# "A Voice for the River, a Voice for the Stream:" Organizational Perspectives on Environmental Stewardship and the Maryland Watershed Stewards Academies

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## Abstract

This whitepaper details findings from interview data collected from partner organizations working with three of the Watershed Stewards Academies (WSAs) of Maryland. Building on findings presented in previous whitepapers from this study, "Understanding the Effectiveness of the Watershed Stewards Academies in Maryland," we discuss the types of partnerships between local organizations and the WSAs, as well as the perspectives of partner organizations on the settings in which the WSAs are most effective, the unique role of the WSAs, and the challenges the WSAs face in their work to educate local communities, implement watershed restoration projects, and advocate for watershed protection in local and state political arenas.

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**Executive Summary**

How do local environmental stewardship groups partner with the Maryland Watershed Stewards Academies? How do partner organizations perceive WSA programs, both in terms of their role and the settings where they are most effective? What do these groups perceive as the primary challenges associated with the WSA model?

This whitepaper focuses on organizations that partner with the WSAs in Maryland to understand how the WSAs are embedded within local environmental stewardship networks. We draw on interview data collected from 13 partner organizations of the Anne Arundel County, Howard County and National Capital Region WSAs. We find that these organizations collaborated on projects and programs with the WSAs in their efforts to address common goals associated with watershed health and restoration. Partner organizations also provided funding and grants for WSA projects and publicized WSA courses and events. Representatives from these organizations saw the WSAs as being most effective at education and implementation at the "hyperlocal" level, noting that the members of the WSAs are especially well-suited to work with individual citizens, homeowners' associations, neighborhood groups, and churches in their own communities. Partner organizations described the role of the WSAs as fitting into three primary areas: educating communities about watershed issues, implementing projects to improve and protect watershed health, and advocating for watershed issues in local and state government settings. In terms of challenges faced by the WSAs, representatives of partner organizations noted that volunteer engagement was prone to attrition as members dropped out of the programs over time. This observation may be due to the intensive time commitment associated with the WSA training programs, as well as overlap between civic activities for an already over-committed group of volunteer stewards. Moreover, respondents mentioned funding as a consistent challenge for the WSAs, which must constantly seek to secure financial support from public and private sources.

**About the Study**

This paper follows the previously published whitepaper "Why Engage in Environmental Stewardship? Volunteer Participation in the Maryland Watershed Stewards Academies," which details findings from interviews with volunteer stewards from the Maryland WSAs and provides a full description of the methods employed in this study. This previous paper is available online at http://www.cse.umd.edu/uploads/1/7/9/4/17940149/wsa_whitepaper2_final.pdf

This study was funded by a grant from the Maryland Sea Grant Program. The grant, entitled *Understanding the Effectiveness of the Watershed Stewards Academies in Maryland,* studies the WSAs in Maryland to understand how these academies are training citizens to steward their communities, looking specifically at the internal dynamics of each group, along with the ways these groups are connecting to their communities.

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## Introduction

This whitepaper presents findings from interviews conducted with partner organizations of the Maryland Watershed Stewards Academies (WSAs). Building on results about volunteer recruitment, participation, and engagement detailed in previous whitepapers, we explore the perspectives of partner organizations in order to understand the role of the WSAs within the framework of local environmental stewardship more broadly. We begin by describing the types of partnerships between local organizations and the WSAs. Then, we explore organizational representatives' perceptions of the settings in which the WSAs are most effective and the broader role of the WSAs within the context of local environmental stewardship. We also detail the specific challenges that partner organizations identified as being particularly relevant to the Maryland WSAs.

## Methods

This study employed three approaches to understanding the WSA programs and their volunteers: an online survey of WSA participants (detailed in the study's first whitepaper[1]), follow-up interviews with survey respondents (detailed in the study's second whitepaper[2]), and interviews with representatives of organizations working or partnering with the WSAs in various capacities. Methods for the survey and volunteer interviews are available in the previously published whitepapers. As described in previous whitepapers, the WSAs in this study are the Anne Arundel County Watershed Stewards Academy, the National Capital Region Watershed Stewards Academy, and the Howard County Watershed Stewards Academy.

[1] Whitepaper #1 available online: http://www.cse.umd.edu/uploads/1/7/9/4/17940149/fisher_etal._wsa_whitepaper.pdf
[2] Whitepaper #2 available online: http://www.cse.umd.edu/uploads/1/7/9/4/17940149/wsa_whitepaper2_final.pdf

The sample of respondents for the organizational interview portion of this study was constructed using information from preliminary interviews with WSA leaders, write-in data from the online survey of volunteer stewards, and WSA program informational materials (websites, pamphlets, newsletters, annual reports, and conference programs). After reviewing these sources, we identified a total of 18 unique partner organizations associated with the three WSAs included in this study. Partner organizations are defined here as groups that collaborate with, provide support for, participate in, or contribute to the WSAs, their programs and trainings, and on-the-ground restoration projects. We contacted the leaders of each of these organizations via email asking them to participate in interviews, following up via email and phone if necessary. In total, we interviewed representatives from 13 partner organizations, which represents a response rate of 72%.

