Frequently asked questions about the WSU Whatcom County Watershed Master / Beach Watcher Program

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What does it mean to be a Watershed Master / Beach Watcher?

The goal of the WSU Whatcom Extension Watershed Master / Beach Watcher program is to educate adults and youth about the most pressing environmental issues facing Whatcom County. Graduates can then make informed choices regarding their own sustainable stewardship practices, and can teach others to make informed choices.

Graduates of the program will take on education and leadership roles in their own communities and around the region. They will work with a variety of individuals and organizations, including many of their fellow volunteers. The work will range from small individual projects to bigger, coordinated projects or programs. Participants will work on at least one group project as part of their volunteer commitment.

Elected officials and others have told the staff of the earlier WSU Whatcom Watershed Steward program that they could tell when they were discussing issues with a program graduate because of their informed views. The value of such an informed population to the county’s future cannot be overestimated.

How long has the program been offered by WSU Whatcom Extension?

Since it’s inception in 2005 we have graduated 3 classes of Watershed Master/Beach Watchers in Whatcom County (Yahoo!). The Island County Beach Watcher program which has been our model (see below) has been conducted for 15 years, since 1990!

I’m confused. There are Beach Watchers in other counties, and there are Watershed Masters (or Stewards) in yet other counties. And then you seem to call yourself both!

Our program is an expansion of the very successful and highly respected Island County Beach Watcher program. We have found, however, that the name “Beach Watcher”—while very appropriate for Island County—is misleading here in Whatcom County because of our very different geography and demographics.

Hence, our long name is the “WSU Whatcom Extension Watershed Master / Beach Watcher Program.” Make no mistake, though—we are very proud to be associated with the Beach Watcher program and we will continually remind people that we are part of that larger program.

Shellfish such as crabs and oysters are important in Whatcom County, but they are very sensitive to distant land uses.

Incidentally, despite the “Watcher” term, there is no enforcement or “people-monitoring” aspect to our program.
Are you doing mostly marine training and volunteer work, or are you instead emphasizing freshwater and upland areas?

We present a balance of both freshwater and marine topics which reflect Whatcom County’s landscape and issues.

Comparing soils against a color chart to determine if a wetland is present.

What type of volunteer projects do Watershed Masters engage in?

Graduates are asked to participate in one of several group projects developed in-part during the training and to support the program in various ways such as engaging the public at festivals and events. For the balance of their commitment, graduates choose projects which are important to their community and meaningful to themselves.

Some of our volunteers are pursuing educational projects such as creating publications, presentations, landowner workshops, and riparian education tours. Others are focused on surveying public perceptions of stormwater detention basins, changes in runoff patterns, and landowner knowledge of environmental friendly practices.

Some volunteers are identifying opportunities for Low Impact Development, doing water quality sampling, and mapping shoreline characteristics. Many wish to donate their time and energy to enhance or expand the efforts of established programs in riparian restoration, bird monitoring, and marine education to name a few. Others are working to enhance the educational and outreach efforts of public entities such as their libraries, local schools, and brownie troops.

All volunteers are strongly encouraged to pursue leadership and educational roles within their community.

How many people will be selected?

Since this training involves a lot of participation and interaction the class size is limited to 20 people.

Why do I need to come in for an interview?

These types of programs usually receive many more applications than available training slots. The brief time together gives Extension staff a chance to learn more about you, and also for you to learn about us. The interview gives you the chance to ask detailed questions about the program, which will be a major commitment of your time and energy.

What kind of people are you looking for? I’m hardly the environmental activist type!

Welcome! We are looking for Whatcom County residents with a wide variety of viewpoints, but who basically care about the land, water, and other natural resources of our county. In fact, we actually prefer a class with diverse views about environmental issues, since it is during respectful dialogues about controversial issues that previously unrecognized solutions are often found. A class with diverse viewpoints also makes for good training, because effective communication with others who hold different opinions is such a critical skill for a Watershed Master.

Likewise, and for much the same reason, we also want a group of volunteers which varies greatly in age and occupation.

WSU Extension also believes in the importance of both environmental and...
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economical sustainability. We believe that both values can and should be pursued.

Our colleagues throughout the state have found that people with previous volunteer experience and commitment succeed as Extension watershed masters or stewards. You must be willing and able to make the major commitment of time necessary to complete the training and service.

How technical is the training?
This is not a technical training, although it does include certain technical elements. We want to give volunteers the basic understanding of natural and related human systems, and how to do rudimentary monitoring of those systems. You certainly don’t need to be a scientist but you should be willing to study and actively participate.

We will stress field trips, because adults seem to learn best outside of the classroom.

By the way, one of the skills sought in Watershed Masters / Beach Watchers is the ability to communicate scientific information in a manner understandable by people from all walks of life.

What will be covered in the training?
We will cover three general categories: science, policy, community efforts.

Why do you have the training on weekdays?
Because of the number of hours involved in the training and the availability of most outside speakers only on weekdays.

If I can’t make this training, when will you have another?
We will hold new trainings each year in the spring. You can also check our web site at http://whatcom.wsu.edu/environ/water/bw.htm

Hobby farms are important for many Whatcom County residents – but there are concerns about the effects downstream. Can we have both horses and clean water?

What have other people learned?

What will the training cost? Does it include lunch?
There is no charge for the training, only your commitment to provide 100 hours of volunteer service back to our community. You will, of course, be responsible for your own lunches.

Since you are having field trips, what happens during bad weather?
Dress accordingly, because we are still going out! Fall weather can be nice or nasty, or both on the same day. We will go out regardless of the weather.

I can’t attend all the sessions. Does it matter?
Yes, it absolutely does matter. Each session provides valuable information that is not available in any other form. You will meet people who can help your understanding of various subjects and assist you when it comes time to work on projects. If you miss sessions, for whatever reason, you may be asked to terminate the program and reapply to a subsequent training when you will be able to attend.
I don’t like public speaking—in fact, I’m a bit (or more) on the shy side. Does this mean I shouldn’t apply?

Public speaking is just one of many ways to educate people. Each volunteer will develop, in conjunction with program staff, an individualized volunteer service plan that fits well with what they know, their interests, and how they prefer to work.

I have a disability. Does this mean I can’t go on field trips? Should I even bother applying to the program?

You bet you should apply! The WSU Watershed Master program is committed to providing services to all. Given adequate notice, we will provide reasonable accommodations. The presence of a disability has no influence whatsoever on the application process. We just need to know before the program begins so we can plan accordingly.

Do you provide the lunches? How about transportation on the field trips?

No lunches, sorry—but you probably wouldn’t like our cooking, anyway! You need to bring your lunch with you each day because they will usually be working lunches and there are few restaurants near the Extension offices.

We will car pool to field trips.

Can I ask WSU Extension to verify that I took the training so I can get credit for a course I’m taking or for consideration of a job that I am applying for?

We will certainly be happy to supply references, after the completion of the minimum service commitment.

I need an application form (and/or) I have more questions.

Please call Cheryl Lovato Niles at WSU Whatcom Extension at (360) 676-6736. or email: clniles@wsu.edu

Application forms can also be downloaded in an Adobe .pdf file format at:
http://whatcom.wsu.edu/environ/water/bw.htm

A clam survey in appropriately-named Mud Bay, at the north end of Chuckanut bay.