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Principles for Effective Communication With Communities About Ecological Issues



INTRODUCTION

At the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, communication with the public is an essential part of our job. Our mission is to protect human health and the environment. To achieve this mission, we need the assistance and support of people who live in the ecosystems we try to protect. EPA employees engaged in environmental projects conducted within communities will be more successful if they work consciously toward clear, effective, multi-party communication about environmental protection and ecosystem management. Here are five principles to consider as you represent EPA in a community project:

1. Understanding your role in helping to protect the local environment and ecological resources
2. Understanding who you will be communicating with about ecosystems and the environment and why
3. Listening to and understanding what motivates people to conserve natural resources and protect the environment
4. Planning your communication efforts so you and your audience will effectively exchange information, views, and problem solving ideas
5. Communicating clearly using language and examples your audience will understand.

Along with training in ecology, public speaking, facilitation, conflict resolution and cultural awareness, the five principles identified in this brochure can help you communicate more clearly and effectively with community partners. Though designed for EPA regional staff who work on projects within defined geographic areas, these points may also be shared with practitioners in State or local environmental agencies.

INTRODUCTION



Principle 1: Understand your real and perceived role before you go into the community or geographic area

Many of today's public servants seek partnerships and shared decision making among community interests. While you may consider yourself a public servant or a facilitator, your audience may see you as a regulator or an enforcer with a set agenda. To build trust and credibility, you must be sure that your target audience and all potential partners know who you are and why you are there. To achieve this objective, you need to understand what your limits are and how much flexibility you have as an EPA employee before engaging in a community-based project.



Suggestions:

- Consider your role and image when you go into the community or location. Are you going in as an information provider, an expert, a participant in a collaborative process, a regulator, an enforcer? Will you have multiple roles? At what level do you represent the Agency?
- When you are working with stakeholders, be clear about why you are in the community or location and what your role is in the proposed effort.
- Interview EPA colleagues who have worked in this locale, talk with local partners, or read local newspaper clippings of past Agency experiences with the community or geographic area on environmental or ecological issues. Try to learn which communication efforts have been successful or unsuccessful and which issues are the most difficult to discuss.

1. UNDERSTAND YOUR ROLE



Principle 2: Define and understand your audience(s)

You should be aware that the public comprises a diverse array of individuals with different interests in, concerns about, and levels of understanding of science, the environment, and ecosystems. Try to identify clearly the geographic and cultural boundaries for the issues you are addressing and determine who may be affected by or concerned with the activities under consideration. Identify the different target groups in the geographic area or community. Determine if groups outside of this location may have an interest in or be affected by your actions.



Suggestions:

- Be aware of the many differences among people who will receive your message, use your information, and supply information to you. These differences may call for different approaches and responses from you.
- Consider where your audiences might be found, such as in churches, community centers, and historical or cultural organizations. Incorporate this information into your communication strategy.
- In addition to public announcements or meetings and fact sheets aimed at the general public, contact city and community leaders, citizen advisory committees, and local environmental groups and work with them to identify key audiences.
- Coordinate with other Federal, State, Tribal, or local partners who address similar ecological issues or who talk to similar groups or target audiences within the community.
- Use existing community groups to avoid duplication, find experts, and identify potential allies in the community.

2. UNDERSTAND YOUR AUDIENCE(S)



Principle 3: Listen to how and why your target audiences care about the natural world that surrounds their community

Now that you've identified your audiences, find out about their range of attitudes toward ecology, the environment, and ecosystems. There will be divergent viewpoints, values and motivations, as well as varying degrees of knowledge about environmental or ecological issues within a community or region. Understanding your target audiences, their values, knowledge, and interests will help you craft a clear, appropriate message. For instance, individual concerns about an ecological issue may stem from a respect for or an aesthetic appreciation of nature, regard for future generations, desire for species survival, or from religious or spiritual beliefs. Some individuals may value protecting home, heritage, health,

a sound economy, property rights, or quality of life. Realize that personal culture or history may determine how individuals see the value of a particular species, habitat, or ecosystem.

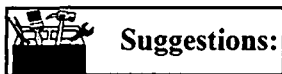
Listening to comments about values helps you understand what individuals see as an acceptable set of solutions—and helps you tailor methods of addressing issues that they will understand and that will resonate with them.



Examples of some links between ecological and environmental issues and community values and interests:



- Biodiversity (mix of plants and animals familiar to a community)
- Habitat destruction (draining wetlands, clearcutting for development)
- Loss of open/green spaces (urban development and aesthetic values)
- Numbers and types of species (aesthetic and economic values)
- Watershed issues regulations (private property questions)
- Water quality (recreational fishing, birdwatching, swimming, human health concerns)
- Ecological indicators (return of fish, birds, animals to a community)
- Ecotourism (economy, recreation, and revenue)



- Understand that an individual's views of nature, the environment, or ecosystems may differ from your own views.
- Listen to their opinions; do not assume you know them.
- Ask individuals what they value in the natural world surrounding their community—for example, their concerns about their work and leisure, the legacy to their children and future generations.
- Ask open-ended questions of interested community participants so that you may understand the range of individual values and attitudes.
- If time and resources allow, use such approaches as personal interviews, surveys, and focus groups to understand how individuals frame environmental and ecological issues.
- For additional information, read the results of public opinion polls and previously conducted focus groups. Listen to local radio and television talk shows, and review local newspapers to determine whether and how environmental and ecological issues are presented. Use census data to formulate a profile of the people who live in the area.

