

# Credibility With Volunteers: How to Establish and Maintain It

by Marie-Françoise Walk and Jerry Schoen

**V**olunteer monitoring program coordinators typically labor to prove our credibility to town boards, state agencies, and other data users. But what about the people who collect the data? As Abby Markowitz, a program director at Maryland Save Our Streams, says, "If the program is not credible to the data generators, it will never be credible to the data users."

How do you maintain credibility with volunteers? In much the same way as you would satisfy the "experts" who scrutinize your program.

## PROMISES, PROMISES

To begin with, make sure everyone knows the ground rules. Spell out clearly the program's goals and explain what is required of each volunteer and of the program. For example, in the Acid Rain Monitoring Project (ARM), volunteers know that their data will be thrown out if either they or the lab that analyzes their samples fails to follow required quality control measures. This policy can cause frustration when mistakes happen—particularly when a lapse by an "expert" wipes out a layperson's work. However, it proves to the volunteers that the database they are building is sound and error-free.

Having obtained commitments from your volunteers, let them know what you will provide them in return—but keep your promises realistic. We all want to move mountains for our volunteers, but if they expect mountains, don't deliver molehills. If you don't intend to conduct advocacy campaigns with them, let them know up front, rather than on the night of the big meeting when they are making plans to shut down Midnite Dumpster, Inc.

## BE ORGANIZED

Nothing frustrates a volunteer more than dealing with a poorly organized group. If you send a volunteer the wrong equipment—or the right equipment two days after a collection date—you send the message that the program is not working and the volunteer's efforts are wasted. Probably the worst sin is losing the data that volunteers braved storms, dogs, and mosquitoes to collect.

Late is better than never—but not by much. Promptness in replying to volunteers' inquiries and in analyzing and reporting results demonstrates to the volunteers that someone is in charge and is overseeing all the details efficiently.

## EXPERTISE AND VISIBILITY

Do you have any hotshot scientists working for your program? Let them out of the lab once in a while to mingle with your volunteers. "Have the experts on your staff visit volunteer groups and give presentations," advises Charlie Olchowski, volunteer county coordinator for ARM. The volunteers appreciate the chance to ask questions and enjoy being part of the same team as the experts.

It's okay to let others blow your horn for you. Hearing favorably of the project from a third party, such as a state agency, gives citizens faith in a program's worth. Recognition from established institutions helps too. Tom Murdoch, director of the Adopt-A-Stream Foundation in Washington State, reports that having two universities offer graduate credit to people going through the program's Streamkeeper training contributes to Adopt-A-Stream's scientific credibility.

Let volunteers know when their work is used by other organizations or agencies—for example, if the Division of Fish and Wildlife uses volunteer-generated stream temperature data for its stocking program—or if the program receives recognition through media coverage or by winning an award. Publishing the program's results in a peer-reviewed scientific journal is an especially good way to establish the scientific credibility of the data. Most important, be sure to publicize any actions, such as new legislation or elimination of a discharge, that are prompted by your data.

## COMMUNICATION

Your volunteers should know that they can turn to you for advice or troubleshooting. An ARM volunteer who was losing interest in the project because she thought acid rain was no longer a problem happened to confide her misgivings to the ARM coordinator during a routine phone call. An explanation of the importance of long-term trend monitoring was all the volunteer needed to restore her commitment. Don't rely on coincidences like this as your main feedback mechanism. Use newsletters and regular reports to keep volunteers informed of results, program progress, and events. Encourage volunteers to telephone you with any concerns. Hold regular conferences, picnics, and other get-togethers—they provide invaluable opportunities for volunteers to share their questions and experiences with each other and with you.

## MATCHING VISIONS

Your volunteers expect sound advice from you, even if it may contradict some of their own ideas about what to do. The Massachusetts Water Watch Partnership (MassWWP), which provides assistance to small groups throughout the state, was recently approached by a river association for help in designing a

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monitoring program. The group wanted to test for boron, which was being released into the river in the effluent from a nuclear plant. But MassWWP felt that boron was not a significant problem compared to other impacts and counseled the group to concentrate on more traditional projects, such as macroinvertebrate monitoring. The group followed this advice. Had MassWWP refrained from comment, or assisted in a costly and probably frustrating boron study, the volunteers would have had ample reason to question the worth of the Partnership's "assistance."

On the other hand, don't underestimate the volunteers' expertise. They are generally quite knowledgeable about their local resources. If their goals don't fit with your program, don't force your vision on them; compromise. For example, MassWWP encountered a situation in which a state agency was interested in obtaining baseline data on five sites per river. Some of the local volunteers were more interested in locating specific pollution sources. A compromise was struck to sample the five baseline sites and also check two or three additional "hot spots" on a roving basis each month.

Remember, environmental protection takes teamwork, and your volunteer samplers are your frontline players. If you want them to keep performing for you, you have to convince them they're on a winning team.

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