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Why Engage in Environmental Stewardship? Volunteer Participation in the Maryland Watershed Stewards Academies

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Abstract

This paper studies participation in local environmental stewardship as a countertrend to reports of decreasing civic engagement in the United States. Using data collected from participants in the Watershed Stewards Academies (WSAs) of Maryland, we assess how these organizations are successful in mobilizing individuals to be environmentally and civically engaged in their communities. The WSA training programs appeal to citizens who are either already civically engaged or who wish to be more involved in their communities. Participation in the WSAs offers volunteer stewards what a "paper-membership" cannot: the chance to lead their own environmental restoration projects, create tangible change in their communities, and network with other like-minded individuals. Although most participants in these programs find their efforts and those of the WSAs to be worthwhile, they did note several challenges to the ongoing success of the training programs and their corps of volunteers.

Executive Summary

Why are some individuals motivated to join the Watershed Stewards Academies (WSAs)? How do volunteers learn of the WSAs and what opportunities do the WSAs provide for their participants? What do volunteers see as the major challenges to their environmental restoration work?

This paper focuses on the WSAs in Maryland to understand how environmental restoration groups successfully attract individuals to participate in their training and education programs. Drawing on interview data collected from participants of the Anne Arundel County, Howard County and National Capital Region WSAs, this paper presents findings about individual motivation to join the WSAs, the channels through which participants learned of the WSAs, and the challenges WSA participants identified with regard to the efficacy and sustainability of these training programs and the environmental restoration work carried out by their volunteers.

Most volunteers learned of the WSAs through other environmental organizations in which they were already involved, while fewer learned of the programs from neighbors and friends. Many respondents reported that they became involved with the WSAs because they wanted to make a tangible difference in their communities, lead environmental restoration projects, learn more about watershed issues, serve as resources to their neighbors, and network with people in their respective communities. The volunteers we interviewed believed that the WSA model was an effective means of alleviating problems in their watersheds, and that those problems were best addressed through community outreach. At the same time, most volunteers agreed that competition for limited funding, an unstable political climate, and lack of organizational visibility may undermine the work of stewards and the WSAs.

About the Study

Introduction

Although some works have highlighted the active democracy and civically engaged citizenry of the United States, (see particularly Toccqueville 1966; See also Almond and Verba 1963; Wuthnow 1991; Ladd 1999), recent research on civic engagement has sounded the alarm for decreasing rates of political activity, a trend that seems to grow as each new generation of Americans comes of voting age (see McPherson et al. 2006 for a more in-depth discussion of social isolation in the US). In Putnam's words: "Americans today feel vaguely and uncomfortably disconnected" (2000: 402; see also Bellah et al. 1996; Putnam 1995; Sander and Putnam 2010). Related research that focuses on various aspects of the political system, such as voting behavior (e.g. Piven and Cloward 2000; Eisner 2004; but see McDonald and Popkin 2001), social capital, political trust, volunteering and participation more broadly defined (e.g. Almond and Verba 1963; Putnam 1995, 2000; Eliasoph 1998; see also Smith 1994) has also affirmed these sweeping conclusions. These arguments are connected to the professionalization of social movement organizations (e.g. Staggenborg 1998), a consequence of which has been that many national organizations are perceived to have lost touch with local level civics (Skocpol 2003).

However, a number of scholars offer conflicting views of civic engagement (e.g. Boyte and Kari 1996; Skocpol 1996, 2003; Weir and Ganz 1997; Paxton 1999; Rotolo 1999; Skocpol and Fiorina 1999; Eckstein 2001; Wuthnow 2004; Sampson et al. 2005), which tend to center around ways that Americans *are* civically engaged. For example, Wuthnow argues that "individualism does not necessarily contradict holding altruistic values and engaging in a wide variety of caring and community-service activities" (1991: 23; see also 1998) by demonstrating that self-fulfillment may be the goal of otherwise

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disconnected individuals becoming civically engaged (Lichterman 1995, 1996; Westphal 2003; see also McCarthy 1987; Jasper and Poulsen 1995). Furthermore, according to Lichterman, the individual's "personalized form of political commitment underlies significant portions of numerous recent grassroots movements in the US" (1996: 5). This finding is in contrast to the loss of the federated structure Skocpol (2003) observes, wherein many national organizations can only offer a "paper" membership and provide few, if any, opportunities for hands-on engagement or direct participation at the local level. In fact, Putnam himself discusses environmental groups as an example of what he calls "countertrends" to his observations of America's declining social capital (1995, 2000). More recent work on environmental stewardship has begun to unpack this countertrend (see particularly Fisher et al. 2015; Krasny and Tidball 2015). In their book about the environmental stewards who participated in the MillionTrees NYC initiative, Fisher and her colleagues find that when volunteers engage in environmental stewardship they are also more likely to engage in other civic and political activities (Fisher et al. 2015).

This paper builds this literature to explore the opportunities that engagement in environmental activities affords volunteers. Focusing on the Watershed Stewards Academies of Maryland (WSA), we draw on data collected through surveys and open-ended semi-structured interviews with WSA participants to demonstrate how these organizations are successfully mobilizing individuals to be civically engaged in their communities. As part of a national trend, organizations such as the WSAs market themselves to potential volunteers as providing opportunities to learn more, become engaged in the local community, network, and "make a difference." In the pages that

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follow, we present a literature review that summarizes dominant trends in the study of civic engagement, focusing on environmental movements and stewardship.

