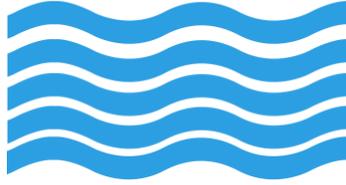


Hudson River
Watershed Alliance



Hudson River Watershed Alliance Watershed Needs Assessment Report

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Estuary Program**

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Hudson River Watershed Alliance

Watershed Needs Assessment Report

Summary of Findings

This Watershed Needs Assessment Report summarizes and highlights our conversations with 56 watershed group members and regional partners from across the Hudson River watershed, reflecting both the impact and challenges that these groups face. This report provides valuable information that will help groups make effective decisions, achieve goals, and continue their work of improving regional waterways.

Watershed groups include passionate and smart people that are working toward a common goal of improving their local rivers and streams. They face significant challenges in their work. Watersheds cut across municipal boundaries, resulting in a geographic unit for management that is different from political jurisdictions. The problems they are working to solve can be incredibly complex, and may require new science or technical expertise to understand the best solutions. Nevertheless, watershed groups are able to achieve significant accomplishments in their watersheds.

Key findings of this needs assessment suggest watershed group strengths include capable and willing volunteers and leaders, commitment to a shared vision for their watershed, the ability to engage community members in meaningful ways, and strong technical and project implementation skills. Watershed groups and regional partners articulated many challenges, barriers, and needs, which if fulfilled, would present opportunities for even greater success and effectiveness.

Watershed groups are working diligently to communicate concerns about and respond to a variety of issues within the Hudson River watershed. Watershed groups and their partners consistently mentioned flooding, pollution, development, climate change, and emerging contaminants as major watershed issues they are tackling.

Watershed group needs include:

- **Capacity.** In order to meet their mission, watershed groups need to expand their capacity, or their ability to meet challenges and enhance their strengths in the face of uncertainty. Expanding capacity can include increasing the number of people involved, as well as refining group structures to help them work efficiently. Capacity can be increased through bringing on new or additional staff, expanding paid or volunteer leadership roles to include more members, and developing partnerships with other entities.
- **Leadership.** Watershed groups need strong and consistent leadership. This can be achieved by strengthening and cultivating leadership skills, bringing on new people in leadership roles complementary to existing leaders, succession and transition planning,

and developing organizational structures that share responsibilities across the organization.

- **Goals.** Watershed groups need to clearly define and communicate their priorities and objectives to ensure that everyone is working together towards a common goal. Priority-setting will support watershed groups' bids for funding as well as their ability to develop mutually-beneficial partnerships and collaborations.
- **Structure.** While watershed groups can take on a variety of structures to respond to local needs, those structures need to be clearly defined and documented. Having organizational systems in place will improve the groups' sustainability over time, make it easier for members to understand their roles, and strengthen their ability to manage funding.
- **Diverse Skills.** Watershed groups need to increase membership or develop partnerships to gain access to specific skills. While groups are very strong in developing partnerships with scientists and researchers, for example, they also need access to additional skills and experience, including legal, organizational development, GIS/mapping, communication, and technology.
- **Communication.** To the extent that it will support their missions, watershed groups need to improve public communication about both their watersheds and their group missions. This can help develop new partnerships and build more community support for key actions.
- **Funding.** Watershed groups need clear and up-to-date information about what grant funding is available, and in many cases, assistance applying for grant funding. Groups also need access to unrestricted funding that can support administrative and operational needs.
- **Information-Sharing.** Watershed groups need information that is accessible, relevant, and action-oriented. They would benefit from access to additional data, both new and existing, about their watershed and across a larger geographic area. Regional networks provide valuable access to information, resources, and potential partners.
- **Water Quality Monitoring.** Watershed groups need support to help them monitor water quality. They want to collect, compile, and communicate data so that it can be as useful as possible. They need assistance to set goals, develop monitoring plans and quality assurance protocols, interpret findings, and review and modify projects.
- **Partnerships.** Additional pathways and support for partnerships with academic institutions, municipalities, and community organizations would strengthen watershed groups' ability to carry out meaningful watershed projects. With limited capacity within the groups, watershed groups need partnerships to meet their goals.
- **Government Partnerships.** In particular, watershed groups need support from county and municipal staff and elected officials for decision-making, funding, and implementing key projects. They also need clarity around programmatic, jurisdictional, and regulatory overlap across watershed, county, and municipal boundaries. Watershed groups would also benefit from training in how to advocate for policies and interventions by government agencies.

Needs Assessment Overview

Introduction

The Hudson River Watershed Alliance unites and empowers communities to protect their local water resources. We work throughout the Hudson River watershed to support community-based watershed groups, help municipalities work together on water issues, and serve as a collective voice across the region. We are a collaborative network of community groups, organizations, municipalities, agencies, and individuals.

The Hudson River Watershed Alliance hosts educational and capacity-building events, including the Annual Watershed Conference to share key information and promote networking, Watershed Roundtables to bring groups together to share strategies, training workshops, and a lecture series that focuses on technical and scientific innovations. We provide technical and strategic assistance on watershed work, including fostering new initiatives and helping sustain groups as they meet new challenges.

From 2019-2021, the Hudson River Watershed Alliance conducted a needs assessment to better understand the needs of watershed groups in the Hudson River watershed. This work was funded by a grant from the Hudson River Estuary Program and the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, with support from the New York State Environmental Protection Fund. The purpose of this study was to delve more deeply into the specific issues facing watershed groups and learn more about their goals, challenges, barriers, needs, strengths, and accomplishments. The Hudson River Watershed Alliance will use this information to develop programs and technical assistance, which will help watershed groups meet challenges and barriers, leading to a community of effective watershed advocates and stewards. The Alliance will also share the results with a wide range of partners, particularly those that may be able to help meet the needs expressed here.

This report summarizes our key findings. The [Watershed Needs Assessment Appendix](#) includes more detailed information with specific quotations directly from interview and focus group participants. We have kept all participant information confidential.

What is a Watershed Group?

A watershed is the area of land from which water drains into a river, stream, or other waterbody. Water flows off the land into a waterbody by way of rivers and streams, and underground through groundwater aquifers. Watersheds are defined by the lay of the land, with mountains and hills typically forming their borders. Watershed boundaries rarely match political boundaries.

The Hudson River watershed, from Lake Tear of the Clouds in the Adirondacks to New York City, covers 13,400 square miles. To improve the Hudson River and its ecosystem, we have to take a watershed approach. Each stream that flows to the Hudson is connected to the health of the

river. Each watershed group is a critical part of our Alliance, sharing their strategies and successes so we can all grow stronger together.

For the purposes of this study, we defined watershed groups as community-based groups working to protect local water bodies within the Hudson River watershed, who use a watershed framework and scale. Watershed groups and initiatives take on a variety of forms and roles. In general, these groups convene stakeholders around common water issues like degraded water quality or poor legal enforcement, share information, coordinate projects, educate residents, and promote stewardship of their watersheds through projects like tree plantings and stream cleanups. Many groups are actively monitoring water quality to understand conditions, partnering on research with academic and municipal institutions, and helping to write and implement watershed management plans.

Some watershed groups are entirely volunteer-run, while others are intermunicipal councils that provide a structure for multiple municipalities to work together on issues of mutual interest. Some groups are led by agencies or organizations that devote staff to coordination while others are independent 501(c)(3) nonprofit organizations. Whatever the form, collaboration is key for meeting goals. Many projects have been successful through partnerships with municipalities, county agencies, Soil and Water Conservation Districts, Cornell Cooperative Extension offices, community organizations, and regional nonprofits like Hudson River Sloop Clearwater, Scenic Hudson, and Riverkeeper.

Watershed groups fill an important niche as a voice for their river or stream. They have boots on the ground, waders in the water, and considerable local knowledge. They partner with experts to provide strong scientific foundations and strengthen coalitions. They lift up local champions who use their strengths to advocate for our waterways. They help municipalities prioritize water management and work together across political boundaries.

Methods

For this project, we used a qualitative social science methodology to gather information about watershed groups. First, we conducted semi-structured interviews with watershed group leaders or representatives. We interviewed 32 people from 28 different watershed groups across the Upper Hudson River, Mohawk River, and Hudson River estuary watersheds. Interviews lasted between 35 and 90 minutes. Interview questions were designed to learn more about the background of the individual and watershed group, the issues facing their focus watershed, and the strengths, challenges, barriers, needs, and goals of the watershed group. Interviews took place between November 7, 2019 and March 4, 2020, in-person, with the exception of one interview conducted via phone. Each interview was recorded and transcribed.

In addition to their common involvement in watershed groups, participants represented a wide array of professional and volunteer roles, including: volunteers, staff from agencies and nonprofit organizations, municipal officials, college and university faculty, and more. Some participants were leaders of active groups that meet regularly, while others were the point person for a

particular watershed that does not have a formal group associated with it. These may be “local champions,” or leaders of groups that had existed in the past. All had an incredible wealth of experience to share, having worked locally to improve watershed management.

The second stage of the project was to utilize focus groups to develop a more in-depth understanding of what we learned from interview participants, particularly around strengths and needs. We invited regional partners to participate in four focus groups, organized by similar affiliations, including municipalities with whom they partner for implementation, academic institutions and scientists for technical support, and regional organizations for strategic focus. We specifically invited regional collaborators that are implementers, experts, and influencers, in order to learn their perspectives on watershed group needs.

Four focus group meetings were held via Zoom between March 16, 2021 and April 2, 2021. Each session lasted two hours and included six or seven participants in conversation with each other, with questions prompted by a session leader. Focus group participants included state and county agency staff, regional nonprofit staff, regional planning board staff, academic institution faculty and staff, and other partners. Of the 26 people that participated in focus groups, two were also interviewed during the first stage of information-gathering and 10 were also members of watershed groups, in addition to their regional roles. Each focus group meeting was recorded and transcribed.