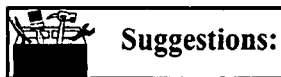
3. LISTEN TO HOW & WHY YOUR AUDIENCES CARE ABOUT THEIR NATURAL WORLD



Principle 4: Take time to plan how to communicate and use that plan to guide your communication efforts

Once you have determined your role in the project and have done your homework about the audience and its perspective on the environment, ecosystems, and ecology, the next step is to plan your communication effort. You need to develop in advance a clear idea of what your main messages will be, how you will deliver them, and how you will know when effective communication has occurred. You need to identify your objectives and then consider the views of a variety of people concerning the issues you will be addressing. Based on what you have heard, determine what you think the public wants and/or needs to know about the issues. Try to plan your part in each discussion or presentation and how you

intend to deliver your messages over time. Your project may be multi-level with cooperation among various Federal agencies, State officials, local government bodies, and citizen groups. Consider developing joint communication strategies with other participants in your project area.



- Take time to identify your goals. Are you trying to raise awareness, gather data, educate, or provide information to motivate people to take action to protect ecosystems and ecological resources? What information do people need to help them reach those goals? And what are the best ways to exchange this information?
- Prepare an outline of the main ideas or points of your message in advance.
- Be creative in seeking opportunities to communicate about your objective. Meetings of neighborhood organizations, gatherings of church and community groups, local festivals, local newsletters, posters, flyers, door-to-door campaigns, and television and radio spots provide some of the opportunities to communicate about ecological issues. Time, money, and your creativity are the limits!
- Practice your presentations and test materials (written and video) and communication strategies with others who can give you feedback.
- Prepare a list of local and Federal contacts for issues or information that are outside of your expertise or regulatory authority and discuss your strategy with these people before any meetings, information, or action campaigns.
- Work with community relations staff, or other community leaders you have identified, to communicate with your audiences early and properly in order to maintain their trust.
- Plan to evaluate how your communication efforts succeeded in meeting your objectives and how they could be improved over time.

4. PLAN HOW TO COMMUNICATE



Principle 5: Use language that is understandable and relevant to your audiences

Communication bridges differences between you and your audience and builds on mutual interests. When you have heard what your audience values, and the language, customs and symbols used to express those values, you can convey the importance of the environmental or ecological issue in a way that resonates with those values.



Suggestions:

- Tailor your communication efforts to appeal to the values and attitudes of your target audience using language and terms familiar to them. For example, look at the language used in local surveys or newspapers to identify phrases and terms familiar to this audience.
- Present your message in positive ways. Messages about how your objective will save time, save money, prevent human harm, preserve ecosystems and the balance of nature, or ease compliance under environmental laws are effective ways to interest people in ecological issues. Be aware that some words associated with ecological protection, such as “preserve,” “restrict,” “prevent,” “regulate,” and “growth management,” may sound limiting and may present unnecessary barriers to communication.



Examples of communicating the relationship between human activities and environmental or ecological resources:

- Tie in the ecological importance of an estuary as an ideal place for recreational opportunities (e.g., birdwatching, sailing, swimming).
- Explain how pollution kills fish and reduces the number of jobs in the local fishing and tourism industries.
- Discuss the importance of marshes, forests, rivers, and streams in cleaning the air and water upon which the community relies.
- Demonstrate how wetlands control floods and reduce the potential for damaged property along the community’s coastline or river.
- Show how increased sedimentation from soil erosion impairs water transportation and escalates the costs of maintaining navigation channels.

