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Voluntary Estuary Monitoring Manual

Chapter 3: Planning and Maintaining a Volunteer Estuary Monitoring Program

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Planning and Maintaining a Volunteer Estuary Monitoring Program



Establishing goals, objectives, timelines, and strategies are important steps in creating an estuary monitoring program. People starting a monitoring program must also face questions about liability and other risk management issues. Another important component to a successful program is ongoing financial support. Finally, the program should be promoted regularly throughout the community.

Overview

Volunteer data contributes in many important ways to our understanding of the magnitude and extent of estuarine impairment. Therefore, it is important to ensure that a volunteer monitoring program is effectively and efficiently designed. Planning, implementing, and maintaining a volunteer monitoring program requires organization, time, resources, and dedication. However, the payoffs can be great. A well-organized, properly maintained volunteer monitoring program can yield credible water quality data that will enhance capabilities to identify problems, assess trends, and find solutions to water quality problems. The basic ingredients for success are outlined in this chapter.

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Establishing Goals and Objectives

No step is more critical in the planning process than establishing the goal or goals of your estuary monitoring program. Every phase that follows will depend upon this initial decision. These all-important goals are best determined by the people who will be using the volunteer data. Once the program is established, volunteers can also help shape future goals. So, the first step is to identify the people and organizations that will use your data.

Identifying Data Uses and Users

The best-designed volunteer monitoring programs always begin with a clear understanding of how the data will be used (see Chapter 5 for more information). Potential data users should be identified and asked to serve on the project's planning committee. This committee will develop and articulate a clear purpose for the use of the data. The committee should include members of the scientific research community, local and regional officials who will play a part in resource policymaking, representatives of other monitoring groups, and citizen leaders who are potential volunteer monitors or who represent groups from which volunteers will be recruited.

Determining Goals and Planning for Quality

In addition to understanding who will use the volunteer data, the broad overall goals for the

program should be determined. Is the primary goal to collect data that will supplement government monitoring? Or is the main goal of the program to educate the public? For a list of common program goals, see page 3-5.

Determining the goals of the program goes hand-in-hand with creating a plan that can deliver the level of data needed. As you will see in Chapter 5, many of these early decisions will play a critical role in developing a quality assurance project plan (QAPP). This plan contains details on all the methods you expect your volunteers to use. Careful planning ensures that your data will be consistent and of the desired level of quality.

The perception that amateurs cannot collect good quality data is the most common reason professional water quality managers decline to take advantage of volunteers as a resource. However, by preparing a QAPP and adhering to its elements, your volunteers will produce "data of known quality" that meet the stated data quality objectives of your program.

After establishing primary goals, the planning committee should go on to answer, in detail, the following questions:

- *What are the major problems and priorities in the specific estuary or sampling area?*

Planning an effective monitoring project

Benefits of Partnering

Partnering with data users when planning a monitoring project has several benefits. Examples are provided below:

- Their input on sampling parameters and methodologies will improve the likelihood that they will accept and use your data.
- The participation of regulatory agencies in the process will better ensure that they will be responsive to potential problems identified by the data.
- They can guide data management practices to maximize their access to the data (e.g., using compatible databases, reporting methods, etc.).
- They can help interpret the data.

Prospective Users of Volunteer Data:

- state environmental protection or management agencies
- state conservation and recreation agencies
- state and local health departments
- water quality analysts
- land use planners
- fisheries biologists
- environmental engineers
- educational institutions, including elementary, middle, and high schools
- state, regional, and local park staff
- local government planning and zoning agencies
- university researchers
- environmental groups
- soil and water conservation districts
- U.S. Geological Survey
- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
- U.S. Environmental Protection Agency
- National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
- Soil Conservation Service

requires that you learn everything you can about potential monitoring sites by contacting programs and agencies that might already monitor in your area. As you identify the most critical problems of the estuary, include the perceptions and values of community leaders, residents, and community organizations. Selection of priorities will help you determine what water quality parameters you need to monitor.

- *What sampling parameters or conditions will you monitor to characterize the status of the estuary? What methods or protocols will you use for collecting and analyzing samples? How will you pick your sampling sites, and how will you identify them over time?*

An important part of developing a monitoring program is selecting monitoring sites, parameters to be monitored, and a monitoring schedule. Also, there are sometimes several different methods or

protocols that can be used to monitor each parameter. Considerations on selecting the “what, how, where, and when” to monitor can be found in Chapter 6.

