

## Engaging the Public in Education, Outreach and Volunteering for Water Resource Protection

H-GAC Presentation | June 16, 2022 | Teri MacArthur, Water Conservation Specialist, The Woodlands Township | [tmacarthur@thewoodlandstowship-tx.gov](mailto:tmacarthur@thewoodlandstowship-tx.gov) | 281.210.3928

Do you volunteer for a cause or organization?

If asked to honestly answer why, what are your reasons?

- Like how it makes you feel
- Feels as though you are making a difference for your family/loved ones
- Want to help your community - express your commitment to community values
- Want to help the environment
- Get to meet and work with others who think like you
- Opportunity to learn more about a topic of interest to you
- Able to improve your career path by the experience
- If Citizen Science related, feel you are contributing to scientific knowledge

Still being honest, why did you choose the organization/cause you support?

- I feel rewarded and recognized
- The organization has a good reputation and demonstrates values I appreciate
- Volunteer tasks are well organized and communicated by the organization
- The organization has produced measurable results based on volunteer efforts
- If CS related, the organization uses the data I produce through volunteering in useful ways
- I receive training or experience that helps with my career
- I can find leadership opportunities as a volunteer with the organization
- It's a fun place to meet others interested in the same things I am

**No surprise that all these reasons are routinely stated by volunteers when asked.**

*How can water professionals and communicators educate the residents in their audiences about water issues in ways that lead to action – in other words, closing the knowing-doing gap?*

If you work with volunteers, you already know that simply providing information doesn't lead to action. Volunteers do need to know enough to understand the issues, but there is more work to be done to get them to take action.

- ✓ Start with educational events advertised as being “for volunteers.” Raise the expectation that participants will be getting their hands dirty as soon as they decide to attend. Be sure to spend time in conversation about the personal value of the actions you wish for them to undertake. Make sure the value for the community related to wildlife habitat, ecosystem health, water resource protection and other benefits are clearly presented.
- ✓ Have a plan already in place with dates, locations, and expected outcomes to present at the training class(es) you hold. Use a sign-up form for attendees to add their names before they leave. Include a flyer (with a QR Code) showing future planned dates as well as the nearest date.

- ✓ Emphasize the specific problem, issue, or need for action and spend time to explain the negative results if no action is taken. Include such factors as increased cost of treating drinking water if issue is allowed to remain with no mitigation.
- ✓ Send reminders by best methods for your audience at least twice – about a week in advance, and again about a day in advance. Offer encouragement and appreciation for showing up to help with this community issue – speak to your audience’s values that drive them to want to be the sort of people who take care of the environment.
- ✓ Invite volunteers who routinely attend workdays and exhibit leadership interest to consider setting dates on their own schedule and inviting volunteers they personally know and have worked with. Be sure to have sufficient work for the separate group and supply any needs the new leader may have – training time and/or supplies.
- ✓ Report successes to your entire volunteer corps, including outcomes, number of participants, time spent by the group, and occasionally remind the group how valuable they are to the community’s healthy environment – including their own families’ enjoyment of the outdoors.

**Building capacity to reach your goals requires planning and work, but isn’t that difficult to accomplish with good volunteer engagement**

**Sample issues** you can inform about so volunteers can tackle at a booth, or by making a presentation to their circle of influence or neighborhood group

- Need to reduce/eliminate water waste (water conservation) inside & outside home
  - o How water is used in households – where waste can be reduced/avoided
- Human land uses and actions affecting local waterway health
  - o Plastic and other trash in the waterway
  - o Aquatic invasive vegetation, and possibly invasive animals
  - o Organic materials in waterways – leading to low levels of DO
  - o Lawn chemicals in waterways – leading to low levels of DO
  - o Dog waste in waterways – leading to high levels of bacteria

**Volunteer Activities** you can organize

- Improving water quality/conservation literacy locally
  - o Install educational markers on storm drain inlets
  - o Organize waterway cleanups
  - o Hang educational cards on doors (if budget to print allows)
  - o Give away dog waste bag dispensers (if budget to purchase allows)
- Volunteers can organize neighborhood groups to discuss issues and encourage changes in landscape maintenance, pet waste pickup habits, and other water saving behaviors
  - o Teach sprinkler audit methods
  - o Share how to find whether/how much to water lawns
  - o Explain why native plants are beneficial compared to non-natives
- Create programs for students – both classroom and outdoor studies – to increase awareness within their homes by sharing what they learn