

Summer 2016

Nebraska Watershed Network

University of Nebraska at Omaha

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NEBRASKA WATERSHED NETWORK

VOLUME 5 ISSUE 1 SUMMER 2016

WATER AT KANEKO GALLERY

The distant worlds of science and art came together this spring when the Nebraska Watershed Network (NWN) took part in an exhibit entitled WATER at KANEKO Gallery in downtown Omaha from February 5th through April 23rd. WATER featured displays of scientific data and fine art from local organizations and artists to be representative of water and the impact it has on our lives and our community.

The NWN contributed several pieces including a dilution series (Figure 1) to illuminate high and low concentrations of pollutants in water, a small piece of equipment (mini mobile unit) used to monitor water quality by the NWN, and enlarged data maps from the NWN's 2014 Lil' Miss Atrazine project. KANEKO's quarterly exhibits bring in thousands of patrons from all over the state and region.

NE SCIFEST

Science! Science! Science! April 2016 marks the second year of the NWN's participation in the annual Nebraska Science Festival (NE SciFest). NE SciFest is a collaborative, week-long event that brings organizations and individuals together to celebrate the advancement of science and science literacy in the Omaha community. NWN interns had booths at two locations including KANEKO Gallery and the UNO campus at Roskens Hall. Patrons from all ages and backgrounds had the opportunity to view water samples and contaminants through cell phone microscopes created by the NWN (Figure 2). The NE SciFest was a big hit throughout the Omaha community as 314 people attended the KANEKO exhibit and 50 made it to UNO.



Figure 1: A dilution series created by the NWN on display at KANEKO Gallery

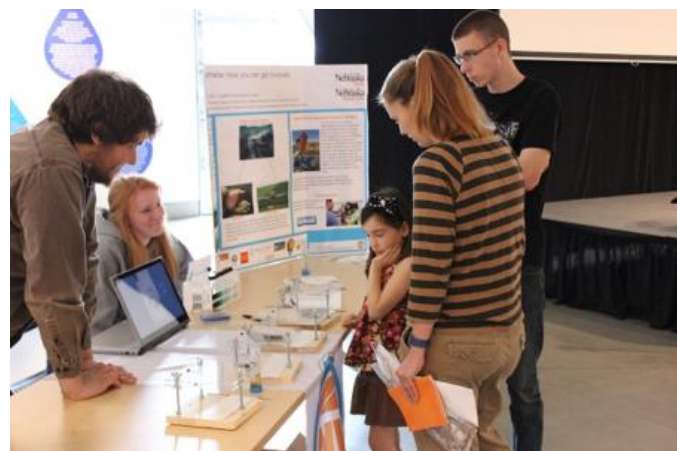


Figure 2: NE SciFest attendees stop to chat with NWN interns about water quality at KANEKO Gallery



Figure 3: Garden plots maintained by members of the Youth Garden Program. Photo credit: Chris Foster of Gifford Park Community Garden

RAISE THE ROOTS

The combination of live music, local food, and community organizations is what makes Raise the Roots such an eclectic event. Raise the Roots is an event aimed at educating the Omaha community on sustainability issues that hit close to home. Musicians, local food vendors, sustainability groups, and community members come together under one roof several times throughout the year to promote local efforts in keeping Omaha a more sustainable place to live.

The NWN had booths at both the January 6th and March 6th Raise the Roots events held at the Waiting Room Lounge in Benson. An estimated 300 people attended the two events, and several attendees stopped by to talk with the NWN about water quality monitoring on a local level. A miniature dilution series and a demonstrative poster exhibiting runoff was on display. The NWN answered an array of questions related to water quality and how to get involved in the effort to protect our water.

Each spring, the NWN hosts the water quality monitoring project “Watershed Days” in which citizen scientists are the primary mechanism of collecting data related to runoff. As a result of the many conversations had at Raise the Roots, several of the event goers participated in the Omaha-based research project and contributed valuable data to help us understand the movement of runoff contaminants throughout the community.

GIFFORD PARK GARDEN

“Why is water quality important?” That was the question of the day on the morning of June 11th when the NWN was invited give an interactive presentation at the Gifford Park Community Garden located at 35th and Cass Street (Figure 3). Each Saturday during the summer, the Youth Garden Program (an extension program of the Gifford Park Community Garden) invites children and families from the surrounding area to tend to their very own garden plots (Figure 3). In addition to maintaining and harvesting garden plots, Gifford Park Community Garden coordinator Chris Foster frequently invites community groups such as the NWN to speak at the weekly gatherings.

