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**"It's like Putting 50 Gallons of Water in a 5 Gallon Bucket": Examining Multiple Stakeholder Perspectives on Watershed Health in Southwestern Illinois**

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Abstract:

A statewide survey conducted in Illinois revealed that 90 percent of residents rate protecting water quality as very important, outranking other community issues such as preventing crime and improving public schools (Illinois Department of Natural Resources 2003). Still, many community leaders have struggled to inspire citizen commitment to watershed conservation. Despite existing water quality impairments and problems with stormwater management, many communities lack a shared vision for watershed health or effective action plans for improving watershed conservation. We believe a key first step to community synergy around watershed issues is to create a venue for effective dialogue. In this paper we examine multiple stakeholder perspectives on watershed health in seven watersheds of the lower Kaskaskia River. These diverse perspectives were voiced in what we believe were quite candid and enlightening conversations about water, community, and problem solving needs. This paper reports on one component of Southern Illinois University Carbondale's Watershed Health Integrated Research project aimed at integrating water quality and community capacity assessments into a series of outreach programs. Specific objectives are to examine diverse stakeholder perspectives and identify shared and contrasting visions for watershed health. Data were collected through key informant interviews and focus groups with community planners and managers, water resource professionals, and concerned citizens. Qualitative analysis techniques were used to code transcripts, organize data into categories and themes, and generate conceptual frameworks for interpretation. Preliminary study findings indicate that growth and stormwater management are among stakeholders' top concerns associated with watershed health. Lack of funding, limited citizen awareness, and the clash between economic development and community preservation values were identified as constraints to problem solving initiatives. Opportunities and challenges for generating a shared vision for watershed health and effective action plans for watershed conservation will be presented.

Impact Statement:

At the early stages of this project, our most significant outputs and outcomes have been via a series of focus groups with community planners and managers and concerned citizens. In these focus groups we have disseminated preliminary water quality findings, thereby raising community awareness and interest in water quality issues. To date, 46 community members have agreed to join our 'community research team' which will serve as key contacts, liaisons, and project advisors.

Category: Watershed Assessment and Restoration  
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