

Ecologue

For members of NCA EC Division and Friends

A Quarterly Newsletter

Fall 2008

Become an Editor

My term is expiring and nominations will be taken in San Diego at the next NCA meeting. Consider contributing to the association...

Questions: contact Trudy_Milburn@csuci.edu

Photos taken by Chris & June Christian

Plants in the Workplace

Benefits

1. Plants decrease stress while enhancing productivity by 12%.



More Plant Benefits

2. Interior plants lower Operations and Maintenance costs while contributing to "Green Building" design considerations.

See:

www.goodearthplants.com

Consuming Green



SanDiegoNaturalGuide.com is a directory of Green restaurants and businesses to frequent in San Diego.

NCA Update

PreConference will be held at the conference hotel.

ECD business meeting will be held offsite.

Contact the officers for more info.

Stacy Sowards, Pres.

Jonny Gray, VP

Bill Kinsella, VP Elect

San Diego Boycott

The Environmental Communication Division issued a statement regarding the NCA HyattManchester Hotel. See: natcom.org



Voices from the Field

By Tracylee Clarke

Ecologue provides an excellent forum for those in our field to engage in scholarly conversations about issues of importance. To facilitate discussions on key and emerging issues, Ecologue feature a "voices from the field" section wherein scholars from a variety of disciplines discuss important and timely topics. In addition there is a "featured voice" section where a chosen colleague's response is highlighted.

For this spring edition of Ecologue, the topic of discussion is working with government agencies. I solicited responses from your colleagues who have done consulting and/or research projects with government agencies and asked them the following questions:

What are the opportunities and challenges when working with government agencies?

What advice would you give others who work with or are considering working with government agencies?

The responses from colleagues were extremely helpful for others engaging in consulting work or contemplating working with government agencies. I have summarized their thoughts and ideas below.

Opportunities: Working with government agencies provides many exciting opportunities for researchers and scholars. Caitlin Wills-Toker, is currently working with the CDC engaging the public in deliberation exercises about pandemic influenza planning. In her experience the agency is open to listening to the opinions of the public and value her expertise as a communication specialist. Of her experience Wills-Toker states, "I find that it is exciting and rewarding to know that you are contributing to real immediate change in the way that the government operates." Tarla Rai Peterson, Boone and Crockett Endowed Chair of Wildlife & Conservation Policy at Texas A&M University echoes this sentiment.

She believes that one of the most rewarding aspects of working with federal agencies is "the potential to directly influence environmental policy."

Christie Manning from Macalester College, Minnesota and Britain Scott and Elise Amel from the University of St. Thomas, Minnesota focus their research on understanding and motivating sustainable behavior. In their work with the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (MPCA) they assess various MPCA outreach programs and provide the agency with information to better understand their audience, design targeted messages, and help people overcome barriers to sustainable behavior. In their experience, working directly with government agencies gives researchers "access to participant populations that otherwise would be hard to recruit." In addition, collaborative consultation work with government agencies gets scholars "in touch with what's happening out there in the real world, where our research results can have direct impact."

From the Field...

Finally, Jessica Thompson, Assistant Professor, Human Dimensions of Natural Resources, Warner College of Natural Resources at Colorado State University is currently working with the National Park Service (NPS) on a project aimed at improving the Park's adaptation to and communication about climate change. She believes, "the most rewarding opportunity is the chance to work on applied problems in real-time. I have the opportunity to interact directly with NPS leadership and natural resource managers to develop practical solutions that we can implement and test on the ground."

Challenges: Although working with government agencies can be very rewarding, there are challenges scholars must be aware of. Giving a realistic assessment of consulting work, Peterson states that sometimes agency rules and agency bureaucrats are too much trouble and the costs exceed the benefits. Often agencies are on short time-lines and might have unrealistic expectations for researchers. Also cautions Peterson, agencies may agree to fund your project but at a reduced rate. This means you may need to revise your deliverables to reflect the resources you get. Wills-Toker also speaks to this as she cautions scholars to be clear about time frames and agency expectations. Agencies may not be entirely clear about their



purpose, project objectives or "what they really want from the public" says Wills-Toker. She suggests that it is up to the researcher to clearly understand and

articulate the goals and deliverables of the project.