In total, we spoke with 56 people as part of this study. The list of questions from both interviews and focus groups is below. Once interviews and focus groups were completed, we analyzed transcripts in two stages. First, we reviewed transcripts to develop general themes, such as common responses or ideas that emerged from the conversations. Then, we developed a more focused assessment tool. We used this to review text from each transcript and code responses to specific questions and key themes. These codes were then grouped together by question or theme and analyzed together to better understand watershed group challenges, barriers, needs, strengths, and accomplishments across the region. We use these direct quotes and themes to help us better understand both broad topics (e.g., leadership) as well as details (e.g., leadership succession planning) that can inform watershed group decision-making.

This Watershed Needs Assessment Report is a report-out of the information that we heard from interview and focus group participants. All content expressed within the report came directly from participants and is not based on Hudson River Watershed Alliance interpretation, unless otherwise noted. Focus group participant statements are noted; all other statements were from interview participants.

The [Watershed Needs Assessment Appendix](#) includes direct quotations from participants, organized by theme. For more detail on specific challenges, barriers, needs, strengths, or accomplishments within the report, please refer to the corresponding section in the Appendix. For more details on watershed group accomplishments, see Hudson River Watershed Alliance’s [Work on Watersheds](#) report.

Interview and Focus Group Questions

Interview Questions

Before recording: Informed consent

- Describe the project, risks, rights
- Consent to participate and record

Introduction: To build rapport and learn about the participant

- Where are you from? How long have you lived in the region? What do you do for a living? What is your expertise/background? What do you do for fun?
- How did you come to work on watershed issues?

Watershed group specifics

- Tell me about your watershed...
 - Facts? Location for information?
- Tell me about your group...
- What is your group working on now?
- What are your goals?
- What are your short-term priorities?
- What guides your work?
 - Do you have a watershed assessment, plan, or implementation strategy?
- How do you build relationships with the community?
- How is your group perceived in your community?
- Do you work with municipal structures?

Strengths/Assets/Accomplishments

- What's working for you? Something you are proud of?
- What are your accomplishments?
- What are your group's strengths?

Challenges

- What's not working for you?
- What are your group's challenges?
 - Challenges internal to your group?
 - External challenges? In the watershed?

Goals

- What does success look like?
- What are your goals for the watershed? For your group? Projects?
- Do you have long term goals?

Barriers and needs

- What would make you more successful?

- Are there barriers to meeting your long and short term goals?
- What are the barriers to accomplishing your watershed management goals?
- Do you feel like you or your group is lacking technical skills?
 - Other needed resources?
- What are your group's needs?

Anything else you want to tell me?

- Anything else you want us to know?
 - About your group? Overall concerns?
- Anyone else we should talk to?

Focus Group Questions

Background

- Tell me about the roles that watershed groups play in the region. Feel free to give examples based on your experiences.
 - How do you define watershed groups?

Strengths

- What are watershed group strengths? What are they good at?

Needs

- What do watershed groups need to be more successful or meet their goals, from your perspective?
 - What does a successful group look like?
- What barriers or challenges do watershed groups face to accomplish their goals, from your perspective?
 - Do you feel like watershed groups are lacking certain skills? (Technical or otherwise)

Partnerships (collaborations, networks, legitimacy)

- Tell me what successful collaboration with watershed groups looks like.
- What would it take to collaborate more effectively?
 - What would allow for new or more productive collaborations?
 - Are there barriers to creating partnerships?
 - Are there opportunities for new collaborations that you see?
 - What role do you think your group could play to support watershed groups?
 - What role could watershed groups play to support your work?
- What role do you think Hudson River Watershed Alliance should play to support watershed groups?
- Anything else you want us to know about watershed work?

Watershed Group Forms and Functions

In the interviews, we asked participants about their personal backgrounds, how their groups formed and why, and what structure their groups currently take. The watershed groups included in this Needs Assessment take many forms and serve different functions. This variety stems from the diverse backgrounds, passions, and skill sets of individuals involved with each group; and the variety of different conditions, concerns, and/or opportunities that prompted groups to form or foster their continuation, such as shared goals, common funding, or crises.

Members' Personal Background

“So just because of my family and how I grew up, I completely appreciate and I understand the significance of the water.”

- interview participant

Members' personal backgrounds provided insight into their involvement in watershed groups. Regardless of education, professional background or life history, passion for water and river protection was the most common theme when interview participants were asked about their personal backgrounds. These experiences clearly drove them to actively participate in their watershed group. Many participants cited personal connections to rivers, streams, and water as central to their passion for watershed work. Some participants noted early connections to water, such as boating or fishing with a parent or grandparent, swimming as a child, or spending time on family land with small streams running through them. These experiences and love for water and nature in general were themes that drove their desire to help protect and improve local rivers and streams as adults.

About two-thirds of the participants had formal education in the sciences or engineering, including geology, ecology, hydrology, and engineering. A smaller percentage had backgrounds in social sciences, education, real estate, financial management, and accounting. A few interview participants mentioned direct land management experience, such as growing up or working on a farm. Some participants noted they had “gone back to school” as adults to enhance their environmental science knowledge and skills sets, and apply them to both paid and volunteer work. Some interview participants had extensive planning or conservation nonprofit board experience, while others mentioned that their watershed group participation was the first time they had worked on this type of effort. A few held elected positions at the municipal level, especially later in their careers.

About half the interview participants were volunteers in their groups, while others were tasked with working on watershed issues as staff support in their organizations or institutions (e.g., a nonprofit employee whose duties include supporting a watershed group). Several also had professional roles in related fields such as engineering, academia, public service or government agencies, and nonprofit management. Many of the interview participants took on watershed work of their own volition in response to needs they perceived in their communities.

Group Origins

“And there was a sense that it was important that people show up and pay attention, because maybe the government agencies that we were assuming were going to take care of us, were not going to be there to take care of us.”

- interview participant

With a total of 28 watershed groups reflected in the study, there was a great variety of origin stories. These diverse origin stories suggest there is no single path to the creation or success of watershed groups. Some watershed groups formed when individuals realized they had common concerns about a specific threat or water quality issue. These included private development and government action or inaction on environmental issues, such as flooding and PFAS monitoring and remediation.

Watershed groups formed when members learned about watershed planning or specific impacts at community meetings and decided to organize. For many groups, funding for planning or for a specific project was the impetus to form a group around a particular watershed. Funding or programs cited included New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (NYS DEC) Hudson River Estuary Program and the Department of Agriculture and Markets Soil and Water Conservation District programs, Cornell University’s Cooperative Extension, and The Nature Conservancy’s Community Resilience Building Workshops. Commonly, watershed groups formed because of a combination of the factors above, and in some cases, groups have had various iterations over time.

Many groups have defined connections with their nearby municipal or county water authority, while others are more independent. While some watershed groups date their organization to the late 1990s or early 2000s, many have had formative growth in the past 10 to 15 years. Many interview participants noted the need to raise public awareness around connections between lands and waters, in both developed and rural settings, as a key underpinning of their watershed group’s origin story.

Watershed Group Structure

“But we have evolved, where we now have a board of directors. And an organizational structure of which will hopefully hold it together.”

- interview participant

Like group origins, there is a wide variety of group structures within the 28 watershed groups interviewed in this Needs Assessment. Generally speaking, these structures can be broken into six categories:

- **Intermunicipal councils**, in which municipalities are members and send representatives to meetings based on formal agreement documents such as a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) or Intermunicipal Agreement (IMA).
- **A staffed nonprofit** run by several paid staff, reporting to a volunteer governing board.

- **One paid staff position** (such as an executive director or a coordinator) and several board members that share workload with paid staff.
- **Entirely volunteer-run** organizations.
- **Groups based in or hosted by colleges and universities**, which are often led by one or more active professors with volunteer or paid undergraduate/graduate students rotating through projects over time.
- **Groups that grew from other entities**, such as Riverkeeper or local community or advocacy groups, and may have some elements of their prior structure intact.

Some groups have formal 501(c)(3) nonprofit status, while others are either working towards nonprofit status or are intentionally staying away from it. For example, one watershed group intentionally has no paid staff and relies solely on committed volunteers. A few groups have just a few members who manage the entirety of both group administration and key projects such as water quality monitoring.

Several interview participants mentioned that their group was primarily focused on education and therefore their group structure was organized to support educational events. Several groups that have received state or other grant funding have organizational elements stipulated by that specific grant, such as formal partnerships or committees with specified membership.

Group administration varied widely as well. Some watershed groups have one or two board members who are primarily responsible for administration, including financial management, meeting organization, and communications. Others have one or two staff support who are employed by agencies or organizations. Several of the groups that have established partnerships with a municipality co-coordinate some administration.

All groups rely heavily on volunteers, as board members who take on administrative roles, as well as small and large cadres of volunteers who participate in water quality monitoring, data collection, education programs, or cleanup events. Many interview participants mentioned relying on volunteer time and energy to carry out critical programs, lead important conversations, communicate with elected officials, and keep the organizations running smoothly.

With a variety of structures and ways of organizing, watershed groups can be difficult to define. For the purposes of this study, we defined watershed groups as community-based groups working to protect local water bodies within the Hudson River watershed, who use a watershed framework and scale. Some watershed groups may not be currently “active,” in that they are not meeting regularly. Some may not actually be structured groups, and instead are led by a local champion that can call upon others for support as needed.

This challenge of watershed group definition was raised in focus group conversations. One focus group participant noted that watershed groups are sometimes perceived as “rag-tag groups of volunteers” and later in the conversation realized that this was entirely untrue, citing a group that has a very established program and substantial funding. Another focus group wondered

whether a watershed “group” is primarily a convener of conversations and partnerships, or whether it should have staff or volunteers and motivations of their own.

Questions were also raised by focus group participants about entities that played similar roles to watershed groups, including municipal task forces, stormwater coalitions, or water quality coordinating committees. Some of these had state or county support for a period of time, but when that funding changed or ended, they either dissolved or morphed into something different. The perspectives of regional partners are important to understand, as they reflect what outside partners perceive the goals, motivations, and needs of the groups are.

