

Earth Day 2012



Career Profile

Name: Harry N. Vitolins
Job Title: Water Pollution Biologist Supervisor
Location: Northcentral Regional Office
Years with DEP: 33

What kinds of activities do you perform on a daily basis?

My daily activities vary depending upon the season of the year. As a supervisor, I attend to routine administrative tasks, such as time sheets, leave requests, employee performance reviews, etc. With respect to the Dam Safety and Encroachment Act and Chapter 105 of the Rules and Regulations, I review complaint investigations conducted by subordinates. I also review and recommend action on wetland restoration, creation and enhancement projects and conduct environmental analysis of wetlands and waterways for dam, water obstruction and encroachment applications and recommend permit action. During the Spring-Summer season, I am the Black Fly coordinator for the West Branch of the Susquehanna Watershed. That responsibility includes conducting comprehensive field monitoring of the presence, abundance and life stages of black flies as it relates to scheduling treatments and evaluating treatments. I oversee and direct the daily activities of an assigned seasonal intern for that particular program. Also during that time of the year, I review subordinates' work that coordinates investigations and surveillance activities in monitoring mosquito populations and control operations in the 14-county region.

What kind of educational background do you have?

I have a bachelor's degree in environmental resource management from Penn State.

What is the most challenging part of your job?

Since there is more work to accomplish than there are hours in a day, setting priorities on a daily basis are routine and a necessity in order to accomplish my goals. Distributing workloads to subordinates is a challenge when staffing levels are down in lean years. It can be frustrating when you know that environmental compliance usually goes hand in hand with field presence. Because of the aforementioned issues, some work does not get done in a timely basis which can make some people, including citizens, upset. Being able to be honest and polite with them in explaining the issues is sometimes not enough to satisfy their concern but they deserve our time and respect.

What got you interested in working in an environmental field?

I grew up on a farm adjacent to the West Branch of the Susquehanna River near Williamsport. Periodically, as a youngster (early 1960's), I witnessed fish kills in the West Branch due to acid mine drainage slugs moving downriver from the coal mining counties of Clinton and Clearfield. Later, I read that at one time, well before I was born, there weren't ever any fish kills in the West Branch Susquehanna River at Williamsport. That was because the West Branch was so polluted by acid mine drainage, that there were no fish to kill. I also witnessed in the late 1960's, how 4-lane highways were put in with little or no consideration for the environment. I witnessed acres of wetlands being filled, and streams such as Daugherty's Run being cut off from its meandering form through wetlands and forced into a perfectly straight half-mile trapezoidal channel to empty about a mile upriver from where the original confluence with the river occurred. Additional wetlands were dried up, not from the highway fill but from the loss of hydrology when the stream was cut off from its natural channel. All this was done without any thought for replacement of the lost functions and values those water bodies provided naturally. I witnessed first hand, how this "environmental conquering" affected my extra-curricular activities. Hunting, trapping, fishing and just playing "neighborhood ice-skating tag" on the wetlands during the wintertime made me appreciate these water bodies at a young age. Eventually, I came to realize that this

method of progress really didn't consider the next generation and I needed to be proactive in making a difference. The first Earth Day, April 1970, took place while I was a sophomore in high school and I knew then, this was the field I should enter.

What is the most rewarding part of your job?

Environmental progress can happen when appropriate laws and people that care implement the rules and regulations that come from those laws, such as the Clean Stream Law. As a youngster, I witnessed aquatic life in the West Branch of the Susquehanna River at Williamsport in "a struggling" condition. The river was starting to recover, but had a long way to go. In this present day, 48 years later, the aquatic life has made significant progress to the road of recovery. Bass fishing tournaments now occur regularly and the adult forms of aquatic macro-invertebrates bother people as they conduct their daily routines, all signs of a recovering body of water. I would think that I may have had a small part in that recovery along with a multitude of people that cared and did their jobs.

The progress at Babb's Creek is another great example of environmental progress. I used to take weekly samples on Babb's Creek at the bridge at Blackwell. Babb's Creek was turquoise in color and was void of aquatic life. Since then, efforts made by federal, state and county governments to treat acid mine discharges and re-mining have brought that stream back to an elevated existing use of exceptional value. A nice success story though it came at a significant cost.

What advice do you have for someone thinking about a career in environmental science?

Even though the West Branch of the Susquehanna River has made a dramatic turnaround from the times when there were no fish present in Williamsport, there continues to be new challenges in this and other Pennsylvania waterways. Emerging contaminants, such as endocrine disruptors, are theorized to possibly be affecting the smallmouth bass populations in our waters. A lot is still unknown and there is a need for individuals to keep a common sense, level-headed approach to solving our present and future environmental challenges.