Grumbles on water

By Benjamin H. Grumbles

'River of Words and Deeds'

Engaging students, citizens and organizations in watershed education

September signals a new school year for most, so it's a great time to focus on environmental education—for students of all ages (from K to gray), for professionals at all stages (from beginner to master operator) and for communities of all types. And while April is "National Poetry Month," it is important to use poetry and art year-round to inspire action for cleaner and healthier watersheds.

Dot Org

River of Words (ROW) is one of my favorite organizations, and www.riverofwords.org is one of my favorite websites. Full disclosure: I'm a member of the Board of Directors and a long-time fan, so don't expect an impartial view here.

This special 501(c)(3) organization promotes literacy, the arts and environmental awareness. ROW's "Watershed Explorer" curriculum, which combines history, math, science, social studies, geography, language and the arts, is helping youth to develop an informed respect for the natural world and an understanding of their place in it. ROW conducts an annual international poetry and art contest for children in kindergarten through 12th grade on the theme of watersheds.

Former U.S. Poet Laureate Robert Haas and writer Pamela Michael founded the organization in 1995. ROW administers an extensive network of coordinators who train thousands of teachers, park rangers and other educators each year on how to connect kids to their watersheds and their imagination.

Watershed Awareness

ROW is about reconnecting to our watersheds. The watershed concept is a great organizing principle for teaching students. All of us enjoy connecting the dots and trying to make sense out of complexity. By introducing students at an early age to the ecology of a watershed, we help students, as well as teachers and parents, connect the drops.

What's Your Drip Code?

Second graders typically know their zip codes, and that's great—they learn about a special man-made, organizing system and their place in it. But it's equally important to know your ecological address—where you fit in, where you get your water supplies and where water goes when it rains and drains to gutters, pipes, creeks and coasts.

Memorizing hydrologic unit codes may be unrealistic at such an early age, but the sooner citizens know, at least in some sense, the name and boundaries of their watershed and sewershed, the better.

Getting Wet

Here are some of my favorite ways to engage students, citizens and organizations:

1. *Recruit poets and scouts.* ROW is a great way to do it. Check the website and learn about state chapters. The group's annual poetry contest is the largest of its kind in the world. Girl Scouts have been awarding Water Drop Patches for community service and educational achievement over the last several years, and other groups should do the same.
2. *Be an exhibitionist.* Look for opportunities to post watershed information and environmental education in common and uncommon spots. For example, every water and wastewater plant should create teachable moments for guests and customers. I've seen some great visitor centers and hands-on learning materials at facilities across the U.S.—large and small, urban and rural. Public service announcements on buses and trains may cost some advertising dollars, but they build goodwill and ratepayer support.
3. *Celebrate World Water Monitoring Day.* Sept. 18 is the official day, but monitoring efforts can take place anytime between March and December. The results are posted on this website: www.worldwatermonitoringday.org. It's a great way for citizens and watershed organizations to measure basic water quality (dissolved oxygen, pH, turbidity and temperature), share the results and energize conservation and restoration. The Water Environment Federation and the International Water Association have carried on the tradition begun by Roberta Savage and other water professionals several years ago.
4. *Train and certify watershed professionals.* Organizations such as the Association of Public Works Agencies are training and certifying members for extra focus on managing and sustaining water infrastructure. We need a skilled workforce and a new class of managers who specialize in "watershed ed."

The Last Word

A river of words can lead to an ocean of action, often through youthful inspiration and fearless determination. Poets, artists and teachers may not write permits, issue regulations or operate heavy machinery or membrane filters, but they play a big role in getting the job done. Poets inspire by recording truth and beauty and, as Dostoevsky said and Pamela Michael of ROW reminds, "Beauty will save the world." WWD

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