Starting a Monitoring Group

If you can't locate a local group, consider starting one yourself.
If you decide to start your own program, you'll need to do some basic research to determine how to proceed. To help your research, develop a list of questions that you can discuss with other volunteer program coordinators. For example:

What relationships does the program have with state and local agencies, local businesses, schools and colleges, other groups?

What kind of monitoring does the program conduct?

What is the program's monitoring costs? How is the program funded?

How are volunteers recruited, trained, and retained?

How is the quality of the data ensured?

Does the program have an approved quality assurance plan?

What reference materials, training aids, and methods manuals do they recommend?

Starting a volunteer monitoring program is not a simple task. You will need money for equipment and possibly for staff; appropriate meeting, training, and lab facilities; a network of knowledgeable people (such as educators, extension agents, local government representatives, etc.) who are interested in your project and willing to advise and help out; connection to (or sponsorship by) potential data users who can help you plan your project so that it meets their needs as well as your own; and organizational skills to manage and maintain the project. Most of all, you will need time to make contacts in the community, design your monitoring plan, develop training sessions, recruit volunteers, revise the program as it matures, raise funds, analyze the data, and report back to the volunteers and the community.

Here are some of the lessons learned by other volunteer programs:

Start small. A pilot project that serves to test out methods, training sessions, and organizational skills can keep you from being overwhelmed and allows you to evaluate and refine your project before moving on to more ambitious efforts.

Keep your goals--and those of your volunteers--realistic. Chances are slim that your data will ever be used in court to stop a polluter. Data collected for such regulatory purposes requires a very high degree of quality assurance. Most volunteer data is used to educate the community and to screen for potential problems.

Planning pays off. Beware of collecting a year's worth of data and then finding that you have no idea how to analyze it, that the methods you used are not considered valid, or that you sampled sites in the wrong locations.

Make connections. The more people you talk to in your community and within local and state agencies, the more friends and supporters your program will have. Include potential data users in all phases of your project's development.

Develop volunteer leadership. Volunteer leaders within a project provide the vision for setting goals and the commitment to achieve them. They also enable a project to develop and grow without stagnating. Build into your monitoring project plenty of opportunities for volunteers to develop as leaders.

Pamper your volunteers. Volunteers give up their free time to come to meetings, attend training sessions, and trudge out to monitoring sites. Provide social opportunities and reward volunteers for a job well done.

Use your data. Report findings to volunteers and to the community. Help volunteers present monitoring results at fairs and town meetings. Send your findings to your contacts in state and local government. Create a newsletter or data report and let the world see what you've accomplished.

Some USEPA resources on the World Wide Web... Office of Water Homepage: http://www.epa.gov/water/

Wetlands, Oceans, and Watersheds Homepage: http://www.epa.gov/owow/

Monitoring Water Quality Homepage: http://www.epa.gov/owow/monitoring/

Volunteer Monitoring Homepage: http://www.epa.gov/owow/monitoring/volunteer/

Surf Your Watershed: http://www.epa.gov/surf/

Adopt Your Watershed: http://www.epa.gov/surf/adopt/

Index of Watershed Indicators: http://www.epa.gov/iwi/

Volunteer Monitoring Resources
USEPA supports volunteer monitoring by sponsoring national conferences, publishing methods manuals, producing a nationwide directory of volunteer programs, and funding a national newsletter, The Volunteer Monitor (see resource box for information on subscribing to this publication). Volunteer coordinators in the 10 EPA Regional offices provide some technical assistance for local programs and help coordinate regionwide conferences. The Regions are also responsible for grants to the states that can be used, in part, to support volunteer monitoring programs that help assess nonpoint sources of pollution or that serve to educate the public about nonpoint source issues.

For more information on USEPA's volunteer monitoring program, or to obtain any of the documents listed in the resource box, contact Volunteer Monitoring Coordinator, USEPA (4503F), 401 M Street SW, Washington, DC 20460.

Volunteer monitoring resources available from USEPA National Directory of Citizen Volunteer Environmental Monitoring Programs, Fifth Edition. EPA 841-B-98-009, November 1998.
Proceedings of the Fifth National Citizen's Volunteer Water Monitoring Conference. EPA 841-R-97-007, October 1997.

Proceedings of the Fourth National Citizen's Volunteer Water Monitoring Conference. EPA 841/R-94-003, February 1995.

Proceedings of the Third National Citizen's Volunteer Water Monitoring Conference. EPA 841/R-92-004, September 1992.

Volunteer Estuary Monitoring: A Methods Manual. EPA 842-B-93-004, December 1993.

Volunteer Lake Monitoring: A Methods Manual. EPA 440/4-91-002, December 1991.

Volunteer Monitor's Guide to Quality Assurance Project Plans. EPA 841-B-96-003, September 1996.

Volunteer Stream Monitoring: A Methods Manual. EPA 841-B-97-003, November 1997.

Volunteer Water Monitoring: A Guide for State Managers. EPA 440/4-90-010, August 1990.