



Big Sky Watershed Corps Evaluation Project

Natural Resource Planning and Protection Semi-Structured Interview Results

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Acronyms

BSWC-Big Sky Watershed Corps
CDs-Conservation Districts
DEQ-Department of Environmental Quality
DNRC-Department of Natural Resources and Conservation
FWP-Fish, Wildlife, and Parks
MACD-Montana Association of Conservation Districts
MCC-Montana Conservation Corps
MWCC-Montana Watershed Coordination Council

1. Introduction

The Big Sky Watershed Corps (BSWC) is an AmeriCorps program implemented through a partnership between the Montana Conservation Corps (MCC), the Montana Watershed Coordination Council (MWCC), and the Montana Association of Conservation Districts (MACD). Individual Corps members are paired with water resource-related organizations and agencies, known as host sites, to promote professional development and increase the operating capacity of host sites to achieve their missions and/or purpose. Corps members serve eleven-month long “terms of service” with their host sites. This report is part of the overarching BSWC evaluation project, which seeks to understand the following research questions and sub-questions:

- 1) Do Watershed Groups/Conservation Districts (CDs) that host a BSWC AmeriCorps member:
 - a. Treat and improve more miles of rivers and streams than comparable non-host sites?
 - b. Educate and engage more individuals in environmental stewardship curriculum and activities than comparable non-host sites?
- 2) How, if at all, do BSWC AmeriCorps members increase their host site capacity, as compared with non-host sites, to:
 - a. Implement mission-oriented programming and initiatives?
 - b. Execute river and stream stewardship and restoration projects?
 - c. Recruit, engage, and maintain volunteers?
 - d. Form new partnerships or collaborative efforts?
 - e. Deepen relationships with existing partners or collaborators?
 - f. Educate various stakeholders about environmental stewardship?

To answer these questions, we conducted a pre-survey administered during the first half of the 2021 cohort of BSWC members’ term of service (see Gilbert et al., 2021ⁱ) and a post-survey administered after the Corps members’ term of service concluded (see Gilbert et al., 2022ⁱⁱ). Additionally, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 36 people. The results of the semi-structured interviews are the primary contents of this report.

2. Data Collection and Analysis

The research team wrote a broad set of interview questions to answer the research questions listed above. We adapted the original guide (BSWC host site interview guide; see Appendix for all interview guides) to develop six different guides specific to the role of the person being interviewed (e.g., board member, landowner, non-host site, Corps member, etc.) Interviews were conducted using the specific interview guide for the type of interviewee being interviewed (see Appendix). We piloted our BSWC host site interview guide with two Corps member supervisors from two current BSWC host sites. We include these pilot contacts in our interviewee numbers reported below and share their comments throughout this report.

Using the pre-survey data (n=79), we created groups comparing three non-BSWC host sites (organizations or CDs that had never hosted a Corps member) with three BSWC host sites that were currently hosting a member. We used survey information about each site's workplace staffing, budget, the number of volunteers who served the previous year, environmental focus issues, and more to create the comparison groups. Next, we reached out to the survey respondent from each host site and non-host site in our comparison groups to request an interview. Three host site contacts and one non-host site contact agreed to an interview and two non-host site contacts did not respond to our interview request. Because we were unable to schedule interviews with two of the non-BSWC host sites, we were unsuccessful in forming comparison groups.

We proceeded to conduct interviews with the survey respondents who agreed to participate in the study from our initial outreach effort. We were able to interview five survey respondents: two Corps member supervisors who work for water-resource-related nonprofit groups, one CD staff member who supervises a Corps member and one person who works for a water-resource-related nonprofit group who had never hosted a Corps member. We then utilized snowball sampling to identify further key informants based on these interviewees' recommendations. We asked interviewees to connect us with informants who were familiar with the BSWC program and/or had worked with their Corps members. Contacts identified from snowball sampling include nonprofit volunteers, nonprofit board members, and one landowner who had worked with a nonprofit group on restoration projects.

We also reached out to natural resource state agency staff to gain their perspectives about the BSWC program. We identified state agency participants using publicly available contact information. Some state agency interviewees volunteered additional contacts for interviews, including nonprofit staff or steering committee members and other state agency employees.

Additionally, we identified two organizations that were essential to the BSWC program's operations and had participated in the round one survey and conducted interviews with them. We also interviewed Corps members who were currently working with four of the organizations/CDs. Corps members were invited to participate using the contact information provided by the MCC.

The results presented in this report are the synthesis of interviews from a variety of interviewees that could speak to the BSWC program as a whole or people who understood each watershed group or CD's operations and interactions with Corp members (see Table 1). In total, we conducted 33 semi-structured interviews with 36 people (two interviews entailed conversations with two people), see Tables 1 and 2:

Table 1: Number of interviews by group type

Interviewee type	Number of interviews
State agency staff*	12
Water resources-related nonprofit staff	9
Nonprofit board/steering committee members	5
CD staff	3
BSWC members	4
Watershed group volunteers	2
Landowner	1
Total	36

* State agencies included Montana Department of Natural Resource and Conservation (DNRC), Montana Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ), and Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks (FWP).

Table 2: Number of organizations/agencies by BSWC affiliation

BSWC affiliation	Number of organizations/agencies
Current BSWC host sites*	8
Former BSWC host sites	3
Never a BSWC host site	1
State agencies	3
Total	15

*Includes interviewees from pilot interviews

Interviews were recorded with the interviewees' permission and transcribed using a transcription service (TranscribeMe) and Otter.ai transcription software. We utilized qualitative analysis software NVivo 1.5.2 to facilitate our coding interview transcripts into meaningful themes. Interviews were conducted, transcribed, and coded by the first author. The coding definitions and framework were reviewed by the first and second authors. Here, we report on prevalent themes that emerged from our analysis. Quotations presented in this report exemplify these themes, which emerged from interviews. This study received approval from Montana State University's Institutional Review Board (AG033031-EX).

3. Results

The following results are organized by themes that emerged from the interview transcripts. Each section contains direct quotes from interviewees and summarizations of our discussions.

3.1 BSWC Program Background

The BSWC program began in 2011 and, at the time of writing, is in its 11th year of operation. The overarching goal of the BSWC program is to provide Corps members with professional development in a natural resource-related field and, in turn, provide the BSWC host site with increased capacity to achieve their missions and reach goals. The overall structure of the BSWC program is designed so that, generally, MCC supports Corps members and MWCC and MACD support the host sites.

One of the founding members of the BSWC program who currently works for state government described the original goal of the program:

“...the goal really was to change the dynamic and demographic of capacity that existed out on the landscape. And bringing in these Corps members who were working within the context of the AmeriCorps mission...public service, volunteer generation, K through 12, education, all of that, really gave a great boost to the capacity at the local level for delivering conservation. I think it may be one of the most significant things I've been involved with, it has changed the dynamic of conservation in Montana, frankly.” -State Agency Staff 1

Another interviewee who was involved in the founding of the BSWC program described how partnership-building and collaboration became the foundation of the program, as relationship building was needed to secure host sites for the Corps members. The interviewee also described that though there was some initial reluctance on behalf of CDs in rural areas to take on a Corps member, the initial success of the program increased positive perceptions of the program and inspired other CDs to inquire about the BSWC program. Multiple interviewees involved in the founding of the BSWC program noted that it has developed into a successful program that benefits Corps members, their host sites, and the greater communities in which Corps members serve their terms.

3.1.1 Why Participate in the BSWC Program?

Several interviewees said that the reason their organization or agency decided to bring on a Corps member was to **increase their capacity to meet goals and administer programs**. One interviewee said that they were interested in the potential of the Corps member **becoming a staff member** after their term of service had concluded.

Some interviewees mentioned that they began hosting members to **increase their capacity in specific programmatic areas**. For example, one CD administrator mentioned that they brought on a Corps member specifically to work on education and outreach for their district—their education events had become increasingly popular, and they had no designated staff member to run them. Another interviewee described how their organization brought on a Corps member to work on a monitoring program.

Corps members mentioned that they decided to participate in the program due to the **professional development opportunities** and positive experiences with prior MCC/BSWC programs. One Corps member said that the **length of the term of service** was ideal for them, 10 months was long enough for them to gain professional development experience and then return to their undergraduate degree program. Another described wanting to **continue working with a supervisor** they had liked during their previous year as an AmeriCorps member with MCC:

“... I kind of just thought as a really viable employment opportunity post grad[uation]. It started at an ideal time right after Christmas break, because I graduated in the fall. But I did really, really enjoy my time with Montana Conservation Corps as an intern. And I really liked my site supervisor. So, the opportunity to stay with [name of supervisor] ...I couldn't really pass up because [the supervisor is] a great boss. And I really liked the work that I did there. So just kind of wanted to continue that.”

-BSWC Member 1

3.2 BSWC Member Contributions

Overall, we found that Corps members contribute to project management and administration, education and outreach, monitoring, recruiting and engaging volunteers, collaboration, and relationship building. Current Corps member supervisors and those who had supervised Corps members in the past described many contributions that members made or make to advance their organization or agency's goals and initiatives. In the following sections, descriptions and examples of Corps member contributions to their host sites, communities, and natural resource conservation in Montana are described in detail.

