

Keeping an eye on your water

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Have you ever wondered what exactly is in the water that you swim in, sail on, and surf around? Well, there is a fairly easy, and quite interesting, way to go about doing just that.

Harbor Watch/River Watch is a local program that works to help protect and restore the biological integrity of Long Island Sound and its adjoining watershed. It was originally created in 1986 as a data-gathering project of the hypoxic conditions around the area harbors, and was primarily monitored by residents who were interested in maintaining a healthy coastal environment.

In 1993, the Harbor Watch/River Watch curriculum joined forces with Earthplace in Westport, another existing organization with similar goals and visions. Together, they now offer a comprehensive approach to keeping on top of environmental issues along the shoreline.

With the help of volunteers, water quality is currently being tested and monitored regularly throughout our neighboring rivers and harbors, and along the Sound. Efforts to collect dissolved oxygen data in shallow water harbors is enhanced by using such sophisticated equipment as dissolved oxygen meters, conductivity meters, and pH meters.

The information gathered is then used to design vital oxygen profiles of our local harbor waters and to record any hypoxic (or low oxygen tensions) events that may have occurred throughout the year. Such "events" usually take place during the warmer months of summer and can be extremely destructive and damaging to most marine life.

These important statistics are then sent to the Connecticut Department of Environmental Awareness to help support their own studies of hypoxic events throughout the United States.

In addition to the important task of data collection and research, volunteers are also asked to participate in catch-and-release activities in regards to benthic (or bottom dwelling) marine juvenile fish that live in near-shore estuaries. The facts and figures that they compile are forwarded to the Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection Fisheries Division for their records and to help with their respective water-monitoring campaigns.

Other projects on the Earthplace and Harbor Watch/River Watch agenda include retrieving data on nutrient concentrations, bacteria and aquatic insect populations in and around the freshwater watershed areas. All of the data analysis is actually performed right at the Earthplace site in their highly-sophisticated Water Quality Research Lab.

Earthplace and Harbor Watch/River Watch have a common mission to increase public awareness and watershed literacy, and to help encourage environmental stewardship. Their hope is to continue to expand their resources through a viable network of concerned citizens within all age groups.

Current needs are for people who would like to assist in conducting on-site tests, in-lab analysis, and data-collection processing. They are also looking for individuals to captain or work as crew members aboard their research vessels, or simply to act as mentors in some capacity for the program.

Interested in keeping a keen eye on the water in which you play? Earthplace and Harbor Watch/River Watch have all the tools you need. For more information about their programs and how to get involved visit www.earthplace.org.

Karen Jewell's Water Views runs Thursdays in The Hour.