- *How large a monitoring program should be attempted?*

What is the capacity of the planning committee to raise funds and organize a program? Do you have the skills, staff time, financial resources, and community support needed to reach your program’s goals? If not, the planning committee may need to improve its organizational capacity by creating or strengthening relationships with community leaders, environmental interest groups, and community agencies such as local conservation districts and colleges.

Alternatively, your organization may need to revisit its goals to set something more realistic. Always keep in mind that small programs done well are far better than larger efforts done poorly. Small programs that are well-run can grow over time.

- *How will volunteers be recruited and trained, and how often will they receive refresher courses?*

As you develop your new estuary monitoring program, you will need to determine who will recruit and train the volunteers. The initial training of the volunteers is a crucial part of developing a water quality monitoring program. Without such training, usable, high-quality data cannot be obtained, and volunteers will soon grow frustrated. In addition to initial training, refresher courses for volunteers should be planned. Some practical considerations on successfully recruiting, training, and retaining volunteers can be found in Chapter 4.

- *How will you manage your data and ensure that your data are credible? How will the results of the program be presented?*

Understanding how the data will be used will lead you to answers about how the data will be managed and how reports will be generated to best fit users' needs. Choosing a data management approach early on in program development is critical if the hard work of the volunteers is to be meaningful. To take information from data sheets and convert it to something that makes sense to your audience requires several elements, which are summarized in Chapter 8.

Not only is it important to manage and present data according to users' needs, but every volunteer monitoring group should also address early in the planning process how the data analysis will be communicated back to the vol-

unteers, who should see the tangible benefits of their work. This requires planning, since the data may need to be summarized and some general conclusions prepared for a non-technical audience. Chapter 5 provides more information on this topic.

- *How should the program be evaluated? What outcomes will you measure to determine if your program is "successful"?*

Success, especially at the beginning of a project, can be measured in many ways. The first time your volunteers take to the field and collect samples can rightfully be considered a success. Proving that it can be done is an extremely important step. Later, success may be measured by whether your data is used in local land use decisions or leads to actions that improve the health of the estuary.

Ongoing evaluation of the program is critical. The planning committee should meet periodically to evaluate the program, update objectives, and refine the monitoring process. You may decide to improve on sampling techniques, site selection, lab procedures, or any of the other elements of your monitoring project design. These periodic reviews should help ensure that the volunteer monitoring program will continue to produce high quality and useful data for those who require information concerning the estuary.

Be sure to document the important contributions of the monitoring group to community leaders, legislative bodies, and the community. This may help establish program credibility with funders and aid volunteer recruitment efforts. ■

Common Goals of Citizen Monitoring Programs:

- To supplement water quality data collected by professional staff in water quality agencies and scientific institutions.
- To educate the public about water quality issues.
- To build a constituency of citizens to practice sound water quality management at a local level and build public support of water quality protection.
- To obtain data from remote areas during storms or during unique events in the watershed.
- To increase awareness about a problem in the estuary, such as the documentation of illegal discharges into the water.
- To establish baseline conditions where no prior information exists.
- To determine water quality changes through time.
- To identify current and emerging problems, such as pollution sources, habitat loss, or the presence of non-indigenous species.

Designing a Data Collection Form

Most monitoring data, including those collected by volunteer programs, are stored and managed by computer. Data users and the database manager should be involved in the development of the data collection form to be sure that it clearly identifies the information to be collected and that the information can be easily and accurately entered into the database. Consideration should also be given to the ease with which the form can be filled out and understood by the volunteers.

Several suggestions for consideration when developing a data collection form are as follows:

- Print the form on waterproof paper, if possible.
- Keep it simple for volunteers to fill out.
- If many of your volunteers are over 40 years of age, consider using larger type sizes (12 point and larger).
- If possible, keep your data form to one side of an 8 1/2" x 11" piece of paper so that it can fit on a clipboard.
- Ask your volunteers for input on how the form can be improved.
- Remind volunteers that pencils are best when filling out the forms.
- Always include the full address and contact phone numbers of your program.
- On the back of the form, include:
 - emergency phone number and notes about safety;
 - a chart showing the expected ranges for each parameter that is tested (this can help volunteers verify that they are using the monitoring equipment correctly or determine whether their chemicals need to be examined for accuracy);
 - steps to remember for collecting the sample or data; and
 - an identification key of organisms (e.g., phytoplankton, SAV or macroinvertebrates).
- Specify on the form what units should be reported with the data. For example, if Secchi depth is measured in centimeters, then put "cm" on the line where volunteers write their Secchi depth data.
- Include on the data form any equations needed to convert measurements. This will minimize the chance of error.
- Put a reminder that a value of zero should not be reported. Remind volunteers to report the value as less than the lowest value that can be read with the equipment (Miller, 1995). For example, if the range of a test is 0-1 mg/l, the smallest increment is 0.01 mg/l, and the test result is zero, report the value as "less than 0.01 mg/l" or "<0.01 mg/l."

