
Working with Species at Risk...Working with People?

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Abstract: Conserving, protecting, and restoring habitat for species at risk is as much about human behavior change as it is about the physical recovery of species and ecosystems. The tools and techniques of The Living by Water Project employ an anthropocentric approach to outreach and communication with mainstream Canada; this paper outlines some of these tools.

The Living by Water Project goes beyond education and awareness into the realm of stimulating attitude and behavior change with the ultimate objective of creating sustained behavior change. Programs and materials are tailored to specific target audiences. Shoreline residents include tenants and leaseholders as well as landowners; other target audiences include realtors and municipal officials. With each group, tools and techniques to bring about enlightened self interest are utilized.

An approach centered on 'environmental due diligence' is employed in an education program for realtors. Presentations and seminars for elected officials focus on assistance with informed decision making. The values of natural shorelines are presented from a holistic rather than just a wildlife and species at risk perspective. For example, the role of shorelines in protecting water quality, economic well-being of the community, tourism, and fisheries are all of interest to municipal officials.

Understanding landholder needs has been critical to outreach and education programs that focus on shoreline protection and restoration. Showing off 'what we know' or providing endless amounts of technical information does not satisfy the majority of our audience. Rather, their needs are for information packaged in ways that are relevant to them. Collaboration and partnerships have been vital to The Living by Water Project, which works to support government agencies at all levels, environmental nongovernment organizations, and First Nations.

Key Words: education, outreach, behavior change, communication, The Living by Water Project

Conserving, protecting, and restoring habitat for species at risk is as much about human behavior change as it is about the physical recovery of species and ecosystems. A scientist once said, "It's easier to work with fish and streams than it is to work with people so as to prevent them from causing the need to restore the stream in the first place" (Langer 1997). The tools and techniques of The Living by Water Project employ an anthropocentric approach to outreach and communication with mainstream Canada; we suggest that this approach needs to be considered in public education regarding species at risk. For example, urban development and individual human behavior have been identified as factors in the decline of a number of species in British Columbia (B.C.) that have been targeted by the Habitat Stewardship Program (CWS 2003). Because individual shoreline residents influence shoreline habitat and water quality, landholder contact programs are proposed as one way the Habitat Stewardship Program can influence shoreline residents (CWS 2003).

The Living by Water Project, its programs, and its publications extend beyond education and awareness into the realm of stimulating attitude and behavior change with the ultimate objective of creating sustained behavior change (Kipp and Callaway 1999). The Living by Water Project works to support government agencies at all levels, including municipal, environmental nongovernment organizations (NGOs), and First Nations, with a full spectrum of programs and resources that focus on shoreline stewardship and capacity building.

Sustained behavior change is also the essential purpose (albeit often unstated) of many traditional educational and advertising information campaigns carried out on the part of local, provincial, and federal agencies. In the case of riparian education, for example, shoreline residents may be encouraged to protect shoreline vegetation. These advertising campaigns can be effective in creating public awareness, and may sometimes influence attitudes; however, behavior change rarely occurs as a result of simply providing information. Education and awareness raising alone are insufficient for sustained behavior change (see McKenzie-Mohr and Smith 1999).

A conservation action marketing program has been developed which builds on traditional marketing, community-based social marketing, and environmental education (Callaway and Kipp 2002). Conservation action marketing is based on research that shows that initiatives to promote behavior change are most effective at the community level when direct contact with people is involved. A key strategy is to remove barriers to behavior change, including using motivational techniques to do so. Some of the other principles of conservation action marketing are as follows:

- Influencing individual action is the end objective (enlightened self interest).
- Understanding the target audience and their needs is critical to developing the message in ways that are relevant to the audience. This translates into a customer-centered, benefit-led approach in developing products, and in communications about the products.
- Benefits must be perceived to be greater than costs.

Conservation action marketing is client-centered rather than organization- or product-centered. This translates into some simple tips for communications. First, it means 'putting people

in the picture'. How many brochures include pictures of a particular species of concern and considerable information about that species, but much less information about its relevance to the people whose behavior we wish influence? We need to think first about our audience and what matters to them, not what matters to us. We need to identify the benefits to our audience of the behavior changes we propose, and the losses which might happen if they do not change their behavior. We also need to identify obstacles or barriers to behavior change, and address them.

Conservation action marketing is solution-oriented rather than problem-oriented. And, in communications with audiences whom we want to influence, the emphasis needs to be on tips and applied knowledge rather than on facts for their own sake. It is essential to avoid 'showing off our knowledge'. While as scientists we may become excited about our discoveries, we will be unlikely to gain audiences if our knowledge cannot be presented in ways that make it relevant to those we want to listen to our messages.

