
Volunteers for Rural Watersheds
2.5-Year Progress Report
January 2011

The OSM/VISTA Teams:
Appalachian Coal Country Team
Western Hardrock Watershed Team



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Executive Summary

Significant accomplishments were made for the “Volunteers for Rural Watersheds” Research Project since July 2008 in each of the three research phases: surveying volunteers, testing trial practices, and disseminating research findings. A large amount of information has been gathered to transform into a volunteer management toolkit that can be distributed to as large an audience as possible via a final report, website, presentations, and publications.

In the first phase of the study, surveys were distributed to volunteers with 16 different community/watershed improvement organizations in Appalachia and the Rocky Mountain West. Data was compiled and analyzed to form a general profile of rural volunteers and to gain valuable insight into their opinions. Most respondents were 55 and over, though the average age was 50 years old. The majority was married, has children, and lived in their community for at least 25 years. Volunteers tended to hold a bachelor’s degree and make between \$20,000 and \$39,999 annually. Most were recruited by friends and family already in group, encouraging group’s to use current volunteers as the best recruiters of new volunteers. This information identifies who is most likely to volunteer and, perhaps more importantly, reveals gaps where new individuals and groups can be targeted for recruitment.

In addition to participation with watershed groups, it is clear from survey data that many volunteers are involved in organizations both within and outside of the environmental arena. Survey data also demonstrates that volunteers are very politically active, with a large percentage voting in national and local elections and contacting government officials at all levels about issues. The civic power of these volunteers is a large, often untapped resource for groups to use to spread awareness of issues and secure possible funding. Involvement in other organizations provides connections for potential partnerships that can benefit communities in new ways.

Volunteers for watershed organizations in both regions are very positive about the environmental and community impacts being made. In general, respondents have very positive beliefs in the management of their respective organizations, the benefits they gain personally, and their role within them. A few areas of less optimism emerged, however, primarily in regard to beliefs about their group’s financial, volunteer, and technical resources. There is also less confidence in the financial benefits to communities and ability “to address watershed problems without much delay.” For the ACCT and WHWT, these doubts are a spur to better broadcast the ties between environmental and economic improvement that are the basis of our work. It is also a reflection and confirmation of the magnitude of entrenched problems in rural, environmentally-degraded communities.

For the second phase of research, 25 volunteer practices proven to be successful in recruiting, managing, or retaining volunteers were identified and tested for one year by two different rural watershed groups. Successful volunteer management practices were identified through informal interviews with watershed organization stakeholders during site visits and analysis of ACCT and WHWT Quarterly Reports. All partnering organizations in the ACCT and WHWT network were then invited to apply to “test” up to three practices within their organization. A formal application was used and the Volunteerism Coordinator worked to match volunteer management needs with successful volunteer management practices. Research was structured for two trials of

each of the 25 practices, resulting in 50 case studies. To monitor and capture the implementation of trial practices, participating organizations completed initial, six-month, and final reports and the Volunteerism Coordinator conducted interviews and site visits.

Forty-eight case studies emerged, brimming with successes, challenges, and ideas for other rural groups to utilize. While each volunteer practice has its own specific characteristics and obstacles, several overarching trends emerged. The need for a lead person or committee to drive planning was a key factor in the success or failure of many trial practices and, in small rural communities, specificity was crucial. Broad appeals for help with tasks and events often went unheeded. Practices that employed targeted recruitment of individuals and groups with skills for specific tasks had the best results. For tasks requiring large groups or crews of volunteers, rural organizations often succeeded by bringing in outside groups, such as alternative spring break crews and faith-based mission teams. These lessons and many more will be presented as a suite of volunteer management options in the 48 case studies compiled throughout this research phase.

