

## Designing a Public Participation Program: Education

Education is a key feature of all participation activities. Education should be a two-way process with information flowing from the project to the stakeholders and, equally importantly, from the stakeholders back to the project.

Education increases public awareness and understanding of opportunities, problems and their causes, and possible resources. Well-designed public education efforts should convey both information and the values of the project. Public education materials may:

- Provide information
- Motivate a change in behavior
- Encourage participation in the management process
- Encourage voluntary compliance with regulations

This learning continues throughout the life of a project. During the early planning stages, participatory approaches can be used to piece together the history of an area, identify current issues in light of their historical roots, and understand public perceptions of the project. Visioning is one way to work with a community to understand its view of current issues and future opportunities.

To design a public education program, it is necessary to (1) analyze the local context and define the major issues, (2) identify target audiences, (3) identify the messages to be conveyed, (4) select educational techniques, and (5) evaluate impacts.

*Analyze the local context and define the major issues.* Review issues and select a subset as the focus for the initial public education campaign. Issues that lack public awareness and impede improved management may be selected. Examples of issues are water pollution causes and consequences, protected species collection, and habitat deterioration. The analysis of the issue should produce a clear statement of each problem and a brief examination of its implications for society.

*Identify target audiences.* Identify stakeholders whose support is essential to solving the problem and evaluate these groups to determine the most effective means of delivering information to them.

*Identify the messages to be conveyed.* Formulate educational goals and objectives, and organize content into distinct messages. Messages should be simply stated and technically accurate. They can be developed jointly by project communicators and technical staff.

*Select communication tools and techniques.* Once the message is clearly defined, project managers can reach the target audience through tools and techniques, including printed and audio-visual materials, mass media, exhibits, and special events. Each has limitations and advantages, and the effectiveness of any tool or technique depends on local conditions. Public education projects are usually more effective when several tools are used in combination. Consider financial limitations, message complexity, and past audience responses to communication techniques when choosing tools for an outreach effort.

*Evaluate impacts.* The real test of an educational project is how it contributes to the success of the resource management effort. Public education programs should always be evaluated on how well they are achieving their stated objectives. Information gained from evaluation can be used to improve subsequent education efforts.

Some questions to consider when evaluating an educational project are: Did the information reach the target audience? Was the message accurately conveyed by the mass media? Did people understand the information? Is there evidence of a positive response? What would you do differently next time?