

Public Outreach & Engagement: A Resource for Sea Grant Investigators

As marine research more frequently addresses issues of social and political concern—seafood sustainability, workforce development, coastal erosion, etc. — scientists are being called upon to interact with public audiences. Many granting agencies, including the National and State Sea Grant Programs, require an outreach component. Public service is also an essential component of the University of Maine's role as a Land and Sea Grant University.

Goal 2: We will continue to provide accessible and affordable education, research and service through processes that ensure effectiveness, efficiency and quality.

—University of Maine Strategic Vision and Values umaine.edu/visionandvalues

What does "outreach" mean for your research topic? The terms education, outreach, community engagement, and public participation are often used interchangeably to describe scientists interacting with public audiences, but they have different meanings depending on context, and they require different communication approaches and tools.

Outreach: Activities to enhance awareness of science and research. Implies a one-way delivery of information, or includes an element of education to help public audiences "understand" information. Examples: fact sheet, website, presentation.

Participation: Involvement of interested parties in science-based policy, management planning and decision-making that will affect them, directly or indirectly. Levels of participation vary. Examples: task force, community committee, public hearing.

Engagement: Collaboration between institutions of higher education and external communities that results in exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity (Source: Carnegie Foundation). Can be the same as participation and sometimes used interchangeably with outreach, but engagement implies a two-way communication process, whereas outreach can be unilateral communication. Examples: participatory research, collaborative problem solving, community visioning.

Maine Sea Grant extension staff adapted the graphic to the right from a model offered by the International Association for Public Participation to describe the continuum from outreach activities that help to inform our audiences to engagement activities that help to empower those we serve. The model serves as a tool to help our staff and research partners consider which of these approaches will be most appropriate, based on the goals of the project at hand. (Image credit: Jaclyn Robidoux, Maine Sea Grant Extension Specialist)



"The end game of public engagement should be empowerment: creating a real and meaningful mechanism for public input to be heard far enough upstream in science and technology policy making and program development to influence decisions." (Source: scienceprogress.org)

An important step: Ask: Who is your audience? When designing outreach approaches, it is important to identify your audience (often, those who will benefit from understanding your research results). The level of public interaction will depend on the nature and focus of the research. Audiences for Sea Grant research activities vary depending on the goals of the project. They often include commercial fishermen, aquaculturists and related marine or coastal businesses; industry associations; state, federal, or tribal leaders and resource agency staff; municipal officials; nonprofits and community organizations; coastal property owners; educators and students; and tourists and tourism-related businesses.

The following are links to documents and resources that may be of help. We encourage you to **reach out** to the Maine Sea Grant Marine Extension Team members with expertise in your areas of research and engagement as you consider potential outreach tools.



Maine Sea Grant/Cooperative Extension Marine Extension Team
seagrant.umaine.edu/extension



International Association for Public Participation iap2.org



AAAS Communication Toolkit, Center for Public Engagement with Science and Technology,
AAAS qr1.be/KIHJ



Public Participation in Environmental Assessment and Decision Making, National Academies Press qr1.be/MOON



Education and Public Outreach, A Guide for Scientists, Centers for Ocean Sciences Education Excellence (PDF) qr1.be/904Y



Centering knowledge co-production in sustainability science: Why, how and when.
Oceanography Special Issue: Sea Grant: Science Serving America's Coastlines and People
Volume 37(1) March 2024 qr1.be/VC0S



Storytelling in the field with Sea Grant science communicators Oceanography Special Issue: Sea Grant: Science Serving America's Coastlines and People Volume 37(1) March 2024 qr1.be/TT04

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