The end of the one-year trial practice period marks the beginning of the third project phase and the transformation of research into useable rural volunteer management resources. The need for these resources has been felt by the positive and eager response of those attending presentations of the project overview and case study examples at local, state, regional, and national conferences. Attendees are impatient for final products as a good source of ideas and a guide of where to start and what to expect. An in-depth guidebook for working with alternative spring break groups has already been created and shared with partner organizations, and more opportunities for resource creation are being explored. Project presentations and workshops have also been an effective way to educate others about environmental and economic problems and the answering community efforts in rural mining communities.

Third Year Accomplishments (July 2010-January 2011)

- Monitored the final six months of 48 trial practices across the OSM/VISTA Teams.
- Received and compiled final reports from all participating watershed organizations to track and capture the successes and challenges of their progress.
- Further analyzed database of information collected in rural watershed volunteer surveys to compare viewpoints of watershed group impacts of volunteers with groups on the ACCT versus those on WHWT, and by age brackets of youth adults, adults, and seniors.
- Presented findings at local, state, and regional trainings and conferences, including Volunteer WV's Faces of Leadership Conference (July 2010), 32nd Annual National Association of Abandoned Mine Lands Programs (September 2010), Midwest Ground Water Conference (October 2010), West Virginia Water Conference (October 2010), and ACCT and WHWT Fall Trainings (October and November 2010).
- Submitted presentation proposals for local, state, regional, and national trainings and conferences, including Southern Rural Sociological Association Meeting, Tennessee Conference on Volunteerism and Service-Learning, Appalachian Studies Association Conference, National Conference on Citizenship, National Service-Learning Conference, National River Rally, and National Conference on Volunteering and Service.

Next Steps (January 2011-July 2011)

- Submit grant requests to governmental organizations and private foundations to expand funding for volunteerism trainings, mini-grants, and outreach materials for findings.
- Synthesize research into a web-ready toolkit of best practices to guide organizations in rural area.
- Produce and disseminate final results and findings as a volunteer management toolkit to as large an audience as possible via a final report, website, presentations, and publications.
- Submit presentation proposals for local, state, regional, and national trainings and conferences.
- Present findings at Tennessee Conference on Volunteerism and Service-Learning (February 2011), Appalachian Studies Association Conference (March 2011), and ACCT and WHWT Spring Trainings (April and May 2011).

Trial Practice Reporting

Reporting templates were created and distributed through the online survey database SurveyMonkey (www.surveymonkey.com) at the beginning, 6-month, and end points of the one-year trial practice study period.

Watershed organizations submitted initial reports for trial practices in January 2010 to document the progress of their initial planning and implementation efforts. Additionally, they worked with the Volunteerism Coordinator to select indicators to measure the impact of their practice over the coming year. These indicators were tailored to each trial practice and the site's goals and intentions, and ranged from the number of new volunteers recruited for an event to the average duration of board meetings.

Midterm reports were collected in June 2010 to assess progress in implementing trial practices after six months of effort on the part of participating watershed organizations. Groups were in a flux of every stage of implementation from planning to final result. Some were recruiting volunteers for planning committees, picking dates and venues, waiting on grant funds to buy needed equipment. Others were making final event arrangements, changing plans due to new obstacles, or continuing discussion on board development, meeting efficiency, and community outreach. After a winter of planning, many held events relevant to their trial practice, working with student athletes, local businesses, community service volunteers, and the Retired and Senior Volunteer Program to complete a variety of projects.

Final reports were collected in January 2011 to assess trial practices after twelve months of effort by participating watershed organizations. These reports are a detailed reflection upon the implementation of the practice, its applicability to their group, and an evaluation of the effectiveness of the practice through the measurement of particular indicators associated with each practice.