3.2.1 Project Management and Administration

Several current and former Corps member supervisors described how Corps members take on administrative tasks and execute projects. Some interviewees described how their Corps members had written grants to secure funding for projects and/or assisted their organization with the grant writing process.

Additionally, several interviewees discussed the important role that Corps members play in project management through organizing projects and gathering volunteers or other partners to execute projects. One Corps member described how they wrote and applied for a grant to address nonpoint source pollution, which funded a planting project. Another interviewee who administers grants to Corps members discussed how the grant program allows Corps members to execute a project that enhances water quality and provides professional development:

“We also have project funding, where members can...it has to be related to water quality, but they basically can do a small restoration project...it's usually their first grant...they apply for this grant. And then they carry out the project, implement it, do all the things...And part of the purpose of it is partly to get conservation work done. And it's partly their professional development...helping them work through this whole process, and how to keep your budget.” -Host Site Staff Member 2

From an administrative perspective, one supervisor described how helpful their Corps members were with managing their social media accounts:

“...it may seem like a small part. But her keeping up on the social media content is huge. And she's been able to consistently post things. And it's just so helpful to have an online presence that I don't need to worry about. I can just focus on project stuff and grant stuff. And she's really good with the website and picking up like technological intricacies.”

-Member Supervisor 1

Two supervisors also mentioned how helpful their members were at managing social media and marketing, particularly at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic when much of their presence shifted to online formats. One Corps member played an integral role in re-designing their host site's website. The Corps member described how, because they were new to the organization, they were able to construct the website's content from the perspective of someone who was unfamiliar with the organization. The Corps member also re-organized the website's organization to make it easier for constituents to navigate.

As this section shows, Corps members play significant roles in completing administrative and project-oriented tasks for their host sites including social media management, grant writing, and project management.

3.2.2 Education and Outreach

Education and outreach were the most frequently mentioned activities or types of programming that Corps members assist with or oversee for their host sites. The education activities Corps members execute or are a part of include classroom visits, tabling at community events such as farmer's markets, organizing drought forums and community speaker series, planning workshops, drafting and sending out newsletters, and more. Multiple Corps member supervisors mentioned that education and outreach are among the most important tasks that the members complete for their organization or agency. Some of the topics that Corps members cover include aquatic invasive species, drought, watershed health and structure, stream permitting processes, pollinators, and more.

One staff member of an organization that hosts a BSWC member discussed how receptive education event participants are to the member's education activities:

"They [Corps members] do a lot of education and outreach, and I think they do a really good job of it. I don't know if it's because it feels relatable or it's because they're volunteers or what it is, but I always feel like people are really open and willing to talk to our Big Sky Watershed Corps members and listen to them or attend their workshops...I feel like, if the member is open and willing, then I think they do just a really good job of getting people to their events and having people listening to them...and just bringing them into the fold of what we're trying to do..."

-Host Site Staff Member 1

Similar to education, both Corps members and their supervisors described the important role Corps members play in creating and sending outreach to their host sites' constituencies. This most often occurred in the form of newsletters and email correspondence. One Corps member described what they had learned about outreach during their term of service:

"I've learned that it's best to do outreach in a variety of mediums...we always do Facebook events, and we do an electronic newsletter, but we also do signs and posters, and we do it on cycles, because sometimes people can miss the first round. And it's always good to check back in and then we do reminders, but I've also learned... how to communicate with volunteers. And just keep them in the loop, because it's important to give them enough details and also how to communicate with them, whether it's, you know, when they first sign up for a project, you want to give them a certain amount of information. And then once the group is all together, you can give them the full picture...then you want to give them a reminder. But yeah, there's... lots of details in outreach..." -BSWC Member 2

3.2.3 Monitoring

Another activity that Corps members participate in is monitoring. Corps members have been involved in monitoring the outcomes of projects or programs (e.g., determining how well a project or program is or is not working) and environmental monitoring (e.g., plant counts, plant ID, water quality, stream flows, groundwater data, aquatic invasive species, presence of pollinators, road surveys, etc.). Overall, Corps members and their supervisors reported more instances of members participating in environmental monitoring than project/program outcome monitoring. One supervisor mentioned that their Corps members have not typically been present to see the outcomes of the projects they work on due to the length of their terms of service:

“...it's just the nature of the beast that we've had the corps member plan a project, implement the project, but by the time it gets to the monitoring, they're gone. And they're not there for a couple of years to see the results because they're out of there.”

-Member Supervisor 1

Thus, the length of time it takes to implement and monitor a project does not always align with Corps members' length of service. However, multiple interviewees indicated that Corps members are important for collecting feedback directly from landowners or volunteers that participate in their programs. For example, one Corps member who had worked on planting projects with landowners described how they were able to collect feedback that led to project adjustments:

“...just touching base with the landowners and seeing... what worked? What didn't? We didn't use... the little nets that you put on baby saplings... We didn't use those because they didn't make a difference to the previous member's project landowner. So, yeah, I guess taking notes from that, like, okay, let's not use those little casings. They're just turning into trash.” -BSWC Member 1

Corps members are required to compile data about certain activities that they do as a requirement of the BSWC program. These data include information about the number of people in attendance at education events and miles of riparian area restored or stewarded. While some interviewees described the level of reporting that the BSWC requires as cumbersome, one interviewee noted that the monitoring Corps members are required to do as part of their service is helpful to share with their constituents:

“...because they [Corps members] have to do such intense reporting, it's helped us...because they're measuring their Big Sky Watershed Corps term and...what it shows AmeriCorps that they can do. But then it also shows our grantors. We use that information to report back to our grantees, which always looks good to have that type of really in-depth information because, if we want to continue the program, it's really good to have that really in-depth information... And it looks really good to our membership. When they're asking, 'Well, what have you done in the last year?' we have this really intense data to provide.” -Host Site Staff Member 1

In sum, Corps members engage in environmental monitoring more often than project/program outcome monitoring, although they can play a significant role in collecting feedback from their host site's constituents about what is and is not working with projects or programming. The required monitoring documentation that Corps members do as part of their terms of service can also be beneficial for their host site's grant writing, membership, and outreach activities.

3.2.4 Recruit and Engage Volunteers

Some interviewees described Corps members as integral to their volunteer recruitment. At some host sites, Corps members have developed strong working relationships with volunteers and engage with them throughout their terms of service. Notably, some host sites seldom use volunteers due to the nature of their work or the location of their organization or agency. Therefore, some Corps members do not have opportunities to work with their host site's volunteers or assist in volunteer recruitment process.

One riparian landowner who had hosted a planting project on their property discussed how important the local watershed group Corps member was in organizing volunteers for the project. The landowner discussed how at the beginning of a project people tend to be really enthusiastic and then that support drops off, but the Corps member was able to keep the momentum of the project going and greatly contributed to its success.

Another example of Corps member volunteer engagement came from a water resource-related nonprofit organization. This organization places volunteer management under their Corps member's purview. During their interviews, the organization's Corps member supervisor, Corps member, two volunteers, and

a board member all discussed the vital role that Corps members play in volunteer management. The board member described the connection between Corps members and their volunteers in detail:

“Sometimes you [would] think that...we've got best friends working together out there... the volunteers get kind of attached to our Corps members. Most of our volunteers are retirees... And I think to work with someone who's up and coming in the field and interested in preservation and conservation, it's probably a little bit of a parental feeling, you know, it's like they want to help our Corps member. At the same time, they want to help the resource and relationship is - I've never seen it be less than outstanding between the Corps members and the volunteers, they all get to know each other, first name basis. Some of the projects can be quite large. We'll have 20 people show up for a project or two dozen people show up for the project and the Corps member's really responsible for coordinating the activities on the ground, giving the safety talk, try to incentivize the group if it needs it, usually doesn't, because they're there for a reason, they're there on their own volunteerism, and [to] support the project... the Big Sky Watershed Corps member's really the [name of organization's] front and center person representing us and expressing the appreciation of the board... the Corps member ends up being our advocate, and being our translator, so to speak... they play an incredible role.”

-Host Site Board Member 1

Two interviewees who are long-time volunteers for the same organization described above discussed how they enjoy that Corps members take leadership roles during their volunteer work. One of the volunteers said:

“I don't like making decisions, so I let [name of Corps member] make all the decisions ... it's nice to have somebody take charge, first off, and have the stuff and do the organizing and we can say, ‘What do you want us to do next?’ and they tell us what to do and that's great. And they have the big picture. I mean, you have to have both - you can be kind of focused on what you're doing, but to have [name of Corps member] position, you have to have a greater gestalt of everything that takes place and that's really important, and the organizing and things... And they carry the enthusiasm that's really good, that keeps us moving.” -Volunteer 1

As the last two quotes show, Corps members play a valuable role in managing and engaging volunteers for this water-resources-related nonprofit. Though not all Corps members have the same opportunities to work with volunteers to this extent, enhancing volunteer relationships and managing volunteers is an activity that Corps members have been successful.

