

River Voices



Establishing Watershed Benchmarks Tools for gauging progress

by Don Elder

In the widget business, measuring success is simple. At the end of the year, you count widgets sold and profits earned. Then you report to your shareholders what you accomplished with their money.

In the watershed business, measuring success isn't nearly as cut-and-dried. It is, however, even more important.

The long-term, incremental nature of watershed work makes it essential that we find ways to determine if we are heading in the right direction — and if we are making progress fast enough. As watershed organizations mature, and as expectations of them rise, it becomes increasingly important to find ways to measure progress each year.

Measuring progress in watershed work can help us fine-tune our strategies so that we invest our energies and money where they can make the most difference. Through regular evaluation exercises, we can generate accurate, reliable information about our progress that keeps volunteers, staff and board members, donors, and the general public informed and enthused about our work.

Benchmarks

River Network encourages watershed organizations to establish benchmarks: measures that can be used to gauge progress year to year and over the long haul. These benchmarks should be as objective and quantifiable as possible. They should fall into three general categories:

1. *Organizational benchmarks:* measures of the health of a watershed organization.
2. *Activity benchmarks:* measures of the efforts being expended to improve the health of the watershed.
3. *Watershed benchmarks:* measures of trends in watershed health.

Some might contend that it's only the last category that really matters. It's true that the purpose of a watershed

organization is to improve watershed health. But it's also true that measuring watershed health isn't always easy, and that improving it measurably often takes a very long time.

The problems of most of our watersheds weren't created overnight, and they certainly won't be solved overnight. Progress toward watershed health can be slow, indeed, sometimes undetectable — even if a watershed organization is doing all the right things. That's why it is so important to recognize the importance of building strong, healthy

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River Network is a national nonprofit organization whose mission is to help people organize to protect and restore rivers and watersheds.

We support river and watershed advocates at the local, state and regional levels, help them build effective organizations, and promote our working together to build a nationwide movement for rivers and watersheds. River Network also acquires and conserves riverlands that are critical to the services that rivers perform for human communities: drinking water supply, floodplain management, fish and wildlife habitat, recreation and open space.

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From the President

It seems strange, in a way, that America's conservation movement has evolved into a collection of specialist protection endeavors. Forests, rivers, oceans, deserts, ducks and insects, birds and rare plants: it seems that every component of the natural world has its own organized protectors.

The reason this can seem strange is that environmentalism's greatest insight is that everything is connected. A poorly built logging road high in the mountains can produce erosion that ends by killing a marine coral reef hundreds of miles away. Extirpation of a single species can cause an unforeseen cascade of extinctions.

Of course, the specialized approaches to conservation have risen from the specific issues raised in different kinds of ecosystems, and the bodies of knowledge and law that have grown from them. In many ways, this diversity strengthens our movement.

Still, it is also useful to remember—precisely because everything is connected—that, ultimately, it is whole systems that we must protect, manage, and restore.

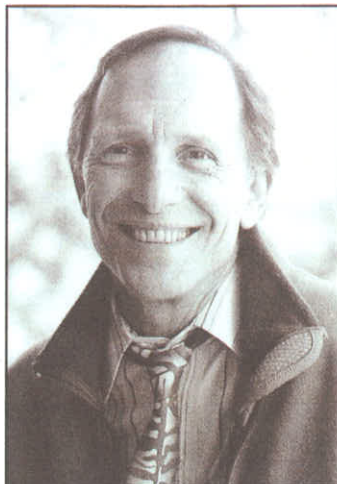
We are still learning how to do that. Ecosystems interpenetrate and intergrade in subtle ways and can be impossible to map with precision. More and more, those who study and work for conservation believe that watersheds may be the most useful units for us to protect and manage. And the best way to measure watershed health is by studying the rivers that drain them. As Dr. James Karr writes, "Aquatic ecosystems embrace an interactive mosaic of environments, extending from headwater streams and meadows through mainstem rivers to the sea. Because rivers integrate everything in their landscapes, the living organisms found in rivers tell us about the status and quality of their watersheds."

This issue of *River Voices* tackles the question of how river and watershed conservationists can measure our success. In the long run, we can do so only in terms of the health and diversity of our watersheds. That measurement, in turn, will tell us much about the health and viability of our society.

Sincerely,



Ken Margolis
President



© photo by Linda Kilewer

WELCOME River Network Hires New President

We are pleased to announce that previous River Network board chairman Ken Margolis has accepted a position with our organization as president.

As chair of the board Ken helped draft our five-year strategic plan to systematically expand the state and local river and watershed protection movement in the U.S. Most recently, Ken helped found Ecotrust and Ecotrust Canada, organizations devoted to working with local communities in Oregon, the Pacific Northwest and British Columbia. The groups work to strengthen their local economies while protecting the environment.

Founding president Phil Wallin will stay on with River Network as he builds the Riverland Conservancy into a national program. Phil's vision and leadership has made River Network what it is today. We eagerly look forward to his success with the Riverland Conservancy Program. 🐟