Phase 3: Volunteer Management Final Reports

The end of the one-year trial practice period marks the beginning of the third project phase and the transformation of research into useable rural volunteer management resources. Forty-eight case studies have emerged, brimming with successes, challenges, and ideas for other rural groups to utilize. The following are just a sample of the successes and challenges documented by rural community/watershed improvement organizations in Appalachian coal country and the Western hardrock mining region:

Trial Practice #2: Recruiting volunteers through partnerships with off-road and 4x4 clubs

The Rural Appalachian Improvement League (RAIL) had everything planned for an ATV Poker Run/Trail Clean-up event: Volunteers would pick up litter on sections of the Indian Ridge trail, a part of the Hatfield-McCoy trail system near Mullens, WV. It would take place on March 13, 2010, and, upon completion, volunteers would receive the first of five playing cards. The following day, volunteers would have a chance to ride other trails, stopping at four other locations and acquiring four new playing cards. The rider with the best hand would win a prize at an end-of-day BBQ. This combination event is a wonderful idea, but unfortunately various factors did not align as planned. The biggest problems were finding ATV riders that were willing to spend their valuable recreation time and money doing a litter clean-up and conducting the major outreach effort necessary with a small, overworked staff. The general interest and willingness to help by local businesses, campgrounds, and the trail system were just too low to get the event off the ground.

Even though the event fell through, RAIL was able to follow a different route. RAIL has the capacity and facilities to host alternative spring break groups and have successfully hosted hundreds of students. In March 2010, 15 visiting students from Columbia University in New York used ATVs for a Hatfield-McCoy Trail clean-up. Participants, who had never ridden ATVs before, were able to clean 10 miles of trails with donated hedge trimmers, machetes, and ATVs. By cleaning the trail and keeping the area open to riders, they helped to bring tourists and revenue to the restaurants, campgrounds, and other businesses of a rural area “Community members were happy to see ‘outsiders’ getting a taste of what is, for many southern West Virginians, a very important part of their culture,” said Jack Seitz, a RAIL employee at the time of the clean-up.

Because of her work coordinating alternative spring break volunteers to clean up the Hatfield-McCoy trail system, former OSM/VISTA Katie Prussia was asked to present at the National Off-Highway Vehicle Conference in Great Falls, MT, in August 2010. She presented on her OSM/VISTA experience, her involvement with the Hatfield-McCoy Trail System, and how other systems can use VISTAs or volunteers. The presentation was well received and Prussia fielded a lot of questions from people seeking more information about the ACCT and other AmeriCorps VISTA programs.

Trial Practice #3: Recruiting volunteers through church partnerships

Friends of the Russell Fork (FORF) has difficulty recruiting the large numbers of volunteers

needed to complete big projects from the small local population of 302 people¹ in Haysi, VA, so they have begun looking beyond town limits. Volunteers at FORF are meeting with an Asheville, North Carolina-based organization called ReCreation Experiences, a program whose mission is to share their faith through home repair. Many homes in the Russell Fork watershed are in need of repair or lack proper wastewater treatment systems. Volunteers with ReCreation Experiences currently do home repair mostly in western North Carolina, but are interested in expanding their scope. “They just happened to be looking for another area that they could work in when I contacted them about work in Haysi and Dickenson County,” said former OSM/VISTA Amber Bellamy, who laid much of the groundwork for this partnership.

ReCreation Experiences staff has visited Haysi twice and are planning another site visit to solidify plans. ReCreation Experiences would bring in a home repair crew of about 100-120 people for two weeks at two different times during the summer. The main requirement for the host area is finding a place for the volunteers to stay with access to a kitchen. Other than housing, there is no cost to host a volunteer crew---volunteers pay a fee to participate that covers the cost of supplies. This is a huge advantage for rural organizations with limited resources. FORF is now tasked with identifying homes in need of repair, working with homeowners, and locating housing for visiting volunteers. To help with this effort, FORF has applied to get help from an NCCC team in the spring of 2011 to conduct sewer surveys and identify families who need help in the region. Local citizens and town officials have been notified of plans to have ReCreation Experiences establish a work plan in the area and FORF has received all positive responses. By putting in the time and effort to lay the groundwork for a visiting faith-based group, FORF is building a partnership with the potential to truly benefit residents of their watershed. Installation of septic systems will also improve water quality in the Russell Fork, which is popular for recreation.