3.2.5 Relationship Building and Collaboration

The interview data showed mixed results in terms of Corps member involvement in collaborative efforts. Some interviewees felt that it is inappropriate for Corps members to be in a relationship-building role due to their short terms of service and that it should really be a long-time community member who is in that position. On a similar note, one interviewee discussed how it can be difficult for members to develop relationships in the less than one year term of service that they are with their host site and in their communities. One staff member of a state agency expressed hesitation over Corps members being the one to develop relationships for their host site, but noted that they can still be valuable to the relationship building process:

“...it's a pretty short time period for them to build meaningful relationships. I think the value that I've seen is that they can spend time writing grants, which nobody else has the time to do to help out other people in the watershed group that might have a full-time job somewhere else.” -State Agency Staff 3

Despite some of these reservations, several interviewees offered concrete examples of where Corps members' unique positions allow them to build connections for their host site. When asked if Corps members can play a role in collaborative efforts, one former member supervisor and current board member of an organization that hosts a Corps member said:

"I've seen that happen with the [name of partner organization]; We've worked with them on some projects. And that's because of a Big Sky Watershed Corps [member] who has some capacity to arrange a cleanup or a planting project, and so brings multiple groups together...it's kind of cool because the AmeriCorps members... sometimes get along better than the organizations that they're hosting. And so, they can bring those organizations together through the individual members." -Former Supervisor 1

One CD administrator described how hosting Corps members can help them build new connections:

"I think no matter what - somebody calls us and says, 'Oh, I need somebody here to help out with this, or help out with that,' they've been a great resource for the Conservation District in our community to make more partnerships with organizations and to just get our foot in the door because they needed a volunteer for something..." -Member Supervisor 3

Other interviewees mentioned how their Corps members have been successful in roles where they facilitate and coordinate collaborative groups. One interviewee pointed out that how collaborative a Corps member is during their term of service can come down to that member's personality and how willing they are to engage in relationship building. A state agency staff member summed up how the nature of the BSWC program allows for collaboration and connection building:

"...I think the Corps members could potentially link people together based on the connection to Big Sky Watershed Corps, but also just showing up and being willing to reach out to different partners and landowners, and then people to try to get them together. I think the projects that Big Sky Watershed Corps members work on sort of lend themselves to collaboration, and I think a lot of times, that's one of the goals for them is to be able to connect people... it's kind of nice to have a fresh face come in and not know, the history, or the drama, or the turf wars, and just be like, 'Hey, we're doing this, let's bring everybody together'... I think it's kind of nice to have a new person come in and be able to connect a lot of people maybe in places that...we've just gotten tired and less able to communicate." -State Agency Staff 2

In this section, we have discussed the specific tasks and activities that Corps members work on for their host sites. Corps members complete administrative tasks such as grant writing and social media management, manage water stewardship projects, execute education and outreach programming and initiatives, work on environmental monitoring and sometimes outcome monitoring, recruit and engage volunteers, and participate in collaboration and relationship building. In the following section, we discuss the impacts that Corps members have on their host sites, communities, and State of Montana, and, in turn, how the BSWC program influences Corps members.

3.3 BSWC Impact

Corps members contribute to their host sites, communities, and natural resource conservation and stewardship in Montana beyond completion of tasks and activities. Overarching BSWC program impacts include increasing host site capacity, bringing a fresh perspective to host sites, and increasing the number of full-time natural resource professionals working in Montana.

3.3.1 Capacity Building

The ability to increase capacity to implement natural resource conservation and protection in Montana was the most frequent Corps member impact discussed by interviewees. Many Corps member supervisors said that certain projects or programs they implement would not be possible without the member's help. Several interviewees mentioned how integral Corps members are to moving projects forward and in increasing their host site's ability to take on more projects. In some cases, successful projects implemented by Corps members laid the groundwork for the creation of a paid position to continue the project or continue working on the issue; we discuss this phenomenon in more detail in section 3.3.5.

Several interviewees who have experience working with multiple host sites across the state observed how the BSWC program has been particularly helpful in increasing the capacity of small watershed groups with few to no paid staff members. This quote from an interviewee who had hosted Corps members in the past describes this phenomenon:

"...the ability to increase the amount of work that gets done, especially with the smaller watershed groups, has been phenomenal...capacity building, I think also having this network of AmeriCorps members across the state that-- we do a lot of building beaver mimicry structures and collecting willows and planting willows and just doing a lot of community projects that require a lot of people, and having 26 AmeriCorps members across the state, and they're like, 'Yes, we'll show up. Just tell us where to be'...so they can just come and be this entire workforce."

-Former Supervisor 3

The above quote also describes the benefits of the BSWC network, which we describe in detail in section 3.3.4. Another interviewee working as a CD administrator described how participating in the BSWC program for multiple years has allowed their CD to get more work done and become better known in the community:

"...our capacity has just gotten out of control, which is great. And now we're known in the community for helping out more and being involved in different natural resources events... And everybody knows to call us if they want to do an education thing or if they want somebody to table and talk about pollinators...And that's the kind of stuff that with just one person, I could never fill the amount of things people asked me to come do." -Member Supervisor 3

Additionally, a landowner who had received help from BSWC members to complete planting projects on their property described how helpful the Corps members are:

"...you can't do these projects yourself...I do think they [BSWC members] make a big impact, because they come with a smile on their face... they're just there to help. 'What do you need? Let's just do it.' And that's what makes it work." -Landowner 1

This section demonstrates how Corps members increase the capacity of their host sites to implement programming and initiatives. An increase in capacity contributes to natural resource stewardship and protection in Montana.

3.3.2 Fresh Perspective

Several interviewees described how they enjoy the fresh perspective BSWC members bring to natural resource conservation work in Montana. Multiple interviewees mentioned that many members are recent graduates of conservation-related degree programs and are up to date on newer technologies and that this is useful in their work. Several interviewees mentioned that because Corps members tend to be young, early career professionals, they bring excitement and energy to the projects and groups with which they are involved. One interviewee described how this can bring beneficial cross-generational interactions to agencies that tend to be made up of older, later career, professionals.

One Corps member supervisor who works on communications and outreach for a nonprofit organization described how their Corps members bring a fresh perspective to their work:

“...it's good, I think, to get them to kind of do a first draft of press releases and stuff because they have a fresh perspective on a lot of that stuff... it can kind of be a different voice than what I write every time...I would say in general, it's very helpful having members through the years just with fresh perspectives on things... because sometimes you get so much in your head or jargony in a way that you don't even realize is a thing.” -Member Supervisor 2

Another interviewee who had hosted Corps members in the past discussed how they bring in new ideas to their work, and how the greater BSWC program provides a network of ideas and connections:

“They [BSWC members] definitely bring a good perspective to our work, which I think is part of the reason we love the AmeriCorps program is that we often get stuck in our little lane, like, ‘This is what we do. We only do this, and we only talk to these people,’ and they're like, ‘Oh, so-and-so, I was talking to this AmeriCorps member and they're doing this program over here and they came from somewhere else, and they were going to do this,’ and just connecting that. That's, again, that sort of networking idea... having 27 members across the state of organizations I have never worked with before has been great because I have made connections with those people, and their AmeriCorps members are friends...So I would say that they are definitely bridge builders and they bring in new ideas. They shake up our routine, no matter how you look at it. I mean, sometimes good, sometimes nerve-wracking, but I like it.” -Former Supervisor 3

3.3.3 Community Involvement

Several interviewees described instances where Corps members immersed themselves in the communities in which they work. However, some interviewees noted that Corps members' level of involvement in the community can come down to individual personality and preferences.

An interviewee who currently works for a nonprofit organization who had been a Corps member in the past described how, during their term of service, they were able to immerse themselves within the community they were placed:

“I had to learn how to communicate with the community with different perspectives and learn how to talk to a rancher which is really interesting, because I came from [Name of large city], so very different experiences. But I personally got fully immersed into the community...and kind of learned how to truly care about a community that actually really cares about its landscape.” -Member Supervisor 5

This interviewee described participating in many community events when they were a Corps member and noted that they still hold many of the relationships they made during their term of service. This former Corps member stayed in the community in which they completed their term of service and currently works for the same organization that hosted them.

Another example came from a Corps member supervisor who described how members being involved in the community is beneficial for both the members and their organization:

“I think it is beneficial in two ways that it kind of helps the members have a more meaningful experience and feel a part of the community. But then it also kind of strengthens the [name of organization] position in the community that we have this young person that people think is cool and is doing all this stuff in the community. So yeah, I think it can benefit kind of in both ways of helping them and helping us for those things.” -Member Supervisor 2

This interviewee also described how their Corps members are typically able to build meaningful relationships with the organization's volunteers and how one volunteer in particular returns year after year and continues to engage with the members. The interviewee described how, through this relationship, the volunteers can bring Corps members "*deeper into the community.*"

One former Corps member who currently works for a nonprofit organization in Montana described how a benefit of the program was that they were encouraged to make connections within the communities they were placed. Other interviewees reflected on how meaningful it is when Corps members build relationships in their placement communities and then serve multiple terms or stay in Montana to do natural resource work. A former Corps member supervisor noted how, even if Corps members do stay after their term of service is complete, they contribute to their placement communities:

"And I don't know how many of these people have proved that over and over that actually, they do stay. They enrich the community. Even if they don't stay for very long, couple years or whatever, they're still a part of our community, and they are young and energetic and they really want to be a part of the community because, I mean, they wholeheartedly invest themselves." -Former Supervisor 3

This interviewee also discussed the value of Corps members staying in Montana after their terms of service are complete. We discuss examples and benefits of Corps members transitioning to Montana natural resource staff in section 3.3.6.

