

RESOURCES FOR CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN WATERSHED PROTECTION

Olin M. Ivey

AUTHOR: Executive Director, GEO - Georgia Environmental Organization, Inc., 6750 Peachtree Industrial Blvd., Suite 802, Atlanta, Georgia 30360-2218.

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Abstract. The objective is to implement an integrated approach to EcoBasin planning, protection, and management grounded in citizen initiative and leadership. In Georgia, three projects have been developed to further this objective. The first two are publications, being developed simultaneously and in tandem with each other: *A Citizens Guide to Watershed Protection* and *RIO: River Inventory for Organizing--A Watershed Atlas for the Georgia Region*. The third project is to train citizens in the utilization of the two publications as a means developing a coordinated, citizen-based, watershed program.

INTRODUCTION

Georgia's waters embody one of its great natural resources. In addition to its lakes, reservoirs, wetlands, estuaries, coastline, and aquifers, the state has better than 71,000 miles of rivers and streams coursing within or as its boundaries. Its river basins comprise many more miles since a number of tributaries originate in other states. Without proper management a watershed's natural, systemic operation can be thrown out of balance severely, especially through wanton pollution. For this reason, GEO: Georgia Environmental Organization, Inc., proposes a plan of cooperative action to expedite the protection and management of Georgia's watersheds and to involve all interested parties, especially grassroots organizations and citizens, in the process.

GOALS

The Watershed Protection and Management Plan [WPMP] proposed by GEO has the following goals:

Citizen Participation.

One of the primary questions asked by GEO whenever it begins a program or responds to a request for help from a community is "What is the role of citizen involvement and how can we facilitate that?" In relation to a comprehensive watershed management plan, citizen participation is a vital element. The Georgia EPD is to be commended for the development of its River Basin Planning Program. However, no matter how efficient and effective that program is administered, it will not begin to have the depth necessary to protect and manage all the streams of Georgia and to coordinate that with the management of the tributaries in other states that flow into our basins. The only way that kind of attention can be given is through citizen participation --indeed,

leadership -- in the development of such programs. It is when--and only when--citizens become responsible for a coordinated program of EcoBasin protection for the stream that run through their backyards and crisscrosses their communities that our streams--and, consequently, our rivers--will return to health. Citizens are there in their own neighborhoods to give daily oversight and attention to those streams and to watchdog encroachment.

GEO's proposal may seem radical to some, but it is really the only practical approach to take because of the economies of scale. With the coordinated help of citizens and grassroots groups working in concert with the EPD and local officials, protection and management plans for most EcoBasins in Georgia can be completed within an estimated five-to-ten-year period. If local and statewide environmentalists as well as local citizens are not involved in developing these plans, suspicion will arise that little real progress will be made toward implementation by state officials and industry, even when the plans are finally completed. Participation becomes critical if the watershed management plans are to have any real impact on curtailing the degradation of the state's water resources. Protection and management plans begin at the stream--the EcoBasin--level rather than at the much larger scale of the river. This cannot be stressed too much.

The approach by GEO impels individuals and local organizations concerned with environmental integrity to become involved in a positive, productive way, to focus their energies in an organized manner at the table with all other interested parties, and to learn how to re-fashion their lives to live in harmony with the environment. Citizen empowerment and state advancement go hand-in-hand.

An Integrated, Comprehensive Strategy.

The WPMP, as envisioned by GEO, is concerned with effective restoration, protection, and enhancement of aquatic-based ecosystems in the Georgia region. An "aquatic-based-ecosystem" approach encompasses not only the water resources such as a stream, river, lake, estuary, wetland, or aquifer, but also the habitat--all the land and its supporting systems from which water drains or to which it flows--the "EcoBasin." As such, the plan becomes integrated and comprehensive.

Effects of Human Activity on the Watershed.