Appendix A contains several examples of data forms.

Insurance, Safety, and Liability—Risk Management

Questions of insurance, safety, and liability are always important considerations when starting any program that will place volunteers in the field. Insurance issues are rarely the favorite topic of volunteer monitoring programs. In fact, many programs may not be fully aware of what their insurance policies cover. Some may not even have liability insurance.

If people are confused about issues of insurance, safety, and liability (collectively termed **risk management**), there is good reason; this whole field is a tangle. To make matters worse, laws differ dramatically from state to state. For example, the interpretation and validity of waivers depends to a large degree on what state you are in. Workers' compensation is another case in point: some states allow volunteers to be covered while others do not.

So, what is a volunteer monitoring organization to do? The following sections offer answers to some of the most common questions. This is basic information; volunteer groups are encouraged to seek legal advice regarding any risk management issues.

Liability Insurance

Liability insurance protects you if you are sued. The most common type is “general liability,” which covers most bodily injury and property damage claims. A liability policy covering an organization does not necessarily cover its volunteers in case they are sued personally. You can get your organization's liability coverage extended to your volunteers, but beware: once volunteers are added to the list of insured, they are excluded from collecting medical benefits under the policy if they are injured. A general liability contract protects the organization against claims brought by a third party, and once a volunteer is listed as an “insured” he or she is no longer a third party. In other words, you cannot sue yourself for damages.

Individual volunteers can also get liability

coverage under their own homeowners' policies. It is especially important for each of your organization's board of directors to do this, since by law they can be held personally liable for damages caused by the organization. Note, however, that most homeowners' policies do not provide protection if someone sues you for a purely financial loss.

Injuries to Volunteers

How can you protect your volunteers in case they are injured “on the job”? In some states, volunteers can be covered by workers' compensation; call your state Department of Employment for information about applicable laws and the cost of covering volunteers. If workers' compensation is unavailable or very expensive, your organization may want to buy a separate accident and injury policy for volunteers. For a “supplemental” policy (one that takes effect only after the individual's own medical coverage is exhausted), the cost is usually only a few dollars per year per volunteer. Another option is to include volunteers in the medical payments portion of your general liability policy; however, the dollar amount of medical coverage in such policies is usually fairly limited.

Insurance Through Partnering

Teaming up with a partner who has good coverage is popular among volunteer monitoring groups. In some cases, volunteers sign a partner's form, after which they are covered by workers' compensation. This is easier and less expensive to do in some states.

For programs associated with a university, participants may be considered university volunteers and covered by the university's insurance policy. Student monitors may also be organized under a larger umbrella organization that affords coverage. The Boy Scouts of America, for example, has a division known as Explorer Posts, which allow boys and girls to participate. Each Post

focuses on a specific activity (in this case, the water monitoring project). The group must abide by all Explorer Post regulations, and participants are eligible for low-cost insurance coverage through the Boy Scouts.

Waivers

A carefully worded waiver can protect you if you are sued for negligent (unintentional) acts. Waivers are best suited for adults; those signed by minors (persons under 18) usually do not hold up in court.

It is important to make sure your waiver clearly spells out all the risks involved in an activity. Because states interpret waivers differently, it is impossible to design a standard form that can be used in all jurisdictions. Consult a lawyer for the best wording to use in your state.

Risk Reduction

Prevention, as always, is the best medicine. Volunteers should be trained to look for and avoid hazards at sampling sites, to use the buddy system, and to take appropriate precautions when handling chemical reagents. Above all, monitoring groups should stress that volunteer safety is always more important than the data and that volunteers should never put themselves at risk to obtain a measurement. See Chapter 7 for a discussion of volunteer safety.

