

Water Guardian

Leadership and Tu Agua

Handbook to Take Action in Environmental Conservation

Introduction

Learning Goals:

1. Know how to find reputable information about water quality and water protection.
2. Understand who you can contact for help in local government and local conservation organizations.
3. Develop communication skills such as framing, questioning, and listening, and know how to use them in interactions with your community.
4. Apply what you have learned to share information, motivate action, and communicate about water quality and protection.
5. See yourself as a resource in your community as a Water Guardian.

Why we are here:

People take action in environmental conservation for many reasons:

- Overlapping goals of caring for the environment, making a positive contribution to the community, and building a better future.
- Participating in the decision-making process on issues affecting our community.
- Building community and cooperation to take action creates a sense of ownership and pride.

We can all identify issues in our community and take action to work toward solutions. Taking action can happen in many different ways including starting projects in our communities, electing people who will make new policies, and motivating others to take action on issues that are important to us. In this training, you will learn and practice skills to identify and work with key people who can help you take action. Those people could be family, friends, neighbors or even elected officials, non-profit organization staff, or business owners. No matter who the key people are, we all have the chance to get their help.

We hope this training helps you feel prepared to reach out to others in your community about issues that are important to you! You, your friends, and your neighbors can create change, but it can only happen if you make a plan and commit to using the plan. This Water Guardian training focuses on issues like water quality and stormwater, but the skills you practice here can be used to take action on any issue.

Why Water?

Think-Pair-Share Activity
Water Guardian Training | 15 minutes

Why is it important to engage our community in protecting clean water?

Consider practical, personal, local, and global reasons.

We are going to answer this question together through a think-pair-share exercise. Here's how it works:

- **THINK:** Reflect on the question individually. You can record your thoughts and ideas in writing or sketches.
- **PAIR:** Share your thoughts with a group of 2 or 3 people. You may discover new details you want to add to your notes!
- **SHARE:** Choose a representative from your small group to share a summary of your conversation with the whole group.

Why is it important to engage our community in protecting clean water?	
Practical	Personal
Local	Global

Take Action Step 1: Identify Your Action

So many things impact water quality, which makes it hard to know what you can do as an individual or small group. Here are some examples of actions you could take to help improve water quality.

- **Install a rain garden or downspout garden with native plants** to help more rain soak into the soil, reduce runoff, and support pollinators.
- **Install a rain barrel** to help more rain soak into the soil, reduce runoff, and help water your garden or lawn.
- **Redirect gutter downspouts** to help more rain soak into the soil and reduce runoff.
- **Leave grass taller** by adjusting your mower height to help more rain soak into the soil and grow a healthy lawn.
- **Use fertilizer wisely** to reduce nutrient pollution in our lakes and rivers.
- **Keep leaves out of the street** in the fall to prevent excess nutrients from getting into our lakes and rivers.
- **Be Salt Wise in the winter** to prevent salt pollution in our waters. Shovel to prevent ice from forming, use less salt, and use sand at temperatures below 15 degrees F.
- **Mark a storm drain or create a storm drain mural** with Dane County Ripple Effects to help teach others about how our storm drains are connected to our lakes and rivers.
- **Adopt a storm drain** with Dane County Ripple Effects to prevent localized flooding.
- **Become a Water Action Volunteer** to learn more about what makes a stream healthy and how to monitor a stream as a volunteer.
- **Volunteer with a "Friends" group** or other group that does work that protects local waters and land.
- **Host your own training or event** to teach others about water quality and stormwater issues and actions they can take.
- **Create a social media campaign** to teach others about water quality and stormwater issues and actions they can take.
- **Advocacy:** Learn about the city's efforts in stormwater management. Report a problem to the City or write to an elected official about it.
- **What other ideas do you have?**

Take Action Step 2: Gather Reliable Information

Gather information

Before starting a project, it's essential to familiarize yourself with the topic or issue at hand. What specific information do you require to address the topic or concern you're passionate about? Conducting thorough research in advance and structuring the gathered information in a clear and coherent manner will establish you as a valuable source of expertise.

What is information?

Information can include observations, experiences, statistics, stories, pictures, guidelines, instruction manuals, etc.

Assessing information

As you work on your project, it is important to use information that is factual, reliable, and logical. You also want to organize the information in a way that is easy to understand and useful for the other people involved in your project.

It is easy to find information about any topic, but it can be hard to make sure it is reliable and factual. Use the Reliable Information Guide on the next page to help figure out if the information you find is reliable.

Reliable Information Checklist

With the internet, we have access to virtually unlimited information. However, not all of it is trustworthy. Are your sources reliable? Figure it out by responding “YES” or “NO” to the following questions:

Creator

- Has a reliable organization published this information? (Look for websites that end in .gov or .edu). Who created the account, or who recorded the original content?
- Is this the original post of publication?
- Is the author an expert on the topic?
- Is the source unbiased? (Avoid sources that advocate for a specific view or product.)

Content

- Is the information based on facts (not opinions)?
- Are multiple points of view addressed?
- Is the language fair and respectful?
- Is the information current (not old)?

