

People, Partnerships, and Communities

The purpose of the **People, Partnership, and Communities** series is to assist The Conservation Partnership to build capacity by transferring information about social science related topics.

USDA Natural
Resources
Conservation
Service

Social Sciences
Team

Conducting “Rapid Resource Appraisals” of Watersheds

What is Rapid Resource Appraisal?

Rapid Resource Appraisal (RRA) is a set of activities that can be used by locally- led resource planning committees to rapidly learn about their watersheds.

RRA is a full day of the following:

- w Information packets
- w Educational presentations by technical specialists
- w Watershed tour
- w Discussion sessions with stakeholders and government officials

NRCS and the Conservation Districts often do similar activities with resource planning committees over the course of many months. The RRA, however, is done very early in the planning process in a single day for the educational benefit of the committee as they embark on the planning effort. This contrasts with watershed tours, for example, which are typically held near the end of a planning project to inform the community of the committee’s work. RRA also brings in technical experts from multiple disciplines and stakeholders who are not serving on the planning committee to share information and insight.

RRA is consistent with Phase I of NRCS’

Three-Phase Planning Process. RRA helps the committee identify their resource concerns, define objectives for their watershed, determine the group’s mission, and learn about the ecological, social, economic and political aspects of the watershed.

Although doing all four activities in one day is most efficient and effective, RRA can be modified to best meet the needs of the committee. Some committees have elected to conduct the RRA in two sessions, touring a portion of the watershed and holding group discussions on the second day.

Why do RRA?

Citizens who call for resource planning are often initially motivated by a crisis: flooding, agricultural chemicals in drinking water, wildfires, and so forth. As they learn about the complexity of their resource problems and the hard work of solving them, committee members can become overwhelmed. The Three-Phase planning process helps the committee meet these challenges, but its deliberate nature can be frustrating for anxious citizens. RRA can jump start the planning process. In a single day, committee members start tackling issues that ordinarily can take months to unfold. In an informal, relaxed

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setting they share ideas and get to know people whose opinions they may oppose. By engaging in discussions and learning together in the presence of the resources, they start to develop a common vision for the watershed and an identity for their partnership. They leave the RRA with a sense of accomplishment and renewed purpose.

RRA helps bring about a more effective planning process with improved decision-making and an increased likelihood of plan implementation by:

- w Helping the committee identify short-term projects to maintain momentum and build trust and confidence in the planning process.
- w Encouraging holistic thinking by increasing understanding of watershed functions, land uses and interactions.
- w Providing an opportunity to gather relevant social, cultural and political information about watershed communities.
- w Initiating public outreach with non-committee members and potential partners.

How to do RRA

Planning committee members and resource specialists who may eventually serve as technical advisors are the primary participants in the RRA. Also invite non-committee stakeholders (government officials and non-government community members) for the group discussions. These stakeholders need not participate in the entire day of activities if their time or your space is limited.



1) Information Packets

On the day of the tour, distribute information packets with:

- General information about NRCS, the Conservation District(s), other relevant natural resource agencies, and the resource planning process.
- Agenda for the day and a map of the watershed with tour stops.
- Published and unpublished information about the watershed, such as agency reports, nonprofit reports, demographic data, or newspaper articles.

2) Educational presentation

- Invite a resource professional to talk for an hour or less about the resources. Or invite others to speak about concerns that are specific to the watershed, such as wildlife habitat loss or water quality.
- Educational presentations set the stage for the tour portion of the RRA by providing participants with background information. Invite the technical expert to join participants in the field after the presentations. For example, after an ecologist's talk in a conference room, the ecologist can point out critical features during walks along the stream.

3) Watershed tour

- Bring the participants by bus on a tour of the watershed. Provide a comprehensive view of the watershed by including a sample of the different land uses, functions, and physical features. Stop at several places along the route to allow participants to explore the area, ask questions and talk about the resources.
- A tour guide (such as a District Conservationist familiar with the area) provides commentary on the bus. Other participants who are knowledgeable about particular areas can also talk to the group as they tour the watershed.

4) Group discussions

- Following the tour, hold discussion sessions with stakeholders who are NOT on the planning committee. Using a skilled facilitator to guide the discussion, the planning committee listens as non-committee members share their views. These

sessions can inform the committee about the political, economic or social opportunities and challenges in the watershed. They also establish initial contact between the committee and the larger community which will eventually implement the plan or be affected by it.

- Limit each discussion session to about 10 invitees, not counting the planning committee or other members of the public who wish to listen. Hold a one hour long *government* session with township supervisors, village presidents, county board members, etc. Another can be with *non-government* stakeholders like farmers, nonfarm rural landowners, business representatives, subdivision residents, etc. Identify individuals and organizations to invite by brainstorming with the committee. Select people who are representative of the community but who do not ordinarily interact with committee members.

Signs of a successful RRA

- ✓ Committee members with different views had fruitful discussions.
- ✓ Committee members gained an increased sense of the importance of their task and the complexity of problems.
- ✓ Committee members learned about previously unknown aspects of their watershed.
- ✓ Committee members are more aware of possible impacts of solutions

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Where can I find more information?

For information about how RRA has been successfully used by conservation partnerships in Illinois contact Jody Rendziak, Sociologist, Natural Resources Conservation Service, 1902 Fox Drive, Champaign, IL 61820. Phone: 217-398-5267. Also consult a booklet about RRA, forthcoming Winter 1997 from the Social Sciences Institute. Phone: 616-456-2247.

Rapid Resource Appraisal is based on a multidisciplinary approach to investigating rural communities in developing countries. Called *Rapid Rural Appraisal*, it was developed in the 1970's by researchers as a way to gather and analyze information with limited time and resources. Rapid Rural Appraisal involves a suite of techniques including:

- Secondary data review
- Semi-structured interviews
- Direct observation
- Conceptual models
- Workshops

To learn more about Rapid Rural Appraisal, consult: Conway, G.R. and J.A. McCracken. 1990. "Rapid Rural Appraisal and Agrosystem Analysis," p.221-235 in *Agroecology and Small Farm Development*, (eds.) M.A. Altieri and S. B. Hecht, eds.. Boca Raton, Florida: CRC Press. Gibbs, C.J.N., *Rapid Rural Appraisal: An Overview of Concepts and Application*, presented at Int. Conf. Rapid Rural Appraisal, Khon Kaen, Thailand, September 2 to 5, 1985.

RRA Tips

- Conduct the RRA after the committee has met a couple of times.
- Select a group of two or three people to do the organizing with assistance from NRCS.
- Brainstorm ideas from the entire committee about what they want to see and learn during the RRA.
- Limit participants in the tour portion of the RRA to those that can be accommodated on a single bus.
- At the committee meeting after the RRA, discuss newly identified concerns, insights gained, opportunities identified, etc. Build on this information throughout the planning.

Social Science is the scientific study of human behavior. It helps us better understand the forces that affect us in social situations. A range of social science topics includes culture, social interaction, communications, groups and organizations, the economy, and social change.