Collaboration

“And actually, that’s been a theme throughout... We are very much a coalition in a network. Even though we’re our own discrete organization, we don’t exist apart from our connections... We don’t exist, really, apart from our connection to... County Planning, or to residents, particularly [in one municipality], or to Riverkeeper, or to Hudson River Watershed Alliance.”

- interview participant

When asked about collaboration – or “who are the people you work with?” – watershed group members named specific partners as well as the important things that are gained from partners. Interview participants noted that partnerships were critical to success and an important way to cross over political, jurisdictional, and other barriers. Some challenges with collaborations include volunteer and staff turnover, changing interest or energy around an issue from different groups in the collaboration, and difficulty sustaining relationships.

Watershed group members listed numerous partners, including but not limited to the following:

Community Groups

- Scouting groups
- School groups
- Arts and photography groups
- Farming and agriculture community
- Other watershed groups
- Lake associations

Other Nonprofits

- Hudson River Watershed Alliance
- Local and regional land trusts
- Scenic Hudson
- Riverkeeper
- Hudson River Sloop Clearwater
- The Nature Conservancy
- Open Space Institute

- Audubon and wildlife conservation societies
- Trout Unlimited
- Hunting and fishing clubs
- Outdoor recreation groups
- Regional land trusts
- Education centers
- Earthjustice

Government Actors or Entities

- Local legislators
- Intermunicipal councils and official coalitions
- State agencies: Department of Environmental Conservation (especially Hudson River Estuary Program and Mohawk River Basin Program), Department of Health, Department of State
- Municipal and county government
- Municipal boards, such as Sustainability or Conservation Advisory Councils
- Soil and Water Conservation Districts
- Cornell Cooperative Extension
- County water quality coordinating committees and stormwater coalitions
- Regional planning councils, commissions, and boards
- US Fish and Wildlife Service
- US Environmental Protection Agency

Academia

- Bard College
- Cary Institute of Ecosystem Studies
- Columbia University/Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory
- Cornell University/New York State Water Resources Institute
- Marist College
- Mount Saint Mary College
- Pace University
- Sarah Lawrence College/Center for the Urban River at Beczak
- Siena College
- SUNY Albany
- SUNY Environmental Science & Forestry
- SUNY New Paltz
- SUNY Purchase
- Union College
- University of Connecticut
- Vassar College

Watershed Group Motivation and Goals

Motivation

“We're working together as an organization to solve problems.”

- interview participant

While passion for clean water and healthy rivers drives many participants' personal connection to their watershed group, the groups themselves had motivations that include implementing watershed plans or other formal guidance documents, following direction or implementing programs developed by outside entities, and developing site-specific projects and programs to address specific local issues that demand constant attention.

Several participants mentioned guiding principles of their organization that underlie their activities, such as education and outreach, land protection, or water quality. These resource- or issue-driven principles provide a framework for group decisions; some were termed “guiding lights” or “pillars” of their organizations. Some participants were open about their role as advocates, especially water quality and clean drinking water. Others preferred to avoid the word “advocacy” because of particular connotations or limitations in their staff roles.

Watershed groups that are based at or have strong ties to academia have an additional set of motivators beyond traditional nonprofit “education and outreach” activities. The members of these groups balance teaching and research efforts, generally about half and half according to these interview participants. Offering valuable experiences to students through coursework or research experience was a primary motivator in choosing what projects to work on.

Groups that have strong partnerships with other nonprofits or government organizations, whether via funding or long-time project coordination, cited these relationships as both primary drivers of their work but also potential constraints. These partnerships affect group identity and sometimes cause friction if the partners' goals are not the same as the watershed group's goals.

Focus group conversations mentioned education and advocacy on specific issues as key roles for watershed groups. Focus group participants discussed the community connections that watershed groups have, which helps them to tap into local knowledge about the watershed and local streams, and their strong motivation to make progress on local projects such as stewardship and monitoring. Focus groups also noted that watershed groups are motivated by their role in connecting to influential people in the community to raise awareness, and in some cases, engaging political actors on critical issues or concerns.

Planning

“We try to follow... the recommendations in the watershed plan... I'll always try to bring a copy, and some of our members are really good at flipping through when we talk about goal-setting for

the year... [T]hings can pop out of the woodwork. But at the meetings, we try to use that as a guide.”

- interview participant

Watershed groups with established watershed plans cited these as primary motivators for their work. Focus groups with regional partners also mentioned the planning that the watershed groups are doing, such as watershed plans and inventory and assessment projects. Because these plans were often funded and/or written by partners at organizations such as county agencies, the substance, structure and partnerships in place have often contributed to a generally good record of implementation. Because some of these partners had bureaucratic structures and regular meetings, watershed groups were supported by ongoing conversations and decision-making that kept project implementation moving forward.

A few groups had strategic plans, or elements of strategic plans such as “Strengths – Weaknesses – Opportunities – Threats” (SWOT) analyses from which they drew guidance. Some used templates to get started, such as Riverkeeper’s source water protection scorecard or The Nature Conservancy’s Community Resilience Building Workshop. Interview participants who worked with larger or more established watershed groups also noted that the established plans provide important legitimacy for grant applications and priority-setting.

A few groups had no written plans to guide their work. These interview participants mentioned “having the plan in their heads” or working primarily on what the public or board members bring to their attention. In a few cases, existing plans aren’t actively being put to use as guides for watershed group work, either because a group has a different focus, or there isn’t a group working toward implementation.

Regardless of whether a group has a formal watershed plan or strategic plan in place, many interview participants also mentioned that managing a crisis, such as flooding or drinking water contamination, can sometimes dominate short-term decisions and activities. On the other hand, communities benefit from having an established group that is able to react to crises when they arise.

Goals

“Good water quality, good water quantity, and education are the three that come to mind real quick.”

- interview participant

“A river that we can swim in and eat the fish out of.”

- interview participant

“[M]y ultimate goal... is that people become the strongest advocates for themselves.”

- interview participant

Watershed group members were asked to describe the primary goals of their organizations and what success “looks like” to them. Their replies can loosely be grouped into goals for resource protection, community education, legitimacy, and funding or programs, with significant overlap across goals. Some interview participants have very specific goals which they could articulate and list, while others spoke more generally. These goals can be categorized as:

Resource protection goals

- Improve water quality/clean water
- Remediate toxic sites and hold government actors accountable
- Maintain or improve water quantity/availability
- Achieve fishable and swimmable waters
- Reduce fuel transport on Hudson River
- Conserve land and water
- Mitigate flooding

Community education goals

- Foster understanding of the connection of clean water to economic vitality (tourism)
- Foster understanding of the connection of lands and farms to water
- Improve watershed education in local schools
- Create a better website
- Work with more youth

Goals around serving as a reliable resource

- Ensure decisions are based on science and research
- Improve/increase partnerships with other nonprofits
- Ensure communities have a supportive forum for communication and decision-making
- Ensure local officials come to groups for information, to help them make decisions
- Foster municipal involvement in watershed issues
- Repair or improve relationships with partners

Funding or programmatic goals

- Develop a watershed program
- Attain 501(c)(3) status
- Become an independent nonprofit
- Complete a watershed plan
- Lobby the state for more funding
- Come together to lobby
- Find members in all areas of the watershed
- Implement watershed plan recommendations
- Fund a paid coordinator position

Interview participants were also asked what long-term success looks like for their group. Replies included to:

- Work deliberately on areas central to their missions
- Improve water quality in the long-term
- See fish return to streams and the Hudson River
- Achieve fishable and swimmable waters
- Build a sustainable organization that has momentum on its own
- Build a strong, vibrant, recognized, and respected group
- Encourage people and communities to become advocates for themselves

Focus groups made up primarily of regional entities were also asked what watershed group success would look like. Their discussions reflected some important themes of how watershed groups are viewed by partners and outside entities, such as:

- A place for the community to come together, express their concerns, and work together
- A diverse group that can survive turnover and keep moving forward
- A group that has planning and prioritization complete, so they are ready to implement projects when funding becomes available
- Groups that carve out and clearly articulate specific roles
- Groups that get something done
- Groups have a specific focus and are not trying to be involved in too much, and set boundaries on their own abilities and responsibilities
- Group becomes a trusted partner that other entities ask for ideas and input
- Groups should articulate their own success: define it, achieve it, and celebrate it
- Group that has leadership that is not overstressed and underpaid and resentful about it
- Academic partners and their students not seen as hindrance but as active community members
- Groups that rely heavily on youth/students/colleges need to think about longevity and sustainability as those youth move on
- A group that is no longer needed and has achieved their goals is one definition of success

Watershed Issues

Watershed-specific issues or conditions of concern were predominantly about water quality or quantity in some form, but other concerns emerged as well. Some interview participants shared either perceived or known causes of the issues in their watershed. In the bulleted lists below, items towards the top of each list were mentioned more often, and items towards the bottom of the list were mentioned less often.

Specific concerns included:

- Flooding
- Drinking water contamination
- Emerging contaminants/PFAS
- Garbage and waste in streams
- High nutrient loads in streams
- Sewer/septic overflow and runoff

- Sedimentation and erosion of stream banks
- Harmful algal blooms
- Inadequate water supply for new developments
- Source water protection
- Impact of poor water quality on beloved recreation and nature areas
- Invasive species
- Radioactive sediments

Perceived or known causes of these issues and concerns included:

- Poor permitting/planning of new developments
- “Big box stores” and large warehouse buildings that have large footprints, infrastructure, and use
- Growth of towns without adequate water supply and or water and sewer infrastructure
- Illegal dumping
- Illegal discharges
- Aging or failing septic and sewer systems
- Combined Sewer Overflows (CSOs) and Sanitary Sewer Overflows (SSOs)
- Agricultural runoff
- Road salt
- Poor sediment control measures at construction sites
- Climate change
- Ineffective or poor enforcement
- Inactive or absent zoning laws designed to protect water resources
- Ineffective or underfunded water quality monitoring
- Inactive or ineffective planning and zoning boards
- Reservoir releases

Watershed Group Challenges, Barriers, and Needs

Watershed groups face numerous challenges, ranging from tangible staffing, funding, or technical needs to less tangible concerns like communication, leadership, and legitimacy in their communities. When asked about challenges, watershed group members clearly stated the difficulties they face, but also shared the specific barriers to success they are facing, and the needs or capacities that would help them overcome those barriers.

