

ACTION PLAN TO IMPLEMENT RECOMMENDATIONS

EXPANDING EXISTING EFFORTS

Use Experiential Learning to Engage the Next Generation of Leaders

Connect nonprofit organizations that undertake citizen science, experiential learning, and hands-on volunteering with county-level organizations to better engage the general public and current leaders, and train the next generation of environmental stewards and elected officials.

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Introduction

Although the Delaware River Watershed is an area with many stream miles, receives a moderate amount of rain, and provides drinking water for two major metropolitan areas, water quality may not be considered a high priority by the general public. There are many reasons why. One reason may be that people are disconnected from the geography of local waterways and the challenges of protecting water quality. In many communities, smaller waterways are hidden in underground pipes and culverted. The waterway might look more like a drainage ditch.

The environmental movement and area nonprofit organizations have learned that hands-on activities—such as conducting regular visual stream assessments, planting trees next to a creek, and removing invasive plants—are effective in educating and engaging volunteers. Many of these volunteers then become environmental stewards. Some stewards become ambassadors and advocate to their neighbors and local officials. A few ambassadors become motivated to serve on a local board or commission or run for elected office.

There are many watershed associations, environmental educational nonprofits, and research organizations that lead well-established environmental education programs and offer meaningful volunteer opportunities. There is an opportunity to create a more formal pipeline to help these educated, interested, and motivated citizens become active in local land use and environmental decision making. A more formal process for connecting citizens to opportunities, and specifically opportunities related to local land use decision making, supports existing grants

Can most people name the creek closest their home?

Alliance for Watershed Education of the Delaware River

Launched in June 2017, the Alliance is a regional initiative of 23 environmental education centers located along The Circuit and on waterways throughout the Delaware River Watershed. The alliance introduced an Environmental Fellowship Program in which each center will host a summer fellow, between the ages of 18 and 24, to manage community outreach and programs. The fellow does not have to have previous environmental education experience. Paid professional opportunities may possibly be expanded to individuals with diverse backgrounds.

made by the William Penn Foundation to the League of Conservation Voters, the Academy of Natural Sciences for its Citizen Science program, and the Alliance for Watershed Education of the Delaware River.

Successful Programs

Not all citizens will be or are able to become Master Watershed Stewards. A volunteer program must provide a variety of options for volunteer engagement. Providing a basic understanding of watersheds and a visit to a creek is a first step. The next level of engagement could be participating in a tree planting. And the highest level of engagement is committing to and carrying out monthly monitoring.

County Conservation Districts in New Jersey and Pennsylvania are in an opportunistic position to coordinate and lead more citizen science and environmental stewardship programs because of their knowledge of water issues, their relationship to municipalities, and their role as technical assistance providers. In Pennsylvania, County Conservation Districts have established Master Watershed Stewards programs, and many have Watershed Specialists on staff. Conservation Districts could provide a more formalized way of connecting individuals who volunteer with a watershed organization to county and municipal boards and commissions that need informed citizen appointees.

Anticipated Outcomes

A short-term outcome of expanded educational programs based at nonprofit organizations, and more coordination with the County Conservation Districts, is the recruitment of citizens to serve on county and municipal boards.

A longer-term outcome is the increase in local elected officials who have a stated environmental ethos.

Another long-term outcome is an overall increase in the general public rating water quality as a high priority.

Anticipated Outcomes

A short-term outcome is increased recruitment of citizens to serve on planning boards/commissions and environmental advisory councils and environmental commissions.

Longer-term outcomes are increased numbers of local elected officials who have stated environmental goals and a demonstrated increase in the general public rating water quality as a high priority.

League of Conservation Voters

Conservation Voters of Pennsylvania and New Jersey League of Conservation Voters, with support from the William Penn Foundation's Delaware River Watershed Initiative (DRWI), have developed tools to help DRWI organizations grow their email lists, get educational programs and volunteer opportunities in front of more people, and learn more about current members. The ultimate goal is to identify more individuals who are interested and able to become more active and engaged in conservation organizations and water quality issues.

Funding

To realize this recommendation and anticipated outcomes, more funding is needed to support existing educational and volunteer programs, as well as directly funding Conservation Districts. This funding would enable nonprofits and the quasi-governmental organizations to regularly collaborate and identify service opportunities for citizens. Additionally, funding is needed to measure anticipated outcomes. Tracking might include polling pre-effort and mid-effort, tracking individuals who engage with a nonprofit, reviewing local election results, and interviewing recently elected officials.

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