

GEORGIA'S ADOPT-A-STREAM PROGRAM

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Abstract. The number of citizen monitoring programs, both nationally and in Georgia, has grown exponentially in recent years. This paper examines why citizen monitoring programs have become increasingly popular, who is involved, what are the program outcomes, and where active programs are located. Georgia Adopt-A-Stream encourages individuals and communities to adopt a local stream, river or lake. By working in partnership with local governments and other community leaders, volunteers help protect water quality by raising awareness of specific local water conditions and taking steps to improve stream health.

INTRODUCTION

Citizen monitoring or Adopt-A-Stream (AAS) programs have grown exponentially in the last 20 years. Izaak Walton League fishermen are credited for starting the citizen monitoring movement in the 1970's when they taught themselves to use field testing kits in local trout streams. The Environmental Protection Agency first published a national directory of volunteer environmental monitoring programs in 1988 where 44 programs in 24 states were listed. The 1994 directory contains 517 groups in 45 states and the District of Columbia (EPA 1994). In Georgia, there were less than 10 active programs before the Environmental Protection Division initiated the Georgia AAS program in April 1993. In November 1994, over 50 individual and community groups were conducting Adopt-A-Stream projects, with over 2300 volunteers involved.

Who Is Involved and Why?

The popular press has reported on this growing movement (Steinhart 1990, Rosenbach 1992, Tomsho 1993). Why have volunteer monitoring programs grown? Both citizens and government have reasons to be involved.

Citizens feel increasingly uncertain about the environment around them. AAS volunteers tend to have personal interest in a specific waterbody. Volunteers are concerned about a local waterbody they use for swimming, fishing, boating or simply watching. Volunteer monitoring is one way to learn about the environment and become involved in environmental protection. AAS programs provide the tools for volunteers to get involved in protecting their resource.

The public's interest and concern is a resource for private and public organizers. State and local governments recognize citizen monitoring as an opportunity to enlist the public's support in protecting water resources. Citizen monitoring programs provide a chance to raise awareness of water quality issues, obtain background data on local streams, rivers and lakes, and develop a sense of stewardship for local water resources.

Government sponsored AAS programs are part of a broader nonpoint source pollution control strategy. Nonpoint source pollution does not lend itself to traditional methods of regulatory control. Nonpoint sources of pollution are tied to land use, which is controlled by private management and local zoning. Yet, state and local agencies are charged with protecting the water that runs over those same lands. Thus, cooperative and innovative methods must be employed to reduce nonpoint source pollution. To improve water quality from nonpoint sources, active involvement of landowners and community leaders is needed. AAS programs provide a means increasing public involvement in water quality protection.

Georgia Adopt-A-Stream

GA AAS was initiated by the Environmental Protection Division in 1993. The program is funded from the Nonpoint Source Pollution section of the Clean Water Act. GA AAS program goals are to 1) to raise public awareness of water quality issues and 2) to encourage public participation in protection of water resources. To achieve these goals, local AAS groups are formed which conduct various water quality assessment and protection activities.

Volunteers agree to commit to a one year project on a local waterbody. A series of steps are followed to evaluate and protect the adopted water resource. Volunteers begin with AAS "Level I". Level I volunteers are introduced to watersheds, the relationship between land use and water quality, positive and negative influences on water quality, and how the physical environment is important to stream life. Volunteers regularly evaluate a stream segment and report results to a local partner, local government and Georgia AAS.

Level I activities consists of finding a stream site/segment for adoption, conducting a watershed walk (mapping upstream land uses and potential water quality impacts), visual assessments of water quality and physical habitat at one site

four times a year, regular litter pick ups, and one public outreach activity.

AAS Level II and III are opportunities for volunteers to further evaluate water quality or improve water quality through habitat enhancement projects. AAS Level II volunteers conduct AAS Level I plus choose one or more of the following activities: Biological Monitoring, Physical/Chemical Monitoring or Habitat Enhancement. AAS Level III volunteers conduct AAS Level I plus two or more of the activities listed above. Water quality information is sent to the same network of partners and local government created in Level I. Training is required for biological monitoring or physical/chemical testing.

Each AAS group is strongly encouraged to develop relationships with their local government and other "partners". A partner may be another local government agency, water department or public utility, nature center or college/university, a Keep America Beautiful Affiliate, or local business. A partner may help identify streams for adoption, act as technical advisors, help coordinate several projects, or help fund equipment and supplies.

OUTCOMES

Public Awareness and Participation

Education is the key to a community involved in protecting its environment (Mullens and Neuhauser, 1991). AAS volunteers learn about water quality, ecology and nonpoint source pollution through the activities they conduct. And volunteers learn how they can adjust their behavior to protect water quality--not littering, leaving buffer areas adjacent to streams, thinking of storm drains as direct links a stream and not dumping grounds.

Georgia AAS goes beyond educating volunteers, however. The program is structured to ensure that local governments and community leaders are also involved. AAS groups provide information about their adopted stream to the community through regular reporting and public outreach requirements. AAS programs are the starting point for communities to think about how individual and group behavior can influence the local environment.

Making a Difference

Citizen monitoring and AAS programs protect water quality by raising water quality as a local issue and regular reporting of conditions. By regularly monitoring visual, chemical, and/or biological conditions, volunteers provide a background for discussion of environmental protection. Volunteers are also taught who to call if problems are noticed. Many small problems add to water quality degradation if left unchecked. AAS groups report sewer line leaks, sedimentation problems or illegal dumping and therefore prevent a small problem from becoming worse. In addition, trends in water quality can be communicated to those with authority to enforce existing

regulations or incorporate planning into local growth.

Volunteers also work on specific protection projects as well. All groups conduct regular litter pick ups. Some groups improve in-stream habitat for fish and other aquatic life. AAS groups may take on a streambank stabilization project, working with a city or county government. Stenciling storm drains to prevent dumping is another hands-on stream improvement activity.

CONCLUSIONS

The number of AAS groups has grown rapidly due to interest from both citizens and public agencies. Volunteers, community leaders and government agencies can act as partners in environmental protection through AAS programs. Volunteers learn about and teach others about local water quality issues. AAS groups provide regular monitoring of stream conditions and work toward protecting local water resources.

LITERATURE CITED

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