

Multi-stakeholder Volunteer Water Quality Program Aims to Bring Swimming Back to the Nation's Capital

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DC's primary surface waters serve as cultural centers and have been treasured by locals and visitors alike since the establishment of the city. Before many of the city's black residents could even legally enter a public pool, they were swimming along the banks of the Anacostia and Potomac Rivers. Despite this past history of recreation, and their classification as Class A waters by the federal government, swimming is banned throughout all District surface waters. This oxymoronic policy stance not only hurts local perception of the rivers, but devalues these waters and the communities who live, work, and play along their banks. Thankfully, due to collaboration between DC government and local NGOs, a nation's capital with swimmable urban waters is only a few years away.

Will DC Government ever feel that residents can safely swim in their waterways?

The District of Columbia sits in the cradle of three primary waterbodies: the Potomac River, Anacostia River, and Rock Creek. Despite all three of these surface waters being classified as Class A waters by the EPA, qualifying them safe for primary recreation, swimming has been illegal in District waters since the 1970s. High volumes of stormwater and combined sewage overflows serve as primary vectors for high bacteria loads in city waters, creating variable recreation conditions for DC's residents and visitors; however, due to recent investments in capital infrastructure and a heightened awareness of the city's natural resources, water quality in DC's surface waters has been improving.

Successful small scale water quality programs carried out by Anacostia Riverkeeper and other local NGOs demonstrated to District government that volunteer lead water quality programs not only promote community buy-in but also improve data transparency by making water quality data publicly available. In 2018 the District Department of Energy and Environment (DOEE) awarded a grant to Anacostia Riverkeeper to build a multi-stakeholder community-based water quality monitoring program; a program that has continued for three years into 2021.

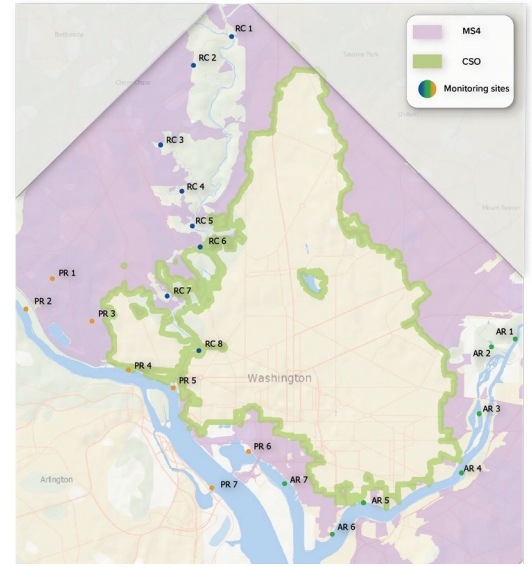
To date, the program has trained over 150 volunteers and collected over 1,500 samples across the nation's capital. Through the establishment of baseline recreational data this program continues to push the District government towards one day lifting the swim ban, with 2021 marking the most significant progress towards that goal through the passing of an emergency ruling making it easier to hold permitted swim events in the Potomac and Anacostia Rivers.



photo credit: Bob Fabia, Anacostia Riverkeeper Volunteer

Role of the Monitoring Program

This monitoring program establishes baseline recreational water quality readings in tandem with recent capital infrastructure projects to document where DC surface waters are improving and where poor water quality may persist. Having a volunteer-based monitoring program not only helps to build a cadre of dedicated river stewards, but also serves to educate the larger regional population through publicly available, well structured water data shared by trusted watershed partners, city government, and their own neighbors and friends. Through the elimination of a vertical, bottom up flow of data, this program follows WDC's goal of a collaborative horizontal infrastructure where municipalities, NGOs, and community members are all working together to collect the data and inform meaningful policy decisions about their local waters and streams.



About Anacostia Riverkeeper

The mission of Anacostia Riverkeeper is to protect and restore the Anacostia River for all who live, work, and play in the watershed; and to advocate for a clean, healthy river for all its communities. Anacostia Riverkeeper works in collaboration with local stakeholders, legal counsel, federal and local government officials, foundations, and community members to ensure well-written environmental laws, enforcement of the existing laws, public awareness of environmental and health issues, and the cleanup and prevention of pollution of the river and its tributaries. One main goal directs our work, to work toward a healthy, swimmable, fishable accessible Anacostia River in order to enhance the community life of DC and MD residents.



Nexus to WDC

Anacostia Riverkeeper's water quality program was one of the first of its kind in the District of Columbia, leveraging watershed partners, volunteers, and data sharing platforms to sample and share recreational water quality data across DC surface waters. The relationship between Anacostia Riverkeeper, the DC government, their partners, and the public at large is a prime example of the relationship building and collective action that the Water Data Collaborative seeks to spark. Furthermore, through organized resource building fostered by the WDC, programs like this can broaden their impact and serve as key examples for other NGOs and watershed groups who are looking to engage in similar monitoring initiatives.



Grant Funding



Distributed Data Management



Network of Networks

Use Case Summarized by

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