

Assessing Citizen and Local River Group Needs for Protecting Wisconsin's Rivers

August 2007

A report produced by the River Alliance of Wisconsin
with assistance from the UW-Stevens Point
Center for Watershed Science and Education



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Executive Summary

The River Alliance of Wisconsin, with the assistance of the University of Wisconsin Stevens Point Center for Watershed Science and Education, the University of Wisconsin-Extension and the Department of Natural Resources conducted a series of listening sessions to learn the most useful format and methods to offer support to local river and watershed groups throughout the state, and the topics of greatest need for local groups. Information gathered through the listening sessions will guide reform of services offered to local groups by the River Alliance, and generates ideas for services that could best be provided through a cooperative effort by two or more of the organizations participating in the project.

Six themes summarize the range of needs identified through the listening sessions.

1. Communicating Environmentally

Local groups need assistance communicating effectively - with their members, with potential allies and future members, and with local government. Needed communication assistance runs the gamut from financial and technical help to developing educational campaigns.

2. One-stop Information Shopping

Many groups struggle to find the information and resources they need, and identified the need for a reliable contact person to provide information directly, or to point them to the best source. The second most popular means mentioned was a comprehensive website providing links to multiple resources.

3. Getting Up Close and Personal with DNR

Understanding DNR's work and priorities, and having a working relationship with regional DNR staff was deemed to be very important to every person providing input to this project.

4. No More Statewide Conferences

Statewide conferences in general are not popular due to the expense and time required. Forums that are short, focused on regional topics with one engaging, educational presentation and plenty of opportunity for networking are of great value to local groups.

5. Making Better Connections

Local groups recognize the importance of sharing successes, tips, techniques and resources among groups facing similar issues, and are interested in opportunities to work with other groups to leverage funding and awareness.

6. Different Groups, Different Needs

Many of the local groups that have taken part in River Alliance workshops found them useful, but some groups have more advanced organizational needs than the workshops provide, while other smaller groups have chosen to not to focus on building their organization.

The recommendations to address these needs call for actions by all of the organizations participating in the project:

1. Create a Rivers Program within DNR, including central staff to articulate policy and ensure consistent application throughout the state, and at least one river point person in each region, similar to the Lakes Program.
2. Clarify University of Wisconsin Extension staff resources in each region: where basin educators are not available, provide river contacts.
3. Develop and maintain a comprehensive “Rivers Portal,” perhaps modeled after the Wisconsin Lakes Partnership web page on the DNR web site, including resources and programs available through the River Alliance, DNR, University of Wisconsin-Extension and other entities such as the Center for Land Use Education.
4. Create a periodic rivers-focused newsletter for electronic and mailed distribution, similar to the Lake Tides newsletter managed by University of Wisconsin-Extension, to supplement the Rivers Portal, market available resources and programs, and alert groups about upcoming events, hearings and issues.
5. Establish a “match-maker” to reach out to groups, direct them to other groups or resources according to their needs, and help convene forums among groups that may have overlapping interests, projects and watershed connections.
6. Develop new workshops and short forums to address the top needs identified: outreach, communication and working with government.
7. Establish regular, short, issue-specific forums tailored to each region, featuring the expertise of DNR, University of Wisconsin, University of Wisconsin-Extension and other agencies as needed.
8. Seek funding or leverage resources to offer trainings by national organizations to interested local groups.

1. Project Purpose

To learn the most useful format and methods to offer support to local river and watershed groups throughout the state and the topics of greatest need for local groups, the River Alliance of Wisconsin, with the assistance of the University of Wisconsin Stevens Point Center for Watershed Science and Education, the University of Wisconsin Extension and the Department of Natural Resources conducted a series of listening sessions throughout the state. Information gathered through the listening sessions will guide reform of services offered to local groups by the River Alliance, and lists ideas for services that could best be provided through a cooperative effort by two or more of the organizations participating in the project.

2. Project Background

Active involvement by local citizens and watershed organizations is key to the protection and restoration of rivers. The River Alliance's Local Groups Program helps Wisconsin river groups organize in their communities and provides tools and training to help groups be effective. We offer workshops, technical trainings, one-on-one consultation and how-to guides on technical and organizational topics, an online directory of local group contacts to promote information-sharing among groups, and various forms of electronic communication to alert and inform local groups about a range of issues. We have also hosted semi-annual statewide conferences to provide special trainings, presentations on pertinent topics and networking opportunities.

A series of events triggered the need to evaluate the services offered to local groups. First, a new Local Groups Program Manager joined the River Alliance in 2006, creating the opportunity take a fresh look at the needs of local groups across the state. Second, demand for some of the workshops has not been as high as in years past. Finally, the 2006 statewide conference was poorly attended, even though the event was held in two locations to provide easier access to groups in the northern and southern parts of the state. To improve services and provide needed support to local groups, the River Alliance decided to hold listening sessions in three locations around the state to hear directly from groups and learn their current needs and interests.

Parallel to this evaluation of River Alliance services, staff from the River Alliance, Trout Unlimited, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, the University of Wisconsin and University of Wisconsin-Extension had a series of meetings to discuss the value, potential composition and responsibilities of a Rivers Partnership, modeled after the successful Wisconsin Lakes Partnership. The Lakes Partnership is a collaborative effort between DNR, University of Wisconsin-Extension and the Wisconsin Association of Lakes to accomplish watershed restoration and lake protection goals. DNR supplies technical expertise and regulatory authority, University of Wisconsin-Extension provides educational resources and training, and WAL brings together local lake groups and volunteers. Activities supported by the Partnership include citizen volunteer monitoring, lake research, pollution prevention, aquatic plant protection, training and education, land and water regulation and dissemination of community assistance grants. In turn, participation in the partnership instills a comprehensive view of lake management within DNR and University of Wisconsin-Extension, and helps build productive relationships between lake organizations, property owners and local governments.

Local river groups currently have access to some of these same services: DNR offers River Planning and River Management grants; the University of Wisconsin-Extension provides citizen volunteer monitoring training through the Water Action Volunteers program; and as noted above, the River Alliance offers training for local group development, serves as the hub of a statewide network of local river groups, and alerts citizens to issues impacting rivers. A Rivers Partnership could help elevate river issues, enhance services available to local river groups, and focus DNR resources to comprehensive river management.

The Rivers Partnership discussion group considered conducting a detailed survey of Wisconsin watershed groups and other river interests to learn what gaps in support services could best be provided through a partnership, and to determine what role and service each partner could provide. Instead, the discussion group recommended expanding and enhancing the River Alliance's evaluation process to include more local groups and to pose questions to inform improvements to River Alliance support services as well as needs that could best be addressed through a partnership effort. Funds were provided by the University of Wisconsin – Stevens Point Center for Watershed Science and Education to increase the number of listening sessions and to provide facilitation of each session.

This report summarizes the comments provided by participants at five listening sessions around the state, highlights local needs that are not currently being met, and suggests ways the River Alliance and potential partners can fill those identified gaps.

3. Project Methodology

3.1 Participant Selection

To ensure broad participation, five listening session locations were chosen based on regional density of known local groups. Of the 150 groups listed in the River Alliance Local Groups Directory, more than two thirds identify themselves as river, watershed or lake *and* river groups, typically formed to focus on protection of a specific river or basin. The remaining one third identify themselves as fishing and paddling organizations, but often are involved in river protection efforts as well. Our intention was to include groups from both categories, and to involve groups that had used our services and workshops in the past as well as groups that had not. The locations chosen to accommodate the most groups based on statewide distribution while ensuring an hour or less drive time for those groups were Green Bay, Baraboo, Jefferson, Rhinelander and Spooner.

3.2 Listening Session Development

River Alliance staff worked with the Rivers Partnership discussion group to develop a series of questions soliciting information about where local groups seek out information and assistance, how they go about seeking this information, and what they need for additional support. To keep each session to an hour and a half, four multi-part discussion questions were posed:

1. What are your organization's greatest needs in each of these areas? For each category, please also explain where you think you would go to meet these needs and what types of help you would like in meeting them.

- a. Conducting watershed projects (planning, getting data, prioritizing activities, getting technical assistance, fundraising)
 - b. Strengthening your organization (getting volunteers, fundraising, board issues)
 - c. Education (technical watershed topics, e.g., nonpoint runoff)
 - d. Voicing concerns about watershed problems (talking to local officials, speaking in public meetings)
 - e. Are there any other big needs we haven't talked about?
2. How would your group benefit from learning about the successes other watershed groups have had with projects, programs, advocacy, etc.? How would you like to exchange information with your peers?
 3. Would it help you be a better advocate for your river if you understood DNR's river program and priorities? What do you think the DNR's river priorities should be?
 4. Are there other needs or issues your group is having that you would like to share tonight?

The questions were included in the invitations to potential participants to help them understand the purpose of the listening session and to allow them to prepare.

To ensure participants in the listening sessions felt free to speak their minds and to allow staff to focus on listening and taking careful notes, a facilitator was arranged for each session. In addition to keeping discussion on track and providing consistency, the facilitator was also prepared with a series of prompts to help clarify the questions and to draw out specific issues that may not otherwise have been addressed. Catherine Neiswender, former River Alliance Board member with a natural resource education background, facilitated the Green Bay and Jefferson sessions. She was unable to attend the Baraboo and Rhinelander meetings, so Allison Werner, Local Groups Program Manager with the River Alliance stepped in. Amanda Kostner, former education and communications specialist for the Marinette County Conservation Department facilitated the Spooner session.

As the discussion questions were intended to elicit comments pertinent to DNR and University of Wisconsin-Extension as well as to the River Alliance, local DNR and Extension staff were also invited to listen. At least two River Alliance staff took notes at each session to ensure every comment was captured. All staff present were seated behind the participants and were introduced at the beginning of each session, but the facilitator asked listening session participants to forget about the "flies on the wall" and to speak freely and critically.

