

7-8-11 The Spirit of Volunteering

Last Tuesday, as I collected my samples of beach water for bacteria testing, I traveled with someone else who was willing to learn about this and to act on my behalf, if needed. My trainee, Kevin, has lots of experience with outdoor events and animals and has lots of experience volunteering; so he was an ideal candidate for stepping in for me on environmental issues.

And we never know what we are going to step in as we go about the swimming areas of our ponds. Last year I stepped right off the new concrete boat ramp. I did not know it was unfinished, as it appeared to be finished and there were no signs indicating that it was closed. I felt the concrete with my boots. I liked the corrugated surface, as it was not slippery. I walked in very carefully, sweeping my lifted foot to the left and right but not carefully enough. The water in the West Monponsett Pond is so turbid, with suspended bits of soil, plant debris and algae, all floating in brown colored water, high in tannic acid, that I lost sight of the concrete ramp and stepped right off the edge. I dropped into the water, nicking my shins on the way down, with only my bucket hat floating on the surface for a moment. I must have been a funny sight as I rose, sputtering with the sample cup in my left hand and my barbecue tongs in my right. The tongs are curved at the ends and are just the right size and shape to hold the sample cup. They were intended to keep my hands out of the water! They did not help accomplish that goal on that day!

I told Kevin how I had stepped off the ramp, as I took a sample, that day, from the dock. He chuckled and agreed that sampling from the dock was the way to go. I was thankful that he was not deterred. Yes, he was a good choice!

We walked along the beach areas, talking about why I take the sample at a particular location and keeping our eyes open for any possible health threats. Our observations were then written on the field data report.

A couple days later, while on a brief vacation in Maine, I received a call from the Police and Fire dispatcher, that a family was sick with vomiting after a day at one of the beaches. When I called the father, I realized that this was another kind of volunteer and equally important. We talked about water quality, the chances of bacteria and/or algae being the cause of the illness and also having an open mind to other possible causes, such as a food borne illness. What concerned the man was that he insisted there had been a bad odor at the beach. That report needed some confirmation and, being unable to myself, I asked if he would go back to the beach, and make note of where the odor came from and if he saw anything unusual. Then, no matter what he reported, I would have one of my board members also go check the beach the next morning.

The man was actually enthusiastic about responding to my request! He said he would go back there right then and I agreed to call him back in another half an hour. During that half an hour, in addition to talking to someone at DPH and thinking about what might be or not be happening at the beaches, I also thought about how helpless we feel when our loved ones are sick and what a relief it is to have a job, especially when that task is potentially related to a solution.

Although only my board could actually “deputize” or appoint someone as a part time health agent in an official capacity, I was grateful for the assistance in this isolated situation.

We were not able to determine any reason for the beach waters causing an illness. The father reported that wind had dissipated the odor and my board also checked and came up empty on observations of anything detrimental. It was even a good week for algae and that does not happen very often for the West Monponsett Pond or many others throughout the world, where fertilizers containing phosphate pollute the water by feeding the algae.

It is important to know the status of the beach water and the status can change from one day to the next. After a heavy rain, following a dry spell, you will see a large plume of erosion at the mouth of the catch basins into the ponds. That rush of previously stagnant water can bring large amounts of bacteria into a beach that was clean and safe the day before.

See something? Then say something. It’s not only okay, it is welcomed. Volunteer your time, your observations, your knowledge, and your caring spirit by contacting the organization of your choice and asking if there is any way you can help. It does not have to be a huge commitment. Small contributions are great contributions, for spirit breathes life into any act.

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