

Participatory Watershed Monitoring: Linking Citizens to Scientists Through the NH Lakes Lay Monitoring Program

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Biographical Sketch of Author

Jeff holds a joint appointment at the University of New Hampshire as an Extension Associate Professor in the Zoology Department, a Research Scientist in the Center for Freshwater Biology and as a Water Resources Specialist with Cooperative Extension. Since 1986, he has been the coordinator of the New Hampshire Lakes Lay Monitoring Program a volunteer lake and tributary monitoring program initiated in 1979. He lectures in Water Resources, Limnology, Watershed Ecology, Community Mapping with GIS, and Lake and Watershed Management. He also works directly with individuals, associations, communities and cooperating agencies concerned with surface water resources assessment and volunteer monitoring.

Abstract

Although originally intended as a university outreach effort to assist local communities, the New Hampshire Lakes Lay Monitoring Program (NH LLMP) has proven to be highly beneficial to all parties involved. By truly engaging and integrating the volunteers and their communities with faculty, students and cooperators the 25 year old volunteer watershed and water quality monitoring effort has evolved to take advantage of the synergy created through truly participatory research and monitoring programs.

The participatory monitoring model employed has a few key common elements:

- It involves community members in the design and implementation of the monitoring efforts.
- The research processes and data analysis outcomes should benefit the community.
- Community members should be part of the analysis and interpretation of data and should have input into how the results are distributed.
- Productive partnerships between agencies, researchers and community members should be encouraged to last beyond the life of the monitoring effort.

The outcomes of the participatory approach generally go well beyond the typical cost-effective monitoring and educational outcomes shared by all volunteer programs. The attention to community stakeholder involvement from the start allows for early buy-in to a project and also can allow for ridding the project of actual and perceived conflicts between stakeholder groups from within and outside the community. If facilitated successfully it may also bring diverse community interest groups together. Often the projects generate the needed momentum to energize or (reenergize) the community as well as spread interest in developing monitoring interest in other communities.

The university also benefits in providing “real world experience” to its students and by connecting the faculty to the communities. Not only do the faculty better understand the prevailing applied research needs but they often have a large and well distributed corps of “field technicians” to help with any type of research interest. Understanding community needs and concerns is a powerful advantage for grant proposal success. Creative funding strategies involving local, agency and university elements can also be developed.

Examples of successful participatory projects will be highlighted.

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