



OSM/VISTA Teams

The Appalachian Coal Country Watershed Team (ACCWT), founded in 2002 through an innovative partnership between the Office of Surface Mining and AmeriCorps*VISTA (OSM/VISTA), provides rural communities impoverished by environmental degradation and its consequences the help they need to make their watersheds healthier places to live and work. The Western Hardrock Watershed Team (WHWT) was founded in 2006 to expand upon similar goals to ameliorate the impacts of historic hardrock mining in the West.

The objective of the ACCWT and WHWT is to identify organizations engaged in work that addresses poverty through environmental remediation and economic improvement strategies in areas impacted by pre-regulatory mining. By placing college-educated and trained OSM/VISTA Volunteers in under-resourced communities, we provide skills and build strength in community organizations already fighting a multitude of social, economic, and environmental issues. These dedicated volunteers combine the science needed to clean up local streams with the civic engagement to leverage sustainable changes in the future.



Introduction

The purpose of this project is to identify, test, and document successful volunteer recruitment and management strategies with 34 different watershed groups, and to synthesize this data into a toolkit of best practices to guide these and other watershed organizations in rural areas.

Funded by the EPA's Office of Wetlands, Oceans and Watersheds, this project consists of three focus areas:

1. Identifying characteristics and services provided by volunteers for rural watersheds
2. Identifying and testing effective approaches or practices for managing volunteers in rural watersheds
3. Disseminating data and research findings by creating tools and resources for regional, state, and local trainings, conferences, and other forms of outreach



VOLUNTEERS FOR RURAL WATERSHEDS



Problem Statement

Rural non-profit groups located in Appalachian coal country and in the Western hardrock mining region face more volunteerism barriers than organizations located in urban and suburban areas, such as:

- ▶ Less economic diversity than urban counterparts
- ▶ Mountainous terrain can be a challenge to commuting volunteers
- ▶ Often lack reliable Internet and mobile phone coverage
- ▶ Out-migration and loss of human capital

The knowledge and resources generated by this project will be useful to rural watershed groups facing these challenges and many more.



Research Methodology

The research methodology employed for this project consists of three phases that require certain outputs from our partnering sites. Sites receive mini-grant payments for successful completion of each phase.

Phase 1: Survey data from their volunteer base.

Phase 2: Identify organization's volunteer management needs, find best practices from other groups that meet these needs, then transplant and monitor these volunteer trial practices.

Phase 3: A web-ready final report featuring recommended practices and tracking the effectiveness of the trial practices over a six-month and one-year period.



Phase 1

For the first phase of this research project, a survey instrument was constructed for volunteers with watershed groups. It asked:

- ▶ How did these rural watershed volunteers get involved with their organizations?
- ▶ What are some of their personal characteristics?
- ▶ What capacity do they serve for their respective organizations and communities?
- ▶ How might they be further engaged in volunteer activities in the future?
- ▶ Practical issues such as days and times when they are available to volunteer, areas of concern for the watershed group and community, and provision for follow-up interviews.



Preliminary Findings from Survey

- ▶ A "typical" volunteer for a rural watershed group:
 - Adult
 - Married
 - Employed full-time
 - Has bachelor's degree
 - Making between \$40,000 and \$59,000 per year
 - Residing within the watershed

This is likely an unfair representation given the incredible variation in age, employment status, and residency.

- ▶ Local water concerns vary by location, but acid mine drainage is the most common water quality concern.
- ▶ 69 % are motivated to become involved for "environmental preservation."
- ▶ Volunteers tend to hold positive beliefs about the impact that their organization makes in the community and the local environment.
- ▶ Volunteers show strong support for the way their groups improve local environmental conditions, provide education and outreach to the community, and build community partnerships.
- ▶ Volunteers are highly involved in local organizations, most commonly: a conservation organization (48%); a church-affiliated group (46%); a civic or political organization (44%).



Phase 2

The second phase of this research project was designed to identify successful volunteer management practices then monitor their application by other organizations. A three-step process is applied:

1. Identify volunteer management areas of need for participating watershed organizations.
2. Find practices or strategies being used with success by other organizations within the ACCWT/WHWT.
3. Transplant those successful practices to the participating organizations that need them.

EXAMPLE: Friends of Lower Muskingum River (OH) needs a new approach to volunteer water monitoring. North Fork River Improvement Association (CO) has a self-sustaining volunteer monitoring program. The OH watershed group will employ the CO group's methods.

Phase 3

Over the one-year term for "testing" a volunteer management practice, the 34 participating groups must submit initial, six-month, and final reports. These reports require a detailed reflection upon implementation of the practice, its applicability to their group, and an evaluation of the effectiveness of the practice through the measurement of a particular indicator associated with the practice.

Continued distribution and analysis of the volunteer survey will provide a clearer understanding of how managers of volunteers and volunteers themselves perceive various management practices. This work will provide an excellent quantitative balance to the qualitative understandings of actual practice implementation.

Additionally, the OSM/VISTA Volunteerism Coordinator will work with all the participating organizations through site visits to improve survey response rates, facilitate volunteer practice implementation, and observe volunteerism and watershed characteristics firsthand.



For more information

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