Literature Review

As has been previously noted, the environmental movement is one of the cases Putnam (2000) defines as a "countertrend" to declining democratic participation in which individuals *are* becoming more civically engaged. In his well known work, Putnam demonstrates this finding by presenting data on individuals in paid positions with national organizations (see particularly Putnam 2000: chapter 9; see also Berry 1999). Numerous other studies also highlight similar findings, where Americans are becoming more civically engaged in environmental stewardship at the local level (see particularly Weber 2000; Sirianni and Friedland 2001: chapter 3; Fisher et al. 2015; Horton 2004; Portney 2005; Portney and Berry 2010).

Based on Fisher and her colleagues' previous work, we define environmental stewardship as the act of "conserving, managing, monitoring, advocating for, and educating local people about a wide range of quality-of-life issues related to public and private resources in their local areas" (2012: 27). Participation in environmental stewardship activities has been linked to increased levels of civic participation. Examining citizens in New York City, researchers found many volunteer tree planters throughout New York City, and compared with the national average, those tree planters were statistically more likely to participate in a range of civic and environmental activities (for a full discussion, see Fisher et al. 2015). Follow-up interviews with the volunteer tree planters showed that environmental stewardship served as a gateway to

other forms of civic engagement (Fisher et al. 2015).

The research on environmental participation through environmental stewardship is inherently linked to the research that has looked at the ways that local environmental groups work to understand more about community based environmental efforts (Andrews and Edwards 2005; Andrews et al. 2010; Fisher et al. 2012). Coming from this perspective, Andrews and his colleagues study local chapters of the Sierra Club to determine the effectiveness of civic associations in engaging citizens (2010). Their article develops a multidimensional framework that measures the involvement of core activists, the degree to which leaders work interdependently, and the degree to which organizational activities are aimed at increasing leadership and program capacity to assess the effectiveness of these groups (Andrews et al. 2010). Through this framework, the authors are able to explain effectiveness as defined by groups' ability to gain public recognition, develop current and future leadership capacity, and recruit and maintain an active membership base. The study concludes that much of the variation in the effectiveness of these local groups can be explained by "the capacity that organizational leaders can develop to make the most of resources and opportunities" available to them (2010: 1228).

At the same time, a relatively disconnected literature has emerged that focuses on the effectiveness of these types of organizations in terms of achieving specific environmental goals. Romolini and her colleagues look specifically at the relationship between the density of stewardship organizations and tree canopy, finding that for each additional stewardship group present in a given Baltimore neighborhood, tree canopy increased by 1.6 percent (Romolini et al. 2013). Similarly, in their work on the

relationship between vegetative cover and stewardship in New York City, Locke and colleagues find what they call "greening neighborhoods"—or neighborhoods that increased their vegetative cover from 2000-2010—tend to have a greater number of stewardship groups (Locke et al. 2014). In other words, this limited research provides some support to the notion that the presence of stewardship organizations is associated with positive change to the local environment. Nonetheless, studies have yet to look more deeply into the relationship between these local environmental groups and their specific environmental goals. Moreover, research is needed to integrate these different perspectives on the effectiveness of civic environmental groups.

This paper integrates the research on environmental stewardship as a counter-trend to the civic isolation of Americans and the social and environmental benefits of local environmental groups to dig deeper into understanding how environmental stewardship matters to the citizens who engage in it. More broadly, we argue that participation in environmental stewardship activities is helping to diversify democracy by rooting citizens to their localities in meaningful ways. In the sections that follow, we present our case of the Watershed Stewardship Academies in Maryland and then present our findings from our survey and interview with participants and leaders in these groups.

Case Selection

The Watershed Stewards Academies (WSAs) in Maryland provide an ideal case for exploring the relationship between environmental participation and civic engagement. These programs are a part of a national effort to recruit and train individuals to take care of their local environments. These efforts, which span a range of environmental issues,

are based on the "master gardener" model developed by Washington State University in the 1970s[1]. They provide in-depth training courses for adult volunteers and certification in specific forms of environmental stewardship. For example, "citizen pruners" are trained to care for the urban forest in New York City,[2] "weed warriors" are certified in the removal of invasive species from parks and public areas in Baltimore and Montgomery County, Maryland,[3] and "citizen foresters" in Washington, DC lead tree plantings and care for trees across the city.[4] Beyond the widespread master gardener programs, watershed restoration and preservation are the most common environmental topics addressed by this type of stewardship group. There are approximately 30 such programs dedicated to watershed-specific issues in the United States. *Figure 1,* below*,* presents a map of these programs.[5]