Equipment Insurance

Volunteer groups may also wish to consider insuring their monitoring equipment for damage. This is especially true for expensive gear. ■

Paying for the Program—The Financial Side

Volunteer monitoring is cost-effective, but not free. Depending on the equipment and monitoring methods you choose, outfitting a team of monitors can cost several hundreds or thousands of dollars. Paying a salary (either part- or full-time) to one or more volunteer coordinators is also a critical component to many water quality monitoring programs. Dedicated staff members are needed to ensure program continuity, train volunteers, manage data, and ensure that data quality goals are being met. The following sections offer guidelines for finding the funds that will help your program to grow and flourish.

Funding Sources

Fundraising is an important component of running a successful volunteer monitoring program. Without funding to cover program costs, a program simply could not exist. The principal sources of funding for volunteer monitoring programs are government funds and private contributions.

Government Funds and Support

Federal grants are sometimes available to public or nonprofit non-governmental organizations to initiate and maintain citizen monitoring programs. Usually, these funds are distributed through grants given by the state. National Estuary Programs are eligible for combined federal and state funds to support research and public participation projects that can include volunteer monitoring. Some federal funding for volunteer monitoring programs is also routed to state universities from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Sea Grant Program and the Coastal Zone Management Program.

State and local funding sources may also exist to implement and maintain volunteer monitoring programs. Some state funding is distributed only to state agencies, while other programs provide funding to private organizations. Call your state and local agencies that are responsible for water quality, coastal, and/or environmental management to learn

about resources and support they offer to volunteer monitoring programs.

States vary in the amount of support they offer to volunteer monitoring programs. For example, in Oregon, interested citizens are trained in water quality monitoring techniques by the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality and supplied with all necessary equipment. Alabama has an extensive statewide monitoring effort that offers training, equipment, and quality assurance procedures through Alabama Water Watch, which is supported by state and federal funds. Other states may not provide equipment, but offer valuable assistance in developing quality assurance project plans and in selecting monitoring sites.

Private Funds and Support

Private contributions to fund your program can come from corporate sponsorships, foundation grants, individual contributions, fundraising events, civic organizations, board members, and even the program volunteers.

Foundations

Grants from foundations are very important for volunteer monitoring programs throughout the United States, and many resources list sources of foundation grants.

A great way to begin your funding search is by visiting Web sites. One site run by The Foundation Center (<http://fdncenter.org/>) compiles information on more than 37,500 active U.S. private foundations and corporate giving programs. This resource, and others like it, can help you identify appropriate funders. Ask your local library or university if they have directories of foundations that you can review. Be sure to read the description of each foundation carefully to learn if their funding goals are a good match for your program.

Check also to see if your state has a nonprofit statewide organization devoted to water quality or environmental issues. Many of these organizations provide research grants and offer funding that is available only within the state.

What's in a Budget?

Budgets for volunteer water quality monitoring programs include some or all of the following:

- staff salaries and fringe benefits;
- equipment and refilling chemical supplies;
- laboratory analysis;
- office overhead (phone, postage, duplicating, etc.);
- data management (software program, data entry, storage and retrieval);
- data analysis (including cost of a statistical software package);
- travel expenses (to train volunteers, perform quality assurance checks, attend local and regional conferences, and promote the program);
- printing costs for annual reports and newsletters; and
- other expenses (conferences, Web site maintenance, etc.).

(Adapted from USEPA, 1990.)

Local Sponsors

To find the initial funding that is needed to start a volunteer monitoring project, many groups also seek local supporters to underwrite postage, printing, and equipment purchases. The first step in this process is to identify potential donors through research. Talk to the leaders of other local nonprofits and ask them about their supporters. While some nonprofits may not want to let you know where they get their funding, others will be willing to give you helpful sources. Make a list of all the people, local businesses, and other organizations that share an interest in the water quality of the estuary.

Prepare a brief, focused statement outlining what the volunteer estuary monitoring program hopes to accomplish. Make appointments to meet with prospective supporters, and let them know how their support will benefit the community. Ask for a specific amount of funding. Corporations have to be convinced that part of their advertising budget should be spent on your program, so be sure to let them know how you will acknowledge their support.

Keep in mind that local sponsors may fund what is important to them and their employees. If their employees can and want to participate in the project, the employer is more likely to help fund the project.

Special Events

Another fundraising strategy is to plan a special event. In addition to raising funds, this approach can generate publicity about your volunteer monitoring program, help educate the citizens in the estuary watershed, and recruit new volunteers. In fact, many events may focus less on fundraising than on gathering new supporters.