Referencing her work with the NPS Thompson states, "the major challenge to this type of work is that the agencies have a very high stake in the outcomes. This leads to spending a large percentage of time negotiating control over every aspect of the project." Similarly, in their work with the MPCA, Manning, Scott and Amel have come across issues with entrenched interests such as an MPCA supervisor who was hesitant to approve specific survey questions that might offend a major sponsor of the event. In reference to this dynamic they state, "we remain uncomfortable with the possibility that such exchanges could compromise the quality of our data and our chance to make a real impact."

Advice: Those who have worked with government agencies have this advice for others who are considering collaborative or consultation work. When applying for work or grant opportunities, Peterson advise, "Don't be shy. Ask questions. Then follow their instructions." After your work is complete, it is important counsels Peterson to, "take the time to make your final report attractive. Agencies have to justify the money they spend on research. They remember researchers who produce reports they can use when they try to



persuade congress that they are doing good things." Wills-Toker states, "My biggest piece of advice to get started is just to take as many opportunities

that come your way as possible. Sometimes this may mean doing things for free. But, eventually it will pay off." Finally, Thompson advises, "It seems the best way to proceed, is to relinquish some control and engage with the agency as a co-investigator. Working with federal agencies has kept me grounded and has kept my research grounded in real-world, real-time problems. While publishing papers is valuable, once you work with agencies the currency changes. Being able to collaborate and tackle multi-layered issues of multiple-stakeholder conflicts becomes top priority."

Scholars concerned with environmental sustainability that have worked with government agencies find their experience very rewarding despite the challenges. As stated by Thompson, "Working with federal agencies may not lead you down the most theoretical path, nor a lucratively funded path, but you will have unique opportunities to engage in meaningful projects that aim to improve the social and ecological systems that you live in."



Our featured voice for this article is that of Jim Cantrill, Professor, Communication & Performance Studies (CAPS), Northern Michigan University.

FEATURED VOICE

In contrast to the 1990s, governmental consulting opportunities in the environmental sector now appear to be less prevalent. Bush-era polices at odds with environmental sustainability and significant state-level financial retrenchments have resulted in far fewer venues for academic contracting. It seems to me that, unless one has already established an ongoing working relationship with one or another agency or happens to be retained by one of the small handful of private consulting firms such as Battelle Inc. that are favored by the current administration, meaningful work with governmental agencies will largely depend on substantial economic and liberal-democratic recovery in the years to come.

Until we (hopefully) come to our collective senses, I believe most of those interested in working with state and federal natural resource or environmental agencies would do well to simultaneously pursue three avenues. First and foremost, prospective consultants need to establish viable relationships with agency personnel at the local or regional level and, in particular, with those in middle-management who focus on public outreach activities at "open house" forums, scoping sessions, and the like. Second, use interpersonal and web-based networks to identify agency needs regarding

Featured Voice Cont.'

environmental communication and volunteer professional services so as to be better positioned if and when paid assistance might be solicited via grants or contracting requests. Third, one of the surest ways to credential one's self is to keep abreast of the environmental social scientific research process and garner what support that may be available from time to time (e.g., RFP cycles associated with the USDA's regional research stations, NSF funding, state-based campus compacts). If nothing else, such a strategy can result in opportunities to enhance prospects for tenure or promotion, provide fodder for the classroom, and leave a professional feeling good about actually practicing the sermon of civic engagement!

Even if the climate were better suited to environmental communication consulting, I would urge caution before blindly wandering off into the stormy landscape of agency contracting. Although successfully mediating conflict, facilitating genuine public participation, or shepherding effective communication outreach campaigns can be quite rewarding, there are some significant challenges to consider at the onset. The structures of governmental contracting are often Byzantine, the highly politicized process of agency decision making breeds cynicism, the governmental consultant often has to dumb-down language that should be in the vernacular of technocrats yet isn't, and knowing that mandated technical reports will typically not be read by agency sponsors who prefer one-page briefings can be quite frustrating. Perhaps even more problematic, a consultant must always appreciate whom she or he works for; one has to sometimes adopt a party-line causing rifts between friends in the home community or even in one's own sense of ethics.