Figure 1: Established Watershed Programs in the United States

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[1] http://mastergardener.wsu.edu/wp-
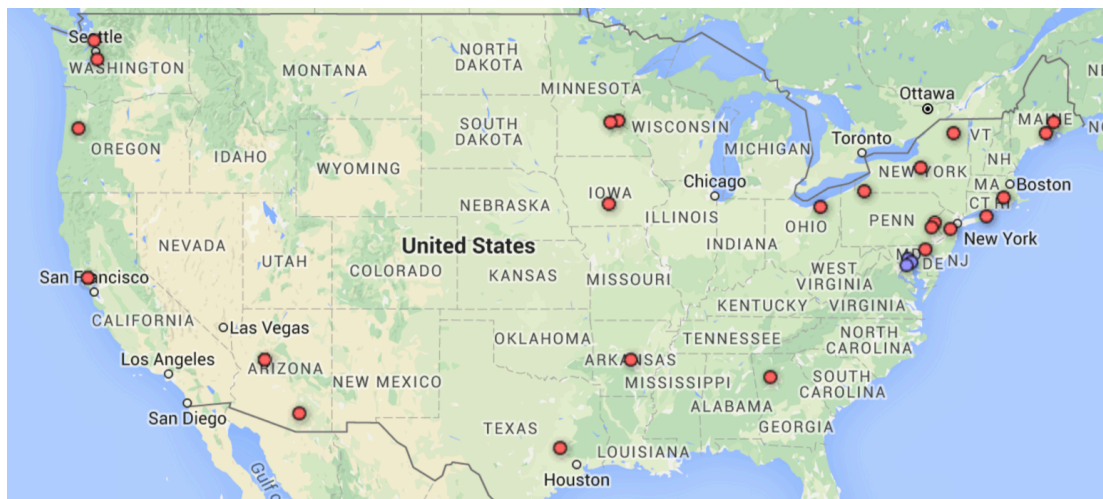
[2] http://www.treesny.org/citizenpruner, accessed December 14, 2015.

[3] http://www.montgomeryparks.org/PPSD/Natural_Resources_Stewardship/Veg_Management/weed_warriors/, accessed December 14, 2015.

[4] http://caseytrees.org/get-involved/cforester/, accessed December 14, 2015.

[5] Map is based on a web search using the terms watershed stewards academy" "watershed stewards program" "watershed stewards project" "watershed stewards" "master watershed stewards" and "watershed stewards training." Programs listed are those providing in-person training and certification for adult volunteers on watershed-related issues and restoration/preservation techniques.

In the case of the Watershed Stewards Academies (WSAs) in Maryland, local citizens are trained to become master watershed stewards, to assess their watersheds, educate their local communities about watersheds, and contribute to the overall reduction of pollutants in the Chesapeake watershed.[6] The WSA program is structured as a training program for local residents and involves an intensive series of courses for master watershed certification. Participants complete a course over several months that culminates in a capstone project where individuals go out into their communities to organize their own projects aimed at achieving positive environmental change. The training provided by the WSAs supports individual stewards to become local leaders and encourages them to recognize their local communities' specific needs and capabilities and to tailor their conservation efforts to meet those needs. Although measuring the environmental effectiveness of the WSAs is beyond the scope of this paper, it is worth noting that research on the actual environmental outcomes of the WSA program is limited (see Close et al. 2015 for details).

This study focuses on the three WSAs programs in the state of Maryland that had graduated at least one cohort of "Master Watershed Stewards" by 2014.[7] The WSAs were established through partnerships between non-profit organizations and public agencies and funded through grants offered by municipal governments, state agencies, and private foundations. The first WSA in the area was established in Anne Arundel County in late 2008 through a partnership between the Arlington Echo Outdoor Education Program of Anne Arundel Public Schools and the Anne Arundel County

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[6] For more details on the WSA model, see www.aawsa.org (accessed 4 January 2016).
[7] Cecil County, Maryland recently began a new WSA, but their first cohort of stewards had not completed the training by the time this research was initiated (http://www.ccgov.org/news/mcsorley.cfm accessed 19 February 2015).

Department of Public Works. Second, the National Capital Region WSA, which crosses into the District of Columbia from Maryland, was founded in 2011 through a partnership between the District of Columbia Department of the Environment, the Anacostia Watershed Society (a non-governmental organization), and a coalition of watershed protection groups in the Potomac, Rock Creek, Anacostia, and East Patuxent watersheds[8]. The third WSA in Maryland, which is based in Howard County, was started in 2012 with a grant from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation and funding from Howard County itelf. The stewardship regions of the three WSAs studied in this project are pictured below in *Figure 2*.

Figure 2: Established WSA Programs in Maryland

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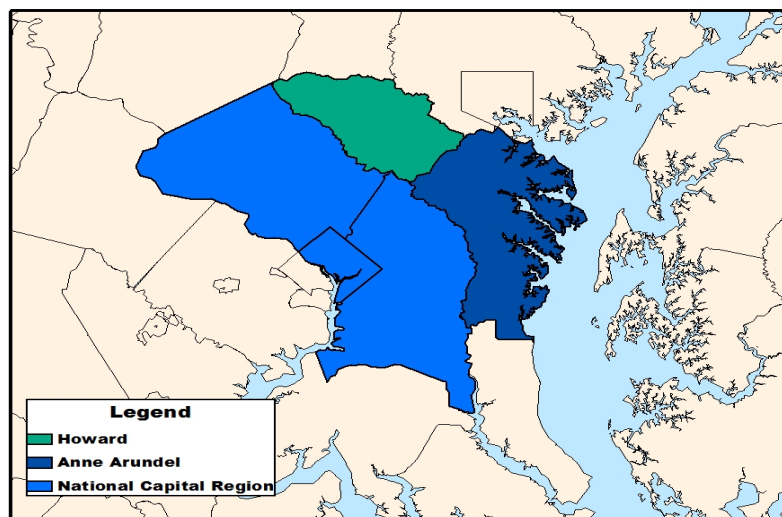
[8] The National Capital Region WSA is based in Maryland, but also serves watersheds within the boundaries of Washington, DC. For more information, see http://www.anacostiaws.org/programs/education/watershed-stewards-academy (Accessed 4 January 2016).