The listening sessions were conducted in February and March 2007, each one beginning at 6:30 p.m. and kept on track by the facilitator to allow for an 8:00 p.m. completion. Each session ended on time, but participants typically stayed longer to talk with staff or network with the other participants.

3.3 Additional Information Gathering

The discussion questions focused on support services local groups felt were lacking, and identifying local groups' needs. To round out the discussion questions, to find out what services and resources local groups have used in the past and to whom they turn to get them, a short written questionnaire was also distributed to participating groups to fill in before the listening session. Staff considered distributing the written questionnaire to all listening session invitees, but were concerned that most

would fill out the questionnaire and then decide not to come to the session. A few listening session invitees who were not able to attend but were interested in participating were provided the written questionnaire, and their responses have been compiled with the session participants' questionnaires. The questionnaire is attached in Appendix A.

In addition to the listening session discussions and written questionnaires, this report also incorporates pertinent comments from a listening session conducted with a range of Wisconsin River-oriented groups in December 2006; comments collected at a retreat sponsored by the River Alliance and attended by local groups with paid staff, also held in December 2006; and information gathered through interviews with representatives of a few local groups unable to participate in the listening sessions, and individual River Alliance members.

3.4 Data Analysis and Conclusions

All responses from the listening sessions, written questionnaires and complementary conversations were compiled and emerging themes were identified. As the information gathered at the listening sessions and through other conversations is qualitative in nature, the written questionnaire provided an opportunity for quantifiable results to be used in concert with the listening session results and to supplement the themes. Verbatim comments from the listening sessions, with participant's names removed, are available upon request to provide background and context for the themes. A series of recommendations and strategies for both the River Alliance and to forward the partnership discussion conclude the report, which will be distributed to the River Partnership discussion group and listening sessions participants.

4. Participation

A total of 127 groups were invited to attend the five listening sessions, with an average of 25 invitees per session. All invitees lived within an approximately one hour driving radius of the listening session location. To ensure a diversity of comments, groups were asked to send just one member. Each of the 127 groups received a written invitation and a follow-up personal phone call or email. Those who committed to attend the session were sent the written questionnaire to complete and drop off at their listening session.

A total of 24 groups sent a representative to a listening session (see Appendix B for map and list of participating groups), with an average of just under 5 participants per session, resulting in a 19% response rate. While the goal of the project was to solicit input from as many groups as possible, the average attendance proved to work well for the format. For example, the Baraboo session had 7 participants, and it was difficult to complete the discussion in the allotted time. The Spooner session, with only three participants, allowed for more in-depth discussion and exchange of information.

The written questionnaire was provided to each of the groups that committed to send a member to a listening session, and to a few groups that wanted to provide input but could not attend any of the sessions. A total of 39 questionnaires were distributed and 19 were returned (49% response rate), 14 by listening session participants and 5 by other groups.

In addition, approximately 20 groups and individual members of the River Alliance were contacted by email or phone and asked to participate in a 10-minute phone interview to gather supplementary information; 4 chose to participate and their comments are incorporated in the report.

5. Listening Session Process and Observations

The sessions and invitations were planned with the recognition that expecting participants to dedicate an evening and a few hours of driving with little direct benefit to them is a lot to ask. In addition to asking local groups to help us in order to provide better service to them, the sessions were planned to allow time up front for each group to share stories of their successes, and to encourage participants to meet and learn from each other. Time was also allotted to briefly describe River Alliance services and resources and announce upcoming events.

At each of the listening sessions, it was clear that participants enjoyed and benefited from the opportunity to make connections with other groups in their region, build relationships, and learn from each other. Discussion during the listening session and conversations following the structured questions reinforced the value of bringing neighboring groups together. On the other hand, discussion was occasionally sidetracked as participants questioned each other about issues and experiences, making it difficult to keep to the structured discussion questions. In these instances, the facilitator asked participants to hold their conversation to the end of the session, and most participants stayed at least an additional half hour talking with their new contacts.

Having staff observe as “flies on the wall” worked well for the most part and did not appear to hinder straightforward and sometimes critical comments about the River Alliance, DNR or University of Wisconsin-Extension. There were a few occasions, however, when participants turned to staff to ask questions, but in most instances staff reminded them that they were just observers until the discussion questions were completed.

At a few of the sessions, a specific issue relevant to the region prevailed throughout the session. For example, the march of aquatic invasive species into northern Wisconsin was mentioned early on at the Rhinelander session, and most of the discussion thereafter was influenced by the topic. As a result, it was more difficult for the facilitator to keep to the structured discussion questions, and answers to the questions were less direct. None the less, answers were gleaned from the discussion, and the participating groups found they had common issues and goals, and reasons to work together.

Finally, an unanticipated benefit to the project was that it provided an opportunity for the River Alliance to update the online Local Groups Directory. The Directory was designed so that each group could access and update its own data, such as contact information and group mission. As with any membership database, it has been a struggle to keep current. With the dogged assistance of a River Alliance intern, all local groups in the Directory were contacted and vitals updated to ensure invitations to the listening sessions would reach their destinations. This exercise also confirmed that six groups were in fact defunct. The Local Groups Directory is now current and available.

6. Results

6.1 Compilation of Listening Session Responses

All responses to discussion questions and related commentary at each listening session were recorded by River Alliance staff. A matrix was developed for each session matching comments to each participant, and participants were given an opportunity to review the proceedings from their session to confirm their comments were recorded accurately.

Discussion stemming from Questions 1 (needs) and 3 (what do groups want from DNR) took up the majority of the allotted time for each listening session.

Question 1: What are your organization's greatest needs?

Once all the matrices were completed and confirmed, River Alliance staff with the assistance of Catherine Neiswender developed a list of topics reflecting all issues mentioned more than once, and coded each comment by topic. While participants were not directly asked about priority river issues, a number were raised in response to this question. The results are therefore separated into two categories of topics: needs for services and resources; and river issues of concern.

The following graphs show the number of times each of these needs and issues were mentioned by participants. The needs and issues came up throughout the listening sessions, but the results are presented under Question 1, where the question was first asked.

Most of the “needs” topics are straightforward, but a few encompass a range of subjects:

- Outreach/communications - includes learning how to effectively market and build community support for their organization and develop campaigns and educational programs, as well as assistance with maintaining websites and printing and mailing newsletters.
- Information clearinghouse - refers to a single point of contact for information and for interacting with other local groups
- Technical assistance – includes indirect and direct assistance with planning and executing in-the-river work, and instruction about applicable rules and regulations affecting river restoration projects.
- Data – includes access to DNR-collected data and assistance with planning for and collecting data for specific local group needs.

Figure 1 shows that four needs clearly rise to the top: assistance with communication and outreach within communities; a simple, one-stop method to get and share information; training in how to work with local government and influence decision-making; and money – more of it to accomplish their mission, and help getting it.

Figure 2 shows differences in responses among sessions, in part attributable to differences in the number of participants at each session.