Capacity

“And everything is seen through the lens of capacity, too... I organize the meetings, I attend the meetings, I take the notes for the meetings, I do the actions on the meetings... I need hours to work, and I’m constantly called away from different things. And because we’re small and we have so many different things going on, my brain is switching gears every hour and it’s exhausting... I have to do it all, really.”

- interview participant

The most-cited challenge for watershed groups was capacity. Organizational capacity can be defined in various ways: the ability of an organization to get work done, to be effective, and/or to fulfill a mission. Barriers to capacity can include human, financial, and other resources. The challenge of limited capacity was evident on a variety of scales, from individuals who lack time or skills, to watershed groups that lack sufficient membership, expertise or structure, to the nonprofit and agency partners that aren't filling gaps. Watershed group members and their partners, both staff and volunteers, have heavy workloads with limited time and capacity to manage everything.

Leadership

"It's interesting how the positives and the negatives kind of go hand in hand. With that leadership that's been in place for so long, there might be a sense of comfort in that so there's not necessarily that new leadership that's stepping up to fill that gap. I would say that is probably our number one challenge right now, just because the future of this group relies on having some form of leadership group, and that's somewhat in question right now."

- interview participant

"But we haven't managed to cohesively get together and assign duties... I think part of that is, we don't have a clear-cut leader... We've had nobody step forward and say okay, I'm going to run the group..."

- interview participant

Leadership is defined as the ability to motivate a group of people to act toward achieving a common goal. Watershed groups have struggled with identifying leadership within their groups. This can include identifying people for overall leadership roles or identifying those who can take charge of specific programs. For large watersheds, it has been a challenge to find structures that support local leadership in an efficient way.

Effective leaders can help watershed groups set goals and ensure that their work is aligned to those goals. With a lack of leadership may come a lack of specific mission, goals, and objectives. This issue can have a ripple effect, impacting meetings, projects, partnerships, and more. It's difficult to develop an organizational structure or specific set of actions without leadership. Watershed group members may be passionate, but lack direction on what would be most strategic.

Planning for leadership transitions is a challenge. With strong leaders currently in place, new leaders may hesitate to take on responsibility. Several interview participants that currently play leadership roles expressed concerns around the sustainability of their groups. In some cases, the challenge of limited capacity may be the barrier for new leaders to step up. In others, watershed group leaders may not have the skills or experience yet to handle difficult situations, create a structure for shared leadership, or grow the watershed group's capacity.

Institutional knowledge is also a challenge when leaders change. Watershed groups need to maintain knowledge over time and through transitions of people within watershed groups. Although some groups have long-standing members, which helps to retain institutional knowledge, most group members can come and go, making it challenging to retain information.

Watershed Group Members

“Well, we need more people. That’s it. Every group has that same problem, from what I understand.”

- interview participant

“...I think burnout is a real thing with watershed groups, a real problem... I don't know the answer to it, but I know I personally have suffered from it... it's hard to sustain.”

- focus group participant

Watershed groups often have few members, with an even smaller subset of people doing the majority of the work to move projects forward. In this view, recruiting new members is a challenge. Watershed groups that are losing membership are even more challenged to sustain their work. In addition to leadership, watershed groups need active members to help with the workload. This is especially a challenge for watershed groups that cover a large geographic area.

Several watershed groups spoke to the need for reaching out more effectively to broaden their networks and increase their participation, specifically to marginalized groups and communities that have not traditionally been involved in watershed work. They are interested in connecting and building relationships with new organizations, municipalities, and academic institutions.

To reduce the workload, particularly for volunteer-based groups, watershed groups need to share responsibilities across more people. Having just a few people shouldering the heavy burden of organizing and administering a watershed group is not a sustainable approach, and may continue to result in burnout.

Several interview and focus group participants spoke to the need for more diversity within their watershed group as well as in leadership roles. Interview participants were concerned about the lack of racial diversity in watershed group membership, and expressed a desire to ensure that their group more accurately represented the demographics of the watershed. This suggests a need for planning specifically around increasing diversity and strengthening inclusive processes, such as developing inclusive watershed group structures so that newer people feel welcome.

The majority of watershed groups rely on volunteer members to get work done, and managing volunteers can be a challenge. It is difficult to keep the work sustainable over time and manage a large workload with limited accountability. Several interview participants cited the need for paid staff, whether as staff of the watershed group itself or as staff support employed by another organization or agency. Having a designated person paid to do watershed work would allow

watershed groups to scale up their projects, build relationships, better achieve their mission, and cover more administrative tasks that are challenging for volunteers.

Interview participants shared a few specific needs for specific staff that would help overcome the barriers created by limited capacity. These include a full-time executive director, as well as roles related to outreach and communication, administrative support, coordination, and technical expertise. Certain roles are better suited for staff than volunteers. While funding and group structure are barriers for hiring staff, several interview participants mentioned that managing the logistics of hiring the right person was the larger challenge.

In addition to increasing membership, watershed groups also need more volunteers to help with specific projects. While many watershed group members themselves are volunteers, in this case, they are looking for people to make a shorter-term commitment to assist with water quality monitoring, stewardship, and other projects.

Some watershed groups include municipalities specifically as members; this is especially true of watershed groups that are structured as inter-municipal councils. Municipal staff have limited capacity or time to work on watershed group issues, which may also result in less information being shared with their constituents.

Group Organization and Structure

“We still need a lot of time and support to build a framework for our operation that is more stable and can start to bring more people in... I think that the easiest thing to say is, right now, is some level of formalizing the roles we have been playing.”

- interview participant

Several interview participants spoke to the need for developing an organizational structure for their watershed groups. They need guidance, support, and time to develop bylaws, formalize roles, and create more sustainable organizations. Not having a defined structure through bylaws can become a weakness, especially when there are different perspectives or conflicts that arise. Watershed groups need information on how to organize, structure, and garner support.

Having a clearer structure in place would help leaders delegate work to watershed group members, volunteers, and other stakeholders, to make sure everyone is working together efficiently. Without this, a watershed group may not be able to engage people productively to achieve its goals.

Managing conflict within the watershed group can also be a challenge, especially with a lack of leadership and/or organizational structure. A structure often provides a framework for handling disruptive people and internal politics, as well as deciding next steps for actions.

It can be a challenge to build an identity for the watershed group, separate from individuals or other organizations or agencies that participate in the group. It can be challenging to determine

the specific role of the watershed group, especially when a group is made up of well-known organizations that have their own roles and priorities. Some interviewees referred to their affiliated watershed group as “we,” while others referred to them as “they,” depending on their relationship with the organization.

Some watershed group members mentioned that becoming a 501(c)(3) is a logistically complicated process that can be a substantial barrier. Operating a nonprofit once it is established is also complex, especially for volunteer groups that have limited capacity. At the same time, becoming a 501(c)(3) and being able to secure their own grants can give watershed groups confidence and autonomy. And, despite challenges, even some small volunteer groups have managed to secure and maintain 501(c)(3) status, and some long-established 501(c)(3) groups in the region have accomplished significant goals as a result. Instead of becoming a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, watershed groups may need a fiscal sponsor to connect to grants and other funding. This requires a certain amount of structure to develop these partnerships. Fiscal sponsors could include a municipality or a nonprofit organization, and there are challenges to both, in maintaining relationships during turnover, ensuring that missions are aligned, and securing grant funding in ways that are mutually beneficial for both the organization and fiscal sponsor.

Managing watershed group meetings is a challenge, with limited time and capacity of volunteers and staff alike. This challenge includes multiple aspects of coordination: defining the number and location of meetings, setting and following an agenda, running the meeting, and moving work forward.

Watershed groups need administrative support to maintain their operations, including data entry, grant-writing, information technology, bookkeeping, and human resources. Implementation projects require even more administrative capacity, including being in legal compliance with all requirements for liability, insurance, contracting, permits, and more. Having a more robust support system for meeting these needs would be valuable.

Watersheds may lack public access points for recreation and water quality monitoring, and accessing rivers and streams on private property can be a challenge. Watershed groups may not have the information they need on how to obtain permission and insurance to access private property.

Watershed groups need structures in place to enable resource sharing, including administrative resources. Several interview participants suggested that given the size and capacity of watershed groups, they would benefit from shared access to insurance and equipment. There may be opportunities for groups that have more or different resources to work together.

Technical Expertise

“I’m pretty good about finding the technical expertise that I need, at least in the science realm. In the business realm, less so... I just don’t know where to go.”

- interview participant

“No, I feel like we have, with [an academic institution] there, we have access to whatever we need, really. But not that we can pay for somebody to do a lot of that. But for answering questions, for some technical assistance with things, we know where to go, anyway.”

- interview participant

Whether through members or partners, watershed groups need access to specific skills. When asked if their watershed groups had adequate expertise, about one-third of the participants said they felt they did, while the remaining two-thirds did not. Interview participants interpreted the question differently, with some focused on technical expertise related to water resources or related fields such as engineering, while others discussed other types of skills. Of those who felt their group had adequate technical expertise, they cited their own technical or science knowledge or skills sets, or ready access to those of a close partner such as an academic institution, a larger nonprofit organization, or a state or county entity. Those who did not feel they had enough technical skills cited lack of training and lack of confidence in specific skills.