Methods

This study employs two approaches to understanding the engagement and mobilization of

participants in the WSAs. First, WSA participants were surveyed during the summer and

fall of 2014. The survey was distributed to all WSA participants: any person who had

participated in the WSAs in any capacity—as a master steward, board member, staff, or

someone who attempted but did not finish the training, and for whom contact information

was available through the WSA leadership—was contacted to take the survey.[9]

Following the online survey, those WSA participants who indicated their willingness to

be interviewed at the time of the survey were asked to participate in follow-up

interviews.[10] Interviews were conducted during the summer and fall of 2015. Each stage

of data collection is described in more detail below.

Online Survey

The first stage of this research (detailed in the first whitepaper from the project, available

on the Program for Society and the Environment website[11]) draws from an online survey,

which is based on a survey instrument designed to study volunteer environmental

stewards by Fisher and colleagues (Fisher et al. 2015). The instrument was modified to

address the WSAs' focus on watershed stewardship, and was designed to be brief and

non-invasive. The survey focused on three topics: basic demographics, civic and

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[9] Survey data were collected in accordance with the Institutional Review Board requirements of the University of Maryland (protocol #598272-1).

[10] Interview data were collected in accordance with the Institutional Review Board requirements of the University of Maryland (protocol #598272-2).

[11] Fisher, Dana R., William Yagatich, and Anya M. Galli. 2015 "Who Engages in Environmental Stewardship? Participation in the Maryland Watershed Stewards Academies."
http://www.cse.umd.edu/uploads/1/7/9/4/17940149/fisher_etal._wsa_whitepaper.pdf

environmental stewardship activities outside and as part of the WSAs, and respondents'

social networks. An open response question asked about participants' motivation in

joining the WSAs.

The survey was distributed to each WSA participant via a personal email link

using the email addresses supplied by the leaders of each WSA. WSA leaders also made

announcements to members of their groups to encourage participation in the survey.

WSA leaders also sent reminder emails to their organization mailing lists to encourage

participation. The sampling frame is composed of a total of 274 WSA participants from

all three WSAs. In total, 154 surveys were completed, achieving a response rate of

56.2%. Table 1 presents the distribution of responses across the different WSAs in

Maryland. The results of the survey were aggregated into a single dataset. The dataset

was analyzed using Microsoft *Excel* 2013, PASW Statistics 19 (SPSS) statistical

software, and Google fusion table GIS software to produce results.[12] In addition, NVivo

11 was used to code the open-ended responses of WSA participants to contribute to the

qualitative focus of the analysis, which is drawn from the second round of data collection

discussed below.

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[12] Based on preliminary analysis of the data, the results from the three separate WSAs are consistent and the findings can be presented in aggregate form. Tests for the analysis of variance were not found to be statistically significant and/or did not meet the assumptions of the test and any conclusions drawn from them would not be valid. Therefore, we find that the best means of presentation for these data are in aggregate form. In addition, in some cases, we also compare responses across the WSA.

Table 1: Survey sample, responses, and response rate by WSA

WSA	Valid emails provided as contact information	Surveys Completed	Response Rate by WSA
Anne Arundel	153	90	58.8%
Howard County	21	15	71.4%
North Capital	100	49	49.0%
Total	274	154	56.2%

In-Depth Interviews

To understand the experiences of WSA participants more fully, we conducted open-ended semi-structured interviews with survey respondents who indicated they would be willing to be interviewed by the research team at a later date. Of the 174 respondents who completed the initial survey, 91 respondents, or 52%, indicated they would be willing to participate in a follow-up interview. In total, we interviewed 22 randomly selected respondents who had participated in the WSA training to learn more about respondents' experiences with the WSAs.[13] The overall response rate of 43.1% for all interview respondents was somewhat reduced by the inability to contact WSA participants who had not completed the training at the time of the survey. Table 2 presents the distribution of participants in the interview component of the study in terms of their levels of training in the WSAs program.

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[13] Initially the sampling design was structured to oversample respondents that had not completed the training and those that were still participating in the WSA coursework due to the disproportionate numbers of respondents in those categories compared with those who have finished the training. The reasoning for this stratified random sampling was to help achieve a proportionate representation of perspectives from respondents at different stages in the WSA training. Due to the lack of responses from those that did not finish the training, sampling continued until theoretical saturation was found among respondents.

Table 2: Interview sample, responses, and response rate by level of training

Level of Training	Requests for Interviews	Interviews Completed	Completion Rate by Training
Completed	24	10	41.7%
Currently Enrolled	19	10	52.6%
Did Not Finish	8	2	25.0%
Total	51	22	43.1%

The interview instrument was developed utilizing sensitizing concepts (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin 1990) based on the findings of the initial survey and the literature reviewed above. The interviews focused on how participants became involved with the WSAs, why they decided to participate and what they hoped to achieve by completing the training. Interviews were conducted until a point of theoretical saturation (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Kuzel 1999) was met, with dominant themes among the interviews emerging during analysis. The interviews were transcribed and then analyzed according to a coding scheme based on the sensitizing concepts and the emergence of inductive themes, using the software program NVivo 11. The findings presented here have been anonymized, and the names of interview respondents are replaced with pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality.

