

The Great American Secchi Dip-In: Creating an International Volunteer Network

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Volunteer monitors may bridge the gap of distrust between the Public and the government agency by bringing the Public into the monitoring process, which had previously been the exclusive job of the professional. It is critically important that the goals of volunteer monitoring and of the agency are not misunderstood by the parties involved. For the professional, volunteer data are often not be considered of adequate quality for serious use or the volunteers are considered as cheap labor. The volunteer, on the other hand, is very serious about their efforts and assume that their data are sufficiently important to be used. For them, it is not an exercise for the fun of it. Volunteers and their interests must be taken seriously and the data must be useful and accurate.

An illustration of this may be found in the Great North American Secchi Dip-In, an all-volunteer international water quality-monitoring network. Dip-In volunteer monitors take Secchi disk transparency readings in their lakes, reservoirs, rivers, and estuaries during a two-week period in June and July. The Dip-In does not recruit volunteers; it works exclusively with existing local and state volunteer programs. For the volunteers, it is a chance to contribute to our understanding of water quality over the continent. For their coordinators, the Dip-In affords a chance to involve their volunteers and to publicize their own program. For the agency, it provides 3,000 new data records taken across North America each year.

The Dip-In considers its primary goal the collection of useful data. Education is important, and the idea that Science can be fun is involved, but the data are regarded as the primary goal of the project. Considerable time is spent verifying the data so that it can be used by agencies. By taking volunteer-monitored data seriously the Dip-In serves as a catalyst between the volunteer and the agency.

Dr. Robert E. Carlson

Dr. Carlson is a professor in the Department of Biological Sciences at Kent State University, where he has taught since 1975. He received his undergraduate education in Biology at Gustavus Adolphus College, St. Peter, Minnesota, and a MS degree in Entomology and a PhD in Ecology at the University of Minnesota.

Dr. Carlson has a number of ongoing interests. He and his students have conducted research ranging from the trophic state classification of lakes and reservoirs to using paleolimnological techniques to investigate the effect of past fish species introductions to lakes. He has been involved with volunteer monitoring since 1973 when he became involved with the first lake monitoring program in the U.S. He is the author of a trophic state index that is used for the classification of lakes and reservoirs and has coauthored a manual on monitoring techniques for volunteer lake monitoring. He was one of the authors of the EPA's Lakes Bioassessment Manual and, most recently, one of the authors of the EPA Lakes Nutrient Criteria Manual.