Trial Practice #7: Labor support from student athlete volunteers

Many communities have a college or university within their boundaries, and student volunteering with a local watershed group is a great way to connect the campus to the community while addressing environmental issues. The Georges Creek Watershed Association (GCWA) in Frostburg, MD, was able to recruit the Frostburg State University (FSU) football team to help an AmeriCorps National Civilian Community Corps (NCCC) crew plant trees on reclaimed mine lands in partnership with the Appalachian Regional Reforestation Initiative (ARRI).

The main challenge GCWA faced was locating the right people at FSU to ask for help. Former OSM/VISTA Adrian Uzunian persevered in this challenge and was able to establish a contact with a member of FSU’s Office of Leadership and Civic Engagement, who helped compile a list of coaches and compose an e-mail to draw interest. By the end of February 2010, the head football coach expressed interest in having his athletes volunteer with GCWA. Twenty-five football players assisted the NCCC in planting 4,000 trees in 4 hours in western MD, which was part of a larger 10-day project where a total of 8,000 trees were planted on 11 acres by 135 volunteers recruited by the GCWA.

¹ U.S. Census Bureau, 2009 Population Estimates.

The GCWA highly recommends recruiting athletes as volunteers because of their high levels of discipline, motivation, energy, and strength, desire to do well, and room in their minds to learn about environmental issues. “The team was very respectful and disciplined and worked very hard to plant every seedling that there was room to plant. It was a great exercise for everyone. The event made the athletes appreciate how difficult it is to replace a forest,” commented Kelly Martin, Regional Watershed Coordinator for Western MD Resource Conservation and Development Council. The GCWA hopes to recruit volunteers from the FSU athletic department for future sustainability projects.

Trial Practice #11: Recruiting youth volunteers through the development of a Youth Advisory Board

Based in Hotchkiss, CO, the Kids' Pasta Project (KPP) engages youth in serving their community by having them prepare and serve freshly-made pasta dinners and donating profits to local causes. The adult board and volunteers, however, would like to see the kids participate not only in the kitchen and dining room, but also in the board room. As a program dedicated to helping youth serve their community and learn through the process, the idea of empowering youth volunteers is at the top of their list of intentions, and developing a youth advisory board (YAB) was a way to formalize this intention. “Kids' Pasta Project and youth development organizations in general need to explore ways of involving youth more in management, not only to enhance the educational experiences of the youth, but also to help ensure the sustainability of the organization,” said former OSM/VISTA Moni Slater, who continues to serve as KPP’s program manager.

The formation of a Youth Advisory Board (YAB) has engaged kids in the inner workings of the organization. Since its creation, the YAB has elected their board, attended meetings of the adult board, discussed expanding the weekly menu and experimented with making lasagna and gluten-free pasta. Some of the members of KPP YAB have become more involved in behind-the-scenes operations and have had opportunities to express their opinions about management issues. They have also been involved in some outreach activities and gave a presentation to the local Rotary Club.

Working with a YAB has had several challenges. The large size of the YAB, 11 members, has proved to be prohibiting, particularly with scheduling. Youth are engaged in a lot of other activities, making scheduling management meetings when youth were available difficult. The regular management activities of the group have had to go on without regular input from youth. It has also been difficult to maintain the adult board’s engagement YAB development and board members were not available to mentor the YAB officers as planned.

The community response to the KPP YAB is very positive, although many members of the community do not have clear ideas about YAB responsibilities and activities. It is important in the future for KPP to share the intentions of the YAB and the importance of youth input to the organization. Though still working out the exact functions of the YAB, future possibilities include working with a local chef on expanding the menu, organizing a volunteer appreciation picnic, and beginning to take over some of the responsibilities of working with partner-recipient organizations.