Findings

Based on the initial survey and detailed in the previous whitepaper from this study[14], the authors found WSA participants to be predominantly white, female, of late career and retirement age, well educated, very civically engaged, and more politically liberal than the average American citizen. While it was not discussed previously, the initial survey

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[14] Fisher, Yagatich, and Galli 2015.

indicated WSA participants were motivated to commit to the training program given

concerns about the environment and participants' aspirations to act on those concerns

about the environment. At the end of the survey, we asked respondents to write an open-

ended response to the questions, "Briefly, why did you join the Watershed Stewards

Academy? What motivated you to participate?" Coding these responses produced

several dominant themes: 1) wanting to work toward ameliorating environmental

problems, 2) wishing to know more about the watershed and how to help, 3) wanting to

be more involved in the local community, 4) wanting to network with others, and 5)

seeking to improve an aspect of their own career or help their professional development.

First and foremost, WSA participants wanted to take an active role in working as a

steward of the environment. As one WSA participant described in their survey response:

> I've been interested in environmental issues since high school and feel that
> working small scale, on a sub-watershed basis, may ultimately be more
> effective in reversing the decline of the Bay and its [tributaries] than all
> the government programs that are so slow to evolve. I love working
> outside with plants and was impressed with the commitment and goals of
> the WSA, so I decided to join so that I could work under the umbrella of
> that organization.

As this respondent notes, the appeal of the WSA is two-fold, in that participants see this

program as a means of countering what they perceive as lack of a timely response from

state-led efforts, as well as an avenue for making a direct impact on their local

environment.

More than half of the survey respondents (55%) indicated that getting involved in

hands-on environmental stewardship was their primary motivation for joining their WSA.

The desire to learn more about watershed-related topics was a motivation for slightly

more than one third of all respondents (36.5%). A little more than one quarter of

respondents (27.0%) indicated that they were motivated by being more involved in their local community. Only slightly more than a tenth of respondents (12.4%) indicated they wanted to network with other individuals and professionals or improve their career prospects.

When asked about their reasons for joining the WSAs, most respondents wrote something similar to, "The joy and fulfillment of volunteering for a meaningful cause, and to make a difference," or "Interest in a socially stimulating, environmental volunteer option with which to transition into an active retirement." However, one respondent's blunt response stood out among these responses: "I seek out opportunities to be active and not just contribute money." This statement about volunteering for the WSA as being an "active" form of participation piqued our interest in how the WSAs and other groups may be serving a special role in engaging environmental stewards who "want to make a difference." As we will discuss in more detail below, the follow-up interviews confirm that these participants were not satisfied with a general membership and wished to take a more hands-on, active role in their respective communities. The sample of those who participated in follow-up interviews is very similar to the larger sample of stewards who participated in the initial survey. *Table 3* details the demographic characteristics of the interview sample.

Table 3: Characteristics of WSA Participants in Follow-Up Interview Sample

		Means
Gender	*Male*	45.5%
	Female	54.5%
Level of Education	*Some College/University*	18.2%
	College/University	27.3%
	Graduate or	54.5%
Race	*White*	95.5%
	Non-White	4.5%
WSA Affiliation	*Anne Arundel*	54.5%
	National Capital Region	31.8%
	Howard	13.6%
Age		54.5

In the following, we detail the findings of follow-up interviews with participants of the WSAs in Maryland. Beginning with how participants learned of the WSAs, we describe how networks of environmental organizations feed into the recruiting of stewards for the WSAs. Then, we move to describing why participants join the WSAs and dedicate a great deal of time to becoming master stewards. In addition, we describe what many participants see as the role of WSA leaders for stewards and the programs alike. Last, we conclude our review of the follow-up interview data by highlighting the challenges respondents reported when discussing their work with the WSAs and the future of the WSA programs more broadly.

Learning of the WSAs

Most participants learned of the WSAs through other organizations, and, more specifically, through organizations with an environmental focus. Typically, participants

were exposed to the WSAs through listservs, mass email lists, which were distributed to the organizations where they were a member. They also learned of the WSAs through local newspapers, from neighbors, and friends but not nearly in the same numbers. According to the initial survey, most participants learned of the WSAs through other organizations, yet it was not clear what sorts of organizations were responsible for the WSAs' exposure. The follow-up interviews suggest that the majority of participants learned of the WSAs through organizations focused on environmental issues, followed by faith-based organizations.

To shed light on how stewards came to learn of the WSAs, we began with asking, "How did you become involved with the WSAs?" From there, we continued with additional questions until it was clear how participants learned of their WSA programs. As one steward, who was active with another organization that focuses on the health of a local river, put it, "[T]here were conversations about the watershed stewards at some of our meetings, and I'm pretty sure I heard about it through that venue and then seen some of the emails come through the listserv and checked it out." Although this is rather typical of most participants that we interviewed, some respondents did learn of the WSAs through more traditional outlets, such as newspaper advertisements. Yet, nearly in equal numbers, people also learned of the WSAs from their friends and neighbors, suggesting that learning of the WSAs comes through social networks that are most likely endogenous. In other words, the WSAs are more likely to recruit people who may already share some form of social connection or those from very similar backgrounds.

