SHARING DATA FROM AND SUSTAINING A LONG-TERM MONITORING PROGRAM

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ABSTRACT

The South Branch Watershed Association's (SBWA) Volunteer Monitoring Program was started in 1994 to collect baseline data and reveal any water quality trends over time for the South Branch of the Raritan River and its tributaries. The program includes 18 stream monitoring sites and approximately 65 trained Volunteer Water Stewards (Volunteers) who collect visual and biological data once each year. Collecting this data is just the tip of the iceberg. In order for the data to have meaning and help improve local water quality, it must be managed and shared with others. The program itself must also be sustained.

Annual visual and biological data collection involves many people, including staff to take care of the details, and the many volunteers who are trained to properly collect the data. The lab is responsible for sorting and identifying the collected organisms, and providing this information to the SBWA for analysis and dissemination to others.

SBWA shares their monitoring data with the Volunteers, general public, media, and local, state, and federal agencies in a variety of ways. The SBWA Monitoring Advisory Committee reviews the data, the results are presented at an Annual Monitoring Conference, and a summary of the year's monitoring results is produced. The biological data is entered into the SBWA interactive mapping site, the River Monitor, for anyone with web access to explore. All data is entered into the NJ DEP online data management system to be used by that state agency and other monitoring groups in the state. A Comprehensive Report using 12 years of SBWA monitoring data has just been published and is posted on the SBWA website.

Keeping this monitoring program afloat for so long has provided challenges to overcome. The longevity of the SBWA program has been possible due to dedicated staff and volunteers. Finding funding and involving the media has played a key part as well.

KEYWORDS

Sustaining, data collection, data management, data exchange, sharing data, long-term monitoring, communication, outreach, local monitoring.