

Analysis of 2001 Wetlands Survey

In the Spring of 2001 the Research Department of SBMWA, along with social scientists at the NJDEP, sent out a survey to gauge local knowledge of wetlands and wetlands regulations. We sent this survey to two groups of people: a sample of citizens living within the watershed, and municipal officials of the same towns. We received a response rate of 47% of the citizen population, and 57% of municipal officials. The results from the survey have helped to drive education efforts at the Watershed, and have helped us to better understand local issues related to wetlands and land use. Following are some of the results that we found.

Wetland Definitions, Benefits & Functions

- Two-thirds of local officials knew that wetlands have unusual soils and plants, and need not always have water visible to be defined as wetlands. The public was slightly less well informed, but most correctly identified 2 of 3 aspects of how wetlands are defined.
- We asked people about the ability of wetlands to improve water quality by filtering out potential pollutants such as nitrogen and cadmium. 43% of citizen respondents didn't know if this was true or not (it is!).
- Officials and citizens had very positive views of wetlands, believing (for example) that they reduce flooding, raise nearby property values, and pose few health concerns due to habitat they offer for mosquitoes and ticks. Given a choice of preserving or developing local wetlands, over 80% of both groups chose preservation.
- Asked to explain their support for wetlands preservation, officials emphasized preserving water quality (53%), habitat preservation (53%), reducing floods (32%) and contact with nature (31%). Citizens emphasized habitat preservation (50%), contact with nature (30%), preserving water quality (19%), general environmental values (18%), reducing floods (18%), and too much development (17%).

Wetland Regulations

- 62% of citizens feel that the State could help their municipality protect its wetlands by providing more funding for open space purchases and maintenance, and 85% of officials agreed.
- We asked people about who they believe has a "high" knowledge of wetlands. The highest level of knowledge from our choices was University experts, with 79% of respondents feeling that they had the best comprehension of wetlands. Second to University experts was the NJDEP at 70%, and then the EPA at 66%.
- We then asked how much these entities could be trusted to make decisions about developing or preserving wetlands. The group with the highest level of trust was "Self" at 65%. Second to that were University experts at 47% and then Local Environmental organizations at 35%. The group that was trusted the least to make decisions about wetlands was Developers, at 1.3%.
- We asked if certain kinds of wetlands are more protected under NJ regulations than other kinds. 49% of the citizen population, as well as 49% of municipal officials didn't know if this was true or not (it is!).

Wetland Education

- We asked if the state of NJ does a good job of educating local officials about wetlands rules that affect local planning and zoning decisions. Only 19% of municipal officials agreed.
- When asked about actions that an individual could take to lessen impact on local wetlands, 68% of citizens felt that changing the way that they use their own property would be effective, and 75% of officials agreed.

The Watershed Management and Education Departments at SBMWA have taken up the tasks of educating the public and municipal official populations about wetlands and wetland regulations, amongst many other environmental topics. Some of the ways that SBMWA is educating people are:

- River Friendly Programs (River Friendly Golf, River Friendly Resident, River Friendly School)
- Natural Lands Network meetings and newsletter, Watershed Watch
- Public and School Programs at the Buttinger Nature Center
- Watershed Management Publications on the website
- The Watershed Institute events and website
- Teacher Workshops
- Streambank Restoration and Reforestation workdays
- The Streamwatcher, the newsletter of the Streamwatch Program

Visit Stony Brook Millstone Watershed Association Web site (<http://www.thewatershed.org>) to learn more about these programs.