Motivations for Participating

As the initial survey demonstrated, some WSA participants were very specific as to what they saw as their role, while others were much more general in terms of just wanting to be involved. In the interviews, WSA participants expressed their concerns about the environment in a variety of ways. Some were more personal than others. For the majority of respondents who participated in the follow-up interviews, issues with the quality of water and the environment in general were reason enough to participate in the WSAs. As one respondent described simply, their goal for joining the WSA was "To try and make a small difference in the polluted Chesapeake Bay and River." As another respondent echoed, "My goal was to learn what I could do to help improve this environment and be able to implement it." Consistent with the mission of the WSAs, the promise of education and training in hands-on environmental stewardship and community education was the primary appeal of these organizations.

In many cases, WSA participants indicated that they wanted to make a difference but were not aware of what they could do to effect environmental change in their communities. For example, Maureen, a woman in her early fifties who joined Anne Arundel County's WSA, recounted being very frustrated after one particular summer when the recreational waterfront in her community was closed for use several times over the summer due to high levels of bacteria. When she saw an advertisement for the WSA, and decided to enroll: "Initially I wanted to understand what was happening and if there was any way that I could help. I doubted if I could do anything or contribute anything valuable, so my goal was to learn and then to put any of what I learned to use." Often,

respondents described recognizing problems with the watershed in their communities, but not being sure what their options were to address those problems.

Lynn, a participant of the National Capital Region's WSA, attended the training course in 2012. Familiar with project management as part of her work in the non-profit sector, she became involved because, in her words,

> I definitely wanted to know a lot more…I knew there were concerns about managing water in the DC area and making sure that the rivers get cleaner and that we keep pouring all our water down storm drains and we try to manage those issues, so I thought it would be great to know some of the specifics and some tools so that instead of just worrying about it, you could do something about it.

Thus, the WSA platforms fulfilled a need for training and educational resources to provide concerned citizens with paths for action. Many stewards hoped that becoming more knowledgeable would allow them to be more involved in their communities and provide them with tools to engage their neighbors in environmental stewardship practices.

Ben, a member of the National Capital Region WSA, was adamant about becoming involved in his community. When speaking of why he wanted to be involved with the WSAs, he said, "Number was one was just to get involved at this level, at the ground level, and get a project under way that I could get my hands dirty with, and in my location, a location near where I live, I could see it and manage it and get others involved. It was primarily about another way to get involved in the community." Here, Ben is describing another goal that was common among interview respondents: many WSA participants saw the programs as an opportunity to lead by example and engage their communities through projects in their own neighborhoods. Thus, interview respondents understood that the WSA model presented an opportunity to engage their neighbors and

respective communities through the projects they undertook as part of the Master

Watershed Stewards training.

Maureen, who we discussed above, began her work with the WSA to learn more

about what she could possibly do to ameliorate the bacteria levels in the water near her

home. As she went through the training, not only did she feel empowered to take action

on her own, she transitioned to working as a community educator. She said that after the

training she was able to serve as a resource to her neighbors:

> I like to think that I'm making big strides. I know that change is slow and
> the damage is enormous. But more than the activities that we do, like the
> capstone projects to clean, just the knowledge that is transferred to me,
> and from me to my neighbors is significant, more than I would have ever
> thought possible because at least in my neighborhood, everyone takes
> pride in our marina and the waterfront and say "hey, you know if you put a
> rain barrel there to collect all of that nasty water coming off of your roof it
> would keep it from going into the bay," and they're on it. I know that it is
> unusual, I don't think other neighborhoods are quite as receptive, but … I
> think that that the role of the Master Watershed Steward is growing.

Maureen was certainly not alone when it came to expressing the notion that the role of a

master watershed steward empowers stewards to not only lead projects, but to lead their

communities in environmental stewardship practices, both through outreach and by

example.

Mark, who completed the MWS training at Anne Arundel County's WSA

immediately after retiring, was adamant about his ability to speak with members of his

community. According to Mark, the opportunity to learn about "…rain gardens, how

they work, how to install them" led him to being able to engage with his neighbors. As

part of the final project Mark completed for his Master Watershed Steward certification,

he worked with other stewards from the program to install rain gardens to catch water

running off of the roof of his home:

> … the primary reason why [we installed] this project here at my house is because everybody in my neighborhood walks by my house. If I'm outside, people will stop and talk to me, and I particularly got a chance to talk to quite a number of people when we were constructing the rain gardens. We dug them over a period of about a week before we actually planted them, so I got to engage a lot of my community that way.

By participating in this project, Mark felt that he could become a leader, someone with some credentials who could help other homeowners in his community to take on similar projects. As he said, he "just saw something that an average homeowner could do to help reduce storm water runoff pollution, which is a big problem here in our area" and took the chance to lead by example. The opportunities afforded by the WSA not only train volunteers and help them to conduct outreach, but also allow them to collaborate with other like-minded individuals to lead environmental stewardship initiatives.