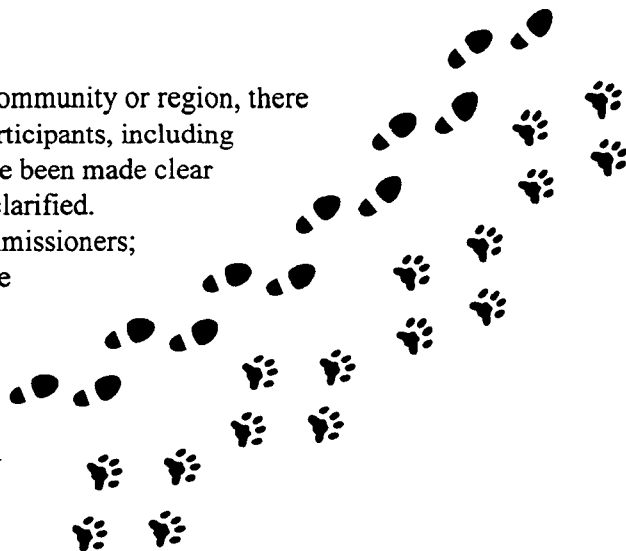
- Avoid using scientific, bureaucratic, or legal terms unless you need them and can define them in a way your audience can understand.
- After introducing broad or complex concepts or approaches to describe an ecological issue, use examples that relate directly to the community.
- Tie in some of the personal experiences you have heard expressed by individuals when talking about their natural surroundings.
- If there are threats to valued local resources, discuss the types of likely effects and where the greatest impact is likely to occur.
- If you see that your audience finds “biodiversity” an abstract concept, describe the importance of natural areas as habitat for a wide variety of plant and animal species. Emphasize that saving habitat is one action we can take to help save many forms of life.
- Where necessary, discuss the role and importance of species your audience has identified as undesirable or unimportant.
- Be cautious about applying value judgements (implicitly or explicitly) concerning which ecological components are important to you.
- Cast issues in terms of your audience's values, such as respect (e.g., how the Agency's position on an issue respects the environment, people, community, or future generations), rights and responsibilities (e.g., how the Agency is responsible to the community), and right to know (e.g., how the audience needs to know about the issue so it can make decisions about issues that affect its livelihood).

5. COMMUNICATE USING LANGUAGE THAT YOUR AUDIENCE WILL UNDERSTAND

NEXT STEPS

Once you have entered into multi-party communications in a community or region, there is still more to do. Follow up on any promises you made to participants, including any questions that required answers. Ensure that all issues have been made clear and that the process and responsibility for follow up has been clarified.

Meet with community leaders (e.g., State, county, or local commissioners; Tribal or community groups) to discuss what you and they have learned, what information led to new choices or options or validated current alternatives. Discuss whether your objectives, as well as those of others in the community, have been met and what, if any, follow up activities you need to undertake.



TO LEARN MORE ABOUT COMMUNICATING ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES:

A Review of Existing Data Regarding Americans' Views on Environmental Issues. Communication Consortium Media Center, Washington, D.C., 1996. This compendium contains surveys about the views of Americans concerning the environment. Contact: Communication Consortium Media Center at (202) 326-8700.

Communicating With the Public: Ten Questions Environmental Managers Should Ask. Chess, Caron and Hance, Billie Jo. Center for Environmental Communication (Cook College, Rutgers University, and The State University of New Jersey) and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, 1994. This brochure has suggestions and questions to help communicators think through their strategies before they engage in dialogues with the public. The Center also offers a video on communication. Contact: Center for Environmental Communication at (908) 932-8795 or e-mail cec@aesop.rutgers.edu.

Human Values and Nature's Future: Americans' Attitudes on Biological Diversity: A Summary Analysis of Findings from a National Survey. Belden and Russonello and the Communication Consortium Media Center, Washington, D.C., 1996. This national survey summary is part of a project for the Consultative Group on Biological Diversity and discusses the role of values and attitudes in educational efforts. Contact: Communication Consortium Media Center at (202) 326-8700.

Seven Cardinal Rules of Risk Communication, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, 1994. EPA OPA-87-020. This brochure provides practitioners with fundamental points and guidelines for successful risk communication. Contact: National Center for Environmental Publications and Information, (800) 490-9198 or www.epa.gov.ncepihom/index.html.

“The Environment of Words,” by Carol Rosenblum Perry, and **“Leadership in State Agencies,”** by Leslie Carrothers, in ***Environmental Leadership: Developing Effective Skills and Styles***. Berry, Joyce K. and Gordon, John C. Island Press, Washington, D.C., 1996. These chapters provide a primer on communication and give excellent examples of personal experiences in communicating ecological issues. Contact: Island Press at (202) 232-7933.

Check the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency’s Office of Sustainable Ecosystems and Communities web site at <http://www.epa.gov/ecocommunity> for the following documents:

Communicating with the Public on Ecological Issues: Workshop Report. Center for Technology, Environment and Development, Clark University and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Office of Policy, Planning and Evaluation, Office of Sustainable Ecosystems and Communities, October 10, 1995. This multidisciplinary workshop report offers insights on issues related to communicating with the public.

Community Based Environmental Protection: A Citizens' Handbook for Protecting Ecosystems and Communities, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Office of Policy, Planning and Evaluation , Offices of Sustainable Ecosystems and Communities, 1996. EPA 230-B-96-003. This handbook provides community practitioners with practical advice and examples of how to carry out community-based environmental protection (CBEP) projects based on key steps in CBEP implementation. The handbook also contains a glossary of ecosystem-related terms and references targeted at the community level.

Public Involvement in Comparative Risk Projects: Principles and Best Practices. Western Center for Environmental Decision-making, Boulder, CO, September, 1996. This sourcebook on the public participation component of comparative risk projects provides the reader with excellent examples of community-based environmental management in action. Contact: (303) 494-6393.