CITIZEN SCIENCE; AN EFFECTIVE METHOD OF EDUCATING THE PUBLIC ABOUT THE HEALTH OF THEIR BAY

Rick O'Connor

University of Florida IFAS Extension, Florida Sea Grant, Escambia County, Cantonment, FL, USA

There is an old adage that states, "the best way to learn science, is to do science". As a county Sea Grant extension agent, one of my jobs is to educate the public about the health of their bay and how they can help improve it. Using this adage, I have found citizen science projects a very effective method of providing education on the condition of their bay as well as how the science process works. The information collected is used by extension to educate those who do not participate as well as fill needed data gaps for state and local agencies. Many of the volunteers give presentations in the community, or serve as volunteers for other education programs, expanding this knowledge.

In Escambia County we currently have nine such projects where volunteers monitor water quality, habitat restoration, coastal wildlife, and invasive species in the bay area. Since 2012 we have trained 528 volunteers, who have conducted 3,979 surveys, logging 4,738 hours.

This presentation will discuss how the projects were selected, how we recruit and maintain our volunteers, how we train them, what resources we provide them, how the data is used, the benefits for both the volunteers and the community, and lessons learned over the years.

PRESENTER BIO: Rick has been a marine educator for 38 years teaching courses in marine science at Dauphin Island Sea Lab, Pensacola State College, and Washington High School's Marine Science Academy. He has directed citizen science projects since 1992. He currently serves as the Sea Grant Extension Agent in Escambia County.