Figure 1: Needs Mentioned at Listening Sessions

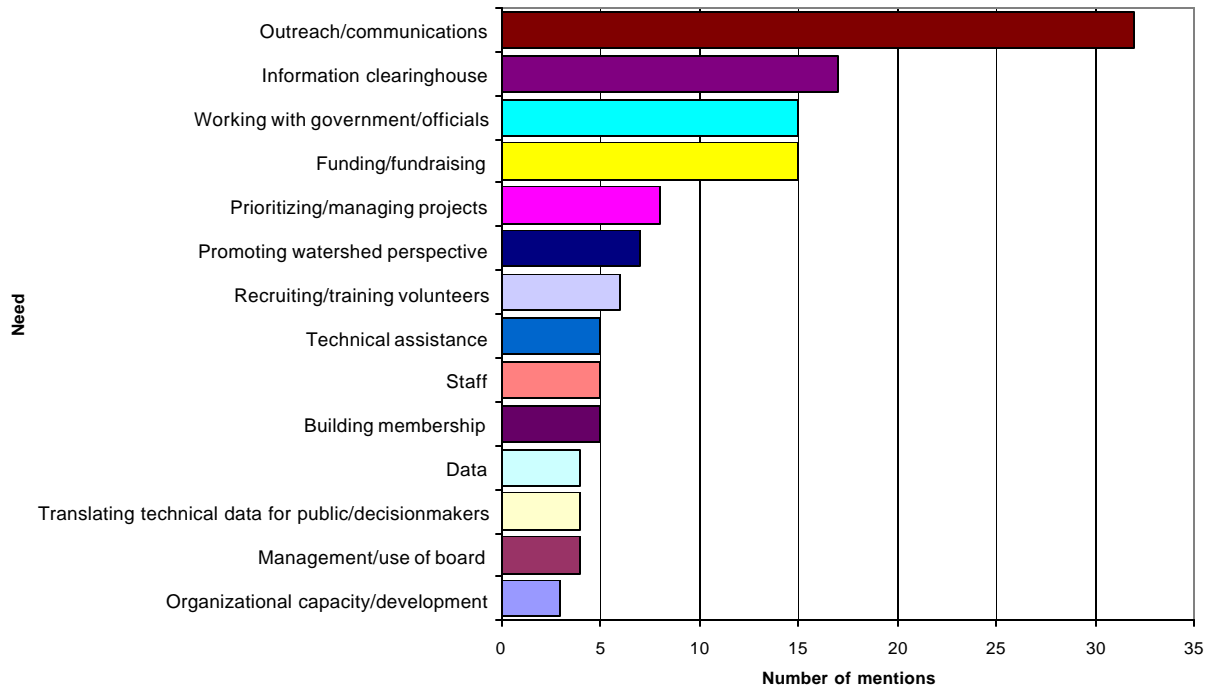


Figure 2: Needs Mentioned at Listening Sessions, By Location

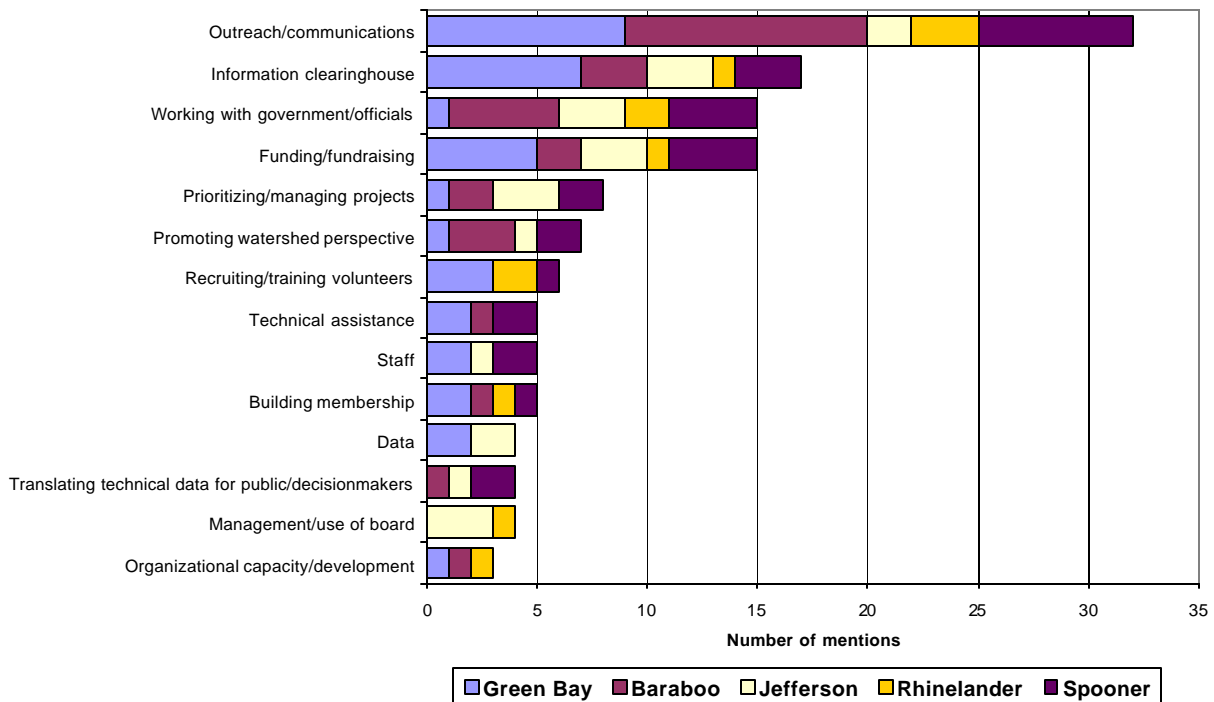


Figure 3 demonstrates that similar to the list of identified needs, a few priority issues rose to the top: invasive species, development and pollution. As Figure 4 shows, the priority river issues identified by listening session participants varied by region, and typically reflect a current problem or activity in the region. Aquatic invasive species are the top concern in the north, especially in the lake-rich northeast where local groups are primarily combined lake and river associations. Development and its impacts on rivers are also of concern in the north, but the concerns were most prominent in the rapidly developing Wisconsin River corridor near the Dells. Dam removal was a primary concern at the Spooner session as there is a nearby, controversial dam removal project in the works, but the issue was not mentioned at any of the other sessions.

Figure 3: River Issues Mentioned at Listening Sessions

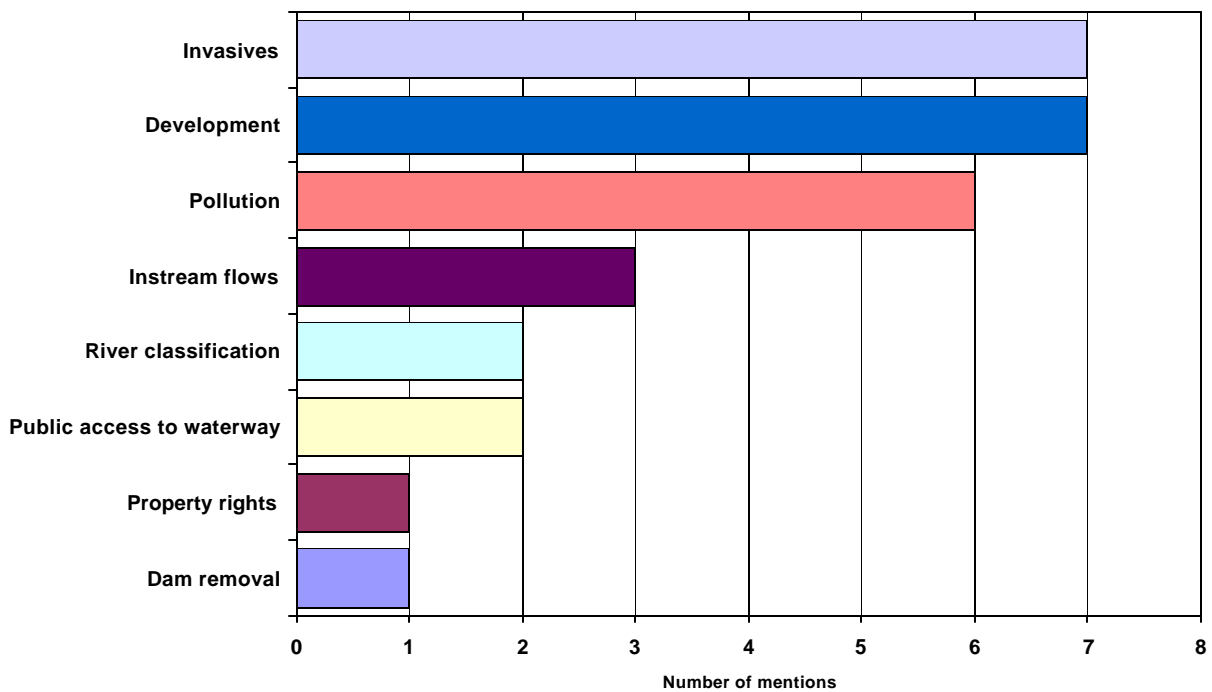
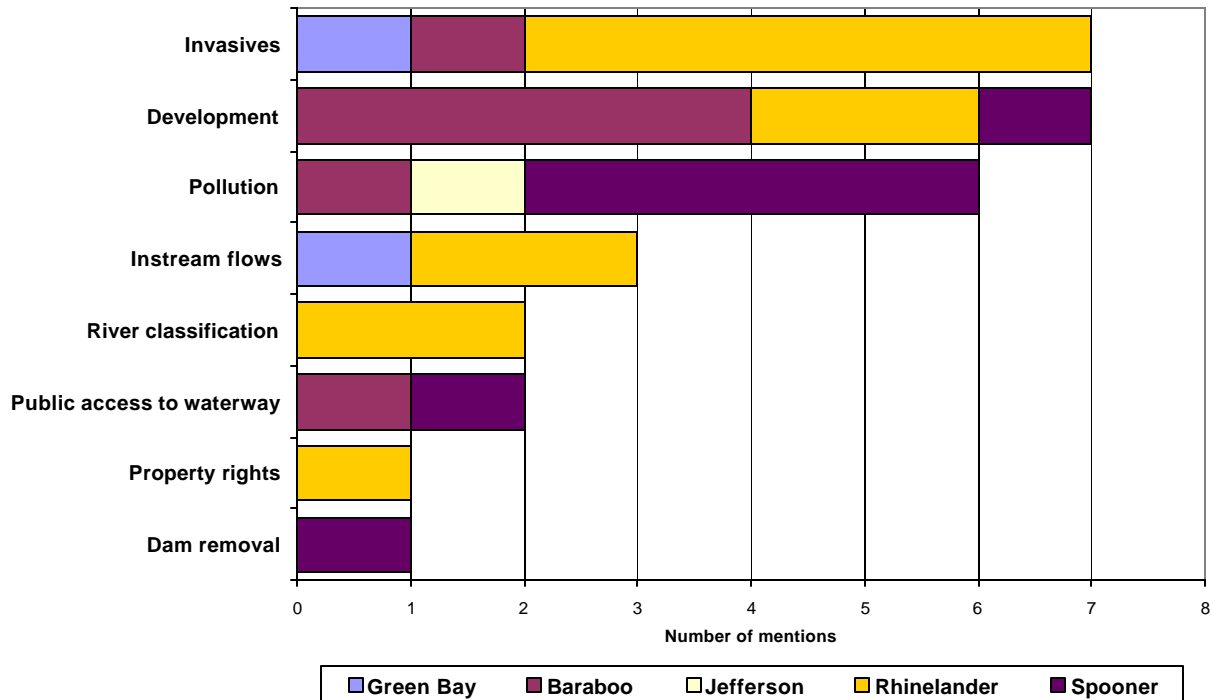


Figure 4: River Issues Mentioned at Listening Sessions, By Location



Question 2: How would you benefit from learning about other groups, and how would you like to exchange information?

This question was intended to gather information about the value of conferences and other opportunities for local groups to network, and to learn how groups prefer to communicate. If conferences were not mentioned in the response, the facilitator prompted discussion by asking whether participants attended River Alliance or other statewide conferences, and if not, why not.

Participants universally stated that learning about and from other local groups was valuable to their work, but there was little consistency in how groups prefer to network. One very clear message, however, was that statewide conferences were not preferred by anyone. Of the 24 participants, only 2 attended past River Alliance conferences. Reasons cited for not attending were: not enough time, too far to travel; costs too much; and lack of interest in the topics. Regionally oriented, half-day-or-less workshops were preferred.