With The Living by Water Project, understanding landholder needs has been critical to outreach and education programs that focus on shoreline protection and restoration. Showing off 'what we know' or providing endless amounts of technical information does not satisfy the majority of our audience. Rather, their needs are for information packaged in ways that are relevant to them. This translates into our communications in the following very specific ways (for an example, see Kipp and Callaway 2002):

- avoiding judgmental words like 'good', 'bad', and 'should'
- avoiding impersonal words like 'the public', 'people', 'stakeholder'
- avoiding negative words like 'not'
- avoiding jargon (like the term 'stewardship') and scientific words (like 'aquatic ecosystem health')
- emphasizing benefits that are relevant to the audience (for example, with shoreline residents, a benefit might be that a natural shoreline is protected from erosion); the spin-off (wildlife habitat) is mentioned but is not the selling point to the audience

Another principle of conservation action marketing is the importance of understanding our audience's fears, which may prevent them from hearing our message, and easing those fears. For example, in programs in which landholders are asked to change their behavior in order to assist with habitat stewardship, their fears might be that

- their right to enjoy and use their property will be affected
- the organization communicating the message is a 'front' for something else—government perhaps, or another type of organization
- the changes being requested of them will be difficult and costly
- their pets will be controlled in some way
- their property value will decrease, or there will be some other type of financial loss incurred

The programs and materials of The Living by Water Project are tailored to specific target audiences by identifying common ground between the messages we want to pass along and the information our target audiences need (Fig. 1). Shoreline residents include tenants and leaseholders as well as landowners; other target audiences include realtors and municipal officials. With each group, tools and techniques to bring about enlightened self interest are utilized.

For example, an approach centered on ‘environmental due diligence’ is employed in an education program for realtors. Other information is presented to assist them with doing their job. Presentations and seminars for elected officials focus on assistance with informed decision making. The values of natural shorelines are presented from a holistic rather than just a fish and wildlife and species at risk perspective. Other values are also of interest to municipal officials, such as the role of healthy shorelines in protecting water quality, economic well-being of the community, tourism, and fisheries.

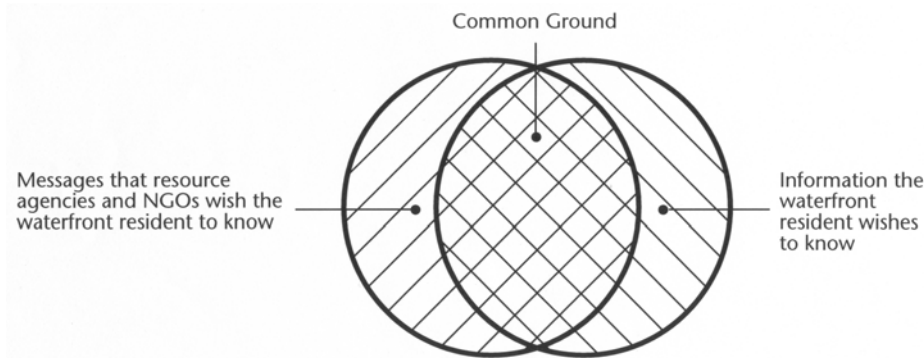


Figure 1. Matching product to user needs.

Conservation action marketing involves an integrated approach; it is much more than communication and promotion. It involves matching products to audience needs. For example, financial constraints may prevent shoreline residents from taking action to restore shorelines. With The Living by Water Project, we have begun to address this constraint by developing a Living by Water loan program in partnership with a B.C.-based credit union (Vancouver City Savings Credit Union 2000).

Conservation action marketing also involves examining an array of stewardship messages for consistency. For example, during the summer of 2003, public information campaigns about preventing West Nile virus contained a number of messages that were at odds with other stewardship messages. On one hand, water conservation programs advised citizens to keep their lawns long; on the other hand, some information about West Nile virus recommended the opposite (Saskatoon Health Region 2003). Similarly, many programs are advocating that citizens

protect wetlands for a number of public benefits, including protecting species at risk; at the same time, public messages about West Nile virus are telling citizens to rid their properties of standing water, brush, and long grass (Interior Health Authority 2003).

Similar inconsistencies are noted with messages about fireproofing properties. For example, in the recently released FireSmart manual, landholders are advised to thin vegetation on slopes—the steeper the slope, the greater the thinning (Partners in Protection 2003). There is no distinction made for riparian areas and slopes which lead to the water's edge. The unfortunate consequence of these policies could be the unnecessary and damaging clearing of sensitive riparian areas. Such inconsistent messages are confusing to the public, and also negate the effectiveness of an integrated public education and outreach program that is part of habitat stewardship conservation marketing.

Working with people to motivate behavior change is an integral part of recovery strategies for species at risk. The effectiveness of outreach and education programs in contributing to behavior change will increase if some of the basic principles outlined in this paper are followed.

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