3.3.4 BSWC Network

Another benefit of the BSWC program that emerged from interview data involved the opportunities created by the BSWC network. A network between BSWC members emerges as members come to know one another through the program and then disperse throughout the state for their individual assignments. Throughout Corps members' time in the program, they connect to each other's host sites and, sometimes, connect their host sites to one another over shared projects and initiatives.

Several Corps member supervisors and Corps members themselves described the value in members traveling to other host sites to assist with volunteer projects. One supervisor noted that they get volunteer help from their Corps members reaching out to other Corps members to help with projects. Current and former Corps members said that opportunities to get involved with other host site's projects are a great benefit of the program.

One former Corps member supervisor described the BSWC network and how it is beneficial for host organizations:

"Our members also serve a really nice networking capacity in terms of...how the Big Sky program works, and how it networks at the members and the entities that have members...there's this entire learning and networking that takes place through the members themselves that brings the hosting organization more in contact- than we maybe already had been with some of the entities...So [name of CD] ...has had members and our members have been very close with them...there's also like an enhanced sort of cohort, right, that actually doesn't go away over time, which is really nice." -Former Supervisor 2

Several interviewees described how the BSWC program can bring together organizations and agencies that do not typically work together. For example, one interviewee who works with the BSWC program at the statewide scale described the importance of building connections between organizations and agencies, and how the BSWC program plays into that:

“...it seems like the conservation community of Montana is really small, for as big of a state as we are. Everything is so connected. And it's really where you have those relationships that things thrive and really get done here...I think maybe that's where Montana, we're still a little behind the curve on a lot of things, but it seems like the recipe is for getting things done or pretty simple. And it really just comes down to the trust in the relationships that you have. So just even getting those diverse interests in the same room and talking can be like a really beneficial step forward...Sometimes I think this [BSWC] program has been able to bring those groups together by incorporating Big Sky Watershed Corps members into the agendas of some of these conferences. Like the ones that we do, like our symposium, provided opportunities for those members to get up and actually speak about the work they're doing. And maybe those members are bringing with them a host site organization that's never engaged with the DEQ or with our organization, even. But it's creating those opportunities to kind of get people maybe even out of their smaller bubbles they might typically work or live in and introduce them to like this larger network of people that work around the state on these similar interests.” -Member Supervisor 4

Some interviewees that had been past Corps noted that they are still able to tap into the BSWC network in their current roles as Montana natural resource professionals. Additionally, organizations and agencies in Montana that do not host members are able to utilize the BSWC network by reaching out to Corps member cohorts for volunteer help.

3.3.5 Lasting Change and Growth

Current and former host site interviewees described how participating in the BSWC program opened doors for their organization to grow over time in terms of the types of programs and projects with which they are engaged. In some cases, Corps member's projects lead to the creation of full-time natural resource conservation positions.

For example, an interviewee who had hosted Corps members in the past described how a multi-partner restoration project they had been a part of utilized BSWC members to fill a gap in project coordination and implementation. The interviewee described how utilizing and supervising Corps members for the project brought the participating organizations together:

“...we would meet because here we have a young person that needs...some supervision, guidance. And so that would bring us together once a month as a part of people in a meeting-in a room discussing ‘What have you done, you know, what are some help you need? What next?’ And it was great. So, it really brought us together...” -Former Supervisor 4

This former supervisor went on to describe how the partners involved in the project continued to hire Corps members for multiple years. Eventually, the work the Corps members had been doing helped create a full-time position:

“...we figured out how... to create a...restoration ecology position. So, in a way the Corps... helped create a position regionally that was not there. And really enhance the capacity in our region for restoration. That person then supervised [corps members] as part of this partnership, even though I secure the Corps members, the main supervision was led by this restoration ecologist.” -Former Supervisor 4

Another example of a Corps member's work leading to lasting change came from a member supervisor. They described how, when their organization first began participating in the program ten years prior, they had one staff member. Since then, their organization has been able to grow and change through the contributions their various Corps members have made:

“I’m pretty sure that our executive director was a part-time executive director when we first had a member...I think she kind of needed as much help as she could get and saw this as an opportunity to get some support and capacity that she very much needed. And that really just allowed us to grow leaps and bounds as an organization. Like our first member did an assessment in the community for watershed education and environmental education in general. And essentially, we built our education program around the information that she collected, and she helped to build our education program. And our [name of volunteer program] ...is something that one of our members built. And obviously, all of these pieces were things that they were...directed to look into and then figure out. But it's really kind of cool to see the different kind of patchwork pieces that different members have contributed to over the years that are now staples of who and what we are.”

-Member Supervisor 2

Another Corps member supervisor who works at a CD reflected on how hosting Corps members has changed their operations:

“It has totally changed our entire organization, having an affiliation with the Watershed Corps because just having an affordable way to add capacity to your small organization has been huge for us...everything we do is different because we have a Watershed Corps member. It's legitimately changed everything that much. We have so much more capacity.” -Member Supervisor 3

As these quotes show, hosting Corps members can provide host organizations opportunities to implement permanent programming that might not have been feasible otherwise.

3.3.6 Transition to Staff

Many interviewees said that the number of Corps members who transition to full-time Montana natural resource professionals is one of the major achievements of the program. Several interviewees named specific people who they knew were past Corps members and pointed to their current professional roles in Montana natural resources as a clear indication of the program’s success. One CD administrator discussed how Corps members taking on conservation jobs in Montana is filling a gap:

“...there's a shortage of natural resources employees in Montana because everybody's retiring. And for the last six years, that's been a big problem with the workforce...the Watershed Corps has really helped us fill natural resources positions throughout the state.” -Member Supervisor 3

Five of our interviewees had been past BSWC members. When asked how, if at all, being a Corps member prepared them for their current role, one employee of a water-resource-related nonprofit organization said:

“I would say it kind of prepared me in every way for my current role because we were just an organization of the executive director and myself as the Big Sky member when I started out...So the two of us kind of did everything...So, I've done most of the things that we do as an organization I have been responsible for at some point, whether it was when I was a member or sometime since then. So yeah, I've definitely done all of the different pieces...as the Big Sky member, and then just kind of learning this community and this organization. I mean, those were kind of the building blocks of it all of that first year of service with them as an AmeriCorps member, it got ...your feet under you to then be able to continue on and kind of expand and move with the organization to keep doing good work.”

-Member Supervisor 2

This quote demonstrates how participating in the BSWC program prepares members to work in Montana natural resource fields. Another interviewee who had been a past BSWC member discussed how, prior to participating in the program, they had worked in natural resources but had not had the level of program management experience that they were able to gain from serving as a member. They said that the skills they gained from participating in the BSWC program led them to pursue future roles that built upon the strengths they developed as a member.

Additionally, some interviewees said that the opportunity to have an “extended interview” with a potential staff member is a major benefit of the program—host sites get a chance to know Corps members very well before hiring them. In turn, Corps members get to know about their host sites before accepting jobs. The results described in this section show that a clear benefit of the BSWC program is the professional development of Montana natural resource conservation and stewardship staff.

3.3.7 Member Development

So far, this report has primarily discussed how Corps members benefit their host sites, communities, and the State of Montana. However, a central component of the BSWC program is professional development for the members themselves. Many current and former Corps member supervisors, host site staff members, and state agency staff described how beneficial the BSWC is for Corps members’ professional growth and networking.

Several interviewees, including some who do not host Corps members directly, said that they strive to provide Corps members with networking and professional development opportunities and to serve as a mentor for members. Some interviewees also noted that it is important to them to try to help the Corps members develop their careers and figure out their next steps after concluding their terms of service.

One member supervisor who had participated in the BSWC program discussed how it influenced them and other members:

“...personally, it has changed my life, obviously, since I now live in Montana and have worked for this awesome organization for as long as I have...it has shaped a lot of people's lives I know because many of them have told me of it. It has meant a lot for them to be here and have the opportunity, and they've gone on to do some really cool things at least with some of our members. We've had them go on to work with other nonprofits or go to grad school. One of them is in grad school right now for environmental education...”