Scientific or technical skills needed included developing water quality monitoring programs, developing a Quality Assurance Project Plan (QAPP), using Geographic Information Systems (GIS), or understanding the State Environmental Quality Review Act (SEQRA) process.

Several interview participants also spoke to the need for organizational skills, including leadership, management and coordination, fundraising, and grant-writing. This need was cited as a barrier to developing a more sustainable watershed group structure because it limits their capacity to put policies in place, develop bylaws, and receive funding, for example. Watershed groups are interested in increasing communications through both traditional and web-based media. Learning new technology can be a barrier for watershed group members. Watershed groups also need communication training for community-building, outreach, lobbying, social media, and diversity and inclusivity.

Many groups have skilled volunteers or staff or partner support, but may be lacking in certain key areas. Watershed group members themselves may not need to learn highly technical skills if they can connect to partners with that expertise. Focus group members mentioned specific types of expertise that they would benefit from, from hydrologists to lawyers with environmental, water resource, and/or planning and zoning expertise. There are also specific subjects they expressed a need to understand more thoroughly, such as the impacts of stormwater. Several interview participants spoke to the need for access to specific technical experts to provide support beyond a volunteer role. Watershed groups most likely do not have the resources or capacity to hire consultants.

Legitimacy

“We had a real sense of needing to be very, very sensitive and delicate about the way that we work, operating in the community, to not come in with this attitude, with a savior attitude. To not come in and to be one more group that’s kind of declaring itself more knowledgeable or more legitimate. There’s a sense of poverty around legitimacy, and that’s something that is really, you

can sense it very strongly. Who gets to be considered legitimate? Whose concerns are legitimate? Whose actions are legitimate?”

- interview participant

“As much as they’ve been alerted to problems, it’s more denial and adversarial relationship than trying to work to mutually solve the problems. I see an effort to discount the things we bring up.”

- interview participant

Entities that are perceived as legitimate are often viewed by the community as having acceptable authority, expertise, and influence. They are respected by communities and partners for their knowledge, positions, and actions. Watershed groups may have strong legitimacy in certain facets of their work, but face a lack of perceived legitimacy in other areas.

Watershed group members cited many factors that increased their group’s legitimacy, from the perspectives both of group members and external partners and stakeholders:

- Longevity of the group, especially if all-volunteer
- Personal knowledge of group members about their watershed
- Use and promotion of science to make decisions
- Role in authoring or implementing a watershed plan or other planning document
- Success in winning grants
- Success in becoming a 501(c)(3) and/or separating from a “parent” organization or fiscal sponsor
- Quality of relationships with individual and programs in state and county government
- Professionalism of branding and identity, including communications products and logo
- Holding office space to hold events and meetings
- Ability and capacity to host a large annual event
- Ability to obtain insurance, hold permits, and host events

A number of challenges to legitimacy were voiced by participants as well:

- Not viewed by outside players or large corporations as knowing their watershed
- Not being respected because of informal training or volunteer status
- Not having support from local entities that could “promote” us better
- Not having a formal watershed or 9 Element plan complete, to help with funding and NYS DEC relationships
- Could be discredited if they come across as “savior” with information

Watershed groups expressed a desire to be taken seriously by partners, particularly by regulatory agencies like NYS DEC, municipalities, and granting agencies. This requires knowing the right jargon, having data, and building respect within their communities. There is a need for science literacy for communities to more actively participate in complex processes, so they are not discounted. Three interview participants who are women also expressed challenges with being taken seriously in their watershed work. They felt this may have been due to communication style, a lack of appreciation from technical experts for lived experience and a broader view of

issues, and/or bias, such as sexism. One interview participant mentioned they intentionally use simpler language to communicate their watershed work, but have been judged as not having technical knowledge because of that same, simpler language style.

Setting Priorities

“The thing for our group in particular, it's just a matter of prioritization. Realistic prioritization... it is just hard to get this group to focus.”

- interview participant

Defining a specific mission, along with goals and objectives, is a challenge for many watershed groups. There are many complex watershed-based challenges and legal, political and social systems that make it difficult to prioritize and articulate specific, meaningful, achievable objectives for volunteer watershed groups. Watershed groups may need a legal framework, a structure for watershed planning, more formalized guidance, and overall, a clearer path forward for what projects and programs to prioritize to have the greatest impact. Decision-making and follow-through are also challenges, particularly when watershed groups are trying to take on too much. An additional challenge is the need to demonstrate success in the short-term to keep watershed groups sustainable. This may become even harder with long-term impacts of climate change, which is already affecting how and what watershed projects are prioritized or undertaken by communities and watershed groups, and what is viewed as success in the face of a rapidly changing climate.

Without a clearly defined mission, watershed groups run the risk of losing momentum and becoming inactive. This also relates to issues of leadership, and lacking a defined set of goals that the group is working towards collectively. There is a need for structure and goals that match the group's capacity or to build capacity to achieve goals. Over time, watershed groups may also need to reconsider and re-prioritize their work. Changing directions or setting new priorities can also be a challenge.

There is a need to articulate both watershed groups' priorities and watershed priorities, especially in connecting the groups' work to local issues of concern. Watershed groups need a proactive plan to help guide their work and identify key actions. While there are many passionate people willing to work hard, and some ways they get community feedback, many groups lack direction. This requires both funding and expertise.

Watershed group planning needs include internal plans to grow capacity, set priorities, establish work plans, and work toward their goals. Watershed groups are interested in growing their capacity, roles, and activities, but they need more information and guidance on how best to do this.

Several watershed groups specifically articulated the need for a strategic plan to provide structure and clear steps for action. An overall strategy may also need to include a shorter-term work plan to take actions in steps. Watershed groups may need to think strategically about

certain projects or programs, such as next steps for water quality monitoring and community engagement to set priorities for watershed-related research.

In addition to internal planning, watershed groups articulated the need for watershed management plans. Funding for planning is needed, to develop plans that clearly identify priority projects and prioritize next steps for implementation. Communities may not be ready to expend or designate funds if they do not have a list of priority projects or approved plans.

While watershed groups would benefit from planning, they also need the flexibility and capacity to respond to crises as they arise. Several interview participants spoke to the challenge of devoting their limited resources to focus on new issues, including threats from new developments, harmful algal blooms, extreme weather, and other less predictable problems. It can be challenging to sustain momentum, focus on just one topic, and manage challenging power dynamics.

Watershed group members acknowledged that their work is slow and hard. It requires real patience and a long-term perspective to commit to this work. The work is never-ending, so it requires people to set their own measures of success. Processes like Total Maximum Daily Loads (TMDLs) or 9 Element watershed plans are extremely complex and long-term, and challenging for volunteer watershed groups to manage, yet groups may play important roles in developing or implementing these plans. Interview participants noted that it is challenging to keep momentum up after achieving an initial goal or crisis that brought people together. The length of a planning process can also result in losing momentum, along with the delayed timing of grant funding for actions. Watershed group members or leaders may move onto other projects over time. For watershed groups that are less active, it would be challenging to bring the same people back together.

Communication

“I don't think they even know we exist... [T]hat, to me, is one of the big hurdles. Is public awareness, public outreach, public participation. It's really hard to get people to understand what's going on.”

- interview participant

Many watershed groups focus on rivers and streams that may not be well-known in their communities. Municipalities may know or be responsible for certain segments, but lack an awareness of the watershed context. There may be a lack of name recognition, or even awareness that the river or stream exists. The word “watershed” may be a barrier for people who are not familiar with the term or meaning.

Watershed group members cited the need for public awareness strategies to build local support for projects. Watershed groups may need support with creating specific messages about the watershed and their work to better reach the community. They may also need to work with partners to share this outreach work. An additional communication challenge is balancing

complex messages that may seem to be in conflict. Watershed groups want communities to appreciate their rivers and streams, while also pointing out challenges and threats that may dissuade public use.

In addition to the watersheds themselves, watershed groups also need to communicate about their own existence and work. Many watershed groups are not well known in their communities, and need to increase public awareness, interest, and engagement. Articulating specific accomplishments or goals is a communication challenge that, if addressed, would help raise overall awareness.

Watershed groups need better communication and public-facing materials, including brochures, websites, and social media. A lack of media coverage, including by local newspaper, television and radio outlets that support fewer news reporters than in the past, makes it hard to learn about programs, new projects, and if/where groups are active. Some groups have harnessed social media as a platform to effectively communicate in the absence of strong local media. However, many watershed groups lack the capacity, skills, or both needed to maintain a web presence via websites and social media. Having an effective web presence is important to develop partnerships with new audiences, develop and maintain legitimacy, and build relationships with remaining press outlets. Groups need additional people to have these specific communications roles.

Many watershed groups expressed an interest in communication skills that can help with community engagement and building relationships with new partners. Language barriers may contribute to this challenge. Watershed groups will need to communicate in a way that is effective and allows for conversations with people from all different backgrounds.

Science communication is an additional challenge and need for watershed groups. It can be difficult to get information from various studies and projects out to the community.

Funding

“I hate to say it, but it all goes back to when the funds run out, the funds run out.”

- interview participant

“Grant writing, we've done a bunch of it, lately more... And it is hell. Getting it together, getting the answers right, coaching the right people... And then administering it is even worse, because most grants will reimburse you after you've spent the money, and if we didn't have money to spend in the first place, that's a real challenge. Funding is probably our biggest ongoing challenge... You need to have funds to get funds, and that's a big gap for us”

- interview participant

“No one is comfortable asking for money. Number one, underline, boldface font.”

- interview participant

It can be challenging for watershed groups and municipalities to stay up-to-date on funding opportunities. Available grant funding may not be enough for larger projects like 9 Element watershed plans, and groups need to divide up projects in creative ways. Applying for grants can consume limited resources, especially when there is a low success rate. Grant programs may not communicate their selection process or evaluation criteria clearly, which makes it more challenging to know if an application might be competitive.