Rick, a WSA participant from Anne Arundel who had recently moved to Maryland, had engaged in environmental stewardship previously through his place of employment. When he moved to Maryland, he was disappointed with the drastic difference in water quality from his previous home, and wanted to do something about his inability to enjoy his local river. He was upset about the "filthy water," he said, but "…when I moved here, you know, the [organizer of the] physical organization on my river…he just wanted my money. He didn't care about my concerns. He didn't care about being involved in projects. He just wanted my money. And all the other organizations around here just want my money."

Frustrated by the inability to directly participate in cleaning up the river, Rick contested, "I want to be involved, I want to be a doer, I want to engage, and I want to enact change, and I knew I needed training to get to that point." He saw the WSA in his area as a means of getting more involved and of gaining the tools and resources necessary

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to do so: "I got the training that I needed to become active and impactful. That was my goal and I definitely got that." Drawing on his previous experience with environmental work, Rick was able to practice a new form of stewardship in his new home in Maryland. He went on to talk about how the WSAs presented an opportunity to network with other like-minded individuals who also wanted to take action, where he even remarked:

> [W]e have a lot of people that really, really care. And they're in the middle of communities, and they're talking and really having a conversation, and no other organization does that. No one's had that kind of impact that they can motivate people. You know, the river keeper, he gets a bunch of donations and he'll do a project or two and pay himself a salary and pay a couple of staff people and helpers, but all you are is a donor with that organization and you don't get any leverage when your organization is just the people that are working as part of the organization. And in our watershed we're dying a death by a thousand cuts, it's no good to have a little organization bandaging up cut by cut. You need a thousand people working at the same time.

Rick effectively summarizes not just the appeal, but the mission of the WSAs, which is to train stewards, to give them the tools to engage their neighbors and in hands-on projects, and to build a network with others to effect environmental change. This tripartite goal of training, engagement, and networking is a main selling point as the WSAs expand their platform to other counties in Maryland.

The Role of WSA Leaders and the WSAs

According to participants, the leaders of the WSAs, those who organize the consortiums and training courses, serve a crucial role in the WSAs' and stewards' successes as intermediaries. As for the WSAs as a whole, participants often described the organization as a vehicle for education, training stewards to serve as educators in their own communities. Although some participants thought of the WSAs as organizations

that were training a corps of people to take on their own environmental restoration

projects, each doing their own part to benefit the whole watershed, this was secondary to

their potential impacts via the training of individual stewards to be sources of information

for their neighbors and communities.

Framed as intermediaries, the leaders of the WSAs are often credited with having

the ability to connect stewards with consortium members or other stewards when trainees

or stewards encounter some trouble or are not sure of how to go about performing a

specific task. In addition, WSA leaders are often credited with doing much of the

community outreach that helps the programs to be more effective in their mission for

public education and improving the environmental efficacy of the watershed. As one

participant fromthe Anne Arundel WSA said of the WSA leaders:

> They send out newsletters to tell people about upcoming volunteer
> opportunities or additional trainings. So, I think just getting more
> information out to people, the public, on different opportunities or
> trainings or volunteer events… I think that they've been really good at
> connecting people too. I mean, they help support the stewards out there.
> They connect people to people… [T]he consortium members, which are
> members like landscape architects or other professionals in the field, like
> contractors and so on, and they are always sort of compiling these
> consortium members who… help stewards get the projects done. And so,
> they're really good at sort of connecting people, and they know about the
> various grant opportunities, and can tell people about those opportunities,
> and relay that information.

Echoing this sentiment, participants often reported helping participants connect with

other people who could serve as a resource. Aside from serving as a resource to

participants and stewards, many respondents also discussed how WSA leaders helped

participants and stewards to secure funding through applying for grants, whether that

meant helping with the language of grant proposals or directing participants and stewards

to apply for grants where they might be competitive. Nearly all participants agreed that

the role of leaders was to serve as sources of information, whether it was to connect

people, outreach to the public, or providing insights into the grant application process, but

participants were nearly split on what they envisioned the role of the WSAs to be.

Foremost, a little more than half of those we interviewed felt that the WSAs

served a means of educating the public. By mobilizing stewards to become leaders in

communities and inform their neighbors about best practices for improving the health of

the watershed, the main role of the WSA was to educate. Of course, this isn't completely

unrelated to what nearly half of participants felt was the main role of the WSAs: to

inspire behavior change and implement best practices for storm water management in

communities located on or near the watersheds in their jurisdictions. As noted in the

discussion of the interview data above, it is not always clear cut that respondents mean

just one thing, or in this case whether the WSAs are primarily a source of education the

public or instituting best practices. As this steward explained what he felt the role of the

WSA was, it becomes clear that the two notions, education and implementation, are

heavily intertwined and cannot easily be reduced to two separate ideas:

> Well, I know that there are a lot of citizen-scientists out there that are
> helping with monitoring water quality in the different tributaries and
> estuaries and stuff like that, but I think that the more people who get
> involved in that program, the more likely other people will find out about
> it. And so, if you join the Watershed Stewards Academy and then your
> friends find out about it, then your family finds out about it and then
> people start thinking, "Oh, the water must really depend on what we do, as
> you know, everyday in our activities," because if we have these people go,
> like everyday citizens, like a business person or someone whose career has
> nothing to do with environmental science or the environment and they
> choose to get into this group, it's just spreading the word that the
> impermeable surfaces that you have on your property, and the runoff, and
> the sediments, and the nitrogen all contribute to the levels in the bay.

