DRY RIVER, WET EYES: COLLABORATION CAN HELP
Gracie Thomsen*, Program on the Environment, University of Washington
Site Supervisors: Alison Schweitzer and Mary Rabourn, King County Stormwater Services
Faculty Advisor: Yen-Chu Weng, Program on the Environment, University of Washington

Background
• Environmental practitioners (AKA environmental workers) face problems such as burnout, eco-emotions, and isolation, which can affect their work and well-being
• Studies have shown that for environmental activists and impacted communities, collective action and communal coping, in which a group works together to solve a problem, can help alleviate these mental burdens
• When considering what could emulate collective action and communal coping in practitioners’ work lives, collaboration was considered
• This study sought to examine the facets of collaboration and how it is/can be useful for practitioners, see Figure 1

Research Questions
What makes collaboration useful for environmental practitioners?
How do facets of positionality relate to barriers to connection?

Internship & Methods
• In the Summer of 2023, I remotely interned with King County STORM
• With them, I conducted:
  • A literature review of collaboration, coping and ecological emotions
  • Seven semi-structured interviews over Zoom with members of STORM
  • An online survey that had 121 qualified participants
• Note: The online survey was done as a pilot survey for King County, as such I was able to do my own research

Results
The Uses of Collaboration

- Hear different perspectives
- Better/ higher quality outcomes
- More efficiency/success
- Can relieve mental burdens

“Collaboration helps build useful tools based on collective experiences - others can catch errors or problems I would miss on my own”

“Generally, collaboration is beneficial and improves the quality and quantity of what I can do for the environment and our people”

“When we work collaboratively, we can solve a problem more quickly than individually”

“I think we provide a good support network to one another. We can commiserate and be reminded of the good days”

Barriers to Connection

Age: “People older than me treat me like I don’t know anything or that I’m in a position that I don’t deserve. It is hard to be respected or taken seriously”

Gender: “I am a young woman who works on teams with mostly older and opinionated men. This can be a difficult environment to feel respected, valued, and secure”

Race and Ethnicity: “Majority upper management were white who felt BIPOC people aren’t as educated or smart as themselves”

Work Experience: “Their [the participant’s teammates] experience is also a lot greater than mine, making it intimidating at times to ask for help and clarify tasks”

Work Position: “My current workplace is hierarchical in structure, with mid-career white male engineers at the top. Attempts to bring up concerns have resulted in backlash”

Results Continued
Reasons These Are Barriers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Microaggressions</th>
<th>Unsafe Working Environment</th>
<th>Lack of Respect</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Suggested Solutions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
• Take stock of your thoughts
• Believe others
• Practice conversations
• Assess your situation
• Take part in or implement trainings
• Record everything that happens
• Be professional
• Be polite
• Be transparent

Broader Significance
• Organizations should foster collaboration as well as interpersonal connections between co-workers
• These relations at work can lead not only to higher quality outcomes but can act as a buffer for harmful emotions and feelings of isolation and burnout
• However, to achieve this effect these interpersonal relationships need to be healthy
• Organizations need to take a long look at their people and the work environment they promote to take effective actions toward making a safe and respectful workspace
• If environmental practitioners have better well-being it then becomes less challenging for them to do the great work that they do

Acknowledgments
I would like to thank my Site Supervisors, Alison Schweitzer and Mary Rabourn, and my Faculty Advisor Yen-Chu Weng for all their support and encouragement. I would also like to thank Nancy Hardwick, Dawn Duddleson, Melanie Good, and Jessica Lechtenberg for helping along with this arduous process. Finally, I would like to thank my family for listening to me complain and I would like to thank all of the animals I cuddled with as outlets for my stress.
Finally, most important of all I would like to thank the people who participated in my research, I quite literally could not have done it without you. Thank you.

Figure 1. Visualization of my thought process. My hypothesis was that practitioners would be more mentally well in a collaborative (outcome 1) rather than being alone (outcome 2)