Special events can take a great deal of effort to plan, so be sure this goal is achievable. Some special event ideas include: a concert on a beach, a festival or fair, a dinner with a guest speaker, or an auction of donated items. Local businesses, newspapers, and radio stations are important partners to line up early in the plan-

ning process. The publicity offered by local media will help ensure good attendance for your event (see “Promoting the Program—Working with the Media” in this chapter for more information). Also consider “tagging” your fundraising event onto an established community event. For example, if your community has an annual festival, your group could plan one aspect of the festival and keep the proceeds.

Board Members

In addition to contributing time, professional knowledge, and expertise, the board members of some volunteer organizations are also responsible for giving and getting financial support. If your program decides to have a board and if fundraising is to be one of the board responsibilities, prospective board members need to understand this expectation.

Membership Support

There are pros and cons to having a dues-paying membership as part of your monitoring program. On one hand, the people who live near the estuary and in its watershed are often interested in the water quality data that will be generated; as a result, they may be willing to help financially support your volunteer monitoring program. But maintaining membership records will take time and effort on the part of program staff. All donors must be thanked promptly, and records must be kept so that members can be billed when their memberships have expired. Members will also expect to be kept informed of program accomplishments, which might require the development of a newsletter or Web site.

In-Kind Donations

Many people and companies cannot contribute cash to your program, but would be willing and able to lend their support with in-kind gifts. In-kind donations of goods and services can offer tremendous support to a volunteer monitoring program. A graphic designer can donate time and expertise to develop a

Fundraising Is About Relationships

To develop funding, develop relationships. Fundraising is a long-term process; you need to build a relationship that benefits all involved. Establishing relationships with multiple funders will help you to ensure that you are not too dependent on one funding source.

After identifying funding sources, make personal contact with them. Call the contact person at a funding organization and ask a few questions about how your proposal can be targeted to the organization's funding goals. Your best chance to receive funding will be from organizations whose philanthropic philosophies match your program goals. For example, if potential funders are mainly interested in education, then highlight the educational aspects of your water quality monitoring project.

In order to survive as an economic entity, integrate fundraising into everything you do as an organization. Your program volunteers can also be valuable fundraising assets, as they can promote the program with others in the community.

brochure. A local printer or truck company can donate printing or hauling services. Individual volunteers can also assist with other non-monitoring activities, such as fundraising, writing press releases, educating the public, and doing administrative work.

Other volunteer monitoring programs can be another source of valuable support. Several non-government organizations around the U.S. conduct volunteer estuary monitoring (see Ely and Hamingson, 1998), and have gained knowledge and skills that they can share with newer programs. Conversations with these other environmental, school, community, and civic groups can greatly shorten your learning curve.

Writing a Successful Proposal

When writing a funding proposal, make your project sound exciting and focus the project description so that it appeals to the funder. Written proposals are sometimes the only opportunity you will have to present your program to funders. It is your chance to show them that your organization is credible, has a strong structure, and will be a valuable asset. Funders need to be convinced that your program will be successful and worth the investment. They want to feel as if they will be part of a successful project that will lead to tangible results.

Make sure that the proposal is professional

and complete, and that it "sells" the importance of the project. A successful proposal should contain the following:

- cover letter (brief summary of the project, amount of funding requested, signature of top staffer, and contact person's name and phone number);
- introduction (description of organization, mission, population served, why your organization is best suited to do the project);
- project goal (and how it fits in with your mission);
- project objectives (specific measurable steps to meet the goal);
- request (specific dollar amount requested); and
- expected results.

When presenting a funding proposal:

- read the foundation's or grant's guidelines carefully and follow them exactly;
- ask for the right amount (know the foundation's limits);
- be succinct;
- do not misrepresent a "partnership" or exaggerate any aspect of your goals; and

- highlight the expertise that the program leaders bring.

It is critical to make your issue relevant and understandable to funders. Be careful to use layperson's terms in your writing, and do not assume that the person reading your proposal knows acronyms or technical terms. After you have written your proposal, ask someone who is unfamiliar with your program's goals to read the proposal. If your reader is unclear about any aspects of your proposal, your prospective funder will likely be unclear as well; a rewrite is necessary.

Keep Funders Happy!

No matter what your source of funding, it is important to keep your supporters happy! Remember: The same people who make decisions to support your program need to feel that their support is appreciated.

