

## What Can I Do?

Natalie Schrader

If you'd asked me two months ago about water conservation, I probably would have told you it needs to be addressed but I wouldn't have been able to tell you anything else about it. I've lived in the Midwest all my life and I haven't seen much drought. Water shortages have always seemed like a far off problem so I've never worried too much about it. Besides, I live in an apartment, if I owned a home I could do something more but there's nothing I can really do now, right? What I learned after spending time with the Master Water Stewards has completely changed my outlook on water conservation and water pollution.

### **Organic Pollution**

When I think of polluting the Mississippi River, I picture glass bottles and plastic bags. However, pollution can actually take a much subtler form. Organic materials like grass clippings and leaves can be just as harmful. This didn't make much sense to me when I first heard about this, don't they just decompose and end up at the bottom of the river? After all, leaves are falling in all the time naturally from trees that are on the banks anyway. As it turns out, this is exactly the problem. When these organic materials decompose, they are releasing nutrients into the water which can rapidly increase the growth of algae. Having a lot of algae in the rivers can take away the nutrients that other plants desperately need.

Ok, so when I buy a house and I have to mow my lawn, I'll make sure the grass doesn't go down the drain. But I live in an apartment right now, isn't there anything I can do? I can't build a rain garden or put up rain barrels, so am I supposed to wait until I own a house? I spent

some time talking with Stephanie Small, a future Steward who is taking the course now, about these very questions. One of the things that we discussed was not to underestimate the small things: turning off the water when you brush your teeth, don't leave the shower on for 5 minutes to warm up. It all adds up and it's all important.

### **Less Meat is Less Water**

Another thing that Stephanie mentioned was not eating meat. I was very taken aback by this as I normally hear of people becoming vegetarians as a way to protest animal cruelty, not water conservation. As it turns out, Stephanie explained that there is a lot of water that goes into producing meat; "85% of our farming; the soybeans, the corn all of that, 85% is grown to feed livestock. Only 15% is edible by humans... you don't have to go vegetarian but what if just one day you didn't eat meat? What if we all did that?" If a majority of the population cut their meat consumption by just a little bit, it would all start to add up and there would be less water going into producing livestock.

### **Word of Mouth is the Best Form of Preventing Pollution and Waste**

So far as an apartment-dwelling college student, I can monitor my own water use, eat less meat, and actively avoid polluting water sources. What else can I do? As it turns out, there's a lot. Many watershed districts organize river and creek cleanups that are more and more effective depending on how many volunteers they have. Getting in touch with the watershed district is also a great way to find other projects like planting rain gardens that need volunteers.

Another important thing that I can do is to encourage my elected legislators to support water conservation efforts and projects that protect freshwater sources from pollution. There are

current Stewards who have gone to their local city councils to discuss the amount of salt that is used on the sidewalks in the winter and have gotten their cities to reduce the amount of salt that they use. This is especially important in preventing storm water pollution in the spring when all that salt is washed into the storm drains. There are other city projects like the new Columbia Heights Library that is currently under construction. This library will feature a huge outdoor greenspace and rain garden to use for community engagement and education in water and environmental conservation efforts. Supporting these projects is another way to encourage legislators to support more efforts towards water conservation in the future.

By far the most important thing that I learned after spending time with the Master Water Stewards program is how important it is to be able to have conversations about water. One steward mentioned that apartment dwellers can often encourage their landlords to install rain gardens and rain barrels. It's not just the people in power who are good to have these conversations with. It doesn't matter too much if I am just turning off the water when I brush my teeth. But if I talk to my neighbors, friends and relatives about it too, it suddenly becomes much more effective. More than anything else I learned, nothing is more important than continuing the conversation about water pollution. Nothing is more effective at water conservation than word of mouth.