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Accountability to Public Stakeholders in Watershed-Based Restoration

There is an increasing push at the federal, state, and local levels for watershed-based conservation projects. These projects work to address water quality issues in degraded waterways through the implementation of a suite of best management practices on land throughout a watershed (also known as a drainage basin). The success of these efforts on both public and private land often depends upon the support and participation of watershed residents, but, to date, there has been little formal articulation about what role watershed residents can and should play in the restoration process. This talk considers the ethical dimensions of public stakeholder involvement in watershed-based restoration efforts, using the specific example of the urbanizing Woonasquatucket River watershed in northern Rhode Island.

Throughout 2013, the author worked with staff from the Environmental Protection Agency's Atlantic Ecology Division to consider the opportunities for and barriers to freshwater restoration efforts in the Woonasquatucket watershed. We interviewed land managers and organizational decision-makers about their work and public interactions, and coordinated a series of focus groups with members of the general public to solicit information about their knowledge of wetlands and watersheds and their concerns about and hopes for restoration projects. With that work, we hoped to capture the knowledge and concerns of local watershed residents in order to incorporate that information in an ecosystem services indicator tool that could be used to guide restoration efforts throughout the state. Inherent in that work was a desire to better represent the concerns and interests of public citizens in wetlands restoration efforts, as well as a desire to return our work to the publics who would conceivably benefit from these efforts.

Attending to both theory and practice, this talk uses a concrete, small-scale example to examine the ethical questions of whether and how to incorporate public citizens in conservation planning and practice at the watershed scale.