Be sure to acknowledge and thank your funders every time they provide any support. Keep them informed about the progress of the program and invite them to attend your receptions, banquets, workshops, training sessions, or demonstrations. Companies, foundations, and individuals often hope to increase their visibility within the community in return for their cash or in-kind donation. You can acknowledge their support by including their names and/or logos in press releases, brochures, reports, or even T-shirts made for the volunteer monitors. Make sure to get approval from the funders before using their names or logos; some donors prefer to remain anonymous.

Forming Partnerships

Being part of a partnership with other organizations can help your chances of getting a grant. Funders like to see that your program is in a partnership, as this shows that your program is supported by others in the community. Partnerships also convey that the expertise of many people will be contributing to the pro-

gram. Many foundations like regional efforts and prefer to make larger grants, so partnering with other groups to make joint applications is very beneficial.

Some funders require nonprofit tax status [called 501(c)3 status] from the Internal Revenue Service. Obtaining this tax status is an important step for a nonprofit group, but the process can be lengthy and requires a fee of up to \$500. If you do not have this tax status, then maybe you can partner with a group that does have it.

Partnerships have additional benefits. A volunteer program should look for other groups in the area doing similar projects in adjacent or complimentary waterways. Partnering with these groups could lead to cost savings on supplies (buying in bulk is cheaper than buying in small volumes) or hiring consultants or staff (one person could work on several projects).

Your monitoring program can also gain strength by taking advantage of opportunities provided by government agencies. Several agencies are involved in volunteer estuary monitoring on the federal, state, and local levels. Federal agencies, such as the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), support volunteer monitoring by sponsoring symposia on volunteer monitoring, publishing newsletters, and developing guidance manuals (see references at the end of each chapter and in Appendix B).

Another federal program interested in assisting volunteer monitoring programs is the National Estuarine Research Reserve System (NERRS), which is administered by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). Also, learn if your estuary is part of the National Estuary Program (NEP). This program, administered by the EPA, targets a broad range of estuary-related issues and engages local communities in the process. NEPs work with volunteer groups and federal and state agencies to gather critical data about their estuary. Many NEPs host informational workshops for volunteer monitors and support volunteer groups in other ways. ■

Some Funding Challenges

Many funders insist that all grants go toward direct project expenses and will not allow any money to go to administrative or overhead costs (e.g., rent, phone bills, electricity). This restriction can be a challenge, given that there are administrative overhead costs associated with running any program. There are other terms you can use in your budget instead of “administrative”; for example, you may use phrases like “contacting volunteers” and “program development costs” to cover some phone calls, photocopying, etc. Developing a partnership with other like-minded groups can also help defray some of these overhead costs.

Some grants are paid on a reimbursement basis. For new monitoring groups, this necessitates finding a source of money to pay the bills while waiting for the reimbursements.

Promoting the Program—Working with the Media

Now that you have clearly established the primary goal or goals and know the program priorities, your challenge is to meet your objectives by focusing your resources and mobilizing the community. Publicizing a volunteer monitoring program through the television, radio, or newspaper media is an effective, cost-efficient method to reach citizens in the watershed. The rewards of successful press coverage can be high as the public will learn about the estuary and the efforts of your group.

Working with the media requires logistical planning. Create a communications strategy that is an integral part of the monitoring program; make communications a priority and allow time to prepare press releases and meet press contacts.

People are interested in reading or hearing about their local environment—it is a quality-of-life issue to readers. Yet getting the press to pay attention to a volunteer monitoring program is sometimes a challenge. Reporters look for the “big story,” but many of our current environmental woes are accumulative problems from what we do on a daily basis and have done for years. Onetime specific events, such as a sewer overflow, will usually receive coverage and can be good opportunities to include information about the bigger problems of water pollution.

Many reporters want to write about community groups and environmental issues, but their first and most pressing concerns are breaking news.

Press Releases

To help get the word out about your program, press releases are priceless! A press release is a one- or two-page document that informs newspaper and electronic media about your program and its goals, findings, upcoming events, need for volunteers, and other topics of interest. Writing one press release and sending it to many local news outlets is a cost-efficient and effective method to inform the community about your program.

As you write a press release, know what you want to say, whom you want to reach, and what you want the reader or viewer to “take away.” Think about why the health of the estuary is important to the readers or viewers.