Organizational interviews followed an in-depth, semi-structured format, following a pre-defined list of questions developed based on the research questions for this study and designed to connect with questions asked of WSA participants in the follow-up volunteer interviews. Interviews were conducted by phone, were digitally recorded, and lasted between 20 minutes and one hour. All interviews were transcribed and then analyzed the software program NVivo 11. The findings presented here have been anonymized to ensure confidentiality.[3]

**Findings**

The following sections detail the main themes that emerged in the follow-up interviews with organizations working in varying degrees of partnership with the WSAs in Maryland. We begin by discussing the types of partnerships between local organizations and the Maryland WSAs.

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

Then, we discuss the primary themes from questions about the settings in which partner organizations perceive the work of the WSAs to be most effective and the primary role of the WSAs in Maryland. We conclude by discussing the challenges partner organizations identified with regard to the WSAs and their programs. Where appropriate, we compare findings from organizational interviews with previously reported findings from volunteer interviews.

*Organizational Partnerships*

The network of local environmental organizations within which the WSAs are embedded is critical to their success. Partnership with WSA programs was most focused around two areas: the Master Watershed Stewards training course and the capstone restoration projects undertaken by course cohorts and individual stewards. Partner organizations provided curriculum materials and members of partner organizations often volunteered as guest instructors for the training courses, helped to organize programs as they got off the ground, recruited participants for training courses, and assisted with organizational resources as the WSA programs were established. The deeply collaborative nature of these partnerships is not surprising given that the majority of partner organizations reported sharing goals related to watershed restoration, protection, and preservation with the WSAs.

The support of these organizations comes mainly in the form of funding and publicity, as well as volunteer labor and organizational resources to a lesser extent. Six partner organizations reported providing support in the form of funding, mostly in the terms of small grants for restoration projects and educational outreach efforts undertaken by individual stewards. Seven organizations, including a number of smaller organizations that reported being unable to

contribute financially to support the WSAs, reported that they publicized WSA programs and events and recruited their own members to join the WSA training courses.

*Effective Settings*

When asked about the most effective settings for the WSAs to pursue their goals of community education and watershed restoration, respondents were unanimous in seeing the strengths of the WSAs to be in engagement at the "hyperlocal" level in individual communities and neighborhoods. In particular, partner organizations saw the volunteer stewards who had completed the WSA training courses as invaluable resources for creating change at the local level: as people who live in the neighborhoods and communities where they do outreach and projects, Master Watershed Stewards are more connected to the specific concerns and interests of local constituencies than larger organizations. Moreover, organizations often lack the capacity to do the individual outreach necessary to create behavior change. In the words of an upper-level staff member at a statewide environmental organization, the WSAs "serve as a link" to local communities:

> "We are so focused on water quality administration, we do great with engaging large groups and large school groups, but we just simply don't have the capacity to go into communities and to affect local change. We don't have the capacity to send someone into each neighborhood and do rain gardens and install rain barrels and try to really do that hyperlocal change. That is where I see the [watershed] stewards coming in."

Overall, representatives of partner organizations saw the WSAs and the hundreds of individual stewards they trained as community leaders who filled a niche that other local environmental stewardship groups had been unable to address fully.

*The Role of the WSAs*

When asked about the role of the WSAs in Maryland, representatives of partner organizations mentioned three specific activities as being most relevant: providing information and education for local communities, implementing watershed restoration projects, and advocating for watershed issues in local and state governments. As a representative of a small county-level organization explained, "I see [the WSAs] as having a huge role in terms of educating people on why storm water management is important […] and then also actually doing things to improve the situation."

According to representatives of partner organizations, the primary role of the WSAs was education and community outreach, both through the WSA training courses and the more personalized work of individual Master Watershed Stewards as community leaders. As one representative from a statewide watershed organization noted, the WSAs provide information and training to individuals who want to learn more about how to care for their local watershed, in addition to being an educational resource for members of their communities more broadly. The role of the WSAs as outreach organizations for groups who may not be educated on watershed issues was an especially important role noted by respondents, especially in terms of programs working with religious communities. In the words of a local environmental organizer who had worked with the WSAs, their "education and outreach activities have been engaged with a wide population of people who otherwise would not have been reached and engaged in these kinds of information and activities." This finding is in line with interview data from the volunteer portion of this study, which also showed that the role of the WSAs as first and foremost to "serve as source of information," "educate the public," and "inform neighbors about best practices for improving the health of the watershed."

In addition to educating stewards and communities, the WSAs also play a significant roles in the physical restoration of local watersheds through the implementation of conservation landscaping and storm water runoff abatement projects, such as installing rain barrels and rain gardens and reducing impervious surfaces. Here, the perspective of the partner organizations is also in alignment with the perspectives of the volunteers who were interviewed for this study. As a representative from an urban environmental organization described, the WSAs are "improving the watershed by way of getting implemented and tangible projects on the ground, projects that are achieving various levels of watershed improvement in the area…everything from very large parking lot retrofits to rain garden installations." In addition to improving the physical health of the watershed, these projects also served as touchstones for outreach and education in the community as WSAs and their members led by example. As a representative from a state chapter of an environmental organization explained, the WSA training programs create:

> "a core group of dozens of people per year who then go into their own communities and build rain gardens and do site assessments, and do outreach and conservation landscapes and tree plantings. […] There was a phrase that was often […] that building projects was the best outreach tool. Because seeing a rain garden is believing that a rain garden is real and works to collect rain water and soak it into the ground rather than sending polluted runoff crashing through our streams. I think that currently the WSA is really helping to provide more voices and more on the ground projects."

