



COMMUNICATING the ENVIRONMENTAL MESSAGE

getting the sustainability
message across

Russ Grayson





Communicating the Environmental Message

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TerraCircle is an international development consultancy working in the South West Pacific and Australia in: food security, livelihood development, training in small scale sustainable agriculture, community health, project management.



Communicating Development may be downloaded as a pdf file from: www.pacific-edge.info



Introduction...

COMMUNICATING the ENVIRONMENTAL MESSAGE was prepared for distribution to Sydney-based international aid and development non-government organisations (NGOs).

Environmental Educator's Forum

The **Environmental Educator's Forum** was held at the University of Western Sydney in July 1997 and was attended by people from community and non-government organisations and school educators.

Speakers included:

- ▶ **Robyn Williams** — science journalist and broadcaster with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation
- ▶ **Jenny Smith** — environmental campaigner and former trustee of the Hawkesbury-Nepean Catchment Management Trust; former vice-president of CHANGE
- ▶ **Pino Migliorino** — communications consultant; managing director, Cultural Perspectives Pty Ltd
- ▶ **Les Robinson** — director, Social Change Media.



The situation

Robyn Williams, science journalist, ABC Radio National...

Robyn Williams emphasised the need to understand the connection between things to enable the development of a number of solutions at no extra cost.

He described a survey carried out for the Commission for the Future, of which he was a board member (the Commission was closed by the Howard government in the 1990s).

The survey found that respondents:

- ▶ held Australian political leaders in contempt
- ▶ had no sense of involvement in the future of Australia
- ▶ were positive about environmental issues because they could act on them
- ▶ were desperate for a sense of community inclusive of the natural world and with an element of permanence as would be found in a village.

The role of educators

Jenny Smith, environmental campaigner...

Jenny pointed out that we already know what we have to do to reduce our environmental impact and to implement ecologically sustainable development.

The role of environmental educators is to make sense of things, influence behavioural change and engender the will to act.

The present situation is one in which the current generation has inherited the task of clearing up the mess left by previous generations. We must not create false ideas of what we can accomplish, she warned.

Communication

The impact of economic pressures is regarded as more important than “nebulous” ideas about the environment and is a barrier to the effective delivery of environmental education messages.

In regard to communication for environmental education, Jenny pointed out that there exists a great deal of competition for people’s attention. People are subject to messages about comfort and consumption and because of this, environmental educators must compete with the messages of consumerism with smart message design and delivery. They must develop marketing and promotional skills.

We should regard people working in the same area as colleagues, Jenny said, and not as competitors.



Communicating with ethnic communities

Pino Migliorino...

Pino spoke about communicating with people for whom English is a second language.

Perceptions

Many migrants regard Australia as a land of environmental abundance.

Surveys and analyses have disclosed that migrant communities:

- ▶ perceive environmental issues as less immediate than issues of crime, law and violence but more important than those of welfare, economics, education, health and transport
- ▶ rank as the highest priority for the NSW government and over short term issues of crime, unemployment and racism
- ▶ replace racism with environment in the number three position in their ranking for attention over the next ten years.

Perceptions of ethnic communities relevant to environmental educators:

- ▶ individual behaviour towards the environment is governed by what the law allows
- ▶ a belief that governments will act on important issues and that people will comply with the regulatory regime
- ▶ individual environmental responsibility is acknowledged but is seen as less important than a strong regulatory regime
- ▶ the targeting of environmental behaviour by the authorities through the provision of information gains greater compliance
- ▶ there is a notion of collective responsibility towards the environment.

Survey data from migrant communities discloses:

- ▶ 77 per cent are greatly or fairly concerned about the environment (Greeks 91 per cent; Italians 58 per cent)
- ▶ home country experience provides the benchmark against which the present environment is measured
- ▶ recent arrivals (eg. Arabic, Vietnamese, Spanish) are more concerned with the immediate issues of settlement
- ▶ the English language media is the main source of environmental information.



