

Colorado Foundation for Water Education

Big Thompson Watershed Forum
Water Education Beyond the Classroom Years
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2009 BTWF Annual Meeting

John Matis: Help members of the BTWF better evaluate and define what role the BTWF might take in the future, concerning water education outreach with the residents of the watershed.

Why Continuing Education is Important

- Colorado is the headwaters to 18 downstream states. The state of Colorado provides almost 70% of the obligation of the upper basin states of CO, UT and WY on the Colorado River. The eyes of the West are firmly on Colorado's water management decisions.
- CO's population is growing at an average of 2% per year (almost 95,000 people per year!) and almost 60% of this is from migration into the state, rather than births.
- Water demands will exceed supplies in the next 20 years. Now is a critical time to balance the needs of our population with the needs of our environment and our neighbors.

Why BTWF is well situated

- The river connects the populations of Estes Park, Loveland, Greeley and provides water to hundreds of thousands of northern CO residents.
- Almost 3 million people visited RMNP in 2008. Many of them traveled along a stretch of the Big Thompson river at some point in their journey. Your audience is potentially huge.
- Larimer, Weld and Boulder Counties are home to some of the few large water projects being proposed that have large numbers of people paying attention to water issues. You may support or disagree with their tactics, but you cannot argue that groups such as Save the Poudre are effective in getting this population to pay attention, and so you have a base that is ready to learn about water.

There are many water education efforts currently going on that BTWF could model after or tap into:

- CFWE is the statewide water education resource. We provide tours, publications, on-line information, workshops to connect educators, etc. We have done a lot to create a

body of accessible information about water resources, but we must first have an engaged public, which is best sown at the grassroots level.

- There are many local initiatives that are successful. Look to CO Muni magazine for an overview.
 - Riverwatch mobilizes thousands of people each year to monitor over 300 CO rivers
 - Water organizations make an effort (Rio Grande Association of Conservation Districts hold trainings for teachers on water issues each summer/Colorado River District developing on-line videos/Brian Werner at Northern will speak to any group any time about water development in Northern CO
 - Denver Water tells us to use only what we need
 - But there is no coordinated effort to educate the general public statewide. What you know depends heavily on where you live and who you get your information from. 2008 statewide survey showed 1/3 of CO counties had no water education programs. Most organizations have a limited budget for water education; there were more than three times as many respondents who reported spending less than \$5,000/year on water education, than those with budgets of \$25,000 or more.
 - So we continue to have the same conversations about people not knowing where their water comes from, not knowing how their actions impact water quality, not understanding the trade-offs of building new reservoirs, expanding conservation programs, moving more water from agriculture.
 - What can BTWF do to help tackle this large, statewide problem that has lingered for decades? Read on...

What is the problem? Why hasn't it been done well yet?

- I believe it is a problem of disconnectedness. We have become disconnected from the rivers in our communities. We do not see them as our drinking water supply, an important urban wildlife corridor or a place to gather and reflect. We've lost our connection with the rivers that are the backbone of our towns.
- Take, for example, a small pothole on I-25. As a regular commuter, I know that a small divot becomes a large crack, and that crack can ultimately become a tire eating monstrosity that sends us straight to Discount Tire for an alignment check. But these cracks rarely become these tire eaters because we drive by them every day and we NOTICE. We ACT by calling the county or CDOT to let them know. And it is FIXED because it is a state priority to have roads that provide safe travel.
- I would encourage the residents of the Big Thompson Watershed and those who are connected to the river (likely those in this room) to begin to ask themselves how they can begin to reconnect people with the river.

- There are great examples going on in CO. The Greenway Foundation in Denver hosts movies on the banks of the South Platte and takes people down Cherry Creek in gondolas. The Roaring Fork Conservancy in Carbondale holds an annual photography contest. The Boulder Creek Watershed Initiative holds a frequent seminar series focused on watershed issues. The most important thing is to get people to visit the river, connect it to their daily lives, and thus to care.
- We have so many concerns, great and small, that vie for our attention. You must make the river and its health a personal issue for people so they are open to the education we all want to provide.

With that, some questions to ponder

1. How do you foster a relationship between your community and the river? Its hard to donate time, money or effort to something you have no personal connection with.
2. Who do you want to focus your efforts on? Children? Teachers? Elected Officials? Specific neighborhood? With a small organization, you cannot be all things to all people. Often, being one thing to one group of people, and doing it well, is enough.
3. Who are the groups in your basin you can partner with to leverage your resources and expand your audience? The Foundation for Water Education is available to provide you with resources and assistance once you've answered the above questions, but creating an engaged public within your watershed is not our role. It is the role of grassroots organizations made up of people who care about our watersheds.