Question 3: Would it help to know DNR’s priorities, how would it help, and what should they be?

Participants vigorously agreed it would be helpful to their work to understand DNR’s priorities, statewide and especially in their regions. Comments about how this would be helpful and what the priorities should be were varied, and are described in detail in the Themes section, below.

Question 4: Any other issues?

A few participants reiterated their earlier comments, but no new issues were raised.

6.2 Compilation of Written Questionnaire Responses

The written questionnaire provided quantifiable information about services used now and in the past by participating local groups, and an indication of the most pressing issues in their watersheds. The combined results from the 19 respondents follow.

Question 1: How are you currently involved with DNR, UWEX and River Alliance?

Figures 5 and 6 indicate that River Alliance, DNR and University of Wisconsin-Extension are all contacted on a variety of topics, though each specializes in certain areas. For example, local groups rely most on DNR for information and data about their watersheds, and on the River Alliance for organizational assistance. All sources were relied upon to lead meetings. University of Wisconsin-Extension is consulted for many services, but is not the primary source for any of the services listed in the questionnaire.

Groups also frequently contact other agencies and organizations for assistance. UW-Stevens Point and local service providers such as county and city government were most often mentioned in the “other” category, and are most often relied upon to help with a specific problem in a group’s watershed. Some groups also listed Gathering Waters Conservancy, the Wisconsin League of Conservation Voters, Trout Unlimited and national organizations such as River Network, American Rivers and Trout Unlimited as sources of support and information.

Figure 5: Agency/organization contacted, by topic (16 total responses)

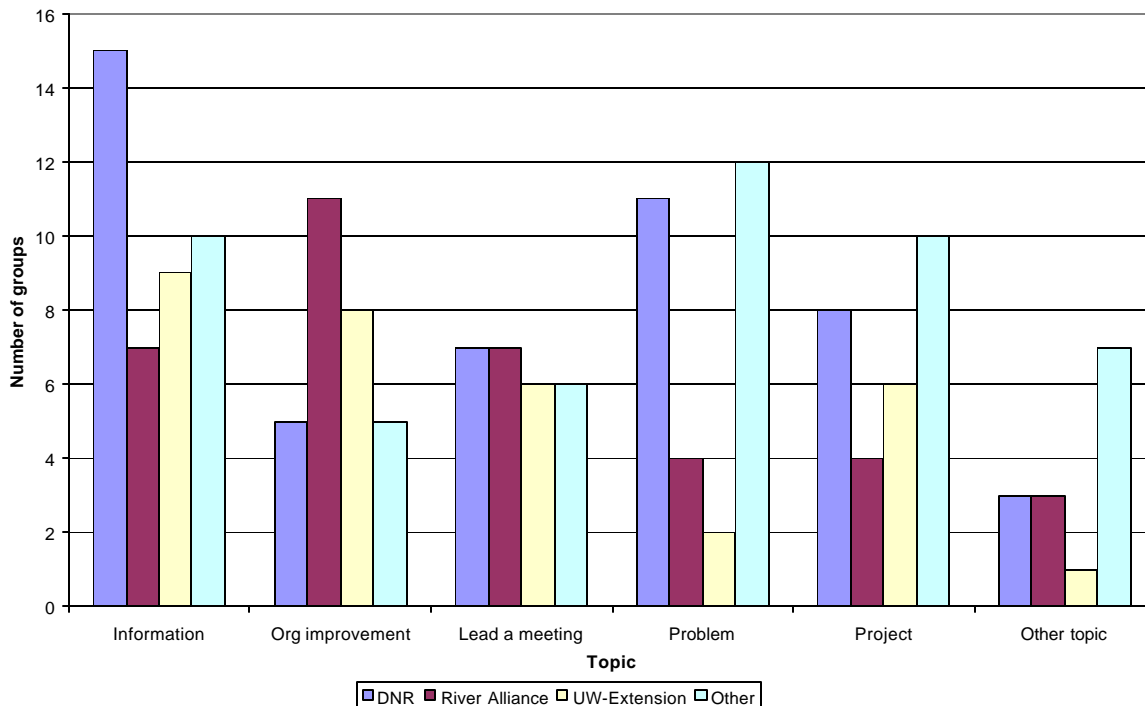
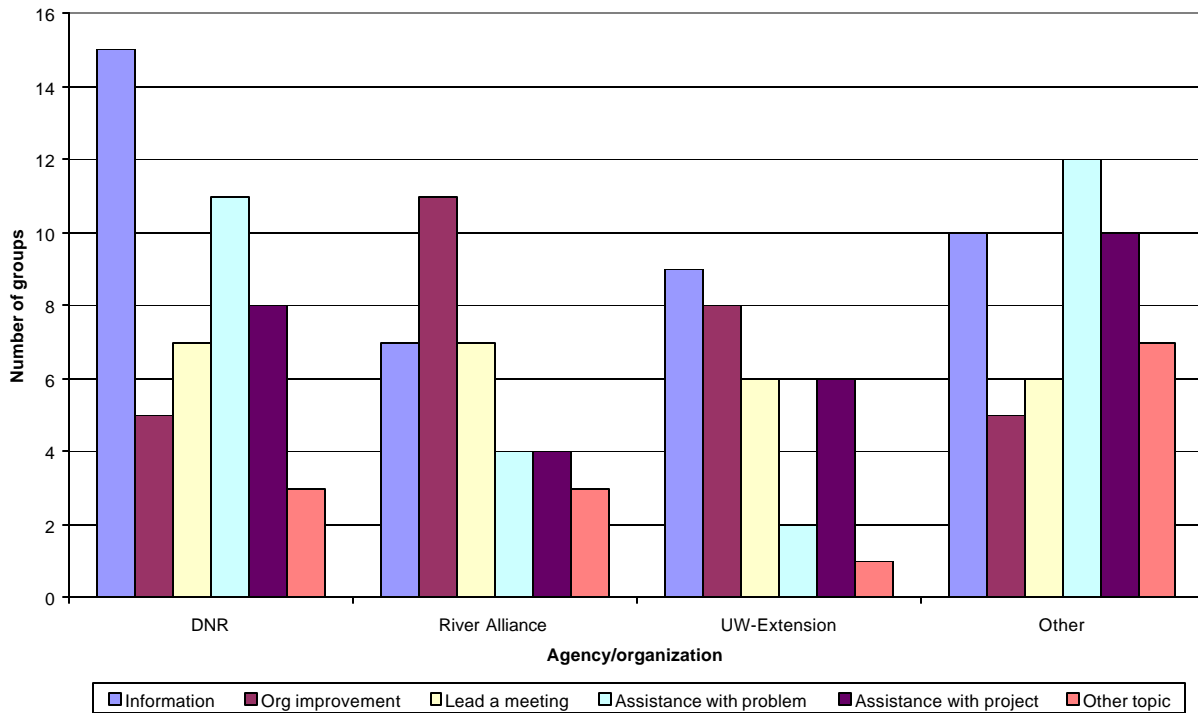


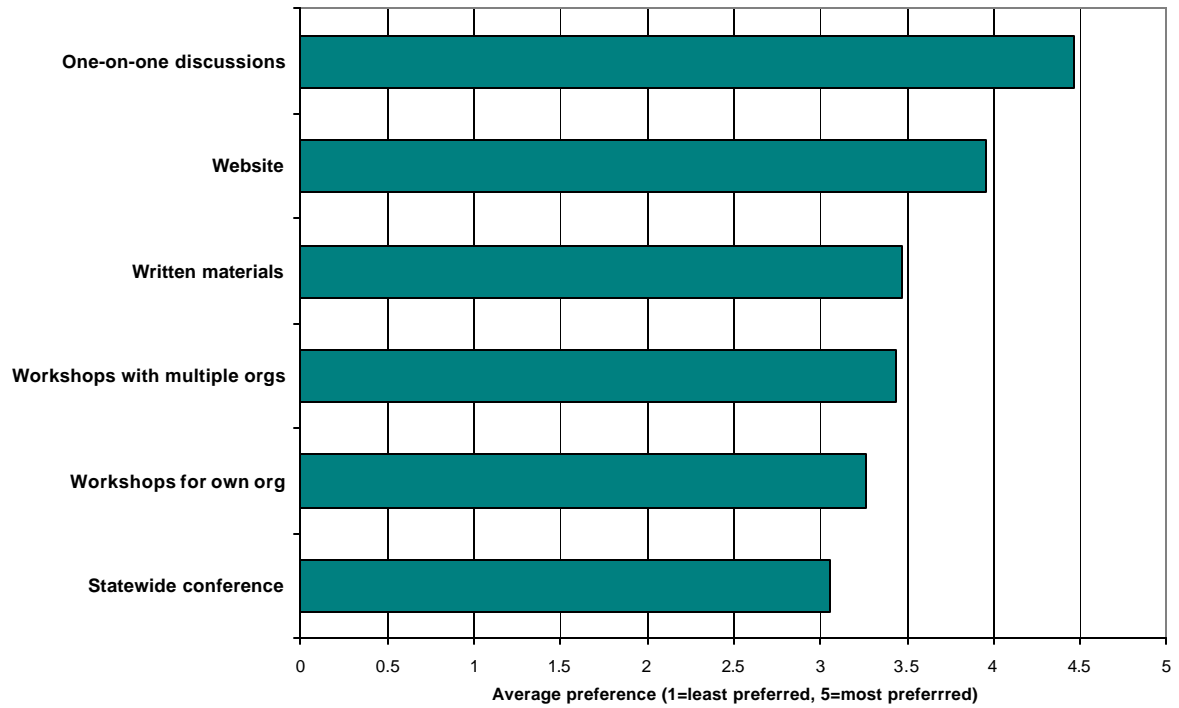
Figure 6: Type of assistance provided, by agency/org (16 total responses)



Question 2: What methods do you prefer for receiving watershed information?