Context

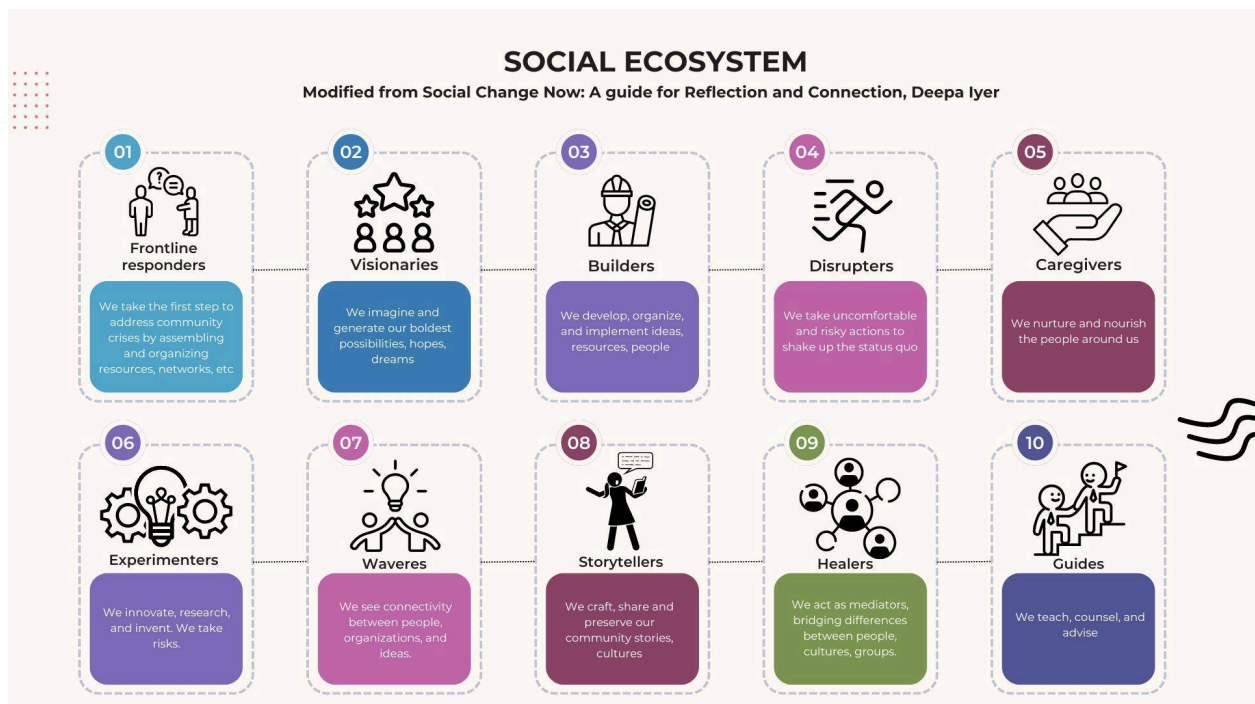
- Is the purpose of the message to educate? (Avoid sources meant to sell or persuade.)
- Can you verify the information in this source with other reliable sources?
- Can you verify where the content was recorded (video or photo)?
- Is the information relevant to the place you are living in?

If you responded “NO” to two or more questions, your source may not be reliable. Consider looking for other sources that are more reliable before drawing your own conclusions about the topic.

Take Action Step 3: Build Your Team

You don't have to work alone! it is crucial to recognize the roles we play and the contributions of those in our close circle. We all possess unique skills that contribute to our community's overall functioning. Consider the individuals in your network who could assist you in turning your ideas into reality. These individuals may have diverse skills and expertise that can contribute to achieving your goals or completing a project effectively. By leveraging the strengths of your social ecosystem, you can enhance your productivity and success.

What role do we play in our social ecosystem?



Build your Team: Think about people you know who:

- Are also interested in your topic or project
- Are impacted by the issue
- Can provide direct support to your project (such as helping build the action plan, gather information, contact stakeholders, etc.)
- Can provide indirect support to your project (such as helping care for your family so you have time to work on your project, providing a meeting space for you/your project team, etc.)

Build my Team

Who are your personal connections? How could they help you work towards your goal?

Examples include:

- Neighbors
- Friends and family
- Neighborhood associations
- Co-workers
- Homeowners' associations
- Parent Teacher Organizations
- Faith groups

Name of person or group	Relationship to me	How could they be involved?	How to reach them (phone, email, etc.)

Take Action Step 4: Identify Key People Who Can Help

Beyond Personal Connections

You will likely need to reach beyond your team of personal connections to work on your project. Additional people can help in many ways, including:

- Provide expert information about your topic.
- Help you get necessary permissions to complete your project.
- Connect you with other people who are working on a similar project or topic.
- Provide resources, training, or equipment.
- Advocate on your behalf.

Who can help?

