

Watershed protection: learning to use science to inspire community action

We started the Saw Kill Watershed Community in 2015 to explore new ways to help people understand science and use it to connect with and value the watershed. Our credibility was based on science and information sharing.

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SAW KILL WATERSHED COMMUNITY

Mission: Protecting the Saw Kill watershed and its ecological, recreational, and historic resources through hands-on science, education, and advocacy.

<http://sawkillwatershed.org>

This project engages volunteers to move frogs and salamanders off roads during annual early spring migrations to their breeding pools. This year more than 65 volunteers signed up just in our small community.

The project is a partnership with the NYS Amphibian Migration project which includes data forms completed by volunteers. This data can be used to identify and protect critical habitat in the watershed. The success of this project shows us how to design other action oriented projects.

Beginning with science presentations, citizen involvement in water quality monitoring and a "State of the Saw Kill" report, we learned that getting people to take action involves more than providing information.

Collecting water quality data aided by citizen volunteers.

Monthly meetings include community conversations on issues like property rights and water pollution. School groups with kids presenting at our meeting.

Our projects are designed to use the data we've collected and apply it to local conditions and issues.

Course correction:
Realizing through experience that we can't "science" or "regulate" our way to healthy watersheds, we've re-directed our efforts.

We reached out to school groups and presented water protection recommendations to the Town Board.

The attraction of projects: Our community responds enthusiastically (volunteer numbers increase) to short well defined projects that are organized, fun, show results, and draw people outdoors to "get their hands wet" (eg our Amphibian Migration project).

Our Stream Naming project explores local history and emphasizes indigenous place names. Planning to enhance historical perspective by engagement with the Stockbridge-Munsee Mohicans.

Translating our amphibian/habitat/wetland and water quality data into forms that relate to local residents' lives, such as drinking water, flooding, and water supply.

Course correction:
Re-grouping post-pandemic: regaining community contact, and improving group's ability to apply for grants and secure funding by joining with a fiscal sponsor. Planning events, occasional meetings, quarterly newsletter

Course correction:
We've learned that while science informs advocacy, connecting as community empowers us. Without science, we don't know where to look for the amphibians; without caring, we won't go out in the rain to move them off roads during migration.

Hired a coordinator for the Amphibian Migration project to manage and organize volunteers and data collection.

Monthly newsletter to replace in-person meetings during pandemic. Website and social media presence overhaul to reflect new directions and engage public.

Focusing on personal connections with land and water and better understanding of watershed value

Course correction:
We're expanding local connections via collaboration with our local Land Trust, learning that sharing common goals, we benefit from pooling resources.

Developing future projects: Connecting backyard buffer protection with flood and water quality protection. Testing for emerging water contaminants.

Our view of citizen science includes understanding and valuing the watershed, connecting people in community to protect it. While our group's credibility is based on science, we've learned that its hard to get people to protect resources they don't care about. Science professionals are challenged to communicate their findings in language the public can understand and relate science information to peoples' lives and what they value.