-Member Supervisor 2

Another interviewee who was a Corps member at the time of their interview described how participating in the program increased their confidence. When asked if participating in the BSWC program had furthered their professional development, the interviewee said:

“Absolutely. I was actually updating my resume recently, and I had a lot of stuff to put on there because of this [term of service], website building, but also just confidence in myself. Before I got this job, I was nervous to talk to anybody. Sending emails, I was nervous doing [that] kind of thing... I've gained a lot of confidence through this position because...it's almost like there's not a lot of pressure to do everything perfect, and you're not expected to do everything perfect and that's what I was used to in college. And so having that mindset like, 'This is meant to be a learning experience. This is meant to be where you grow as a person,' and once I got that mentality, it's like the pressure kind of lifted...I'm able to learn while doing the job, which is kind of what this whole thing is meant to be and that's amazing.” -BSWC Member 3

This Corps member went on to describe how participating in the program made them realize what kind of work environment they wanted to work in, in the future. They discussed how important it is to get along

with co-workers and to communicate with supervisors and how, ultimately, participating in the program gave them a better idea of what they want to do for their career. This interviewee pointed to the flexibility of the BSWC program as one reason they were able to explore these interests and have such a positive experience; they felt that their supervisor and the BSWC program encouraged them to take advantage of opportunities to work on other Corps members' projects.

Another BSWC member, who described knowing relatively little about the professional world before their term of service, felt that participating in the program greatly contributed to their professional development. This member had the opportunity to split their term of service between a government agency and a watershed group. The member felt this split was beneficial for seeing how both types of entities operate, and which type of organization they might like to work for in the future. This interviewee also mentioned that the oversight of their supervisor had been an important part of their success.

Another BSWC member echoed many of the comments made by the Corps members described in this section. They too discussed how working with their host site and learning from their supervisor provided learning opportunities they might not have had otherwise:

"...just being present in an office professionally and a nonprofit has been really important...it's a skill to learn about office dynamics, and how to how to communicate professionally at board meetings or with partner organizations. [Name of supervisor] has taught me so much about how to professionally do outreach, whether it's about events, or just about the organization in general. I've learned how to talk to the public. And more than that, more than even the grant writing... I just feel I have a more rounded experience. Because sometimes in like the biological fields you don't get all of the kind of just practical experience..." -BSWC Member 2

This section demonstrates how participating in the BSWC program contributes to the professional development of Corps members. Both current and past Corps members displayed evidence of personal and professional growth.

3.4 State Agency Perspective

In total, we interviewed twelve people who work at natural resource-related state agencies. These state agencies included DNRC, DEQ, and FWP. Though none of these interviewees was current Corps member supervisors, they each had experience working with BSWC members or were familiar with the program's impact on Montana natural resource conservation and stewardship. Though perspectives from state agency staff have been given throughout this report, in this section we highlight some of their viewpoints that have not been mentioned.

Overall, state agency staff spoke very highly of the BSWC program and the contributions that Corps members have made to CDs and natural resource-related nonprofit groups throughout the State of Montana. One state agency staff member described how BSWC members are able to connect CDs and watershed groups to one another:

"And I see a big disconnect in demographic between, for instance, conservation districts and watershed groups, watershed groups tend to be more organized, more urban settings. Conservation Districts tend to be agriculture and very rural. And oftentimes a Big Sky Watershed Corps member will come in and connect the dots of two demographics that would not otherwise necessarily connect, and they do that around a project." -State Agency Staff 1

Several state agency interviewees described learning about BSWC members and their projects through the members' conference or meeting presentations. These interviewees recalled being impressed by Corps members' work and the professionalism Corps members demonstrate during presentations. One interviewee described that, when Corps members distribute their learnings and activities this way, they

are helping to disseminate information to people who might not otherwise have the opportunity to learn about the topics. One state agency staff member described their thoughts about the BSWC presentations they had observed:

“I have been a part of the MWCC meetings where the Big Sky Watershed Corps members present their work. And it always strikes me that the group of people, the members, they all support each other, they get along. The presentations are always really well done. And they're always showcasing some pretty great things. So, I think, you know, without being there to see directly how they interact with community and landowners, it's pretty evident, I think, from those presentations, that they're making a big impact to connect the work with all sorts of people. Especially because they're elevating it...when they're presenting at a symposium, they're bringing it to a lot more people that wouldn't necessarily know what's going on.”

-State Agency Staff 2

Most of the state agency interviewees mentioned Corps members' contributions to their host sites' capacity as an important contribution to the program and the members. Some state agency staff noted that the BSWC helps fill a capacity gap that state government organizations cannot fill. For example, this interviewee described how Corps members interact with Montana communities in a way that their agency is not able:

“...they [BSWC members] really dramatically increase our capacity in the far-reaching parts of the state...we have a large state and a government capital right in the middle, and a very small budget. So, our ability to actually be present in communities or regions is very limited. We could end up spending our entire budget on just simply travel and get nothing done...being able to place people in those communities and those regions and see what they can accomplish has dramatically increased our capacity. It has also increased the goodwill towards the department...[which is] very strongly regulatory. Most people who work with us view us in an adversarial manner. But, we also have this soft side of our program where we have grants and money and try to help farmers and ranchers and that kind of stuff. People don't see that because we can't really necessarily get out there. But through the Big Sky Watershed Corps we can work with them to help build that capacity in those communities.” -State Agency Staff 4

Another state agency interviewee who had been heavily involved with the creation of the BSWC program described how Corps members and their host sites can learn from each other and how the program provides opportunities for host sites to hire someone they might not otherwise have met:

“...it was really exciting, because I could see these sort of cross-cultural connections... I would always describe to the...the potential host site supervisors that it was a lot like hosting a foreign exchange student, because I'd say, you know, you have these members that are coming from all over the country, and they're not familiar with Montana, or life in a rural ag community...the members were...I think, fairly surprised when they would land in their location, and they weren't getting to choose that location, it was a lot like Peace Corps...but also, the community's learned a fair amount from the members, you know, early on and I think that has been really interesting to see how well that works out...they both learn from having...different perspectives come to the table and work together, and maybe not people that would...necessarily be hired by that organization, if there was...a full job interview process, and not necessarily locations that people would choose to move to.” -State

Agency Staff 5

This section provides viewpoints from state agency staff that are not mentioned elsewhere in this report. Next, we discuss the challenges of hosting BSWC members

3.5 Challenges of Hosting BSWC Members

Interviewees described two main challenges of hosting Corps members: continuity and supervision. Continuity issues primarily involved the difficulty of transitioning outgoing Corps members' responsibilities to the incoming Corps member and retaining the knowledge Corps members gain during their term of service. One Corps member supervisor who works at a water resource-related nonprofit organization described the difficulty of retaining Corps member knowledge:

"...the members leaving, then you lose that capacity. You lose all the knowledge they've built with the organization, and it goes with them. And you try to incorporate ways and develop systems to keep that with the organization. But it's still hard when that person leaves." -Member Supervisor 4

However, another Corps member supervisor described how they reduce some of the difficulties with continuity by extending their Corps members employment by six months. This allows their current Corps member to be available when the incoming member begins their term; thus, the current member can pass on some of their knowledge and training to the new member. Several Corps member supervisors described how their members create transition materials (manuals, checklists, information packets, etc.) to distribute to incoming Corps members, institutionalizing some procedures and programming, and reducing the amount of time the supervisor spends training the incoming member.

Another challenge of hosting Corps members that interviewees reported was the time it takes to supervise. One interviewee noted that, for them, it usually takes three to four months to get their Corps member up to speed to where they can work on their own. Another staff member of an organization that works with the BSWC program statewide described how it can be difficult for small organizations to commit time to supervising members:

"...I think they [host sites] need to have somebody who's going to be a host site supervisor who can actually invest the time. And that's, I think one of the problems that local groups have, too, is that they're scrambling just to get done what they need to get done. And it's like a chicken and egg kind of thing. They need the capacity...of the Corps member, but they might not have the capacity to manage and work with that Corps member...so that can be really tricky." -Host Site Staff Member 2

One interviewee mentioned that, for them, it can be challenging and time consuming to work with Corps members who are quite young and have never lived independently before. This interviewee reported that there were times where they had to step in as sort of a family member for Corps members who had medical problems and needed to go to the doctor or hospital and that this had taken up quite a bit of their time.

An interviewee who works for a state agency described how they had heard from multiple host sites that they feel some pressure to make Corps members responsibilities fun:

"The one comment that I hear consistently from other people that have hosted them...is there's this feeling that for the host agencies, that everything has to be fun. And I have heard more than one person... like, seriously, it is work, and not that we need them to be drudgery and 'This is horrible,' but, but it is work and, and to try to always make sure it's fun is like, 'Do you want a job or do you not?'" -State Agency Staff 6

Another state agency staff member who had previously worked for an entity that co-hosted Corps members echoed this thought. This interviewee discussed how they felt urged to make Corps member responsibilities fun but that ultimately it was supposed to be an experience to increase professional development and work is not always fun.

In this section, we have primarily described interviewee's reported difficulties of hosting Corps members. In the next section, we report interviewee critiques of the BSWC program in its entirety.

3.6 Critiques of BSWC Program

Several interviewees including state agency staff, Corps member supervisors, and Corps members themselves discussed how not every organization or agency is fit to host Corps members. These interviewees said that making sure both Corps members and host sites have a positive experience with the program is important. Additionally, concerns about the BSWC program adequately supporting host sites were reported.

One interviewee spoke very highly of the BSWC program overall but noted that not every host site has such a positive experience. This interviewee mentioned one host site they knew of that had a hard time hosting members and their most recent member quit before their term of service was over.