There are many people and organizations that can help you take action! You can reach out to anyone in local government and organizations! In most cases, it is part of people's jobs to help community members like you learn and solve problems. Here are some examples of people who can help:

- **Government agency or department staff** can provide expert information and explain any rules or policies that impact your project. Examples include: Dane County Land and Water Resources Department, City of Fitchburg Public Works Department.
- **Elected officials** such as your alderperson, can help advocate for changes in local ordinances related to your project or connect you to department staff with expertise on your topic.
- **Universities and colleges** often have many people with expertise who can help, including professors, researchers, educators, and students.
- **University of Wisconsin Extension** provides reliable science-based information on a variety of topics. Extension staff can help you gather reliable information and may be able to help you plan your project. Examples of staff members or programs who might help include: Natural Resources Educator, Water Action Volunteers program
- **Non-profit organizations** often have expertise and resources to share. Examples of non-profit organizations working on issues related to water quality and stormwater include: Wisconsin EcoLatinos, Clean Lakes Alliance, River Alliance of Wisconsin, Wisconsin Wetlands Association.
- **Friends Groups** often support projects in or near a park or body of water. Even if your project doesn't take place in a park, their projects can be a good example. Examples include Friends of Lake Wingra and Friends of Cherokee Marsh.
- **Recreation and water-focused businesses** may be able to support your work by donating supplies or other resources to help your project. Examples include boat rental businesses and sporting goods stores such as Cabela's or Rutabaga Paddlesports.

Identify Key People

What people or organizations can help answer your questions and support your project?

Examples include:

- Elected officials & agency staff
- University staff & programs
- Non-profit organizations
- Friends Groups
- Businesses

Information I need or question I have	Organization or person I can contact	How to reach them (phone, email, etc.)

Take Action Step 5: Prepare Your Message

Preparing your message and how you present it can help you successfully achieve your water goals in many different situations: recruiting volunteers to help you with a project, motivating someone you know to take action for clean water, or advocating for a project to your local city, county or state staff and elected representatives.

Probing questions and **message framing** are two strategies you can use to communicate more effectively with others:

Probing Questions:

Probing questions help you get specific types of responses and more information than “yes/no” questions. You can be strategic and use different types of questions to get information and to invite people to support and participate in your project. For example, you might use probing questions to learn what a neighbor knows about your issue and understand their motivation and barriers to action. Some types of probing questions include:

Type of Probing Question and When to Use It	Example Questions
Fact-finding questions ask who, what, when, where, and how much. Use them to gather information.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● How much time per week can I dedicate to this project?● What kind of training does my neighbor need to be able to help me with my project?● What impacts happen in my neighborhood during large rain storm events?
Feeling-finding questions are used to understand someone’s opinions, feelings, values, and beliefs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● How do you feel about water pollution in our lakes?● What motivates you to protect our waters?
Best/least questions are used to encourage someone to think about different perspectives.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● What is the best part of this project?● What is your biggest concern regarding water pollution?
Magic wand questions are used to explore possibilities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● If time and money were no obstacle, what would you like to see happen in your neighborhood?● Envision a perfect, successful project. What made the project perfect?

Message Framing:

Framing refers to how you present your message to influence how people interpret it. Different types of message frames are used in different situations. Here are some examples of message frames and when they might be used:

Value frames are used to connect your message to something that your audience cares about. You might first use feeling-finding questions to learn about someone's values and then frame your message to connect to their values.

- Example: You learned that your neighbor is afraid that their home will flood. Your message might be "We can use this project to work together to protect our homes from flooding."
- Example: You learned that someone thinks it is important to keep our lakes clean so they are safe for kids and pets. Your message might be "If you join our project, you can help make a difference to limit pollution to keep our lakes safe and healthy."

Using **positive frames** makes your message more effective. This means avoiding using negative words like "no" or "not" when you describe or respond to something.

- Example: Your friend might say "Using less salt on my sidewalk will not make a difference when the city uses so much salt on the roads already". If you respond with a negative frame, you might say "No, the city is not the only one who is causing the problem." Instead, you could use a positive frame and say, "Yes, while the city needs to do its part, each of us can make a difference with our salt use and build momentum for city-wide changes."

How to start the conversation:

There are a few best practices for starting the conversation and ensuring your message is heard and acted on:

- **Start with the likely adopters:** Some individuals will be easily convinced by your message and just need a nudge to take action for their local waters. They can then begin to be a model for clean water action in your community and get the ball rolling.
- **Find a trusted messenger:** The messenger is just as important as the message itself. Consider who the individual trusts and is most likely to listen to. It may or may not be you!
- **Keep the ask simple and help lower any barriers to action:** Everyone, from friends and family members to city government staff, has real barriers that prevent them from taking action. A key part of motivating someone to join your team or take action is to listen and understand what's keeping them from participating, and help address their barriers or concerns.

Prepare your Message

- Look back to Step 3 and Step 4 for people you may need to talk to: to recruit them for a project in your community, to ask them for their help or expertise, or to motivate them to take action.
- Use the table below to think about each person or group that you need to communicate with. Consider their values and how you would start a conversation with them about your water topic or project, using the strategies we discussed around messaging and getting the conversation started.

Who are you talking to?	What do they value or care about?	What are their possible barriers to action?	How would you start the conversation or phrase your questions?

Take Action Step 6: Statement of Commitment