Years ago, when I was at the University of Illinois chasing after my doctorate, I recall telling myself that all the hustling, hair pulling, and heart-hardening compromising some of my mentors reported in their own consulting experiences simply wasn't worth it. Now, looking back over the time I spent working for the Michigan DNR or the U.S. Forest Service or the National Park Service and Parks Canada or USEPA, I think the rewards truly did compensate for the costs incurred. And, along the way, I learned a thing or two. I believe anyone who wants to try their hand at environmental communication consulting with the government should remember at least five virtues:

1. **Learn from Your Colleagues.** To the extent I enjoyed even a modicum of success in my consulting efforts, I learned most of where I needed to go not by going there but by listening to others who had already been beyond and back before me. Most notably, and in addition to

absorbing some of their considerable writings, the conversations I had with Robbie Cox, Tarla Rai Peterson, Sue Senecah and Gregg Walker were invaluable to me in avoiding a few pitfalls and capitalizing on various assets our discipline provides.

2. **Be a Quick Study.** I have encountered more than a handful of highly paid "communication consultants" who were largely clueless when it came to knowing the basics that most of us in the discipline of communication studies take for granted. But I've also seen more practitioners who were woefully ignorant of the issues and science that grounded the focus of their consultancy. It is absolutely essential that someone either have the requisite coursework in one's background or take the time to learn both the physical and social underpinnings of whatever conflict or campaign they are asked to coordinate.

3. **Have a Big Toolbox.** Clearly, the body of knowledge associated with the theory and practice of environmental communication is extensive and goes well beyond the parochial confines of merely communication studies. Those who only know their own discipline imperil not only their future as a valued consultant but also those they serve. Furthermore, appreciating less than a range of qualitative and quantitative methodologies not only makes one susceptible to the "Law of the Hammer" but it also lessens the chance of communicating with a range of publics. In particular, I would advise any graduate student in this field to take the opportunity while it's relatively available to take more than introductory courses in quantitative and qualitative analysis.

4. **Learn the Market.** When I first started out, I sold myself very cheaply. Although that approach certainly kept me busy, I learned fairly quickly that government agencies love to take advantage of naïve vendors. If someone invests in their formal and informal education regarding the nuances of environmental communication, he or she should act prudently to maximize a return on that investment. Sometimes this means sponsors will recoil at the cost of paying what seems to be an exorbitant sum for what they think is a simple puzzle-solving exercise, and a consultant may have to simply walk away. However, in the long run and if you're good at it, they will gladly pay you what you're worth.

5. **Promise Only Deliverables.** Sometimes, government agencies have unrealistic expectations for what is possible in the environmental communication arena, let alone what is feasible given available resources. I even

had a deputy administrator once ask me to guarantee that I could forge consensus among disputants in a process his agency had corrupted almost beyond repair before they thought to call upon my services! A realistic projection of outcomes will result in more return business and less failed expectations when all is said and done.

Working with government agencies on collaborative or consulting projects can be challenging but it can also be very rewarding. For those of you considering this type of work, it is important to have a realistic idea of the challenges and opportunities before you. Hopefully the insight shared by these scholars will help you in your work. Thank you to those featured in this section for their willingness to share such valuable insight.



Next Issue

- What are the challenges and opportunities associated with environmentally related community engagement and service-learning projects?
- What are some of the strategies and techniques you have used to implement community engagement and service-learning projects in the classroom?

Please submit answers, thoughts and ideas to Tracylee.clarke@csuci.edu (no longer than 500 words). If you would like to have your answers given prominence in our "Featured Voice" section, please send an extended response (no longer than 1000 words) and indicate your interest as such.