While it may not be discernible easily whether participants felt the main mission or role

of the WSAs are to educate the public or to institute best practices, it is clear that

participants believe the WSAs operate at the ground level, working from the grassroots to affect change in the health of the watershed.

Challenges Posed to Stewards and the WSAs

In the discussion of how participants learned of the WSAs we stressed that participants indicated they learned of the WSAs primarily through other organizations with similar foci. In fact, very few stewards said they learned of the WSAs through some sort of advertisement or media outlet. This finding leads us into a discussion of what participants found to be one of the major challenges to the WSAs and their ability to mobilize stewards: a lack of organizational visibility.

When asked about what challenges the WSAs face in their work, on steward said bluntly, "I just by accident found out about them, but I know a lot of people don't. So, I think that they do need to advertise more." However, this respondent did go on to say, "I know that's hard to do, and I think they are actually growing." In fact, some stewards feel the lack of visibility can be solved by "more commercials, awareness, big ad campaigns that… put it where people can see it and put into perspective." Although it may not be realistic to train every person who would like to participate after seeing an advertisement for the WSAs, the participants felt that what was more important was the recognition that they are part of an organization and they have received training to work on watershed issues. So, as one steward described the solution:

> I think their challenge is marketing. They need to get out there.
> Somebody needs to get out there and market these classes so more people
> will be aware of it. Not only be aware of it, but it will spark their interest.
> It's one thing to say we have this program to teach you about the
> environment and what you could do to improve it, but sometimes you
> have to package it.

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By making the general public more aware of the WSAs, participants believe they themselved would be more often recognized when they present themselves as Master Stewards who have trained with one of these programs.

According to respondents, an equally important challenge is the ability to secure funding for the WSAs and the projects that stewards may take on as part of their training. Many participants felt most local groups and individuals apply for many of the same grants, making obtaining funding at the local level competitive, largely due to a lack of available federal grants. At the same time, these programs are constantly working to secure funding from local governmentsso that they are not reliant on grant funding and private donations alone. This is complicated by changes in political administration and the approach to the storm water fee, popularized as the "rain tax" by critics of the state law, which was meant to fund projects that would help counties in Maryland meet certain targets for water quality. According to some participants, the intense competition at the local level and the lack of political will to enforce the storm water fee for the use of funding environmental restoration projects poses a problem of fiscal and organizational insecurity for the WSAs and their stewards.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have focused on the role and appeal of local environmental organizations in fueling the countertrend to declining rates of civic engagement (Putnam 2000). More specifically, we have focused on the appeal of environmental organizations that train volunteers to become environmental stewards. Organizations such as the Watershed Stewards Academies in Maryland are increasing in popularity because they

afford participants the opportunity to "make a difference" and provide the tools necessary for participants to lead their communities in environmental stewardship practices. The analysis presented here produces several promising veins of sociological research if we are to understand more fully the relationship between civic engagement and environmental stewardship.

As shown by previous work that examines the relationship between environmental stewardship and civic engagement, those who participate in environmental activities are more likely to be civically engaged and politically active overall (Fisher et al. 2015). Although the volunteers we spoke with may have individual goals for participating, their motivations are, at least in part, driven by altruistic values (Wuthnow 1991, 1998). As previous research has demonstrated, many grassroots movements in the US have been supported and sustained by individuals who have personalized political commitments (Lichterman 1996). We argue that the WSAs and similar organizations exemplify the ways in which Americans *are* civically engaged in local environmental stewardship efforts. Further, these organizations are a viable model for addressing Skocpol's observation that "yawning gaps have opened between local voluntary efforts and the professional advocates and grant makers who seek national influence" (2003:231). Propelled by citizens' desire to take action and make a difference, organizations like the WSAs are able to access, mobilize, and train a corps of volunteers to address environmental problems at the local level. In doing so, these stewardship organizations offer an alternative to top-down strategies of state action on environmental issues at the same time that they provide opportunities for citizens to be environmentally and politically active in their communities.

We find that environmental stewardship organizations like the WSAs represent a countertrend to diminishing rates of civic engagement because they offer what a paper-membership cannot: the opportunity to be trained, to network, and to become a community leader. Through the training of volunteers, these organizations give participants an in-depth, issue oriented education that allows them to become leaders in their community and to network with other like-minded and goal-oriented individuals. In addition, the WSAs give participants the tools they need to lead, organize, and participate in hands-on environmental restoration and community outreach projects. As part of a growing national movement, these organizations serve as an example of a grassroots approach to civic engagement at the local level.

Continuing research on the effectiveness of environmental organizations' in terms of community outreach and mobilization is necessary for researchers to understand successful mobilization beyond the role of organizational leaders. As Andrews and colleagues demonstrate (2010), successful environmental organizations, and their ability to mobilize volunteers, are largely contingent on organizational leaders and their skills to manage their resources properly. Yet, environmental organizations that train and credential volunteers to lead grassroots campaigns themselves offer new pathways for civic organizations to be successful, as well as to mobilize future participants via graduates of those programs. Although not addressed in the analysis here, it would certainly stand to reason that additional research on the ability to maintain an alumni network and leverage the strengths of individuals in those networks would help researchers develop new theories and methods for the study of civic and environmental organizations.

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