To protect water resources, the condition of land areas within the watershed must be addressed as a central concern because as water drains off the land and flows from farms, forests, factories,

and homes, it carries with it the effects of human activities throughout the watershed. The State's watersheds are currently being negatively impacted by the results of such human activity as industrial effluent; non-watershed-sensitive agricultural and domestic fertilizers, pesticides and herbicides; ineffective wastewater treatment; impervious surfaces and the resulting stormwater run-off and dearth of natural filtration; and failure to treat other non-point source pollution. By concentrating on human activity and systems in their many varieties as well as on natural resources and their cycles and systems, prevention as well as remedial action can reverse declines in living species and habitat loss. Technologies reflect and are in sync with the systems and cycles of the natural setting rather than being imposed over against nature. The shape and orientation of developments as well as their architecture and landscape design emerge from the "architecture of the environment," especially the location and flow of the streams and other water bodies.

Rinterpreting the Boundaries of Local Interdependency and Re-envisioning One's Regional Consciousness.

To focus on "hydrologically defined territory" shifts one's geographical orientation and an understanding of one's area to an EcoBasin--or, at least, the watershed in which one resides--rather than simply on areas arbitrarily defined by political boundaries and directed by streets and highways. It re-prioritizes one's life and that of communities. Georgia shares many of its waters with Tennessee, South Carolina, North Carolina, Alabama, and Florida. The watershed within which each of these waters lies ties the effected area together in interdependency and mutual responsibility. By understanding this and developing policies within that context, greater economic and ecological progress can be made. This paradigm is in countervailance to the model of "global village." The two must be held in creative and effective tension with each other.

Education and Promotion of Ecological Responsibility.

The WPMP also serves as an educational endeavor to increase awareness of what it means to have a clean, healthy watershed and the conscientious, responsible role citizens can play in accomplishing that. Paradigmatic shifts in human consciousness cannot occur without education and propagation of the elements that make up the emerging model(s) of thinking and action. *GEO* intends to foster a mindset that the quality of human life is inextricably linked with the quality of all life within an EcoBasin. The question of water quality belongs at the heart of environmental integrity of a region because all other components within the watershed interact with--in fact, depend upon--its hydrology.

Linkage among All Stakeholders to Maximize Participation and Stewardship.

Primary focus is to bring all concerned parties into a collaborative decision-making process *from the initiation* of a comprehensive watershed management plan for each watershed. Many agencies officially mandated to deal with water quality and watershed management are continually subjected to strong

political and economic pressures which run contrary to protection and best management practices. Our aim is to involve the people most concerned, most likely to be impacted, and most able to take action. By a greater number of people being involved in the total process of decision-making and guardianship these pressures can be counteracted and proper solutions can be found to the challenges presented by each watershed. A larger array of alternatives which yield rewards both economically and ecologically can be considered. The aim is to have each person who comes to the table to approach the matter from the standpoint of stewardship of the Earth's resources and long-range viability.

DESCRIPTION OF THE W.P.M.P. PROGRAM

Historically, citizen participation in the environmental protection process in Georgia has been woefully low. The described process of grassroots organizations being fully involved in the development and implementation of the WPMP sounds logical and matter-of-fact. It is so in keeping with the ideal of participatory democracy that one would expect it to be commonplace. In actuality, if EPD cooperates fully in this venture, that will mark a new day of collaboration in Georgia.

Georgia's River Basin Management Act of 1992 [RBM] mandated the Director of the EPD to develop comprehensive management plans for each of the river basins. The RBM requires other management plans--such as the solid waste management plans developed by each municipality and county in Georgia--to be in accordance with the river basin management plans. That is a challenging requirement, indeed, since most of the other plans have been developed along political boundaries such as municipalities and counties. At the beginning of the process, even modest efforts by citizens to ensure the development of environmentally-sound watershed plans are worth far more than a considerably larger effort mounted following the adoption of the plans and, hopefully, with far less acrimony.

The mission of this program is "the development and implementation of a fully integrated approach to watershed assessment, protection, and management for the EcoBasins of the state of Georgia."

To accomplish this, a firm foundation must first be established. This includes three projects, the first two--joint publications--are being developed simultaneously and in tandem with each other. Descriptions of these follow in the next two sections (See following articles by Walker, by McGrath, and by Ivey *et al.*)

Upon publication of the two books, the third entails training workshops shall be held throughout the Georgia Region to train people in the purpose and use of the books as well as the way the two books work together both for the individual and for concerted, community action. These workshops will be the first line of distribution for the two books. They intend to have people all over the Georgia Region taking responsibility for their own watershed and EcoBasin.