national and even international.
- State staff would be needed to assist the basin coordinators to establish priorities, and continually improve and standardize monitoring methodology so that as much information as possible correlates between Basins, Regions, and states and beyond.
- The state program should compile data & generate comprehensive, statewide reports – available on website and for presentation to Basin organizations and community groups. This would highlight regional or statewide trends and would be in addition to the individual basin reports..
- Monitoring data should be presented in a format that is relevant, timely, and useful to decision-makers, the media, and to the public, and in an appropriate manner to generate and support community interest and involvement in a healthy watershed.

The volunteer monitoring of a watershed's health could provide needed information, and meaningful learning experiences to local communities. Like pieces of a puzzle, different aspects of watershed health can fit together to give us greater insights than any piece in isolation. Such a program could provide effective feedback loops that can guide decision-making and give people in a community the kind of personal, hands on experience that leads to action.



The recent DNR reorganization, focused on River Basins, is based on the recognition of the need to bring watershed management decisions closer to home, and to involve local citizens and organizations in natural resource planning and decision-making. A basin volunteer monitoring network could go a long way to creating a sense of place, a stewardship ethic and motivation for action for those who live and work there.

*Lisa Conley – member of the Rock River Coalition\* Water Quality Team.*

The Rock River Coalition is working to develop a pilot volunteer river-monitoring program whose aim is to fit the information gathered into a bigger picture of basin health. We are just getting started – the brochure is available at [www.rockrivercoalition.com](http://www.rockrivercoalition.com)