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Integrating community capitals into water quality protection: A new approach.

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Abstract:

The Healthy Ecosystems-Healthy Communities (HEHC) project works with communities to assess and protect their local natural resources using a public engagement process. It moves water quality to the forefront of community decision-making by linking investment in water quality BMPs and activities to additional community capital benefits.

Cornelia and Jan Flora (2008) with the North Central Regional Center for Rural Development, at Iowa State University, found that successful, sustainable communities paid attention to seven types of community assets or capital: natural, cultural, human, social, political, financial and built. They also discovered that community investment in one capital could be used to build assets in other capitals.

The HEHC program utilizes the concept of multiple capitals -investment and benefit- to encourage adoption of sustainable water quality programs, BMPs, and educational activities in small communities. A third-party facilitator works with community volunteers to expand their local stakeholder group, to initiate public engagement, and promote citizen exploration, discovery and ownership of knowledge about the status and condition of their local resources. Armed with this knowledge and using a public forum process, citizen groups generate water quality projects ideas and activities that are appropriate for their community. These ideas are then further explored to evaluate each project for ways they may create additional benefits to their community's other capitals or assets.

The multiple capitals methodology is successful because it expands opportunities for stakeholder involvement in water quality programs that can be used to create multiple benefits within the community. The Healthy Ecosystems-Healthy Community program also integrates water quality into existing community values and visions which promotes a more sustainable, community-driven program for water and natural resource protection.

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Impact Statement:

The HEHC program developed a public engagement process to help communities assess and identify environmental/community improvement areas and establish environmental improvement goals. To date, the program has tracked 3,000+ hours volunteer participation (over \$42,000 match value), and resulted in more than 20 news articles, and TV and radio coverage to more than 171,000 people about water quality issues and natural resource planning. Communities expanded their water quality projects with:

community cash contributions (\$1250), additional grants (\$17,000), and partnered with local educators, universities, state natural resource agencies and organizations, WRAPS, and other communities.

The HEHC work resulted in new community partnerships with the Corps of Engineers, Kansas Trails Council, Kansas Department of Transportation, State Department of Wildlife and Parks, local WRAPS groups, K-12 educators, and at least 7 universities and colleges throughout Kansas.

The HEHC program resulted in adoption of 12 water quality Best Management Practices (BMPs) in the two pilot communities and led to community-based work which resulted in: development of a hiking trail on a local water resource and a public rain garden filtration basin with butterfly and songbird habitat, participation in a grant for wetlands restoration, a land-owner conservation easement workshop to protect a riparian area, outdoor classrooms for water quality lessons and field trips, and a community health program.

Outcomes:

The HEHC program has resulted in more diverse stakeholder involvement in community planning and water quality projects, new understanding, awareness, and appreciation for water resources and ecosystem health, and has increased public awareness of natural resources and water quality as valuable assets in need of community protection and planning.

Additionally, the HEHC communities have learned how to use a public engagement process for resource planning to continue their efforts for sustainable development and resource protection.

Category: Human Dimensions

Type of Presentation: Poster Presentation