Additionally, one employee of a nonprofit organization that works with host sites statewide described their concerns about maintaining the BSWC program's quality as it grows larger:

"...I worry that as the program expands... that there just aren't enough quality host sites, both to support the members... even at 34 members, it's a little like trying to get everyone trained and making sure that we're supporting everyone and making sure that they're all good quality host sites, and that they're all being supported...I think keeping that quality of members and quality of the host site experience and having it still be a benefit to the community just gets harder as the program expands....so just like being mindful of that... Because I think it's such a strong program, and it has so much support...I can't even tell you. People are just like, 'All Big Sky Watershed Corps.' Because members are awesome, and they do great things. But I just want that to continue. I would hate to see that get diluted in any way..." -Host Site Staff Member

Another interviewee who had hosted Corps members in the past and planned to host them in the future described a similar concern regarding the program expanding into other states.

A staff member of a state agency who had been involved in the creation of the BSWC program also expressed some concerns over the way the BSWC program operates. This interviewee described how MCC has become the primary controller of the program and that the other partners have become less involved:

"I feel like MCC has really taken over this program...we have lost the true value of the partnerships. I think that having one organization be the be-all-end-all for both the host site side of it, and the member side of it is not a good idea...the analogy that I use is...you're often in better shape... if you're buying a house and you have your own representative, versus if the realtor is also acting as the seller's representative. So, I think it's good to have independent representation for the members and have MCC really manage the members, but have the other partners really engaged in working with the host sites and ensuring that...they're advocating for the host sites and for what I still believe is the fundamental reason that we started the program. And I think it's shifted, and I think it's too heavily focused on the members and MCC and the way that they manage AmeriCorps rather than it being a young professional development program while also benefiting the host sites. You know, I think we've lost sight of the host sites and what their needs might be." -State Agency Staff 5

Overall, critiques of the BSWC program discussed during interviews involved host site fit, concerns about maintaining the quality of the program under anticipated growth, and host site support. Next, we discuss interviewee suggestions for the BSWC program.

3.7 Suggestions for the BSWC Program

We asked each interviewee what they thought could be improved about the BSWC program. In the following sections, we describe suggestions offered by interviewees in response to the question, although some of these suggestions also came up spontaneously. Some interviewees felt that it was not their place to suggest improvements, as they had not been involved in the program enough to know what could be improved upon. Additionally, some interviewees did not have any improvements to suggest. The suggestions made include expanding the BSWC program's investment or reach, considerations regarding host site support and interaction, better support for the Corps members, and adjusting training and reporting expectations.

3.7.1 Expand Investment or Reach

When describing the successes of the BSWC program, some interviewees said that they hope the program continues to receive funding. One state agency staff member said:

"...I think it's such a good program, that it would be great to have it be a permanent part of Montana...it'd be great to have permanent funding...I think it's demonstrated success across Montana. And I think anything that we could do to make it stable and funded year after year would be really important." -State Agency Staff 2

One interviewee had a specific recommendation for where some BSWC funding should go. This interviewee, who works for a state agency, described that in the past some professional development funding had been allocated for Corps members to present at or attend conferences and that this had been a great way for them to make connections in the conservation community. This interviewee noted that they do not see as many members at conferences as they used to, and it would be beneficial for this professional development funding to continue so that members can expand their network and learnings or findings.

Another interviewee who works at a state agency described how the BSWC program could expand its reach to parts of the state that it does not currently have a presence:

"...the program is...I think it's well known by people who already know it, it seems to return to the same places, there's just big gaps, regional gaps... So, when I'm trying to defend it before the legislature, there's a lot of legislators who are, 'I don't know what they do, how do they help me out?'... where it's been...successful, it seems like we keep returning to those spots, I feel like there's areas of the state that really, we need to actually make an assertive effort to invest resources into them. Granted, some of those areas of state aren't the, like, if you're coming to Montana to spend a year or two, are probably not the places you imagined you were going to be hanging out. But we still have to reach out to those areas...I think that's an important change." -State Agency Staff 4

Regarding expanding reach, another interviewee who had hosted Corps members in the past described how the BSWC program could do a better job of communicating its successes to those not involved in the program:

"...I think probably Big Sky Watershed Corps could do maybe a better job of letting the world know that it exists. And the success stories that come from it...if you're not in the AmeriCorps communication train, right, which a lot of us aren't...then it's that whole speaking to the choir, like all the people that are in already know, but all the rest of people don't know." -Former Supervisor 2

Another comment regarding expanding the BSWC program's reach came from a volunteer of a water resource-related nonprofit organization. This volunteer noted that their comment was not just for the BSWC program but for AmeriCorps in general—they said that it would be beneficial if the program was

not just for young folks but could incorporate older, retired people as well or people who were in between jobs.

3.7.2 Host Site Considerations

Some interviewees suggested that the BSWC program should think about how to better support host sites. Additionally, multiple interviewees communicated the importance of making sure potential host sites are a good fit for hosting Corps members. One Corps member explained how it is important that host sites understand what it means to be a part of the BSWC program and host members:

“I think that this program's really successful when a host site wants a Big Sky member, which all of them usually do. But not all of them, I think, come in with a plan, or have a plan of work for their member. Some people think like, ‘Oh, I’ll just-yeah. We have some things to do. Let’s just get a Big Sky member.’ And they don’t really think about what that means, they just kind of go and do it...just from what I’ve seen, from talking with different people, and my own experience, too, that just sometimes they don’t even know what the program even fully means, or what it is... Especially if it’s their first time.” -BSWC Member 4

This interviewee made it a point to say that having some flexibility and autonomy in a Corps member’s term of service is a good thing, but too little structure can be difficult.

Another interviewee who works with the BSWC at the state level shared some thoughts about member continuity and how better to support host sites after the members’ terms of service are complete:

“...makes me wonder if it [the BSWC program] is always the best way to really build their [host site] capacity as an organization, or if it’s because it’s simply more cost effective than hire another staff person... I think the challenge groups face when that member leaves is that they’re kind of back in some cases, they’re taking a couple of steps backward because you inevitably just lose some of that capacity when the member is leaving. So how do we... across the state work to fill in those gaps and make sure that we’re really building capacity and not just temporarily, but helping address kind of the long-term needs of organizations. And I think, you know, with the Watershed Corps program, it’s focused on just one year at a time... I mean, that makes sense in the context of that program. I think other partners like maybe us and [name of organization] need to be talking too about...how do we also work from that program to build up more longer-term capacity for groups?” -Member Supervisor 4

One interviewee who has hosted a Corps member in the past discussed the opportunity the BSWC program presents to connect host sites to one another, suggesting that this could be better emphasized:

“But I think that the members network really well amongst each other...but maybe building in something that allows the hosting sites and the hosting entities to be a little more connected with each other...the Montana water world is kind of interesting because a lot of the a lot of the identity of people doing that work is through the Conservation Districts... we have a Conservation District, but we have several other entities that are big in water and we don’t always connect with each other...water is huge to us, a whole bunch of our conservation priorities are water-oriented, but we wouldn’t necessarily be super connected up with the [Name of Conservation District], for example. So maybe something that does a little bit of gelling of the hosting entities where they aren’t already, you know, in any kind of contact with each other.” -Former Supervisor 2

This section has described interviewee thoughts regarding better support for host sites participating in the BSWC program and the importance of host sites understanding what the BSWC program is.

3.7.3 Member Support

Several interviewees suggested improvements to the BSWC program that involved better support for members. State agency staff, Corps members, and former host site supervisors noted that the Corps member stipend is quite small compared to the cost of living and that finding housing in some communities in Montana can be quite difficult. One Corps member described how difficult the housing search was for them:

“When I was first moving here, man, trying to find housing was awful. It was awful. We had to split- we had four people all in AmeriCorps [living] all together...But just trying to find housing. It would be really helpful if somehow, they [BSWC program] had more resources for that.” -BSWC Member 3

Another Corps member noted that the monthly stipend is a flat rate and that the given amount goes much further in some areas of Montana than in others. One state agency staff member also described the difficulty of finding housing in Montana as a Corps member:

“...I'm sure they could be paid more. I think many of them... receive...supplemental nutrition assistance program benefits, which is kind of sad...it would be great if they received a larger stipend to where they could actually afford, you know, housing and, and groceries and things like that. I know that a lot of the partners I've worked with that have hosted members do a lot of scrambling to try to find them... housing with board members of their organizations or...other staff of the organization. So, it seems like, that's a perennial challenge to try to find these Corps members...housing and other resources. So, if there was any room to increase the amount of money that they're making probably would be good to look at.” -State Agency Staff 7

In addition to providing housing support and an increased stipend, interviewees mentioned that better support could be provided to the members to guide them into their next role after their term of service is complete. Of note, some interviewees referred to the collective “we” in this recommendation, suggesting that supporting the career transitions of members might not squarely fall on the shoulders of the organizers of the BSWC program, but also those in the Montana conservation community that work with them. One state agency staff member described this idea in detail:

“But I also think it's a really important change to program that we really need to as leaders, think about what's next for the people in those programs... these people get the experience, but we don't really set them up for what their next career is. They don't make a lot of money. They spend a couple years...and then and then we just kind of leave them out to dry. Where do you go next? Some people have been lucky, they've been able to land jobs, others, you know, they go back to wherever they're from, and, and you kind of feel bad about it.” -State Agency Staff 4

Another staff member of a state agency echoed this thought and mentioned that state agency staff could do a better job of integrating Corps members into their work.