On the other hand, focus group participants that manage grants observed that certain programs are much less competitive now than they were in the past, with fewer applications coming in for watershed work. While funding is available, watershed groups do not seem to be applying for it; this may be related to the barriers they face in applying for and managing grants, mis-alignments between group goals and grant-funder goals, or capacity deficits that prevent successful applications. When applying for grants, watershed groups need to communicate how they are moving their work forward and how a specific project relates to their overall goals, including, but not limited to, implementing priority projects identified in watershed plans. Grant-writing support and storytelling are needed, including knowing how to package projects in a way that funders can understand. This relates to communication and having a clear mission.

In addition to applying, managing grants can be a significant challenge for small and volunteer organizations. Grant programs that pay through reimbursements require watershed groups to have funding in hand to make the payments first. Grant administration and reporting is also a challenge. Government grants require detailed reporting, and grant funding often does not cover administrative time. This becomes a barrier for watershed groups to apply for grants, because the process is so challenging and capacity is limited. Having administrative staff or resources to support grant management would be very valuable. One interview participant described this as a profound burden. Managing many small grants can contribute to staff burnout, and the effort required to administer grants may be disproportionate to the funding that's actually available for programs. Having work funded through grants and pre-defined deliverables can be challenging when there is a crisis, and watershed groups need to quickly adapt their work. Funders need to be flexible enough to allow for changes to work plans, if a crisis does arise.

Building capacity and staff with grant funding is a challenge for all organizations, including watershed groups, municipalities, and entities that provide staff support. While grants can support specific projects, they often can't support ongoing operations. This can be a barrier to implementing watershed projects. Grant funding might assist with capacity needs in the short-term through interns or temporary staff, but watershed groups will have to plan for longer-term solutions. Small capacity-building grants would help watershed groups with this planning. Watershed groups need diversified funding and support to be more sustainable.

While fundraising could provide a source of operational funds, there are also barriers. A small number of watershed groups raise funds through membership dues, merchandise sales, or sponsorships. However, connecting with donors and asking for general donations has been a challenge. Approaches to fundraising are especially difficult to balance when people are also

donating their time. Securing financial support from other stakeholders that value clean water, like breweries, engineering firms and marinas, could be an opportunity.

There are also administrative challenges to fundraising that relate to watershed group structure and capacity. These range from opening bank accounts to financial reporting and managing a donor database.

Watershed groups noted several key needs that could be met with greater levels of funding:

- Staff, both full-time and part-time
- Students, so they can be compensated for their time
- Contractors or consultants for specific work
- Communications, such as graphic design and printing
- Operations costs, like insurance, accounting, and office space
- Project costs, such as water quality monitoring (both equipment and personnel) and infrastructure improvements

Geographic / Watershed Challenges

“What's the scale that's plausible to enable people to feel successful? And what is the scale to the watershed size where people can get their brains around it? We've always oriented towards the smaller streams, what's in your backyard... [Y]ou're always trying to manage money and time, so you want a scale of operation that's going to be meaningful.”

- focus group participant

The concept of a watershed may be a barrier for some people, in making the connection between land and water. Many communities look at problems at a site scale, rather than taking a watershed approach. Working across a large watershed area comes with many political and social challenges, and groups may not have the capacity to focus on the entire watershed. Some also expressed the need for multiple smaller watershed groups to cover a large geographic extent and be more involved locally. This presents both geographic and organizational challenges.

Some watersheds include multiple states, which can create additional organizational and communication challenges. For example, New York State grant funds cannot be used to work outside of New York State, even if a watershed crosses the state line. Defining the boundaries of the watershed can also be a challenge. While watershed delineations can appear straightforward, watershed groups need to make a conscious choice about the scale at which they will work. They may choose to focus on a particular area within a larger watershed. Participants also expressed that there is not only a geographic but a social and cultural divide between the Hudson River Estuary, Mohawk River, and Upper Hudson watersheds.

Watershed problems are complex, and watershed groups need to consider their scale and scope in order to have an impact. This relates to the size of their focus watershed, as well as the roles they play. Almost every watershed problem is too complex for a small watershed group to solve

alone. Certain processes, such as 9 Element watershed plans, may be beyond the capacity and technical skills of most volunteer watershed groups. In the absence of agencies or larger organizations doing the work, small volunteer watershed groups may need to step up and fill catalytic roles. One interview participant shared an experience where their watershed group got pushback from state agencies and municipalities when they were asking for their help with conducting watershed-based studies, instead putting that role on the community members. Larger entities could be supporting watershed groups through water quality monitoring, watershed studies, and planning.

When a watershed is generally healthy, it can be challenging to motivate people in the absence of a crisis or threat. While it's better to be proactive and protect watersheds, it may also be harder to get traction to start a watershed group. An additional challenge may be getting people to care and take action on a waterbody that is not part of drinking water supply. There may be a perspective that it's "clean enough."

Programmatic Challenges

"Like growing in terms of our role and activities. When started we just... did citizen science... It's time to have a bigger story, and I'm not sure how to do that."

- interview participant

"...if you want to get yourself in trouble, go do projects. If you want to stay out of trouble, just go preach to people. Somebody's going to get mad when you do something, somebody's going to say that you caused a problem as soon as you touch it."

- interview participant

Prioritizing what work to undertake as a watershed group can be challenging, especially without a plan of some kind. There is so much work to be done, that it can be difficult to narrow it down. Streamlined protocols make it easier for watershed groups to get projects done; examples include Trees for Tribes and Water Assessments by Volunteer Evaluators (WAVE). More complex projects require a higher level of organization. Challenging program logistics include securing access, renting equipment, obtaining funding, and getting the word out.

Several watershed groups are concerned about a lack of existing or up-to-date water quality monitoring data. Existing water quality monitoring programs like WAVE are not very precise, and more detailed water quality data are needed. Watershed groups also need access to existing water quality and environmental data, which may be housed within different agencies or municipal departments.

Watershed groups want to collect data that can be used for action by NYS DEC, municipalities, and others. They may lack a clear understanding of how to collect, compile, and communicate that data so that it can be as useful as possible. Managing data can be a challenge. Community members may not be aware of water quality data, which may result from a gap in communication or education. Watershed groups are also concerned about the quality of their

data, and may need training on methods. They are concerned that citizen science isn't taken seriously, or that volunteers may not have sufficient training to collect reliable data. They also need assistance from scientists and researchers to interpret and communicate findings.

NYS DEC's water quality monitoring requirements are a barrier to receive funding for monitoring. This problem was discussed at length in the academic focus group, with several different people sharing their perspectives. These requirements limit partnerships between watershed groups and with academic institutions and prevent them from doing their own water quality monitoring. Technology is moving much faster than policies, and this is a barrier for science. Watershed groups need reassurance from academics and state regulators that their data are valuable. They will perceive value when their data is used to influence decision-making.

Watershed groups need support to help them monitor water quality, including funding to hire staff and acquire equipment. One interview participant described the challenge of maintaining equipment for long-term monitoring studies in streams, where data loggers can get washed away or damaged. Groups also need assistance setting achievable, meaningful goals, developing monitoring plans and quality assurance protocols, communicating data, and reviewing and modifying projects based on experience. For most groups, partners will be critical to meeting many if not all of these needs.

Implementation projects such as stream stabilization and green infrastructure are very challenging from a programmatic perspective, in addition to the funding needs described above, and may be beyond the capacity for many volunteer watershed groups. Beyond capacity, in many cases, watershed groups lack jurisdiction to implement projects as a primary actor, though they may play important roles in supporting implementation. Some watershed groups assist with maintenance of parks and public spaces, and some manage land. Specific challenges include invasive species, deer, heat, and floods. Implementation projects take a lot of time, effort, and funding, and may not be around for a very long time. This includes both agricultural and urban implementation projects, which may be intentionally decommissioned or unknowingly altered or destroyed. There also may be unintended consequences of implementing projects. For example, site-scale projects like green infrastructure may be intensifying gentrification.

Watershed groups need to stay updated on the latest science, programs, and case studies for their work. This was highlighted as a need that the Hudson River Watershed Alliance, in particular, can meet. They need information that is accessible, relevant, and action-oriented. They also need regular updates on case studies, to better understand how these projects worked once they were underway and any lessons learned. Watershed groups need support to facilitate discussions of technical information with municipalities. Partners that provide technical information like maps and data may not have the skills for convening and facilitating, but this could be a role for Hudson River Watershed Alliance or other organizations.

Given turnover in watershed groups and municipalities, there is a need for regular education opportunities to share new and updated information and to bring new people up to speed. New terminology and jargon can be a barrier for grants and watershed projects. Watershed group

volunteers need more targeted and specific training opportunities; trainings could be beneficial for a variety of other audiences, including highway departments, wastewater and drinking water operators, municipal elected officials, and consulting engineers for municipalities.

Watershed groups expressed interest in the following specific topics for training:

- Climate change, state climate policies, and resilience
- Stormwater and MS4 education
- Stream restoration
- Invasive species management
- Legislative processes, regulations, and policy
- How to work with municipalities

Collaboration and Partnerships

“I’m always interested in partnering with other watershed groups to get big things done.”

- interview participant

“For me personally, it’s not a lack of motivation and desire to build partnerships, I really think it’s just time, capacity.”

- interview participant

“Being in the trenches on the political side, it appears to be very low down the totem pole of things to do and too low for what’s actually going on in the watershed, and I would like to see it move up higher.”

- focus group participant

“There are some local groups that are not willing to work with us, so there’s personal politics that occur.”

- interview participant

With limited capacity within the groups, partnerships are essential for watershed groups to meet their goals. Partnerships may be collaborations, as groups work directly with organizations, agencies, academic institutions, and municipalities.

Networks also contribute to partnerships, though less directly, by providing opportunities to learn from other watershed groups and overcome barriers. Networking with other watershed groups and partners helps people stay updated on who is doing what and opportunities to partner. It can also help watershed groups learn from each other’s experiences and expertise. This can be especially valuable when a new group is getting started. When watershed groups can learn from or collaborate with other groups, it helps make the most of limited time and resources. Networks provide access to information, resources, and potential partners.

