Understanding the Tap: Perceptions of New York City Water

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Abstract

I am concerned about the extreme disparity between the two types of water in New York City: its impeccable drinking water, which reaches citizens' taps without the requirement of filtration, and its polluted waterways, which constantly endure the discharge of untreated sewage among other contaminants. Given the complexity within NYC's water system, I am studying the connections residents understand between the “quality” of proximate waterways and that of the water source. My research (1) examines the language and accessibility of information about the water system, (2) looks at the effects of living near a Wastewater Treatment Plant through speaking with community members, and (3) gains a better understanding of Manhattanites’ perspectives through surveying. Preliminary findings show the most widely available information – newspaper articles – contain either misleading language or vague explanations of the water system, while reports from the government and environmental organizations are so fragmented that to gain a full understanding of the system requires time-consuming research, likely suggesting that most New Yorkers lack a clear understanding of where their water comes from or where it goes after use. Continued exploration will inform how perceptions, and resulting actions, are formed, which could be utilized for citywide reform of water-use practices.