

Watershed Management for Long Term Sustainability
What Drives a Watershed Group?
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I want to thank the Quivira coalition for selecting me to talk about a topic I love and dream about. My dreams are mostly of a long term relationship with watersheds. I work for the New Mexico Environment Department in the Watershed Protection Section and I have been involved with watershed groups all over the State. My mission is to encourage the development of watershed groups and to provide support. Even with our own program, we provide start-up money, or seed money. Watershed groups are primarily volunteer organizations. What will drive a watershed group to stick together and stay active basically forever?

I sometimes fear watershed groups are a hot topic now but could end up a passing fashion, especially if they are not successful. Folks will get grant funding do a few projects and then fizzle out. All the time and money invested will be wasted if watershed groups don't realize that they are in it for the long term, and especially recognizing the importance of sustainability and the effects of population trends on the watershed. Watersheds don't get fixed over night and BMPs don't produce instantaneous results. After all, most watersheds have been impacted by human activities for more than 100 years.

So how long can we expect a watershed group to last? The world's first watershed association is proclaimed to have begun in 1945. It is called the Brandeywine Valleys Association and today it has 800 dues-paying members according to their website. I called Bob Struble, Jr. and asked him why he thought the watershed group was able to maintain itself for sixty years. His first answer was that they still had more work to do. New issues continue to rise in the watershed, like development and storm-water management. In the past the watershed group worked on issues that have now been institutionalized, like floodplain protection and soil conservation. The group pioneered addressing these issues before they became institutionalized by the soil conservation Service for instance. Their mission has remained consistent and they have a governing board whose basic philosophy has remained consistent. In addition their leadership has remained consistent. Bob's dad was the director before him and his dad got involved the second year that the group was formed. They are not an adversarial group, they understand that change is inevitable; they work quietly behind the scenes and are very complimentary for any successes in the watershed. Their funding has not been consistent, however, they, prioritize and work within their means. They take small steps forward. They bring in technical expertise when they need it. They have multiple objectives within their basic mission. They have a volunteer monitoring group, natural areas and demonstration areas that they are responsible for, and they are the watchdogs for responsible development in a fast growing community. They have an educational component that reaches over 15,000 school children each year. They are a tremendous asset to their community. So it isn't impossible for a watershed group to become a lasting component of a community. Is Paul Stubbe in the audience? Bob says "hi."

So what is it about community members and what drives a community to maintain and stay involved in a watershed group? It may be the same types of things that hold a community together in the first place. A sense of belonging to an organization, a good way to make friends with similar interests - especially if one is a newcomer. A way to donate special skill, or find a paying job working at home.

The community also must value the environment that they live in. I grew up in Chicago where they used to dye the Chicago River green every St. Patrick's day. In those days, urban dwellers, at least us kids, just assumed that the environment was somewhere else, probably in Wisconsin, and that urban areas had no reason to be natural. Now I go back to Chicago and grow the most wonderful vegetables in the deep rich soil in the backyard of our old house. The land is still there and deserves to be taken care of. In New Mexico, open space and natural landscapes are still somewhat intact but are threatened by development and other changes in land use, watershed groups can be an active political force to ensure that the environment is considered by local land use planning and local government.

Stakeholders can be anyone in the community. Anyone can become involved. Individuals should be included capitalizing on their specific talents. What motivates a community to come together and take action? People come together when they perceive there is a common cause that holds their attention. It needs to be at least as important as other things in their lives or it has to effect their livelihood for people to get involved. The work of the watershed group is vital to the welfare of the community and the environment and those that stay involved truly believe in the importance of their contribution. Whether we are talking about ground water or surface water resources, the watershed has an effect on water resources. Protection of these resources is best achieved by a group effort of the community.

A helpful exercise is to look at lessons learned from other watershed groups. I would like to talk about lessons learned, developed by EPA and a number of supporters in 1997. I modified these lessons from my own lessons learned. These lessons based on experience from other watersheds should help include the most important pieces that keep a watershed group functioning. Having a clear vision of what you want the watershed to be, and what goals you must achieve to get there, helps stakeholders understand and support restoration and protection efforts. As we speak, the Las Huertas Creek watershed is holding their first watershed meeting. At that meeting, after half of a morning of speakers providing information about the watershed, the attendees will be given a set of maps with familiar place names and they will be asked to think about places that appeal to them, what they like about the watershed, now, and what they liked about it in the past. Another way to help create a vision is through GIS overlay maps of attributes of the watershed. The way to create a vision is to visualize. Local technical assistance in the form of agency representative might be able to advise and clarify what the goals should be and what is realistic in obtaining that vision. The watershed plan is where vision and goals are documented and include an action plan for achieving those goals.

TMDL documents help quantify water quality goals

Part of that vision has got to be goals that lead to sustainability, to create and maintain the vision even as change occurs in the watershed which will happen, flexibility in achieving the vision may be necessary.

Leadership can come the form of an individual or a committee, the common denominator is that leaders understand the watershed and the community needs, care about the watershed, and have the ability to make the vision a reality through good communication skills, the ability to empower others, the ability to obtain resources through donations, volunteerism, or grants and other funding,

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To achieve a common vision of watershed sustainability, environmental, social and economic values must be compatible in order to prevent polarization. In New Mexico there is also significantly a cultural connection. It is the traditional cultural values that have connected people to the land at its precious water resources. And sometimes recognizing and including viewpoints or restoration activities that acknowledge significant cultural and traditional values will help watershed groups and their efforts be successful.

What strategy can a watershed group use to make watershed protection part of the local culture? Start with the children. Contribute to local science curriculum, have poster contests and field trips, put children to work doing fun watershed restoration and monitoring activities.

On-the-ground projects must be implemented. Ask for in-kind donations from land owners and get restoration activities jump-started on public lands. It is amazing what watershed groups can do with so little funding. Go slow, don't burn out your volunteers. That monitoring is the only way to see restoration achievements, and maintenance of the watershed is necessary to keep restoration efforts effective. These duties are a fact of life and part of that long term relationship .

What makes effective partnerships? EPA lists these attributes – focusing on common interests, respecting diverse viewpoints, thanking each other, good manners, being willing to learn about each others needs, and building trust. Resources include funding, volunteers, services, tools, technical assistance, etc. Progress can be communicated through meetings, websites newspaper articles, monthly newsletters, etc. education and involvement are the keys to getting help on project activities.

Actually fast means train wreck. Pushing it too fast will result in something going wrong, either members burn out, the project fails, the organization falls apart. Take time to observe results and modify strategies, let the watershed, its wildlife and inhabitants, adjust to the new situation.