

The Role of the Citizen/Volunteer in Protecting the Northern Commons

Good afternoon. Thank you for staying to the bitter end.

I am a volunteer. I am here on my own time and my own dime because I believe the Northern Commons an important concept. I'm sure that definition applies to many others here. There are millions of individuals who volunteer all over the world. In the United States alone, there are more than 58 million people who offer their services as volunteers.

Alexis de Tocqueville marveled at the volunteer spirit he experienced as he traveled in the United States in the early 1800s. He saw individuals with common concerns banding together to address mutual problems. This was not anything he had seen before.

I will be talking about the work of volunteers in conservation today but volunteers work occurs in every field imaginable. Over 58 million people in this country alone volunteer.

The conservation movement developed when people saw areas where they hunted, fished, and recreated being despoiled and decided to act. Citizen concerns for sound fisheries and wildlife management, and protection of lands held in common provided the impetus for the establishment of parks, forests, refuges and wild rivers. The Clean Air and Clean Water legislation was in response to demands from across the country to clean up the polluted air and water.

Many scientific investigations have been initiated only after citizens have raised an issue. Human observations have detected trends and occurrences that have later been verified by scientific analysis. It is sad to note that much damage could have been prevented or at least ameliorated, if citizen voices had been heeded earlier.

The scientific and academic communities are finally realizing the importance of the observations and experiences provided by the non-scientist; this is particularly true in the case of Native Alaskans whose indigenous knowledge is the cumulation of many years of living on the Northern Commons. This knowledge is valuable not only to those who

depend on it for their daily lives but for many broader ramifications.

So let's look at who make up the cadre of volunteers that supply the eyes, ears, and noses that provide important information about what's happening to the Northern Commons? They come from all walks of life and all ages. They give their time and energy to collect data that can be used to make better management decisions. They help address the growing need for broad data on the environmental impacts of human activity and climate change. The accumulated effort is significant. As an example, in the Great Lakes Basin, more than 300 volunteers have contributed over 6000 hours of their collective time to gather information on 500 streams that flow into the Great Lakes.

As governments at all levels are cutting budgets, it's even more important to assure that volunteer monitoring and data collection continues and in fact increases. Decisions to greatly reduce volunteer water monitoring in favor of cleaning up pollution as has happen in Alaska is short-sighted.

What needs to happen to effectively engage individuals in protecting the Northern Commons? Develop and sustain good monitoring and data collection programs. Training programs for those not only doing the monitoring and data collection, but also for those who manage the programs. Volunteers should be considered as non-paid staff and their work valued.

Standard methods for collecting, reporting, managing, and analyzing data are essential. Staff must devote sufficient time and attention before a volunteer program is implemented to assure quality results and integration with the total program.

There are many examples of very solid data that is being collected by volunteers as young as elementary school children. For years, weather services have depended on data collected in remote areas. Even with weather satellites, information provided by these lay-people is still being used.

Adopt-a-stream, wetland monitoring and coastal protection programs have spread widely. Surveys of mammals, birds, amphibians, insects and plants are being taken on a

regular basis. People are now being asked to record human-made noise in areas near their homes and in more remote places.

Watershed programs connect and coordinate activities occurring throughout an entire riverine system. This comprehensive approach includes everything from water sampling to erosion prevention; from pollution identification to developing networks of communities to collectively protect the watershed.

It is important that no matter who is collecting the information, careful documentation for the data sets is kept. Even if there is a break in the data collection, it will still be possible to resume and provide valuable information if the same format is used and the same questions are asked.

Although volunteerism started in this country, it has now spread across the globe. An Internet search illustrates the extent of its expansion. Canada's Citizen Science Program is a nationwide program that uses citizens to monitor and provide information on a wide range of environmental issues. Finland has an annual bird survey that has been going on for over ten years and as I speak, thousands of volunteers are being mobilized there to respond to potential oil spills..

As transportation and communication shrink the boundaries of our world and financial constraints reduce the ability of governments to monitor what is occurring, the probability increases that only after a crisis arises will action be initiated. Early warning systems must be in place.

By engaging citizens to provide monitoring, the number of eyes, ears and minds can be greatly expanded. This is already occurring in hundreds of locales. School classes, clubs, and individuals have been trained in techniques for a variety of monitoring processes with very positive results.

The important next step is to reduce the barriers between scientist and the citizen monitor, to provide the training and support for increasing the scope and the number of citizen monitors, and to convince governments that it is the wise and proper thing to do.

The citizen/volunteer can and should play a very important and expanding role in protection of the Northern Commons whose well being is so vital to us all.