

Conference participants represented the broad range of projects and perspectives in the growing field of citizen science. Some of the richest discussions surrounded the challenge of finding the commonalities, and acknowledging the diversity, among initiatives that strive to engage the public in science.

WHAT IS THIS, “CITIZEN SCIENCE”?

A broad vision

Citizen science can mean anything from citizens observing natural events and characteristics to a genuine revolution in ‘science’ that democratizes the important social role of learning about the world around us. Citizen science can be seen as a way ‘real scientists’ leverage the labor of large numbers of people distributed widely, or a way to leverage the brains, experience, and insights of the world’s people to advance understanding.

*... a genuine
revolution in science?*

Such a broad vision leaves much room for interpreting concrete details of project implementation, and details are what the Toolkit aims to inform. While the conference did not lead to consensus as to a single definition, discussions of controversies and commonalities do inform our evolving understanding of this field.

Controversies

Defining citizen science may have merits for establishing credibility, advancing scholarship, and securing funding, but is also exclusionary by nature. Some questions:

- Is there a common element? i.e.,...
 - Must data be used/useable?
 - What degree of volunteer participation?
 - Are professional scientists necessary?

- Is ‘Citizen Science’ the right term?
 - Nationalistic connotations of ‘citizen’
 - Perhaps ‘Community Science’?
- Is a definition even necessary?

If not what, then why?

Some citizen science partnerships came to be because scientists needed more data than they could collect alone. Other projects arose in response to community needs, such as concerns about water quality or access to information. It is a tool to achieve various goals, from informing policy to enhancing lifelong learning.

Regardless of a project’s original intent, citizen science leads to more information about the world around us... in other words, it leads to more science.

Bottom line

Our understanding of citizen science has implications for the construction of the Citizen Science Toolkit. To accommodate the nuances of diverse projects, it may be most appropriate to explore different models for citizen science, and perhaps also multiple Toolkits.