To increase chances of getting an article in a newspaper, do your best to write the story for the reporter. A well-written press release stands a better chance of getting published without many modifications, thereby reducing the likelihood that your message gets presented incorrectly. You have to anticipate

how the press would present the topic. Frame the issue the way a journalist would, and think about what would be their lead. Give to the press the “who, what, where, when, why, and how.” Remember: You often have to educate reporters and inform them why they should care about your issue.

Make it easy for reporters to contact you if they have questions or want to interview you. At the top of the press release, provide a contact person for the press to call for more information. You may also want to include at the end of the press release a contact name and number for the public to use (this may be a different number from the press contact).

The timing of press releases is important. Press releases are best sent to newspapers about two weeks before the event to allow photographers and writers to be scheduled. Television stations should receive your press release one to two weeks prior to the event. It is best to mail or fax press releases, then call the reporter to see if he or she has any follow-up questions. Take time to call reporters and give them “background” information about your organization.

When writing a press release, it helps to have a bold, recognizable masthead on your stationery. For other professional touches, contact a local advertising agency to learn if it would donate the time of its professional staff to assist you. Also, check with your local library for books with specific examples of model press releases.

Press Conferences

A press conference should be an organized event that has been well thought out and delivers specific news. In other words, press conferences must have substance. If your program has discovered an issue that is of interest to the community or if findings from your volunteer monitors have led to a significant event, hold a press conference. For good visuals, invite the press to cover a real activity (not a posed shot) and let volunteers know that they will be photographed. Also, prepare good charts or graphics to show the data you have collected. Local maps showing water conditions are also effective. Press conferences that merely announce upcoming events are seldom attended by busy reporters, and if the reporters show up and are disappointed by the lack of content, they may not come again to more “worthy” press conferences.

The timing and location for a press conference are important. Early in the day is preferred, as it allows plenty of time for TV stations to edit the tape before the noon and evening news broadcasts. Choose a place that has good visuals, such as a location along a waterbody that you have been studying or at your headquarters where volunteers can be shown working in the background. ■



When working with the media, always be prepared for an interview. Have your facts together and use humor, analogies, and inspiration whenever possible (photo by PhotoDisc).

Tips for Working Successfully with the Media:

- Develop long-term professional and personal relationships with reporters, editors, and producers at your local news stations and newspapers. Reporters value contacts with reliable, credible non-government groups like volunteer monitoring programs.
- Write a short fact sheet about your program.
- Create media materials that are clear, concise, and understandable to the general public. Edit and format materials so that reporters under deadline can read them quickly and easily.
- Localize. Make the issues into stories that address the local community.
- Use humor, analogies, and inspiration in your interviews.
- Include graphics, charts, and visuals, which draw the attention of reporters.
- Highlight citizen and student involvement.
- People are more interesting than facts, and animals are more interesting than people. Use animals, protesting citizens, or interested students as a “hook” with the press.
- Write a short summary of your group’s findings (two pages with one visual aid) and send it out with a press release.
- If a reporter wants information over the phone, ask if you can return the call in five minutes. Take those five minutes to write down the major points you want to make, then call the reporter back. This way, you will be focused on the two or three most important points you want to make in the interview.
- Know reporters’ deadlines. They tend to be busiest in the afternoon trying to meet deadlines, so call them in the morning.
- Always cover the important details: who, what, when, where, why, and how.
- Give good directions to the event or field site.
- Explain the topic in simple terms. Avoid terms like “nonpoint source pollution”; instead, show how people and animals will be impacted.
- Be flexible in scheduling the media. Understand that “late-breaking” stories may require you to reschedule an interview.
- Designate spokespeople and have them practice their communication skills.
- Always say the full name of your organization—not an acronym. In fact, avoid using acronyms altogether, since most people are unfamiliar with them and will not understand what you are talking about.
- Remember that television stations have broader geographical areas of interest than newspapers.
- Plan to have interesting visuals, an articulate spokesperson, and video to illustrate a point. These are required if you want to get television coverage.

References and Further Reading

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Web sites:

Fundraising Information

Catalogue of Federal Domestic Assistance: <http://www.gsa.gov/fdac>

Environmental Grantmaking Foundations—Resources for Global Sustainability:
<http://www.environmentalgrants.com>

The Foundation Center: <http://www.fdncenter.org/>. Phone: 212-620-4230.

Foundations and Grantmakers Directory: <http://www.foundations.org/grantmakers.html>

GrantsNet: <http://www.hhs.gov/grantsnet>

River Network: <http://www.rivernetnetwork.org/library/libsou.cfm>