Similar to the results of the listening sessions, Figure 7 demonstrates that respondents prefer one-on-one assistance when available, and rely upon web access for materials. Statewide conferences appeared to be the least preferred option.

Figure 7: Preferred method of receiving information (19 total responses)



Question 3: Which of these River Alliance resources do you currently use?

Figure 8: Use of River Alliance outreach materials (15 total responses)

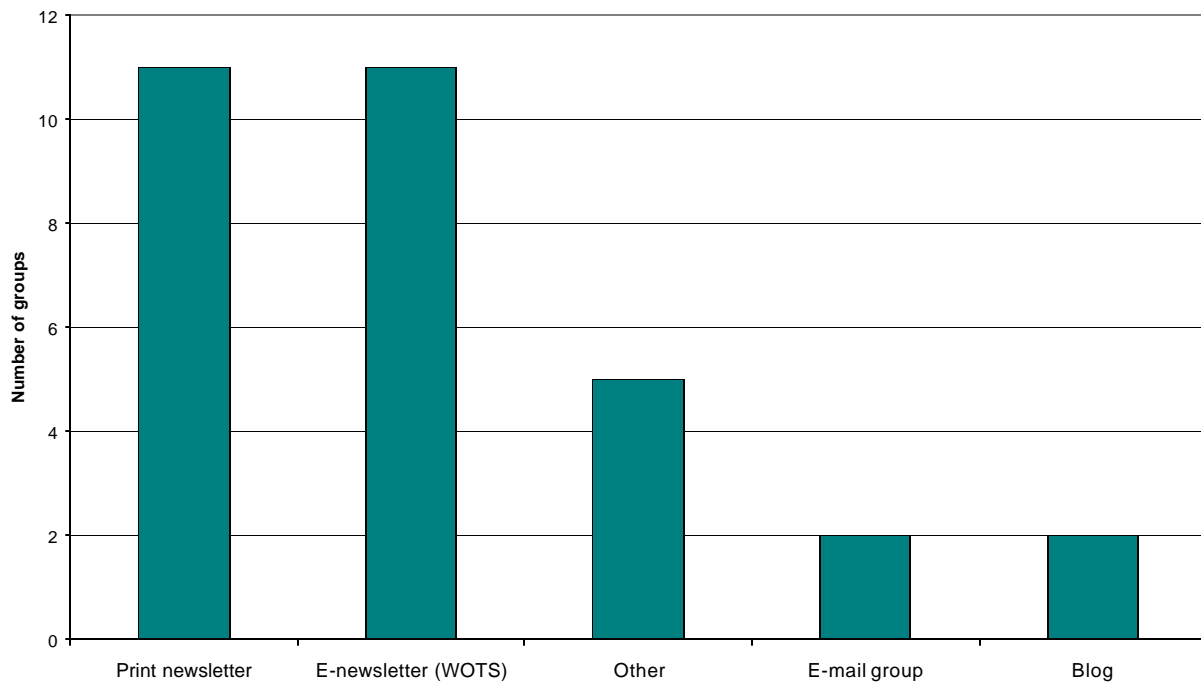
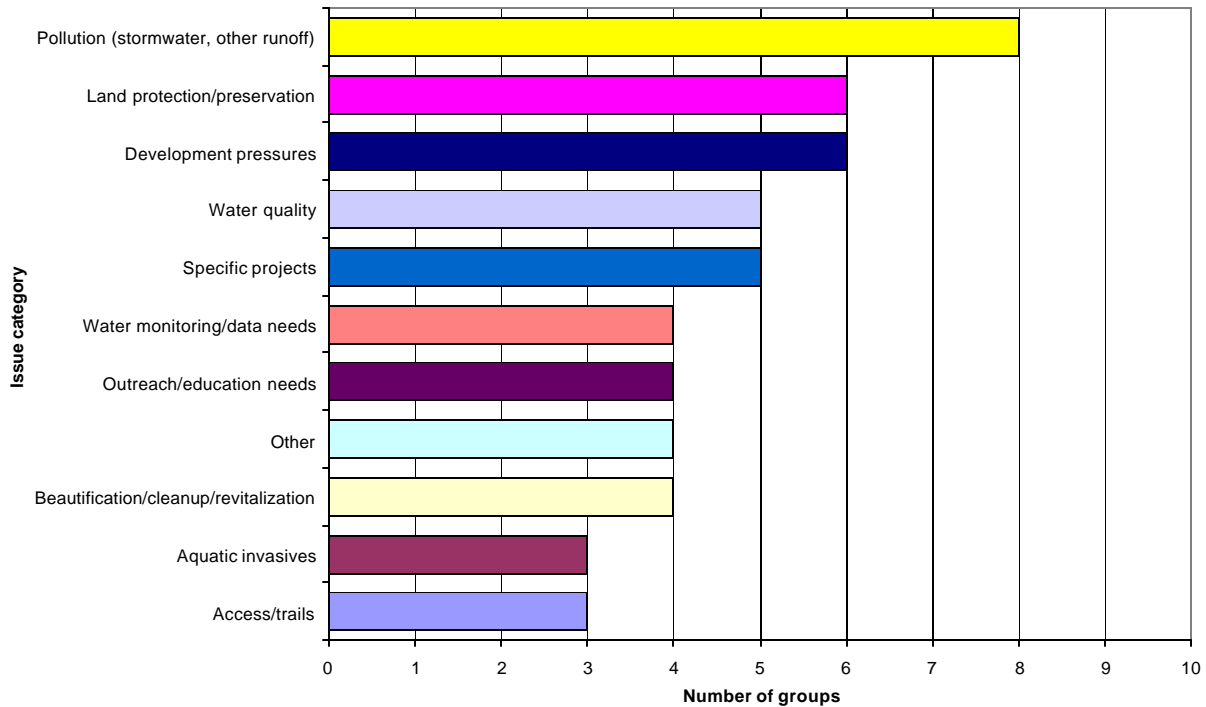


Figure 8 indicates that one-way newsletters (electronic and print) seem to be the most preferred option. Attempts at more interactive outreach (blog and e-mail group) have been less successful.

Question 4: Which three watershed issues are a priority for your group at this time?

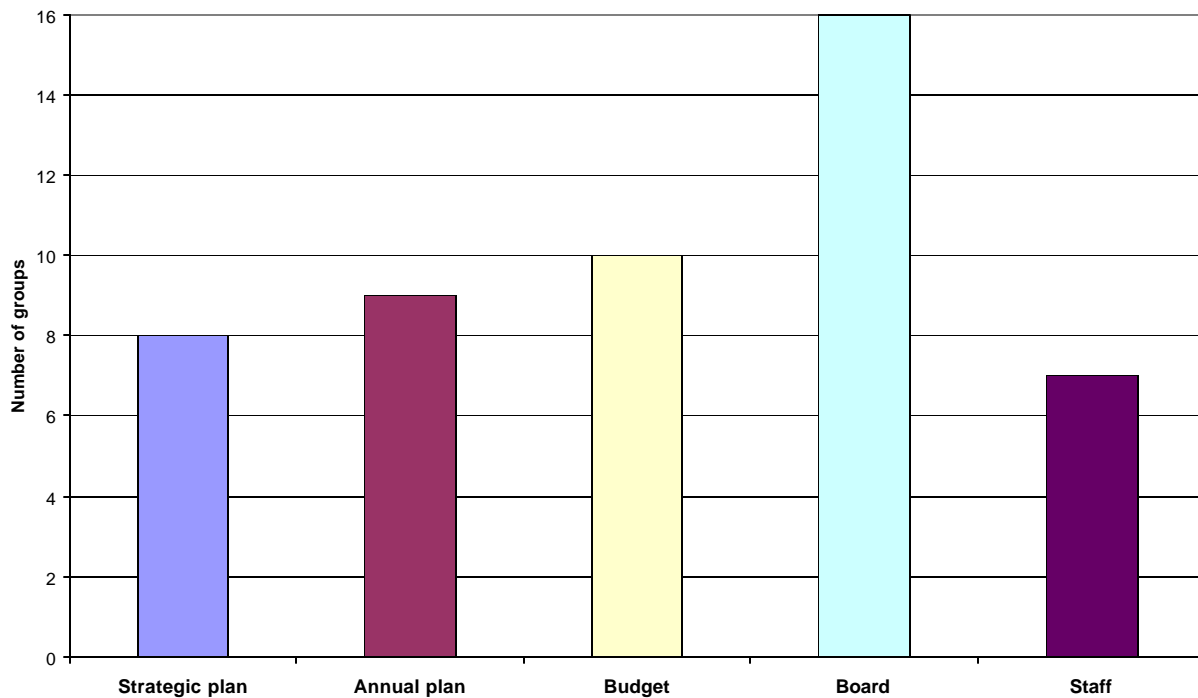
Figure 9: Top watershed issues (17 total responses)



As expected, Figure 9 shows that groups raised a wide variety of topics, with pollution issues selected by more than half the groups as top priorities. Many of these issues were the same as those raised at the listening sessions, with the exception of beautification/clean-up/revitalization. While the question asked about watershed issues, a few responses reflect local group needs, specifically, outreach/education needs and water monitoring/data needs. Both of these categories of needs were also raised in the listening sessions.

Question 5: Does your organization have a:

Figure 10: Organizational components (17 total respondents)



According to Figure 10, while most of the participating groups have a Board of Directors or steering committee, half or less than half have developed plans and a budget, or have staff.

6.3 Pertinent Comments from the Wisconsin River Listening Session and Staffed Groups Retreat

In December 2006, the River Alliance convened members of river groups along the length of the Wisconsin River. The intent of the session was to bring together groups that had not worked together in the past, learn what they were doing and how they might work together toward common goals, and develop ideas for River Alliance support for their efforts. Comments about the type of support needed closely mirrored the points raised at the five Spring 2007 listening sessions, with outreach/communications, information clearing house, working with local government and fundraising again rising to the top.