Watershed groups are interested in sharing their expertise and lessons learned to help others. They need more opportunities and structure to allow this exchange of information. Examples of

specific topics that groups are interested in discussing include invasive species management, group organization, and problem-solving. Watershed groups are also interested in collaborating with other watershed groups for larger projects. This could include advocacy, water quality monitoring, communication and programming, and other regional projects.

A barrier to collaboration may be competition between watershed groups. Organizations are competing for limited grant funds, and there may be a tendency to one-up each other, rather than working together. Clearly defining collaborative projects could help overcome this issue.

In addition to networking with other watershed groups, there is value to connecting with other partners for potential collaborations. While regional entities can help make connections, it can be challenging for them to stay up-to-date with resources available and what the various groups are working on. It's also challenging for watershed groups to keep track of different agencies and potential partners, especially state agencies.

It can be a challenge for a watershed group to maintain its identity when partnering on projects. There may be conflicts in "ownership," communications, and recognition. There may be opportunities for watershed groups to develop less traditional partnerships by considering local priorities. To build effective community partnerships, watershed groups will need to show up and listen to other community concerns. There also may be other groups with shared interests, like sporting clubs.

Watershed groups are interested in collaborating with academic institutions on research and monitoring projects, especially when similar methods can be shared across the region. A barrier to this is knowing who is working on what. Focus group participants from academic institutions discussed the challenge of wanting to support watershed groups, but not having incentives within academia to do so. Both interview and focus group participants shared common challenges with working with students, such as longevity, leadership, experience level of students, and connecting with potential students.

County agencies can provide valuable support for watershed groups. However, some watershed groups do not get support from their county agencies, and that represents a challenge. Not all counties are used to collaborating outside of their jurisdiction, and they have limited resources, including staff and funding to support watershed groups or watershed-focused work in general. Some counties lack planning capacity, and the various departments within county government may not be coordinating well internally. Limited watershed group capacity and staff turnover are challenges for these partnerships.

Likewise, partnerships with municipalities pose challenges. One key barrier is a lack of capacity in watershed groups, including staff time to sit down with municipalities and better understand their needs. Several watershed groups expressed an interest in having municipalities come to them as a resource, even though this currently doesn't happen very often. Municipalities need to understand the value of being part of watershed groups and their networks, especially funding opportunities. Justifying the need for their participation may be a communication challenge.

Municipal staff may be limited in the work they can do outside of their municipal boundary to support the watershed. There may be opportunities for watershed groups to collaborate with municipal Conservation Advisory Councils, county-level Environmental Management Councils, and Climate Smart Community Task Forces on shared priorities. Municipalities may be biased against other municipalities within the watershed, and it can be challenging for a watershed group leader or organizer if they do not live within a particular community.

Elected and appointed officials come from all different backgrounds. There is no “mayor school,” and they need to learn on the job how to balance complicated municipal problems. There is a learning curve for watershed management, and a need for training. Many municipalities prioritize economic development, which could come at the expense of protecting watersheds. It can be challenging to convince municipalities to implement stream protections. There is also a tendency to pit conservation efforts against job creation, and frame them as anti-economic development. Turnover of municipal staff and elected officials creates long-term planning and relationship-building challenges for watershed groups.

Municipalities need to invest in infrastructure, especially where it is causing documented water quality problems and they are required to do so by regulatory programs. A potential role for watershed groups is to encourage municipal focus on key issues like infrastructure improvements. There needs to be political will in place to make these upgrades, or to take an innovative approach when necessary. Watershed groups are also interested in supporting municipalities with their priority projects, such as culvert assessments and right-sizing, but are not sure how to do so. Key variables in determining priorities for many infrastructure investments and available funding are water quality and watershed plans. In both cases, the state must recognize the data or plan, but in both cases, watershed groups can play foundational roles in helping municipalities ultimately receive funding for water infrastructure.

Watershed groups may not be aware of or engaged in other ongoing local issues, and this can result in a disconnect between municipalities and watershed groups. There is a lack of participation in local government overall, which also impacts watershed work. Watershed groups need to have a better understanding of how local government works – including its pace, jurisdictions, systems and the priorities of its participants – so they can develop a community of informed advocates for the watershed. There are limited resources currently available to explain these processes.

Municipalities may not feel comfortable with state or federal agencies making recommendations or telling them what to do, which is a particular challenge for watershed-based work that crosses municipal lines. There is a need to balance state support and programs with locally-driven priorities. Mistrust of regulatory agencies may prevent people from being open and participating with watershed groups. Some municipalities are concerned about being closely monitored by state agencies if they get grant funds or join a watershed group. Municipal officials have a very challenging role in navigating these complexities. Also, municipalities may not be comfortable with watershed groups representing them, or sharing data that may potentially be controversial.

Watershed groups play important roles in supporting connections within and between communities, though organizing multiple partners within a watershed group can be very challenging. There may be competition between organizations, or an emphasis on one aspect or user group over another. Even if other groups are working at the watershed scale, they may not be thinking comprehensively, and they could miss opportunities when resources are being devoted to only one specific topic. Watershed groups need a larger constituency to support watershed work, and need more people to be engaged. This can be a challenge when communities have other priorities, and where watershed-scale organizing is less familiar. Watershed groups may need to focus more on the social aspects of community-building and build these skills. Watershed groups also expressed the need to connect more effectively with farmers, school districts, land trusts, businesses, property-owners, and private homeowners. There are communication challenges related to working with each of these groups. Also, environmental issues have been increasingly politicized, which can also impact watershed work.

Watershed groups are also concerned about how to best engage people in environmental justice areas and traditionally under-represented communities. It can be challenging for watershed groups to build relationships within communities due to trauma, anger, and mistrust. Well-intentioned groups may not understand these complexities, and may come in with a savior mentality that can be harmful.

Regulations and Policy

“It goes back to, if you want to make change, I think you have to go all through levels of government to do that.”

- interview participant

Municipal boundaries and home rule present numerous challenges to watershed group effectiveness. Different laws in different municipalities can make it challenging to work across the watershed, and it’s hard for municipalities to think about governance at a watershed scale. It is difficult to manage even drinking water supplies outside of municipal boundaries, both surface water and groundwater. This can be a particular challenge when municipalities have socioeconomic differences. While the New York City Department of Environmental Protection has a unique ability to manage their drinking water supplies within the Hudson River watershed, it can also be challenging for watershed groups to work with them.

State regulations, policies, and enforcement challenges include:

- Home rule, which presents a fundamental challenge to planning, management at a watershed scale, while retaining implementation as a largely local function.
- NYS DEC stormwater regulations, including erosion and sediment control at construction sites, Stormwater Pollution Prevention Plans (SWPPPs) based on stormwater rate rather than volume, and a lack of enforcement at the state and local levels.
- A lack of oversight from NYS DEC to review State Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (SPDES) wastewater permits and failing infrastructure.
- Errors in regulatory maps related to stream and wetland classification.

- A lack of regulatory water quality standards for emerging contaminants, including PFAS chemicals.
- A lack of enforcement of environmental violations by municipalities, such as filling streams and wetlands, and MS4 and stormwater prevention violations.

Unclear jurisdictions pose additional complexities. It can be difficult to build collaborations when only a small part of a county or a town is within the watershed, but still subject to its regulations. It can also be challenging to understand which agencies and entities have jurisdiction over managing rivers and streams. Watershed groups were unclear where to go when there were problems, and found it difficult to find the right contacts within agencies to help.

Watershed groups are challenged by how to advocate for watershed needs. Group members expressed the need to have state-level decision-makers take watershed issues more seriously to move their goals forward. There is a need for lobbying and making sure their voices are heard. While some watershed groups are interested in advocacy, others have decided not to play this role. Individual watershed group members may not be able to engage in advocacy, especially if they are government employees. Watershed groups may not be sure of their best advocacy role. They need a better understanding of what advocacy means and how to be effective. It can be challenging to identify the right approach to advocacy, especially when agency or nonprofit partners can't or don't pay this role. Advocacy is also limited by funding from state grants.

Strengths

To better understand the strengths, assets, and accomplishments of watershed groups, we asked interview participants about their groups' strengths, defined as aspects of the group that enables it to achieve its goals. These strengths described here are all relevant for at least one group that participated in the project. They also highlight the potential for these strengths in other groups in the future.

During the interviews, watershed group members discussed many different aspects that helped strengthen their groups, including their members and partners, networks, technical skills, group organization, funding, and even their watershed conditions. Interview participants also discussed watershed group roles of communication, programs, and planning as strengths. Focus group participants focused more on the strengths of watershed group roles in the region, including advocacy, education, communication, inspiration, getting the work done, and sharing local knowledge.

Watershed Group Members, Staff, and Volunteers

“The quality of the people that we've attracted to the group. They really feel devoted to protecting and doing things to protect the stream.”

- interview participant

One of the most cited strengths of watershed groups are their people. Watershed groups pull together people with expertise and experience to work together on a common goal. Watershed group members include volunteers and professionals from a variety of backgrounds. In terms of skills, watershed group members bring expertise in a variety of fields: water resources, but also accounting, arts, and media, to name a few. Watershed group members also bring their networks to the group, which can be leveraged for additional support and opportunities.

Part of the value of the watershed group structure is bringing together passionate people with these diverse skill sets to work together on shared goals. Watershed group members highlighted the benefit of having these different people together to help learn from each other and help the group be well-rounded.

In addition to technical skills, this also includes volunteers and people from different communities with different strengths, which can also support intermunicipal sharing and coordination. Diverse skills that contribute to the strength of a watershed group include leadership, outreach and marketing, corporate work, organization and planning, community engagement, and strong communication.