In general, organizational representatives saw the on-the-ground work of the WSAs as being especially important because the labor-intensive nature of these small-scale projects meant that they were not feasible for many other local environmental stewardship organizations to undertake.

In addition to their role as stewardship organizations, the WSAs were also seen as playing an important role in local politics. In fact, more than half of respondents mentioned that the engagement of the WSAs with local communities made them particularly effective at

advocating for watershed issues at the local level, where policymakers are most responsive to individual constituents. Members of the WSAs are seen by partner organizations as "a great source of engaged, knowledgeable citizens who have the ability to weigh in on important policies that bear on storm water management" in public hearings and meetings. In each discussion of political engagement, respondents acknowledged that the WSAs are not explicitly political organizations, but they were equally adamant that members of the WSAs were well-suited to advocacy for watershed issues in local and state politics due to their in-depth knowledge of the subject and their awareness of community needs as they relate to watershed health. As one respondent explained, "it is crucial that watershed stewards see their job as both on-the-ground project building and outreach, but that they also see their role as a voice for the river, a voice for the stream, and to be lobbying leaders."

*Challenges Posed to the WSAs*

When asked about the challenges facing the WSAs in Maryland, partner organizations identified four main issues that make the important and labor-intensive work of these groups more difficult. First, similar to volunteers interviewed for this study, some respondents noted that visibility was a challenge for the WSAs. Although highly-engaged citizens who were already involved in environmental stewardship were likely to know about the WSAs and their mission, average citizens were less likely to engage with them. This challenge was noted both in terms of outreach (where and how the WSAs publicize their programs) and in terms of branding (how the WSAs are perceived and for whom their programs are accessible and of interest).

Second, attrition of volunteer stewards was a major challenge identified by representatives of partner organizations. Although respondents were aware that the WSAs were

working to engage their alumni, most agreed that attrition was to be expected given the time and labor required to keep up with the requirements of the WSA certification programs, as well as the tendency of the WSAs to attract participants who were already engaged in environmental stewardship. The intensive time commitment associated with the WSA programs was mentioned by nearly every respondent. Moreover, as one respondent who works directly with Master Watershed Stewards explained, the individuals who pursue the WSA certification tend to be involved with multiple stewardship organizations and civic activities more broadly. Stewards, she said, "wear so many hats and sometimes it's hard to wear so many hats." This finding is consistent with the results of our survey of WSA participants, which was published in the project's first whitepaper. The paper show that WSA members are more civically engaged than the average US citizen. In the words of another respondent, "the people who attend [WSA programs] have busy lives. Maybe more people would attend if there were not always so many things to do. People have activities with their families, with their churches, with their other community activities."

Funding was the most common challenge noted by respondents in the organizational interviews. As a leader of a larger state-level organization explained, because of the costs associated with the implementation of WSA projects, these programs "cannot be purely a volunteer labor of love." Challenges to funding took several forms, according to organizational interview respondents. First, insufficient and variable funding from county and state governments means that the budgets for the WSAs are constantly in flux and that future funding tends to be uncertain. Second, and in line with findings from the volunteer interviews, competition among multiple watershed stewardship groups for foundation and other forms of grant-based funding means that securing grants is a constant effort for the WSAs and their

participants. As one local environmental group leader explained, every time a new watershed steward applies for funding to complete an individual project, they compete with existing groups who are applying to the same funding streams. Finally, as new groups emerge, the novelty of the WSAs may wear off, leading to less available funding for organizational resources and administrative support, even though watershed restoration funding may still be available. As a coordinator for one grant organization explained, the WSAs "were the hot group, they got a good staff, they keep getting pulled into more and more stuff, they are going to need to raise a […] lot more money to keep it going and that is going to be the big challenge." Several respondents suggested that a potential solution to the uncertainty of government and private grant funding would be transitioning to a market-based model in which the WSAs focus more on job training and support for related business. As one respondent explained, "I think the success of the program is going to be based on private homeowners seeing so much benefit for themselves that they are willing to pay their own money out of their own wallets."

Finally, representatives of partner organizations noted that there was consistent pressure on the WSAs to expand their missions, programs, and course offerings. According to almost half of the respondents interviewed, these programs were already overburdened with work, operating with limited funding, and constantly working to attract new participants. This "mission creep," according to several respondents, including increasing pressure on environmental stewards to act as political advocates. As a representative of an organization that provides funding for multiple environmental initiatives, explained: "another hazard of being a resource-based organization is that they end up getting [distracted]. People try to drag them in various directions based on specific interests […] I hope that the WSAs are able to focus on what they do well and that they be able to bask in their credibility without feeling like they have to be everything to everybody."