“I Want to Help Whoever Can Help the Water”
Explaining Citizen Involvement in Volunteer Water Quality Monitoring Programs
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Funding provided by the Northern Kentucky Ecological Stewardship Institute
and the NKU College of Arts & Sciences.

Special thanks to research assistants: Luke Freeman, Caitlin Harrah, Caitlin Ferris, and Jared Mueller.
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 Overdevest, Orr, and Stepenuck (2004) who have find that wqm volunteers experience an increase in personal networks and community connections. This study 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.

**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.**
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.
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.

- 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.
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 protection via data gathering and sharing AND the importance of the social relationships within the organization.

- “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.”
“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 of 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.
Amy is the director of the oldest wqbm 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 wqbm 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.