The Staffed Groups Retreat focused on the special organizational and financial needs of the six local river groups that had or were looking to hire paid employees, but discussion also touched on the most pressing river issues for each participant's watershed, and how River Alliance could provide additional support. The six participating groups raised a few river issues that were not mentioned during the listening sessions, namely impacts of factory farms, groundwater connections, and urban river issues such as piped and concrete river beds and failing sewage systems. Support needs, however, were very similar to the most popular ideas raised at the listening sessions. The information clearinghouse concept was raised several times, along with the need for regional networking opportunities and a closer relationship with DNR.

6.4 Supplementary Conversations with Other River Groups and Individuals

One of the goals of the project was to learn from other river interests – riverfront property owners, individuals whose work depends upon healthy rivers, and people who are not part of a local group but work on river protection issues – how they might benefit from a Rivers Partnership. To that end, short interviews were conducted with some of the local groups who could not attend a listening session, as well as individuals meeting the descriptions above. Each of the interviews consisted of the following questions:

1. Who do you go to for information and support on river issues?
2. What are the most pressing issues?
3. What's missing? What do you need to accomplish your goals?
4. Would it be helpful to have more direct assistance from DNR?

Because some of the interviewees were a different audience than the local groups participating in the listening sessions, one would expect different answers. Some of the interviews did reveal a few different river issues than had been raised in the listening sessions, including impacts of ATVs, climate change and drought, and uncertainty about preservation of public lands. Responses to the remaining questions, however, were very much in line with the comments generated at the listening sessions and noted in the written questionnaire: River Alliance, DNR and University of Wisconsin-Extension were all relied upon to varying degrees for information and support, a closer relationship with DNR was viewed as important to accomplishing river protection goals, and the top needs mentioned were outreach/communication and raising money.

7. Analysis of All Input

The compilation of comments from the listening sessions, written questionnaire, and supplementary discussions and interviews generates a general picture of the support services needed by Wisconsin river groups. Taken together with the specific comments of the participants and interviewees, 6 primary themes emerged, along with a shortcoming common to the River Alliance, DNR and University of Wisconsin-Extension – inadequate marketing of the services we do provide.

7.1 Themes

Theme 1: Communicating Environmentally

Encompassing several of the most-mentioned topics from the listening sessions, local groups need assistance communicating effectively - with their members, with potential allies and future members, and with local governments. Needed communication assistance runs the gamut from financial and technical help to developing educational campaigns. Specific needs cited by participants include:

- Financial assistance with printing, copying and postage of newsletters and community announcements.
- Technical assistance maintaining websites, contact lists and other Internet communication tools.
- Training in telling a compelling story about the group's mission to build community support and membership, and to reach out to potential allies.
- Advice on how to engage people who are not directly connected to a river, but as residents of the watershed, need to understand the connection of the watershed to the river.
- Advice on how to engage and diplomatically educate landowners such as farmers and shoreland property owners.
- Help understanding government decision-making – state, county, town and city – including who to talk to about what, how to insert themselves into and influence decisions, and what words to use to do so without damaging their credibility in the community.
- Basic training in public presentations.

Theme 2: One-stop Information Shopping

Many groups struggle to find the information and resources they need, and as volunteers dedicating their time, get frustrated spending a lot of time looking. How local groups prefer to get and pass along information varied widely among participants, but the concept of “one-stop-shopping” was important to most. For many, this took the form of a reliable contact person to provide information directly, or to point them to the best source. The second most popular means mentioned was a comprehensive website providing links to multiple resources including local group web pages, chat rooms to post questions and share information, and comprehensive information on grants and application schedules, available 24 hours a day to accommodate volunteers doing their river work after hours. Many had perused DNR's and University of Wisconsin-Extension's websites, but were frequently unable to navigate the sites or find what they needed.

While most saw the value of a comprehensive website, local group members from northern Wisconsin noted that Internet service is not always reliable, many areas are still limited to dial-up

service, and computer ownership is not as prevalent as other parts of the state. One participant asked for help raising technology access in the north, and for agencies to tailor resources posted on websites to work with dial-up.

In the written questionnaire, written materials were the third most popular means for disseminating information. Several listening session participants echoed this view, and voiced appreciation for the River Alliance's quarterly newsletter as a useful way to learn about issues around the state. Several participants noted that while e-mailed information and e-mail lists were useful, they receive so many emails they tend to ignore them, while a mailed newsletter always gets read.

This report does not attempt to list every river-related service or resource provided by the River Alliance, DNR and University of Wisconsin-Extension and then compare that list to the compilation of identified needs, but it is clear that services and resources are currently available to meet several of the identified needs. Many participants mentioned specific resources they had used and River Alliance workshops they had attended, but the impression of staff listeners was that in a number of cases, the local groups were not aware of many of the resources and services available today.

Theme 3: Getting Up Close and Personal with DNR

Understanding DNR's work and priorities and having a working relationship with DNR staff were deemed to be very important to every person providing input to this project. Responses to the written questionnaire indicate DNR is the source most relied upon by river groups for data and information about their watershed, and while several listening session participants felt they had a strong partnership with DNR, many more felt that DNR has great potential to help them but that the agency is just stretched too thin.

A few listening session participants cited disagreements they had with DNR staff on specific issues, but overall, participants value the work of DNR regional staff and believe DNR gets a bad rap from some members of the public and local governments. Political and organizational issues were cited as reasons why DNR staff often are not readily accessible or able to communicate their priorities. Groups are aware there have been substantial staff reductions over the past several years, and as one participant noted, DNR has been so consistently embattled by the Legislature, it's hard to see how their environment has been stable enough to *have* long-term priorities. Others commented that staff may not always make the best recommendations out of fear of political reprisal, and that under the current organizational structure with a central, policy-making "political beast" office and regional offices "splintered off," it is much harder to get a clear picture of DNR's priorities.

Interaction between river groups and DNR staff and responsiveness of DNR staff appeared to vary from region to region. In the northern region, listening session participants praised Kathy Bartilson as a "real person" – she attends some river group meetings, exchanges reports with groups, helps them to understand DNR priorities in the area, and is very responsive. One group developed a relationship with regional staff by first fighting with them over a permit issue. DNR now routinely contacts the group for its opinion on permits, via certified mail. Some participants indicated that DNR water leaders are key to their group's work, and that they had a strong partnership with DNR staff, while others stated they had very limited contact with DNR. One participant summed up the thoughts of many: "We would love a DNR point person, when looking for records, data, field protocols - someone we know on a first-name basis".

In addition to information about their watershed, participants noted a few specific technical needs from DNR:

- Up-front assistance with restoration project planning and permit issues
- Bigger grants to accomplish big goals
- Accurate river classification to guide decision making
- Interpretation of technical information for the public and local elected officials

As one participant stated: “Citizens are the true stewards of the waterways, but the DNR usually has the scientific and technical information. Our group could use the deciphered technical information to educate and pass on to citizens so they can be champions of their watershed.”

Groups were especially pleased when DNR contacted them to help. In the central region, a group active in water quality monitoring was contacted by DNR to assist in a watershed study, and others noted instances where DNR approached their group to help with local issues, including:

- Putting up signs, providing education and checking boats at landings for aquatic invasive species
- Inviting kids to participate in stream shocking projects
- Organizing informational meetings

Participants cited a number of reasons a close relationship with DNR and knowing more about regional issues and projects would benefit DNR as well as local groups. In addition to looking to DNR for information, participants often said they wanted to help DNR achieve their goals. Understanding DNR priorities, work planning and upcoming projects in their region would allow local groups to offer up their assistance and provide opportunities to team up with staff on projects and data collection. “We need DNR to better understand the world of nonprofits and how we can help – let us do outreach – we can help them do their job.” Understanding DNR’s work and potential obstacles would also provide background for local groups to advocate for programs in need of support, write letters to legislators and defend DNR proposals at the local level. “More proactive outreach by DNR staff to describe priorities and opportunities helps citizens understand DNR is on their side as a partner in protecting and managing water resources, and could only help in creating a more positive profile in the community.”

Theme 4: No More Statewide Conferences!

As noted earlier, the 2006 River Alliance statewide conference had unexpectedly low attendance despite efforts to make it convenient to groups across the state by holding it in two locations. Considering the time and expense needed to plan and host a conference, River Alliance was especially interested in investigating why attendance was low, and if other forums would better meet the needs of local groups. Responses to both the written questionnaire and the listening session questions indicated statewide conferences in general are not popular. Participants cited the expense and time as primary reasons they did not attend statewide conferences. Concerns about expense included registration, gas, food and lodging; and concerns about time included travel time and time off work to attend. Some also noted that conference topics were often not pertinent to their area or needs.

On the other hand, there was general agreement that forums that were short; focused on regional topics with one engaging, educational presentation; and offered plenty of opportunity for networking are of great value to local groups. Some of the groups that identify themselves as lake and river organizations stated they usually attended the Wisconsin Association of Lakes workshops, which are regional and tend to focus on issues pertinent to them. A number of participants recollected excellent, regional issue-specific presentations they had attended, conducted by DNR, University of Wisconsin-Extension, and the Center for Land Use Education at University of Wisconsin Stevens Point, that had helped with their work and motivated the community. When asked about how they would like to learn more about DNR priorities, several recommended regional seminars conducted by DNR staff and accompanied by written materials to take away. To get as broad an audience as possible, advertising and explicit invitations were suggested.