3.7.4 Training and Reporting Expectations

Some interviewees suggested that modifications could be made to the required trainings BSWC members must attend. One interviewee who works for a state agency described how traveling from remote parts of the state to attend trainings can significantly cut into the amount of time they are working for their host site:

“...just speaking from things I've heard from partner organizations, but I think...there's some amount of frustration at the number of required trainings that members must participate in. I think that's more of a problem for some of the entities in eastern Montana. I worked in particular...with a member from [Name of County], which is very far east, eastern Montana, and it was really hard because for him to come back to participate in say a training or something in Helena... that's like an eight-hour drive. And so that's two days at least of just travel time, and so two fewer days for him to be actually at his host site working on a project or working with partners there. So, in some ways, I think that might be something that would be worth examining... are there ways to decrease the burden of the kind of administrative training components of that program to maximize the amount of time that the members can spend working on the projects...” -State Agency Staff 7

Another interviewee who had hosted Corps members in the past echoed this thought from the supervisor perspective, noting that going to trainings year after year got quite tiring.

Other interviewees suggested changes to the content of the BSWC trainings. One Corps member mentioned that it would be nice to have a list of acronyms that are commonly used in the Montana conservation community, as it would have been helpful for understanding who does what and what the different acronyms mean. The same Corps member referred to the BSWC network described earlier in this report, noting that it would be helpful for this aspect of the program to be emphasized during trainings:

“...something that BSWC could talk about more at the beginning of the term is to use each other as resources because I felt weird about emailing all the BSWC members...But at the same time, that's part of what it is. We have this network of all these people for a reason, and we should all use it. And so maybe that can be highlighted. I know that they discussed it a little bit, but really home in on that because it's really useful.” -BSWC Member 3

Another interviewee who works at a state agency said that they thought that the trainings had become “static” and that it was time to switch them up and do something different. Additionally, another state agency staff thought that it would be helpful for Corps members to receive water measurement training. We learned that Corps members do receive introductory water measurement training and deduce from this interviewee’s comment that this aspect of the program could be better communicated and/or expanded upon.

Finally, one interviewee who had hosted a Corps member in the past suggested some changes to the reporting the BSWC program requires. They noted that the types of metrics that the BSWC program asks members to track did not necessarily align with what their organization’s mission was, and it would have been more helpful to create site-specific goals for their members.

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

Overall, our semi-structured interview results show that the BSWC program is held in high regard throughout the State of Montana. Every interviewee described positive contributions that the program has made to resource conservation and stewardship in the state. Current and former Corps members, and many who have worked closely with them, described the personal and professional growth they experienced while participating in the BSWC program. One of the greatest benefits of the BSWC program emerged in the form of increased capacity for the organizations and entities that host members. Other benefits include increased resources through the BSWC network and an influx of trained personnel into Montana natural resource professions.

Concerns, critiques, and suggestions for the BSWC program were also discussed during interviews. Among these are concerns about host sites receiving enough support, ensuring that potential host sites are fit to host Corps members, expectations around keeping Corps member duties “fun”, and maintaining continuity of Corps member duties after their terms of service are complete. Next, we list recommendations for the BSWC program gathered from interview data. The recommendations listed here are ones that we found to be most prevalent and actionable. Notably, some of the suggestions listed here were brought up by interviewees in the context of hesitation about the growth of the program and the potential of diminishing program quality.

- **Stipend and housing.** Continue to investigate pathways to increase Corps member stipends. Explore ways to create secure and reliable housing for Corps members throughout their term of service. Come up with emergency housing plans for Corps members who are removed from their housing or are unable to secure housing.
 - **Equity.** When Corps members’ stipends are not large enough to cover their housing and other living costs, they must look to other sources of income to pay for these expenses. We observe that this lack of funding has the potential to create equity issues within the BSWC program if it has not already. Inadequate funding to cover basic living costs can attract BSWC applicants with the financial resources to meet costs not covered by the stipend. Applicants with these financial resources are likely to be white and middle to upper class (e.g., Haynes et al. 2015ⁱⁱⁱ, Hindenlang 2021^{iv}; Levkoe and Offeh-Gyuma 2020^v; Vadehra and Edelman 2020^{vi}; Wolfgram et al., 2021^{vii}; Wright & Mulvey, 2021^{viii}). Increasing the BSWC stipend increases the likelihood that people with less access to financial resources can apply to and participate in the program.
- **Host site support.** Ensure that host sites are receiving the support that they need to host members and are aware of the opportunities that exist to increase capacity through the BSWC network. Consider creative ways to create information exchange opportunities between host sites.
- **Vet potential host organizations and entities for BSWC program fit.** Interviewees highlighted that not every entity that wishes to host is a good fit for the program and their ability to supervise and support members should be seriously considered. Potential host sites should be thoroughly screened before they receive Corps members and should have some projects and activities ready for the Corps member to work on and enough work to fill their term of service. Additionally, host sites that are new to the program should be provided additional guidance and support as they navigate their first year(s) hosting Corps members.

- **Consider where training can be revamped and reduce the travel burden where possible.** Look into what aspects of training can be modified to keep up with new trends and information. It can be difficult for some host sites to travel for training, consider where and how this travel burden can be reduced. Two specific training modifications are:
 - Provide a list of acronyms to members of common terms and names of organizations and agencies that would be useful for them to know.
 - Emphasize the presence of the BSWC network and encourage its use. This could entail the creation of a directory with names of organizations, agencies, and individuals who consider themselves part of the BSWC network and are willing to be contacted for collaborative opportunities or resource and information sharing. Additionally, optional networking events could be hosted outside of required training to allow host sites to connect with one another. These events could be held virtually to increase accessibility.
- **Support member transitions after term of service is complete.** Provide support for Corps members as they enter the professional world, pursue advanced degrees, complete internships, etc. This could take the form of connecting members with mentors or providing one-on-one career counseling. Consider how to better support host sites as they transition members or as they exit the BSWC program.
- **Encourage and provide opportunities for conference and symposium participation.** Many interviewees described the value of BSWC members participating in conferences and symposiums. Consider allocating permanent funding for conference participation and presentations and strongly encourage members to present their work and/or attend.

Appendix – Interview Guides

BSWC Host Site Interview Guide

Opening

1. Tell me about your organization/agency
 - a. Goals?
 - b. Initiatives?
2. Briefly, what are your primary responsibilities? What is your relationship to your organization/agency's Corps member?
3. How, if at all, has COVID-19 impacted your operations?
 - a. Last year?
 - b. Currently?

BSWC - General

1. How many years have you been a host-site?
2. Why did your organization/agency decide to bring on a Corps member?

Operations

1. What sort of planning process does your agency go through to set goals/plan initiatives?
 - a. Achieve goals?
 - b. Feed-back loop?
2. How, if at all, does climate change factor into your organization/agency's decisions or planning?
3. How, if at all, does your organization/agency monitor programs and initiatives?
 - a. How do you use your monitoring data?
 - b. What are the challenges to monitoring?
 - c. How does your Corps member engage with monitoring programs and initiatives?

Volunteer Engagement

1. How, if at all, does your organization/agency utilize help from volunteers?
 - a. How does volunteer recruitment work?
 - b. What, if any, are the challenges of utilizing volunteer help?
2. How does your Corps member interact with your volunteers?
 - a. Are there any cases where your BSWC member(s) has been successful in building professional relationships with your volunteer(s)? *Example:* maintaining contact with them over an extended period or encouraging them to volunteer at multiple events

Education

1. Is your organization/agency involved in education or outreach?
 - a. Informal vs. Formal?
 - b. K-12 vs. Public?
2. Is your Corps member(s) involved in education or outreach programming?

Collaboration & Participation

1. What is your perspective on collaboration in water/natural resource management in Montana?
 - a. What types of collaborations is your organization/agency a part of?
 - b. Do you have a sense of whether Montana is particularly strong in collaborative efforts?
2. We're curious how, if at all, your organization/agency attempts to include stakeholders in your work?
 - a. What, if any, are the challenges associated with including stakeholders in your work?
3. How, if at all, do your Corps member(s) interact with your organization/agency's collaborators or partners?
 - a. Strengthen, build, maintain?

River/Stream Restoration and Stewardship

1. What are the biggest water resource threats in the watershed or watersheds that your organization/agency works in?
 - a. How does your organization/agency adapt to these threats?
2. What role does your Corps member(s) play in river/stream stewardship?
3. There seems to be a lot of talk in natural resource management about adaptive management—where in situations of social and/or ecological uncertainty, interventions are implemented in an experimental fashion to see what works and make adjustments. Do you practice adaptive management? What are your thoughts on adaptive management?
 - a. Active vs. Passive?