Environmental concerns of migrants

Surveys indicate wide variation in the environmental concerns of migrant communities:

- ▶ air pollution - 47%
- ▶ beaches and oceans - 21%
- ▶ litter and waste dumping - 14%
- ▶ household waste - 3%
- ▶ greenhouse effect/climate - 2%
- ▶ soil issues - 1%.

Targeting the environmental message

Pino's tips for effectively targeting ethnic communities with environmental information:

- ▶ first of all, find out which ethnic groups live in an area
- ▶ know your target group — assess their attitudes, knowledge, behaviour, cultural differences
- ▶ develop objectives
- ▶ make compliance with environmental behaviour easy.



Environmental education in schools, a growing practice...

The use of food gardens as educational facilities in schools was stimulated by Carolyn Nuttall's book, The Children's Forest Forest, which was based on her experience of developing a school garden for learning when she was a teacher.

Around 20 years ago, Adelaide's Black Forest primary developed an educational school garden linked to curricula subjects and provided in-service training for teachers.

In 1995, New Zealander, Robina McCurdy, trained Australians in the environmental design of school grounds for learning.

The practice has since become widespread. Randwick City Council Sustainability Educator, Fiona Campbell (on right in photo) started an assistance project based around the development of food gardens in schools on 2005. In Brisbane, Growing Community, an offshoot of Northey Street City Farm, provides assistance to

schools planning to use food gardens in education.

In Melbourne, chef and author, Stephanie Alexander, ran a garden-to-kitchen project at Collingwood College in which she was supported by the agency, Cultivating Community.



Shaping and targeting the environmental message

Les Robinson, director, Social Change Media...

Les prefers the term 'communication' to 'education' because communication implies a participatory process rather than something done to people. He addressed environmental education and campaigning.

Environmental education, Les proposed, involves the notion of a new form of citizenship that is about communities and action that will bring about behavioural change.

The process of choosing to adopt modified behaviour is a complex business that weighs up a range of factors including:

- ▶ financial cost
- ▶ time cost
- ▶ inconvenience
- ▶ social pressure
- ▶ risk of the unknown
- ▶ effort.

These factors are assessed in relation to ease and simplicity, a sense of community, making a better world and financial savings.

Targeting the strategic approach

Les advised taking a strategic approach to environmental education. This follows a logical path:

is there a problem? > define the problem > define solutions > identify the steps necessary to achieve the solutions.

The strategic approach then goes on to consider:

- ▶ how to construct messages
- ▶ how to disseminate them
- ▶ how to evaluate the effect of the messages.

Evaluation discloses mistakes and provides clues on how to do better next time.



Selecting the appropriate media

The dissemination of environmental information requires crafting the message and the choice of appropriate media:

- ▶ have a strong message and slogan
- ▶ construct messages differently for different groups
- ▶ use a variety of media — as many as possible
- ▶ choose sustained media such as street signs that carry the message for months
- ▶ sustain the media campaign with repetition and regular reminders
- ▶ be cost effective.

Shaping the environmental message

- ▶ communicate personally
- ▶ communicate lifestyle benefits
- ▶ use social research
- ▶ integrate communication with pricing and infrastructure to maintain incentive
- ▶ be positive — people want to be part of success, not failure
- ▶ be visual — people respond to visual stimuli immediately
- ▶ be succinct — do not write a book!
- ▶ test your message.

Tips for environmental educators

Environmental educators should:

- ▶ call what you do 'communication'
- ▶ know your audience — their viewpoints and needs
- ▶ develop convincing messages
- ▶ think about the tools you could use
- ▶ do not underestimate community goodwill
- ▶ apply the personal touch
- ▶ lead by example.

Organisations involved in community work should pay attention to detail:

- ▶ the way the organisation does things
- ▶ how the organisation presents itself.



If we want to communicate environmental information effectively, so that it changes how people think and act, we have to understand the barriers to getting that message across... the values those people hold... and the perceptions about environmental issues they have... then we can devise a strategy to communicate with them.