



“I Want to Help Whoever Can Help the Water”

Explaining Citizen Involvement in Volunteer Water Quality Monitoring Programs

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Background

- ◆ Research question: How do participants in volunteer water quality monitoring programs articulate the motivations and goals that lead them to this activity?
- ◆ Data:
 - ◆ 18 in-depth interviews with participants from five regional water quality monitoring organizations.
 - ◆ Three months of participant observation at the lab of one organization, plus attendance at various events, trainings, and forums across organizations.
- ◆ These exploratory results are part of an ongoing project.

Most studies on vol wqm focus on data quality, organization structures, or outcomes (either for water quality data or for volunteers). Few studies focus on the social aspects of participation. Notable exceptions: Bruyere and Rappe (2007) who identify “opportunities for socializing with likeminded people” as a motivation for environmental volunteerism, though not wqm in particular, and Overdeest, Orr, and Stepenuck (2004) who have find that wqm volunteers experience an increase in personal networks and community connections. This study is differs in that I focus on what brings volunteers to the table (or, rather, to the stream, or the lab) to begin, and what keeps them there.

Sample Characteristics

- ◆ Age: Average 51 years, range 24-71 years.
- ◆ Race: Seventeen respondents are white, one is black.
- ◆ Gender: Nine respondents are women, Nine are men.
- ◆ Income: Estimated average 60K, range from 30K to over 100K.
- ◆ Education: Eleven bachelors degrees, five advanced degrees, one high school diploma, one "some college".
- ◆ Occupation: Four retired, Fifteen currently working in fields as varied as art, science, engineering, nursing, planning, education, government, and agriculture.
- ◆ Seven of the respondents hold voluntary leadership positions in a water quality monitoring program, eight participants are volunteers with no leadership role. Three participants have paid positions with their organization.

This reflects previous research suggesting participants in volunteer water quality monitoring tend to be well-educated, middle class, professional, and, on average, middle aged. However, those that I interviewed consistently mentioned various aspects of diversity in their programs in terms of age, occupation, political views, etc. It may be that, for whatever reason, less educated or blue collar participants, etc. are not getting included in studies. For example, my research suggests that organizational leaders and lab volunteers tend to be more homogeneous, on average, than samplers.

Results

- When articulating motivations for participation, responses varied within an overall theme of protecting the water by gathering data for use by experts.
- When asked what is most rewarding about participation, social relationships was a highly consistent recurring theme.

Variations for motivation include protecting the water for: recreation, scenic beauty, restoration, public health, public engagement, and professional concerns (i.e. from a respondent who is an engineer). Despite this variation, the importance of the social relationships cultivated through wqm was explicitly mentioned in all but three interviews.

Variations on a theme: Butch

- ◆ “The EPA and all those other organizations that should be doing this kind of stuff can’t afford it. They just do what they can and we pick up what falls by the wayside.”
- ◆ “I like the people. There is a social part of monitoring that I think is very important. It’s a gathering point and whether you to talk to the same person or not every time, it’s still social.”

Butch volunteers with several organizations in the area, but does not hold an official leadership position. He both collects samples and works in the lab. Butch also has a scientific background related to water quality. This and the following quotes highlight the importance of resource protect via data gathering and sharing AND the importance of the social relationships within the organization.

Variations on a theme: Jack

- ◆ “I like the fact that [the data] is actually [available] for the public to see and for regulators to see. I like the fact that there’s hard data coming out of it that means something to scientists smarter than me. I think that’s pretty cool.”
- ◆ I support the mission of the organization [but] it’s a combination. If they were a bunch of stuck up personalities I don’t know if I would be as involved as I am, honestly. I don’t think we’d play cards or whatever on Friday night... we’re all very different, [but] with a common goal.

Jack volunteers with a single organization by running tests in the lab. Jack’s education and profession is not related to science or water quality, but he describes himself as an “outdoor”. He met some the guys who do wqm as part of another organization and became “networked” into wqm that way. Participation initiation through networks is a common theme. Several other volunteers began wqm because they were recruited by a friend or family member.

Variations on a theme: Amy

- ◆ Our program was the outgrowth of a pollution problem. Our volunteers know that this is a long term initiative and like the fact that we're doing it and producing these datasets that are taken seriously [by the EPA].
- ◆ Just [giving volunteers a chance to] sit around and eat a cold-cut sandwich together is important. The next thing you know people are fishing and canoeing with each other.

Amy is the director of the oldest vwqm program in Cincinnati. Her organization meets Ohio's Credible Data Law for Level 2 training and the EPA using some of their data and testing sites when considers TMDLs on the river. Amy has also been very generous with her support of other wqm in the area. Her comment about lunch underscores another common theme- the importance of food. Volunteers from organization that provided lunch consistently mentioned the importance of sharing a meal together both as a sign of volunteer appreciation and building relationships. For Amy, providing lunch is beneficial in an additional way- it keeps volunteers from leaving early because they are hungry.

Conclusions

- ◆ Organizations with the strongest records of volunteer retention cultivate socialization (i.e. providing lunch and having a radio on for lab sessions; organizing outings).
 - ◆ *“All order, no chaos.” This is how one participant described his experience with an organization that struggled with volunteer retention.*
- ◆ Like all relationships, volunteer relationships must be managed. One group had an issue with “personality conflicts” involving a volunteer in a leadership position and this had a negative impact on volunteer retention.



Central findings:

People *get involved* because they want to help the water;
they *stay involved* because of the relationships
formed while volunteering.

Directions for future research:

I'm currently working on a questionnaire that would be
distributed online to a national sample.