Theme 5: Making Better Connections

As an ice-breaker exercise at the beginning of each listening session, participants were asked to describe a past success of their groups. These success stories as well as responses to some of the other questions often generated conversation among participants about techniques and resources, and highlighted the value of networking with other groups facing the same issues. For example, one group sends a member to each County Board zoning committee meeting, and over time, their faces have become known, and they are now relied upon for their knowledgeable and reasonable input. Another participant talked about the value of becoming a regular at town meetings, where contacts can be made with citizens who are not “part of the choir,” such as farmers and landowners in the upper parts of a watershed. These insights generated a lot of interest, and as one participant noted: “Our group encounters very few unique problems. Almost everything we work with or think about has been encountered by other groups and usually they have figured out ways to solve these problems, so we can learn from and benefit from other groups’ successes.” And: “Not reinventing the wheel is a good thing - borrowing the wheel is better.”

Another benefit of regional networking is the opportunity for local groups to find ways to work together and leverage resources. In one case, three groups have come together to jointly develop a plan to address the whole watershed, and their collaboration has increased their chances for grant funding to accomplish the plan. One of the listening session participants described what they have been able to accomplish by joining forces as an “umbrella” organization covering a large regional area, and others were very interested in the potential of forming a similar relationship for sharing administrative resources and conducting joint projects.

A comprehensive rivers website with links to local group web pages would provide a means for sharing successes and tips, but participants recognized that “face to face is better for sharing stories – we need to hear and see,” and for brainstorming ways to partner. Making get-togethers fun and friendly was also recommended – make it a potluck and allow plenty of time to get to know each other and share ideas.

Theme 6: Different Groups, Different Needs

One of the initial questions that instigated this project was why demand for some of the workshops offered by River Alliance had declined. River Alliance offers four workshops related to group organization and effectiveness:

Benchmarking Your Success: Six-hour workshop to help groups identify and prioritize ways to become more effective and sustainable for the long term.

Grassroots Fundraising: Six-hour workshop to provide training in fundraising, with a focus on individual giving and grants.

Leadership Development: Five-hour workshop to identify innovative ways to recruit volunteers and build new leaders in the group.

Mini Board Trainings: Three one-hour training sessions on the basics of non-profit board roles and responsibilities, recruiting board members to meet organizational needs, and helping boards function effectively.

Responses to the written questionnaire and listening sessions provide some interesting insights, and provoke even more questions as to why workshop demand has changed, but the bigger realization of staff listeners is that not all groups want or need the workshops offered.

The listening session results show that a number of groups want help with fundraising, yet the Grassroots Fundraising workshop has only been requested four times in the past two years. At least one participant stated they could not afford the cost of workshops, even though the cost is significantly reduced for groups that are official members of River Alliance. Concerns raised about conferences that require commitment of a full day may also apply to long workshops, and it is also likely that many groups simply are not aware the workshop is offered. Another possible explanation is the content of the workshop: groups may be looking for a comprehensive list of potential grants, a calendar of application deadlines and assistance with applications, as mentioned above, instead of help learning how to approach potential donors and asking for money.

Other needs that had fewer mentions are also addressed with River Alliance workshops: prioritizing and managing projects, building membership and organizational/capacity development are addressed in the Benchmarking workshop; recruiting/training volunteers is addressed in the Leadership Development workshop; and management/use of board is addressed in the Mini Board Trainings. A possible reason these needs were mentioned less than others is that several of the participating groups may have already attended these workshops. For those who mentioned these needs, the same concerns described above (cost, time, content) may apply.

The clearest take-away message, however, draws less from the direct answers to the written and discussion questions and more from accompanying conversation. The River Alliance workshops are based on successful techniques employed by non-profits across the country, and are intended to be adaptable to the size, composition, capabilities and goals of each group. The workshops were developed under the assumption that they would benefit *all* groups, and that all groups *want* to be bigger and do more. The underlying assumptions may not be accurate, as one participant stated: “We’ve gone through the drills River Alliance offers, and usually feel awful afterwards because we don’t do most of what they say are good things for groups to do. We finally got used to accepting who we are – a handful of people who get things done, and who don’t need a lot of money.”

On the other end of the spectrum, larger, staffed groups have much more detailed needs than the workshops offer. The workshops may provide a good start, but larger groups need help with non-profit management, financial management and budgeting, more advanced board development assistance and grant management training.

8. Recommendations

Of all the needs identified by river and watershed groups, the most difficult to address is, of course, money. Many resources to address identified needs are currently available, but River Alliance, DNR and University of Wisconsin-Extension can help by improving accessibility, and in some cases, revising programs and materials to better address specific needs. Because of the discrete missions of the River Alliance, DNR and University of Wisconsin-Extension, some services will need to remain unique to each organization, but other services, including seeking funding for watershed group needs, would benefit from joint efforts and leveraging of available resources. Key to responding to the needs of watershed groups, however, is a concentrated river focus by DNR, both internal to the agency and to citizens of the state.

1. **Create a Rivers Program within DNR**, including central staff to articulate policy and ensure consistent application throughout the state, and at least one river point person in each region, similar to the Lakes Program. Building a Rivers Program should be the first priority of the new DNR Rivers Coordinator.

- The regional point person is the face of rivers for local groups and citizens, providing a watershed perspective, education about local issues, communication about DNR priorities and projects and how local groups can assist.
- The regional point person must be responsive to local groups, and proactive about organizing forums to educate the public on pertinent issues and provide river advocates with the information they need, in the most useful format for their needs.

2. **Clarify University of Wisconsin-Extension staff resources in each region**: where basin educators are not available, provide river contacts.

3. **Develop and maintain a comprehensive “Rivers Portal,”** perhaps modeled after the Wisconsin Lakes Partnership web page on the DNR web site, including resources and programs available through the River Alliance, DNR, University of Wisconsin-Extension and other entities such as the Center for Land Use Education.

- Development of the portal would help identify and sort out overlaps, possible inconsistencies and cross-references
- The portal could also include:
 - Watershed maps and links to basin information
 - Comprehensive list of grants applicable to group organizational development, in-river projects and river protection efforts, with application timelines
 - Links to watershed group websites and event announcements
 - Contact information for staff
 - Periodic highlighting of available programs and services, areas of expertise and public presentation opportunities
- Ideally, maintenance of the portal would also include on-line assistance to local groups in maintenance of their websites

4. **Create a periodic rivers-focused newsletter for electronic and print distribution**, similar to the Lake Tides newsletter managed by University of Wisconsin-Extension, to supplement the Rivers

Portal, market available resources and programs, and alert groups about upcoming events, hearings and issues.

5. **Establish a “match-maker” to reach out to groups**, direct them to other groups or resources according to their needs, and help convene forums among groups that may have overlapping interests and projects. While the Rivers Portal provides the means for groups to seek out information and assistance, the newsletter and match-making function proactively engage groups and introduce them to opportunities that may not be apparent.

6. **Develop new workshops and short forums to address the top needs identified:** outreach, communication and working with government. Consideration of cost and time commitment should be factored into workshop development.

Note: A number of river groups in northern Wisconsin asked for help countering the strong property rights messages prevailing in development issues in the north. In response, River Alliance sought out funding to develop a workshop to help northern river groups learn effective communication strategies and public speaking basics, build relationships with elected officials and influence community behavior. Three regional workshops are scheduled in September, and a grant from Patagonia allows the fee to be kept to a minimum. Additional workshops could be tailored to respond to regional issues, modified to focus on helping groups determine their role in dealing with local development issues, or revised to address the more complex aspects of working in urban areas with multiple government agencies and interests.

7. **Establish regular, short, issue-specific forums tailored to each region**, featuring the expertise of DNR, University of Wisconsin, University of Wisconsin-Extension and other agencies as needed.

8. **For groups looking for advanced training, seek funding or leverage resources to offer trainings by national organizations.** For example, River Network, Institute for Conservation Leadership and The Nature Conservancy provide courses and programs of value to watershed groups, but many need help with associated costs. Continue to provide assistance to groups to attend River Rally and other networking and learning events.

9. Next Steps

River Alliance staff and members of the Rivers Partnership discussion group met to discuss these 8 recommendations and suggest steps to follow up. Recommendation 1, creating a rivers program in DNR, and consideration of a new staffed office to be the “one stop shopping” rivers resource rose to the top as actions to pursue first.

DNR has created a Rivers Coordinator position to be located in the central office and filled later this year. Budget and staffing limitations preclude immediately hiring a new staff person for each of DNR’s 6 regions, but until such time that new positions can be created and filled, other means to initiate a river focus in each of the regions must be considered. Staff are already spread thin and have their work duties established through department work planning; if new responsibilities are added to their plates, something else will have to give. DNR has identified staff in each region who

may be willing to volunteer time in the short term, but reassignment of regional staff duties to ensure time dedication to local river work will require direction from the DNR Water Division Administrator, or if staff from other DNR divisions are included, from the DNR Secretary. A clear list of duties and expectations for dedicated river staff will need to be developed, and staff will need training to ensure consistency in service delivered across the state.

While there are staff involved in river issues in other divisions of DNR, focusing the rivers program and associated staff within the Water Division will provide consistency for river groups, and will help build a cohesive rivers culture. Over time, river-focused work can be built into annual DNR work planning, and hopefully, fully funded staff positions.

The UW-Stevens Point Center for Watershed Science and Education will convene a team internal to the University of Wisconsin-Extension to discuss the potential for development and maintenance of a rivers portal (Recommendation 3), resources needed to interact with local groups and provide connections between groups (Recommendation 5) consideration of costs and logistics for a printed newsletter (Recommendation 4), and clarification of river issue contacts and roles among University of Wisconsin-Extension staff (Recommendation 2). All partnership members would contribute to the development and coordination of this effort, but agreed that one entity would need to be in charge. DotNetNuke.com was suggested as an interactive web tool with potential as the framework for a rivers portal.