Trial Practice #15: Recruiting senior citizen volunteers through the Retired and Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP)

The Upper Tennessee River Roundtable (UTRR), based in Abingdon, VA, hoped to recruit more volunteers from the Retired and Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP). With one existing RSVP volunteer, UTRR wanted to expand their pool of volunteers to assist with large mailings, creation of education kits, manning festival booths and other office tasks. This assistance would help reduce the coordinator's overtime, and the community would benefit by having additional citizens involved in the work of UTRR and sharing the importance of protecting rivers and streams. This trial practice proved to be a disappointment for UTRR, however. Though expanding the involvement of the existing RSVP volunteer, no new volunteers were recruited despite several outreach efforts.

Former OSM/VISTA Spencer Moss attended an RSVP luncheon and spoke about UTRR and opportunities for involvement. She also distributed custom-made invitations to a UTRR recruitment/orientation dinner to each person at the luncheon, but the dinner was cancelled due to the lack of responses. The existing RSVP volunteer initiated a festival outreach booth that otherwise would not have happened without her. She thought of the idea, found a location, secured approval to place the booth at a site on Main Street, picked up outreach materials twice from the UTRR office during the two-week festival and manned the booth. Despite not recruiting more volunteers, she was able to conduct a lot of positive outreach work during the two-week festival. This helped to raise awareness about the organization and the need to protect rivers in the area. "We found it very challenging and very frustrating continually trying to engage the RSVP volunteers, who were already committed to other volunteer projects and did not have time to work with us, too," said UTRR coordinator Carol Doss, "People in the RSVP program here are already committed to definite programs."

Trial Practice #16: Assisting volunteers by providing transportation to meetings and events

The staff and volunteers of Friends of Deckers Creek (FODC) in Dellslow, WV, often need to work in rural and remote locations within the watershed to carry out tasks important to the organization's mission. FODC also has a need for their Youth Advisory Board (YAB) members to attend board meetings and community activities on a regular basis and in greater numbers in order to empower the next generation of watershed stewards. Over the past year, FODC successfully met these needs by organizing carpools or providing transportation to volunteers. Volunteers that needed transportation were informed about the program via word of mouth or phone, website postings of volunteer opportunities and transportation details on an event calendar, electronic listserv, and seasonal newsletters.

Carpooling and FODC-provided transportation were used extensively in sampling, monitoring, and site assessment trips. Volunteers are always needed for this type of work, and by providing transportation FODC was able to bring volunteers, including YAB volunteers, on almost every trip. Overall, carpooling or FODC-provided transportation was used at least 54 times and accounted for at least 310 volunteer hours committed to FODC-related activities. Of the 310

hours, at least 50 were from new volunteers who had never volunteered with FODC before and another 65 were from YAB members who otherwise would not have been able to participate. The trial practice increased and diversified the FODC volunteer base at events such as yearly fish community sampling, macroinvertebrate sampling, quarterly and monthly water quality monitoring, habitat assessments, and stream walks. The volunteer base for all of these activities was made up of YAB members, community members, college students, interns, probationer volunteers, and senior citizens. Having reliable and regular volunteers is crucial to FODC's continuous monitoring and data gathering efforts throughout the watershed for acid mine drainage pollution, fecal coliform contamination, sediment impairments, and biological community assessments.

Mileage and fuel costs are large factor to consider when providing transportation and, despite successes, will play a role in the future use of this practice by FODC. FODC hopes to continue to provide transportation to YAB members for meetings, field work, and events because they are an important part of the organization and mission, and this trial practice demonstrated how beneficial it is to have all of them present at all FODC and YAB meetings and events. FODC will also continue to provide transportation to volunteers for monitoring and sampling as long as funding for mileage is available.

These case studies are just a sample of the progress, successes, and challenges in the 48 trial practices conducted throughout Appalachia and the Rocky Mountain West. Initial, six-month, and final reports are being compiled into accessible case studies for each trial practice being conducted. If trials are deemed successful and replicable, practices will be reported in a toolkit of best practices to guide watershed organizations in rural areas.