Wrap up

1. Do you have any other comments on water/natural resource management in Montana?
2. Would you say that your organization/agency works mostly on water quality, water quantity, or both? Or neither?
 - a. Our understanding is that water quality and quantity are managed separately in Montana and that there is not a lot of interagency management/communication. What is your perspective on this?
 - b. Does this sort of management work? What could be better?
3. We talked about (topic X, Y, Z) are there any other activities has your Corps member been involved in this year?
 - a. Is this typical?
4. Is there anything else you would like to say about the BSWC program?

State Level Employee Interview Guide

Opening

1. Please tell me about your agency.
 - a. Goals/initiatives
 - b. What water resource decisions does your division make?
2. Please briefly describe your role within your agency.

BSWC - General

1. What is your relationship, if any, to the Big Sky Watershed Corps program?
2. Has your division ever hosted a Big Sky Watershed Corps member?
 - a. If yes: For how long? Why are you not currently a host-site?
 - b. If no: Why not?
3. What outcomes, if any, have you noticed from the Big Sky Watershed Corps program in Montana?
4. What improvements, if any, do you think could be made to the Big Sky Watershed Corps program?

Operations

1. What sort of planning process does your agency go through to set goals/plan initiatives?
 - a. Achieve goals?
 - b. Feed-back loop?
2. How, if at all do you measure the effectiveness/progress of your initiatives?
3. How, if at all, has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted your operations? 2020 vs. 2021?
4. How, if at all, does climate change factor into your agency's decisions?

Collaboration & Participation

1. What is your perspective on collaborative water management?
 - a. Are there stakeholders who are not included in decision-making processes who should be, or is everyone who needs to be at the table mostly there?

- b. Do you think there is sufficient collaboration when it comes to water quality/quantity management?
2. What role, if any, do you think Corps members play in collaboration?

River/Stream Restoration and Stewardship

1. From your perspective, what are the biggest water resource threats in Montana?
 - a. What needs to happen to diminish these threats?
2. There seems to be a lot of talk in natural resource management about adaptive management- where in situations of social and/or ecological uncertainty, interventions are implemented in an experimental fashion to see what works and make adjustments. Do you practice adaptive management? What are your thoughts on adaptive management?
 - a. Active vs. Passive?
3. What role have you seen Corps members play in river/stream stewardship?

Wrap up

1. Do you have any other comments on water/natural resource management in Montana?
2. Do you have any other comments on the Big Sky Watershed Corps program?

Corps Member Interview Guide

Opening

1. What is your history with the BSWC program- is this your first year as a member?
2. What have you been working on with your host-site this year?
3. One of the goals of BSWC is to provide professional development for members- how do you feel you have grown as a professional, if at all?

Volunteer Engagement

1. We're interested in how Corps members work with their host-sites volunteer base- what has been your experience with your host-sites volunteers?
 - a. Recruitment?
 - b. Engagement?
 - c. Maintaining volunteers?

Education

1. We're also interested how Corps members are involved with education- how have you been involved with educating your host-sites target audiences?
 - a. Who have been your audiences?
 - b. Has there been education strategies you've found to work best? What would you take with you to your career from these experiences?

Monitoring

1. How, if at all, have you been involved in monitoring programs or initiatives for your host-site?
 - a. Feed-back loop?

Collaboration/Stakeholder Involvement

1. What is your perspective on collaboration in water/natural resource management in Montana?
 - a. How have you seen your host-site collaborate?
 - b. How, if at all, have you been involved in these collaborations?
2. There is a lot of talk about including affected stakeholder groups in natural resource management. Have you seen your host-site include stakeholder groups? How?
 - a. What worked well? Is stakeholder inclusion something you would do in your career?

River/Stream Stewardship

1. How have you been involved in river/stream stewardship during your term of service?

- a. What have you done?
2. I'm curious if you've made any observations about "best practices" concerning river/stream stewardship; what have you noticed works well or what should be improved?
 - a. Relationships? Transboundary management? Flexibility?
3. Have you noticed that climate change appears in any of your host-sites planning or outreach efforts?
 - a. Climate change discussions? Planning for resources to be affected by climate change?
4. There seems to be a lot of talk in natural resource management about experimental management- where in situations of high uncertainty, interventions are implemented in an experimental fashion to see what works and make adjustments. Have you seen your host-site engage in experimental management?
 - a. Active vs. Passive?
 - b. How, if at all, have you been involved?

Wrap Up

1. What is your overall impression of the BSWC program?
 - a. What could be improved?
 - b. What do you like best about being a Corps member?
2. What do you think your host-site does well overall as far as natural resource protection/stewardship?
 - a. What do you think your host-site could improve on as far as natural resource protection/stewardship?
3. How, if at all, has being a Corps member impacted your plans for the future?
 - a. Networking, relationship-building, career plans
 - b. We talked about (topics X, Y, and Z) is there anything else you've found particularly interesting or surprising that you've learned since you began your term of service?

Board member Interview Guide

Opening

1. Tell me about (name of organization)
 - a. Goals?
 - b. Initiatives?
2. What are your primary responsibilities as a board member?
3. Please tell me about how, if at all, you interact with your org's Corps member

Operations

1. How is the board involved in setting goals/planning initiatives for your organization?
 - a. Achieve goals?
 - b. Feed-back loop?
2. How, if at all, does your organization/agency measure the success of programs and initiatives?
 - a. How do you use your monitoring data?
 - b. What are the challenges to monitoring?
 - c. How does your Corps member engage with monitoring programs and initiatives?
3. How, if at all, does climate change factor into your organization/agency's decisions or planning?
 - a. Plans for the future?

Volunteer Engagement

1. How, if at all, does the board interact with volunteers?
2. How does your Corps member interact with your volunteers?

- a. Are there any cases where your BSWC member(s) has been successful in building professional relationships with your volunteer(s)? *Example:* maintaining contact with them over an extended period or encouraging them to volunteer at multiple events
3. Have yourself or any other board members developed relationships with Corps members?

Education

1. Is the board involved in education or outreach?
2. Is your Corps member(s) involved in education or outreach programming?

Collaboration & Participation

1. What is your perspective on collaboration in water/natural resource management in Montana?
 - a. Do you have a sense of whether Montana is particularly strong in collaborative efforts?
2. How, if at all, do your Corps member(s) interact with your organization/agency's collaborators or partners?
 - a. Strengthen, build, maintain?
3. How, if at all, has COVID-19 impacted your organization's ability to collaborate?

River/Stream Restoration and Stewardship

1. What are the biggest water resource threats in the watershed or watersheds that your organization/agency works in?
 - a. How does your organization/agency adapt to these threats?
 - b. How can Corps members help in this area?
2. There seems to be a lot of talk in natural resource management about adaptive management—where in situations of social and/or ecological uncertainty, interventions are implemented in an experimental fashion to see what works and make adjustments.
 - a. Does the board or the organization practice adaptive management?
 - b. What are your thoughts on adaptive management?
 - c. Active vs. Passive?
 - d. Can or do Corps members play a role in collaborative adaptive management?

Wrap up

1. Do you have any other comments on water/natural resource management in Montana?
2. Is there anything else you'd like to say about the BSWC program?

Volunteer Interview Guide

1. How long have you been volunteering with [name]?
2. How long have you been a member of the community?
3. What do you usually work on, and with whom do you work?
 - a. Education events?
 - b. Do you recruit other volunteers?
 - c. Do you repair or steward streams/rivers?
4. How have you worked with Big Sky Watershed Corps members?
5. What is your overall impression of BSWC members/the program?
 - a. Build relationships?
 - b. Increase capacity?
 - c. Increase river/stream stewardship?
6. How, if at all, has volunteering with [org name] impacted your perspectives on water protection or stewardship?
7. We're interested in how collaboration impacts natural resource protection and stewardship in Montana. What is your perspective on collaboration in this sense? What successes or failures have you seen?

8. What do you think are the biggest problems facing [watershed or water body]?
9. I hear you're a regular volunteer- what keeps you coming back?
10. Do you have any other comments on water stewardship/protection in your area?
11. Do you have any other comments on the BSWC program?

Landowner Interview Guide

1. How long have you been a member of the [name of] community?
2. How did you become acquainted with [affiliated organization name]?
 - a. What have you been working on together?
 - b. Do you have any other partners you work with as far as conservation projects?
3. I understand you have worked with Big Sky Watershed Corps members over the years- can you tell me a little about that?
 - a. Have they increased capacity for stream stewardship on property?
 - b. Have you built relationships with them?
4. What is your overall impression of BSWC members/the program?
 - a. Community relationships?
 - b. Capacity?
 - c. River/stream stewardship?
5. What qualities do you think good Corps members have?
6. We're interested in how collaboration impacts natural resource protection and stewardship in Montana. What is your perspective on collaboration in this sense? What successes or failures have you seen in your watershed?
7. What do you think about experimental management?
8. How, if at all, has working with [org name] impacted your perspectives on water protection or stewardship?
 - a. Corps members specifically?
9. What does living near [name of watershed or water body] mean to you?
10. What do you think are the biggest problems facing [watershed or water body]?
11. Do you have any other comments on water stewardship/protection in your area?
12. Do you have any other comments on the BSWC program?

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