

Education, Outreach, and Diversity – Alias: Information and Education

Two ideas are at the crux of this discussion. The first idea is that the work of Information and Education in state fish and wildlife agencies is mission critical work (Duda 2008). Helping the one helps the other. The second idea is that agencies often place education in conflict with the mission by emphasizing their role in recreation recruitment. Recruitment is a marketing challenge, not an education one. There is apparent widespread misunderstanding about these two functions.

Keep in mind these two major ideas as you read further in the White Paper. The discussion is an attempt to help adjust the lens in our view of education, outreach, and diversity.

For discussion purposes, Information and Education (I&E) is bundled here with conservation education, outreach, information, communications and other I&E organizational cousins. Reportedly, there are not many I&E Divisions left. Education is more often linked with outreach as a title for a division, section, or position – more about such distinctions later. For now and for the purposes of this discussion, I&E will represent the broad composite of all these distinct subsets.

Problem:

A high-altitude look at conservation education today provides potential strategies to help bridge current divides – divides that are creating impediments for progress. Move a self-examining periscope above the work trenches and engage in a look at conservation education both downward and across. It is a critical thinking tactic, offering professionals help to ease tightened grips on individual perspectives – an opening for progress.

At this moment, information and conservation education on the whole stands on an historical precipice, facing forward and reflecting backwards – a type of force-field that presents opportunities for significant increases in effectiveness. At this moment in America, there is a new found enthusiasm for “green.” Not since the 1970s has there been such a buzz about the environment, climate, energy and related things. This broader, positive context holds a promise for I&E Divisions and their respective agencies to make significant quantum leaps forward.

A response to the force-field can go the other direction as well. A failing of the profession to take advantage of opportunities for change can nurture paralysis – the kind of paralysis created from the entrapment of too many individuals in their paradigms. A failure to see the bigger picture could result in the slipping back of momentum for I&E, and other entities with less expertise will most certainly step in to fill the breach.

It's a pickle, catching many unaware. The bottom line is that as a profession conservation education cannot afford to rest in complacency, in the comfort of the familiar, or in the security of avoiding risks and failing to try something different.

What emerges on our scopes from a high altitude perch? For starters, some "perfect storms" have already wreaked their havoc, leaving a plethora of challenges in their wake (Faibisch & Guynn 2006). Examples are unprecedented scrambling for funding; increased worry about protecting agency autonomy; increased external micromanagement; exacerbated challenges to find greater economies while protecting the loss of positions; the continuing downward slide of hunting participation; real anxiety over the on-going disconnect between our children and nature (Louv 2005), the land, and wildlife. Boomers are leaving, and consequential turbulence within the workforce is increasing. A new president is in and the jury is out as to how that will impact state agency work. Energy remains a critical concern. Uncertainty looms as to what to say to our publics about climate change and global warming. *And, the ability for passionate conservation education professionals to take full advantage of these tumultuous times is stunted by a failure to find common ground.*

A view from above the fray holds some classic organization development clues to help I&E change for the better. There are systemic forces affecting the programs and agencies of conservation education during this challenging time. When a system is stressed, it is typical for management and organizations to default back to what worked well in the past. State fish and wildlife agency Information and Education Divisions (I&E), for example, can revert to functioning as an adjunct appendage to the agency – an appendage composed of a suite of programs. Each program is viewed as an ends rather than as a strategic tool for achieving the agency's goals and mission. I&E Divisions, functioning as an appendage, are limited in delivering what the agency and its publics need during extreme threatening and confusing times. Lacking strategic planning, these I&E programmatic ends can more easily evolve into sacred cows, and with that comes a narrow focus on the sacred herd instead of a focus on helping the agency deal with its strategic issues.

Many state fish and wildlife agencies lack a comprehensive planning process. Strategic planning has become a dirty word too many. But comprehensive strategic thinking, on-going critical analysis, and systemic planning agency-wide are absolutely critical for deciding agency education and outreach priorities and processes. Again, it is critical.

High altitude scanning also takes in lessons learned. There is the *technology lesson*. Conservation education needs the benefit of all that modern technology can offer, but technology can also make I&E Divisions more vulnerable. A case example is the state fish and wildlife agency with an excellent broadcast and/or recording studio. The technology leverages the agency's ability to get their conservation messages out to their publics. However, it is a double-edged sword. The ability to change public views can be threatening to those in power. Governors have annihilated some I&E Divisions in the past. Talent was dispersed throughout the agency, leadership

neutered, and the rate of growth limited. Several governors or agency directors later, someone says, “Hey, why don’t we put all our information and education personnel in one division so we can benefit from the synergy?” The power and threat of technology, and the capacity to influence the public, is forgotten for the moment. The cycle may repeat itself. Over time, the agency may forget why I&E is dispersed across the agency. Such dispersal may be a model that works well for the agency, but that may not be the case. It is important to find out what will work best for the agency at any given time.