While most watershed groups are volunteer-run, one key element of watershed group strength can be having a paid coordinator. Often a part-time role, or someone who is providing support as staff of a particular agency or organization, having someone in this role can help with accountability and covering key admin tasks. It also can help with legitimacy. Having a paid staff person or coordinator is a strength for the groups that have someone in this role. Having staff and administrative support can help watershed groups and municipalities overcome a barrier of limited capacity and provide consistency, which are strengths to keep the group together over time.

Many watershed group activities require volunteers, who may or may not be watershed group members. The ability of watershed groups to leverage volunteers to get larger projects done (water quality monitoring, clean ups, tree planting, etc.) is a strength.

Watershed Group Partners

“...[I]t brings together people from a geographic area who wouldn't probably otherwise talk the same way, certainly not in a group setting. And that can lead to other things... One thing that keeps people coming back, including notables who were elected and all, is that they get a chance to network with other people that they otherwise might not see or talk to.”

- focus group participant

“The academic connection is important, because you have to base what you're doing on science.”

- interview participant

People, agencies, and organizations that may not officially be watershed group members can contribute in a variety of meaningful ways through collaborative partnerships. Partnerships can help watershed groups connect with technical expertise, both science and policy. Staff from agencies and organizations that collaborate with watershed groups are often doing so because it relates to their own work. They often do not charge for their expertise and services.

Some watershed groups include municipalities as members, particularly the three active intermunicipal councils. The strength of this model is intermunicipal coordination on issues of shared concern, such as water departments collaborating and sharing information on existing challenges or emerging needs.

It has been a significant strength for watershed groups to have county support. County agencies help coordinate watershed groups through staff support, offer foundational support to get groups started, provide fiscal sponsorship, offer technical expertise, and help interface between intermunicipal projects. Elected officials can also provide key support to groups by elevating issues and advancing important policy decisions.

Watershed group members cited other types of partnerships as key strengths as well. Partnerships with academic institutions help with their foundation in science and legitimacy, and bring a variety of new perspectives to projects. Other types of successful partnerships include those with artists and nonprofits in other service areas.

Technical and Planning Capabilities

“That watershed management plan... has been one of our main guiding tools ever since. We tried to pull that out about this time of the year, as we are doing our planning for the year, to look at what parts we have accomplished, what are the next best steps, opportunities... you can see when you look at it that, oh, we've done a lot of work in this area, and going over here is something that we... haven't been quite as effective in.”

- interview participant

Watershed group members were confident about their technical strengths, whether they were “in-house” or they had direct access to professionals with specific skill sets. Some technical strengths they mentioned included access to information, ability to look at sites and issues from different perspectives and scales, and the ability to create baseline datasets and site-specific maps.

Interview participants noted several interesting points about their technical strengths, such as the importance of using science to validate the efforts of volunteers, the critical need for science to be relatable to the community and what they care about, and the need for direct pathways for their science to be used for advocacy work and local decision-making.

Some groups are strong in planning, either on their own or in partnership with agencies and organizations. Several have plans that guide or support their work, and groups have found that

planning brings people together. Developing a list of priorities for the watershed is good for the group itself, but also helpful for communication with others. Even watershed management plans that were created in the past or are now outdated can provide information to help guide work, in addition to providing a baseline of past data.

Programs and Communication

“We have been able to make contact with legislators in the past in order to achieve goals and keep the lines of communication open so that they can begin – at the county and state level – to implement solutions for problems that we are having. Which I think has been good, and improving over time.”

- interview participant

A key strength of watershed groups is raising awareness and bringing attention to watershed issues. Watershed group members are equipped with information and able to communicate about the watershed and its issues. Groups use a variety of communication pathways and mechanisms, including social media, tabling at community events, word of mouth, branding/identity, direct outreach to municipal staff and elected officials, and trying to be as inclusive as possible during meetings.

Watershed groups are very proud of their successful programs. Watershed groups provide a variety of programming, including regular meetings, lectures, conferences, outdoor excursions like hikes or walks, and more. These events and programs help raise the watershed group reputation, educate residents, and reach and engage new people. Program successes range from fully subscribed small events to 700 people turning out for a community event.

Organizational Status and Funding

“For a long time, people were trying to organize in [our] watershed and weren’t getting to it. And we finally just buckled down around a table and said, this is important. We need to do this. This is how New York State is going. Everyone’s got a watershed coalition. If we’re going to get anything or do anything, we can’t just be our own little islands anymore. We need to organize. And it’s tough to organize... it’s tough to become a 501(c)(3). There’s a lot of paperwork that goes along with that. I think that one of our greatest accomplishments is in a short span of time... We went from absolutely nothing, to kind of legit.”

- interview participant

Watershed group members cited specific organizational characteristics that they felt contributed to their strength. These include obtaining 501(c)(3) status, legitimacy, and the ability to withstand transitions. Watershed groups provide access to funding and other resources, which in some cases would not be available to municipalities working individually. Watershed groups have been able to help municipalities leverage funding for their own projects. A watershed group

member cited county support as important for supporting intermunicipal coordination, including projects of the watershed group.

Watershed Groups Accomplishments

“A lot of people don't want to call attention to problems in their community, for one reason or another. And watershed groups often are the ones to say hey, there's a real problem here.”

- focus group participant

When asked about their watershed group's accomplishments, participants described successes related to the watershed in some manner, as well as organizational and other types of successes. Not surprisingly, responses ranged from infrastructure and water quality-related accomplishments to their abilities to connect with partners and work with the community at all levels. This theme highlights the importance of watershed groups' abilities to cross multiple types of boundaries to achieve important outcomes. The accomplishments listed below are specific items noted by interview participants and focus groups of regional partners, loosely categorized into four groups of accomplishments, though of course overlap exists: water quality and infrastructure, education and awareness, impacts they have as small organizations, and relationships and legitimacy. Some of these accomplishments represent ongoing activities, as well. For more details on watershed group accomplishments, see Hudson River Watershed Alliance's [Work on Watersheds](#) report.

Water Quality and Infrastructure

- Implemented Trees for Tribes projects
- Advocated for reservoir releases
- Worked on FEMA hazmat project
- Established use of source water protection scorecard
- Increased protected land, now being managed by the group or by like-minded partners
- Installed green infrastructure
- Collected water quality samples and other data
- Secured designation as an inland waterway
- Contributed to floodplain forest restoration project
- Finished watershed plan
- Completed flood mitigation projects
- Identified and dealt with illegal sewage/piping
- Improved legal river access

Education and Awareness

- Brought attention to issues
- Provided information to the public
- Gathered information and ideas from the community
- Proved that we have good, not compromised, water quality

- Released “Notes from a Watershed” Blog and related Mohawk Symposium papers
- Made brochures, websites, other information available
- Brought new ideas to light via strategic planning
- Participated in community collaboratives
- Brought small streams out of “anonymity”
- Worked with youth and middle school students
- Worked with college students, some of which later became colleagues
- Used “openings” like recreation to talk about water quality

Having an Impact as a Small Organization

- Worked across municipal/other boundaries
- Used watershed as basis for work, not political boundaries
- Saw good turnout at meetings and events
- Served as a “voice”
- Built a new facility
- Public paying attention to watershed group
- Raised money or dues as indicator of success and growth
- Saw impact after completing watershed plan

Relationships and Legitimacy

- Built trust with government officials
- Built relationship with US Environmental Protection Agency
- Undertook successful convening role
- Supported or created community connections
- Expanded capacity of other partners
- Created restoration advisory committee
- Built relationships for complex implementation projects

Opportunities

With their slightly different perspectives on watershed groups, focus group participants provided different insights about the roles and opportunities that watershed groups currently have, or could have in the future. They suggest that watershed groups have growth potential in the following areas:

- Connecting with other groups with similar or overlapping interests to increase impact (e.g., sporting clubs or housing advocates)
- Providing watershed group volunteer time as “match” on federal or state grants
- Intentionally building community and public participation opportunities in projects
- Providing students to work on community projects
- Coordinating with academic partners for technical assistance (e.g., water sampling)
- Becoming stronger political players or advocates for critical issues
- Providing feedback on local issues to decision-makers

- Helping New York State meet its climate action goals by connecting with land conservation organizations to protect wetlands, lands along streams, etc.
- Identifying and prioritizing projects for municipal or county implementation
- Providing training on specific topics and coordinating educational programs
- Convening meetings that are inclusive of both the public and government staff on a regular basis so that people begin to know and trust each other
- Developing relationships with, and clarifying roles, with municipal CACs

Opportunities for Hudson River Watershed Alliance

“They're all working individually, but that they're working together, they all have a common theme and they're working on the same things and reaching out... And I think helping make those connections is really what makes strong collaboration. So even though there are small watershed groups, they realize that they're not working alone.”

- focus group participant

Interview and focus group participants also mentioned some specific opportunities for the Hudson River Watershed Alliance. Focus group participants discussed serving as a collective voice, advocating for watershed concerns at the state level, and presenting to elected officials on regional matters. They also shared ideas for the Hudson River Watershed Alliance to enhance their technical and administrative support to watershed groups, such as assisting with grant-writing and funding source navigation, providing a centralized communication platform, supporting webpages for individual groups, and helping watershed groups articulate their goals, plans, and next steps.

One interview participant spoke to the need for a program very similar to the Hudson River Watershed Alliance’s Watershed Roundtables, but did not seem aware that this program already existed. Other interview participants spoke to the need for a better understanding of what other groups are doing. The Watershed Roundtables may benefit from being improved or restructured to better meet this need. Another interview participant felt that they got much more out of the Hudson River Watershed Alliance meetings that were small enough for people to really talk to and learn from each other. They highlighted the important role that the Hudson River Watershed Alliance plays in information-sharing, and the need for more of it. One example is a better understanding of what academic partners are working on, to identify win-win partnerships.

Conclusion

The watershed needs assessment project highlighted the many strengths of watershed groups and their partners, and clarified numerous barriers and needs that watershed groups face. Addressing these challenges will undoubtedly support these groups in providing even greater value to their communities and watersheds.

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