The third activity to be pursued is consideration of topical, regional forums (Recommendation 7). There was much discussion of how to best define a “region” – are DNR’s regional office service boundaries appropriate, or should they be smaller, perhaps watershed specific? Other suggestions included: a focus on river headwaters versus downstream areas, where the issues are often prevention versus restoration, respectively; breaking the state into six to seven county regions; and differentiating between forested rivers, urban rivers, and rural/agricultural rivers. There was general agreement that focusing on individual watersheds would be the most effective, and would allow related lake, wetland and groundwater issues to be addressed too, but that it is likely impossible to provide service to local groups at that level. The partners agreed more discussion is needed to determine how to define a workable region in terms of scale and issues, and to be flexible with boundaries to adapt to broader issues. The River Alliance will initiate the effort by working with DNR staff to choose a topic and define a regional audience as a test run. While the listening sessions indicate that statewide conferences are not currently popular among river groups, as regional forums expand and take hold, demand for occasional statewide conferences every few years could build.

To address Recommendation 6 regarding standard organizational workshops, the River Alliance will look internally at revising some of our existing workshops to better meet the needs of local groups, and will look to future regional forums to inform us of new workshop needs. The partners also agreed to participate in quarterly University of Wisconsin-Extension Basin Educator meetings to share current programs and activities, learn who’s doing what, and look for opportunities to work together and prevent duplication of efforts.

10. Final Words of Wisdom

In the spirit of sharing local groups' successes, a few of the tips mentioned at the listening sessions that might help other groups are highlighted here.

Educating the Community About Rivers

Get to the parents through the kids -good for both kids and your purposes.

Our group used six students from a local high school to do stream monitoring through UWSP monitoring program; got grants for their equipment and to provide a stipend to motivate them. They gave the students diplomas to recognize their participation, and the kids are ready to participate again next year.

Two years of monitoring has changed people's attitude about the river, given them ownership: "when I monitored last month..."

Local hardware stores can be convinced to stop selling phosphorus fertilizers.

Building Support in the Community

First fundraiser was important because they got out there and got support just in the process of doing it--got local business to give food, tent, etc.

Any fundraiser is also a way to promote group in positive way, get powerful people involved.

You need the community behind you. The best way is the press - regularly communicates with three reporters to keep them informed.

Influencing Local Decisions

They have two members who have appointed themselves to go to all zoning meetings and work in governmental affairs. Because they provide what the Zoning Committee considers to be valuable input, they are viewed as a welcome part of zoning meetings, and are now asked for their opinion on certain zoning issues.

In terms of working with local officials the best approach they have is to try to have someone attend all the county board meetings so the county board develops a sense of comfort with the group over time - show up, be polite, and don't ask for something right away.

Our county board allows 3 minute public comments at regular and committee meetings. Showing up, they are getting to know you. 3 minutes after 15 years really builds up time and influence.

It's amazing what can be done behind the scenes--know the answers before the public meetings.

There are many open seats on county Boards of Adjustment – get yourself on one to stop variances.

Organizational Issues

I learned project management techniques in my day job, and realized you should not check those skills at the door.

Need to plan specific success items, like leaving the organization in a better place when you leave.

They assign board members to monitor different aspects of the website to make sure it's up to date. The group uses the Natural Resources Foundation to advertise events and to put on some of their programs. They also work with Kemp Station (UW Madison field station). Worked with Northland College to get information out about lead sinkers and the hazard it causes to ducks and geese.

Appendix A: Written questionnaire

1. Who have you relied upon for help in your watershed?
(please check all that apply for each activity and briefly explain the issue)

Activity	DNR	River Alliance	UW-Extension	Other, explain	Subject Addressed
a. Contacted for information (written materials, maps, data) about our watershed/river					
b. Contacted for information about improving our organization					
c. Contacted to lead a meeting for our organization					
d. Contacted about a specific problem (development proposal, violation, runoff pollution) in our watershed					
e. Contacted for assistance with a specific project in our watershed (restoration, monitoring, etc.)					
f. Other, please explain:					

2. Rate the degree to which you or your organization prefer(s) to receive watershed information (both technical and organizational) via each method:

Method	Not at all preferred	Not very	Somewhat	Very	Most preferred
Website	1	2	3	4	5
Written materials	1	2	3	4	5
Workshops for our organization	1	2	3	4	5
Workshops with multiple organizations	1	2	3	4	5
Statewide conference	1	2	3	4	5
One-on-one discussions with an expert	1	2	3	4	5

3. Which of these resources do you currently use? (please check all that apply)

- Wisconsin Rivers Yahoo Group (listserv/e-mail discussion group)
- Wisconsin River Groups Blog
- Wisconsin Rivers newsletter
- Word on the Stream e-newsletter
- Other, please explain:

4. What three watershed issues are priorities for your group at this time?

- a.
- b.
- c.

5. Does your organization have a: (please check all that apply)

- Strategic Plan (3-5 year)
- Annual Plan
- Budget
- Board of Directors or Steering Committee
- Staff

6. (Optional) Group name and contact info:

Organization name: _____

Organization contact: _____

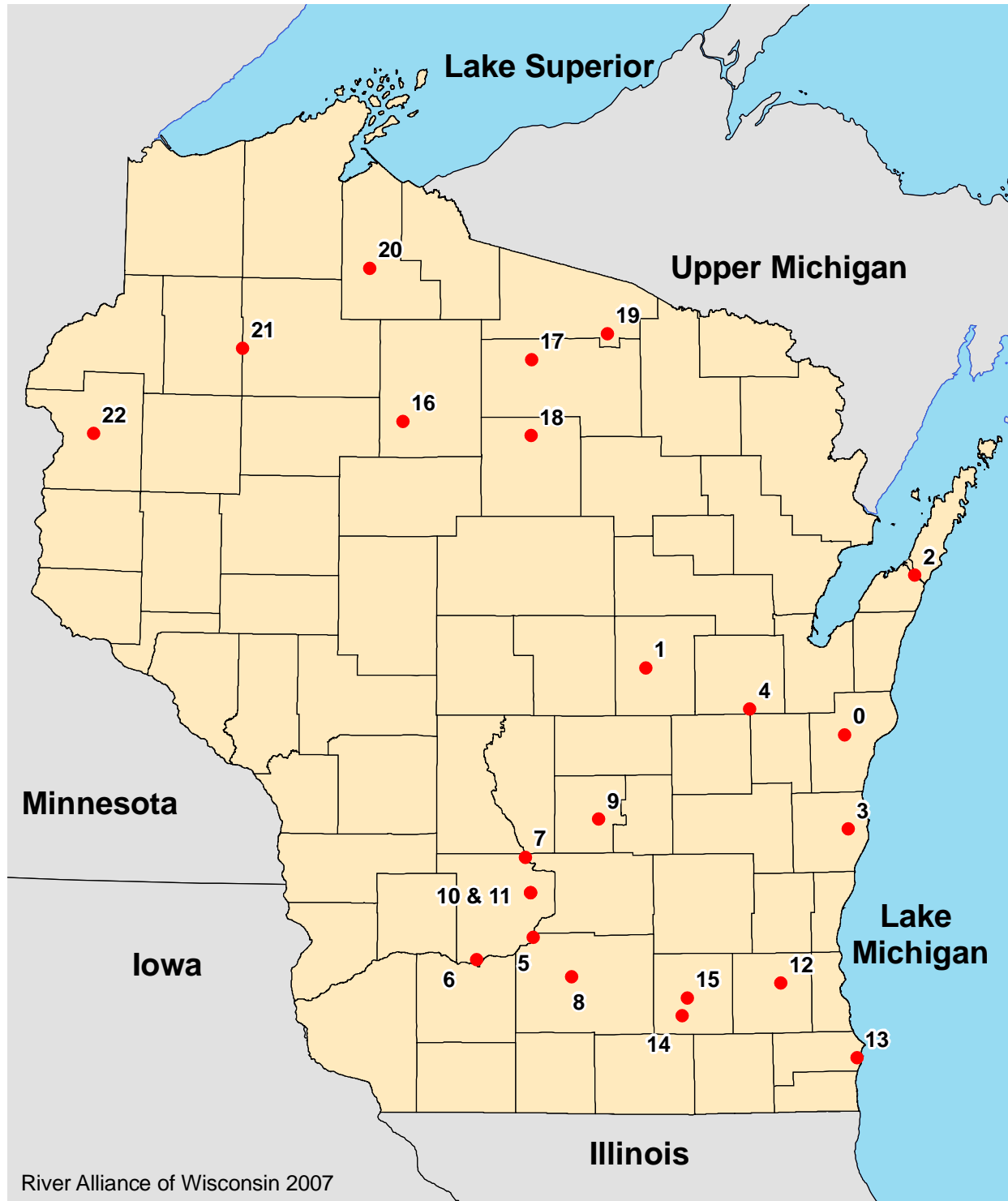
Address: _____

Phone: _____

E-mail: _____

Website: _____

Appendix B: Listening Session Attendees



- | | |
|---|--|
| 0 Friends of the Branch River | 12 Pewaukee River Partnership |
| 1 Friends of the Little Wolf Headwaters | 13 Root-Pike WIN |
| 2 Lakeshore Natural Resource Partnership | 14 Friends of Allen Creek |
| 3 Sheboygan River Basin Partnership | 15 Rock River Coalition |
| 4 Northeast Wisconsin Land Trust | 16 Friends of the Jump River |
| 5 Sauk Prairie River Project Association | 17 Oneida County Lakes & Rivers Assn |
| 6 Friends of the Lower Wisconsin River | 18 Tomahawk River Alliance |
| 7 Stewards of the Dells | 19 Vilas County Lakes Association |
| 8 Friends of Pheasant Branch | 20 Friends of the St. Croix Headwaters |
| 9 Montello River Watershed Task Force | 21 Washburn County Lakes & Rivers |
| 10 Citizens for Waterfront Revitalization | 22 Apple River Association |
| 11 Baraboo Canoe Club | |