There is a type of *threat lesson* too. Whenever capability exists to reach publics on important conservation issues, and that capability is highly visible, it may be perceived as a threat. Sometimes good intentions, hard work, and effective messages have resulted in dire consequences to the message senders, incurred from outside the agency.

There is also the *content lesson*. Historic rifts over the last twenty some years between environmental education and conservation education have produced impediments to progress. It is a rift that more times than not crouches in the corner as a 500 lb. stinky gorilla, politely ignored.

There is controversy over content. There appear to be regional differences in how education is valued or used by agencies. One principle, however, is not debatable, and that principle is that behavior change is the desired outcome of conservation education. Education and regulation enable behavior change in our publics. Information has limited value without serious education programs that teach the skills and engage the public in activities that they are likely to repeat. Education as a discipline is built on science, and the science of education is an important voice deserving a good listen in any content controversy.

Some agencies are working harder and harder and faster and faster at doing the same kinds of things they have always done while expecting different results. Why should an agency, for example, push ahead harder with marketing to increase hunting license sales when they have dwindling access? Or, why should an agency promote their big game hunting when there are so few licenses in the draw? Another example begs another question: Have we really taken wildlife viewing seriously enough, or are we trapped in thinking it may be a threat to our traditional constituents? There are many examples.

A high-altitude look at conservation education also reveals the recent, remarkable strides enabled through Multistate Conservation Grant monies that funded the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies’ (AFWA) Conservation Education initiative. Much tireless work by many committed professionals pushes forward. But, as positive a step as this has been, it is not free from the entanglements of parochialism and the jeopardy that such inability to come together holds.

It is wake up time. It is time to look at the bigger picture. The threats are too great. The times are too lean. The demands on fish and wildlife agencies are too serious.

The full complement of brain power is needed to solve the complex wad of problems hurled at agencies and programs on a daily basis. It is time for conservation education and the organizational systems, structure, and culture that support I&E to align.

Solutions:

Consider how conservation education is housed organizationally. There is a widely accepted principle within the organization development literature that the effectiveness of a program or unit is directly related to the systems, structure and culture of the organization. Applying this principle to state fish and wildlife agencies provides an underlying key for achieving optimal success in I&E. Within our agencies, units are organizationally set up for limited or major success.

Consider the following model. It's not original. It's most likely not perfect. But, it is working in various degrees in some states where they have already stepped up their ante and reconfigured how they will deliver their outreach services and products needed. States like Texas and Missouri, for example, have moved forward adopting new I&E models. Professionals in the Northeast identified key I&E functions that would meet the goals of wildlife agencies and help address many of the issues confronting them (NCIEA 1999).

Proposed here is a prototype model wherein I&E functions much like a high performance public relations firm. The team is composed of various talent and expertise and they come together to tap into their individual talent every time they take on a new project for some other part of the agency. I&E operates to support the agency as a whole and the other main divisions. This means that I&E folks go directly to the other divisions to find out what they are working on, asking how they might help or, better still, suggesting to them how they might help. It means that they are actively and fully part of the decision-makers or senior management team of the agency, participating in the problem analysis and identification and the solution design at any given juncture. It means that I&E attends other division staff meetings, sits on committees, and works as a team.

This proposed model sees I&E as a support function regardless of whether I&E is dispersed or an in-tact unit within the agency. Historically, most I&E professionals have disdained the idea of being thought of as "support" services. Yet, that is precisely what they are. Essentially, support to everyone else. This doesn't mean that I&E cannot do projects that are more characteristically outreach or educational. It means a change in how I&E itself engages in its projects or initiatives – not as ends themselves, but as strategic tools.

Such a change requires that agency Directors also shift the way they view I&E. It may mean that some I&E Chiefs change the way they view I&E or the way they think the rest of the agency views them. It is no longer helpful for I&E to see themselves, and act for that matter, as "*the bastard step-child of the agency.*" Perceptual change may require Directors to find more training for their I&E personnel. It may

mean that some staff move to another division. Since education is often funded by different sources, it may mean improved cooperation is needed between divisions within the agency over the use of these funds. The step-child syndrome can emerge naturally if the bigger birds always get all the worms.

The work of I&E today has become technical enough in nature that just anybody can't do it and do it well. And, at this point in time, we can't afford to do anything that comes out of our agencies and not do it well. Too much is at stake. Education and information often encompass marketing, human dimensions, press releases, magazine production, and various teacher training and youth education efforts. It may include sophisticated intra-communication strategies devised at ways to influence others.