Approximately twenty-five Youth Garden Program members stopped by to listen and ask questions about water quality—specifically in Omaha. Many questions centered on pollution and what individuals can do to help reduce the problem. The NWN responded with tips on how to properly dispose of waste products such as unused pharmaceuticals and cleaning products so these items do not end up in our water.

SUSTAINABILITY LAUNCHPAD

Earth Day is a time to reflect, inspire, and take action on the environmental issues we face on a local and global level. The Sustainability Launchpad did just that by starting a conversation at its annual event held each spring during the week of Earth Day. This year’s Launchpad event was held at KANEKO Gallery on Earth Day Friday, April 22nd.

The conversation topic, Accelerating Innovative Urban Ideas in Water: Policy, Research, Quality, Conversation, and Community Engagement/Service Learning, was dynamic and engaging as an expert panel consisting of local professionals in the field of water, education, and sustainability came together to engage in a public conversation with the Omaha community. The NWN’s director Dr. Alan Kolok was among the chosen panel contributors. Dr. Kolok ignited a conversation about citizen science and how the benefits of crowd sourced research stretch far beyond data collection in that citizen science is also a mechanism for education, collaboration, and starting a conversation about sustainability.

In addition to a public panel, the Sustainability Launchpad held a student poster contest with submissions from all over the Omaha community. The NWN's Jon Ali (Figure 4) won first prize for his research providing evidence that citizen science can provide reliable and accurate data across time and vast distances. Jon is a Robert B. Daugherty Water for Food Institute Graduate Research Fellow at UNMC and a valuable asset to the NWN. Congratulations, Jon!



Figure 4: Director of UNO Center for Urban Sustainability, Steve Rodie presents the NWN's Jon Ali with the first place prize for the graduate-level student poster competition

GIRL SCOUTS

At the end of April, the NWN was delighted to collaborate with Girl Scouts Spirit of Nebraska and the Black Police Officers Association of Omaha (BPOA). Girl Scouts K-6 gathered at Carter Lake and Fontenelle Park on April 26th and April 28th respectively to participate in a range of activities: litter pick up, a nature and pollution scavenger hunt, roasting marshmallows, and a push-up contest!

In addition to the fun activities, the Girl Scouts had the opportunity to interact with members of the NWN and BPOA and discuss the mission of each community organization. Find Girl Scouts Spirit of Nebraska and BPOA on Facebook to learn more about each organization.

DIRECTOR'S NOTE

I am delighted to let you all know that the Nebraska Watershed Network is reaching a significant milestone, as this coming year we will celebrate our five-year anniversary! Back in 2012, our first semester was a rocky one, as we really struggled with defining who we are and what our mission was. Thanks to the great work of two fantastic interns, Chris and Danika, we were able to lay a solid foundation upon which all of our work has been grounded. In 2013, we moved into the beautiful and spacious Barbara Weitz Community Engagement Center on the UNO campus and it really made a difference. The quality space has really helped give us credibility and it was onward and upward from there ever since.

To begin the celebration, we have redesigned the layout of this newsletter. We hope that the stylistic changes convey a tighter, more professional look than what we had before. While we hope that the new look reflects our close connection to UNO and the Omaha community at large, we also hope that it appeals to a wider, national audience.

The newsletter that you are currently reading, as it has since Volume 1, Issue 1, highlights activities that focus on local community engagement. This fall we will launch the redesigned newsletter that focuses on our citizen science project, otherwise known as Watershed Days (formerly Lil' Miss Atrazine). I will let that newsletter speak for itself when the time comes, but suffice it to say that we at the Network have been busy working with you, and that we are extremely grateful for all of your contributions to those projects. Without you, those projects would have never gotten off ground.



As the Network turns five, I am continually reminded of my own good fortune in being allowed to direct this program. I believe that the Network was in the right place at the right time and I am grateful of the support that the Network receives from UNO, the Omaha community, and of course our great students. The community outreach projects, as well as those focused on citizen science, never fail to impress me, both for their quality and for the degree of participation that they generate within the community. The Network has come a long way in the last five years, but we have so much further that we can go. We look forward to working with you, and we firmly believe that our next five years will greatly build upon the successes that we have had in our first five.

Enjoy the rest of your summer, we will be back in touch again later this Fall.

-Dr. Alan Kolok



Dr. Alan Kolok, Director of Nebraska Watershed Network. Photo courtesy of UNMC

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