The proposed model also sees I&E as part of the strategic planning of the agency. It sees conservation education as an explicit element in the agency mission statement. It sees I&E staff playing a role in policy. Increased professional respect for I&E results in the agency using I&E's vetted and best conservation education practices. In this proposed model technical and administrative support is made available to I&E.

Impediments:

A lack of respect is an impediment. As all professionals, I&E professionals want and need more professional respect. Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of human needs lists esteem and respect as one of the top two needs of employees in general. I&E professionals share the same unique, cultural characteristic as other fish and wildlife professionals, that is, a "missionary like zeal" (Kennedy 1985) for their work. There is a need for broad recognition of this fact. It would go a long way to boosting morale and facilitating broader organizational acceptance of I&E value and input.

Misdirection, or direction blindly embraced, is an impediment. Going in the wrong direction would certainly qualify as an impediment for progress. Who's influencing the direction for conservation education? Is it the agencies? Is it the I&E Divisions? Is it some, big important person in Washington, DC? Is it the NGOs? Conservation education, particularly within state fish and wildlife agencies, needs to beat its own drum. The NGOs have been important, long-standing friends and supporters for I&E and its related conservation education programs over the years. Today, however, state agencies need to identify priorities by finding out the needs of their public constituents and evaluating the effectiveness of the agency's services and products (RBFF 2002).

For conservation education/I&E, a limited slice of the budget pie along with a lack of planning are two main reasons why I&E programs have not been as successful as the wildlife management programs within state agencies (Duda 1998).

Consider Project WILD, for example. When it arrived on the scene in the early 1980s, it was *the* program that met our conservation education needs. It has been a valuable tool. But for today, is it alone sufficient? Many I&E professionals who attended the

2004 Summit on Conservation Education agreed that conservation education needed strategic direction and expansion. Much work continues along these lines, but ultimately each state agency will need to thoughtfully explore to what degree it will facilitate its conservation education efforts as part of an overall strategic approach to handling major issues.

But there's more here to consider. For example, all this rethinking about I&E may also suggest taking a harder look at the idea of doing more conservation education and believing it will produce more hunters as a direct cause and effect. That's certainly not a given. There are simply too many confounding factors in that scenario. It may be misplaced marketing, or blindly accepting the value of marketing and then applying it inappropriately.

What about accepting a conservation education direction, determined, for example, by an NGO, rather than through agency smart needs assessment and marketing efforts? That, too, is a type of blind embrace and poses as a potential impediment.

A lack of partners is an impediment. The need for partnerships has taken on a much grander connotation today (Charles 2005). Rarely are partnership opportunities sought because it's good politics and it's good to play nice and be socially correct. Organizations are searching for life lines. Many are now in survival mode. Within the fish and wildlife arena, stressors from economics, politics, national security, energy, etc have combined, exacerbating the challenge of our agencies to respond quickly enough and smart enough. Creating strategic partnerships within the agency as well as with outside partners, so that I&E can use its full potential, seems a logical place to begin minimizing this impediment.

The lack of diversity is an impediment. Diversifying agency workforces and recreational users has moved at a glacial speed over the last fifteen years. While acknowledging some scattered, serious efforts, overall diversity remains at the back of the bus relevant to other agency priorities. Workforce diversity is more often a limp, politically correct gesture than a commitment to both recruiting and retaining women and minorities in the work place. Often, because of the nature of the discipline, I&E may have more female employees. This may offer agencies some insights for achieving greater overall agency workforce diversity. However, the ladder remains very short and the ceiling very hard for the career bound, ambitious and talented woman, for example.

To effectively reach a more diversified constituency, agencies need the benefit of diverse voices from within. Outreach efforts to minority publics require sufficient understanding of their specific needs and communication preferences.

A lack of relevancy is an impediment. A search to find relevancy for I&E is timely. An ultimate quest might be how and what can be done to help the agency survive during these pressing times? More than a mere blip on a chart, the current pressing times are more an historical, seismic change of significant proportions. Failure to

respond quickly enough puts both I&E and their agencies at risk. But, when too much time and effort is consumed, for example, in the care and feeding of sacred cows, then there simply is not enough time or capacity to press in and find out what is relevant. Fish and wildlife agencies have been hardy organizations, enduring many changes throughout their history. An effort to identify relevancy requires a refusal to rest on what brought success in the past. Relying on successful ways of doing business in the past may be an impediment today.

This search for relevancy also includes taking a hard look at the non-governmental organizations that have been at our side for a long time now. Agencies cannot afford to assume that what they are producing at any given moment in time is precisely what is needed. It is too dangerous. Taking clues from the best practices of marketing and business management (RBFF 2002), agencies need to be sensitive to maintaining the positive relationships with historic partners while doing good diligence in determining needs and assessing products and services. To do otherwise, agencies and their I&E Divisions will remain a passive, floating along functionality, accepting what is handed to them from outside entities.

Lack of distinction between education and marketing can be an impediment. As mentioned previously, recruitment is a marketing challenge, not an education one. While useful to borrow best practices from marketing, there also can be pressure between conservation education and marketing (Faibisch & Guynn 2006). For example, many agency conservation education efforts focus on recruiting new hunters and anglers. While every state conservation agency has an obligation to recruit and retain its hunter and angler base, this endeavor is marketing, not education. Marketing in its simplest sense is a mix of Product, Price, and Promotion. An impediment arises when I&E professionals and their agencies ignore asking critical strategic questions on a regular basis. Questions such as: From a national perspective, how well do we know that hunting participation is limited because people need more information, skills or knowledge about hunting (Promotion)? What if participation is limited due to Product issues such as insufficient opportunity to hunt? Are we offering the right mix of products and services to attract new customers to fish and wildlife-related recreation?

Agencies need to be very careful about too eagerly combining education and marketing functions because then both disciplines may suffer. If we are using education programs to meet marketing goals, what happens when we meet our marketing goals but not the educational goals? And, as stated before, confusing the functions of marketing and education can put education in conflict with the agency's mission.

Lack of systematic integration of assessment into education programs is an impediment. It's messy, often complicated, and is not quick to do. But there are sources of help to learn how to do it. It gets a little easier with practice and it offers huge benefits. Today, it is essential to assess the return on investment, or, the value of conservation education efforts. Not knowing how well a program is doing is

managing by assumptions. I&E professionals may feel pretty good about assumptions based on years of experience, but the decision-makers, the publics, and the funding sources want to see the numbers.

It's not only a good way to get director and commission support, but it also facilitates earning the respect so much desired by I&E professionals.

In what we're teaching, the "how" as much as the "what" can be an impediment. I&E can influence our nation on the most effective ways to learn natural resource conservation. For example, I&E could influence the need to have children doing experiments outside, and a retreat from the sterile reliance on books, computers and lecture. To do this, I&E will need to speak boldly, visibly, and transparently. This is not possible if their agency is not in full support.

Some controversy exists in conservation education over whether to teach habitat, ecology, etc. or a skills approach. An impediment arises when such healthy debate is held hostage by the "tyranny of the 'or.'"

Tendency to hope for a passive "quick fix" in the education process is an impediment. Effective programs will likely be expensive, labor intensive, and require a long-term commitment of funding and energy to be successful (Wentz & Seng 2000).

Closing:

The fish and wildlife profession finds itself in an historical moment in time. The nexus of current trends and issues affords a big picture look revealing a number of clues as to how I&E's role and functionality might be optimized. And, such optimization is a critically needed change. Some impediments are:

- A lack of respect
- Misdirection, or direction blindly embraced
- A lack of strategic partners
- The lack of diversity
- A lack of relevancy
- Lack of distinction between education and marketing
- Lack of systematic integration of assessment into education programs
- The "how" as much as the "what" in our teaching
- Tendency to hope for a passive "quick fix" in the education process

Fish and wildlife agencies can profit from including the I&E professionals in strategic direction setting and in other senior management problem solving discussions. The structure and systems of an agency are perfectly aligned to get the results they are getting. This includes the alignment of I&E function with the rest of the agency. I&E can be aligned within their agency for optimized value and productivity.

What is the message to I&E professionals when a first response to budget shortfalls is to cut I&E programs? This well-known, broadly practiced, knee jerk response occurs in spite of public survey information typically showing the public's high value on and willingness to pay for wildlife related education. And, what is the message to I&E when they continue to be marginalized in the strategic discussions of the agency? What is the message to the broad conservation community when conservation education professionals spend more time in debate than in moving forward?

The leadership of our fish and wildlife agencies needs to recognize the valuable resource they have in I&E. And the I&E professionals themselves need to realize the importance and critically urgent role they can provide for their agencies in this time of ultimate challenge. Have I&E professionals become so used to feeling like the agency's bastard step-child that they have accepted it and now cannot see their real value? Has the profession's corporate mind allowed one of the most valuable resources an agency has at its disposal to become impotent through ignorance and neglect?

For long-term success, I&E and their agencies must remember the importance of engaging all employees.

If we want to make incremental change, then we can focus on improving systems and processes, but if we want to make quantum leaps in change, then we need to focus on changing our paradigms. It would appear I&E could benefit from both. I&E is far too valuable an agency resource, particularly in the current tumultuous environment, to give them neither.

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