

Public Outreach & Engagement: A Primer for Sea Grant Researchers

As marine research more frequently addresses issues of social and political concern—climate change, red tide, eutrophication, seafood sustainability, coastal erosion, etc.—scientists are being called upon to interact with public audiences. Many granting agencies, including Sea Grant, require an outreach component, and public service is an essential component of a land- and sea-grant university.

Strategic Goal 3. The University of Maine will strengthen its essential partnership with, and accountability to, the communities and people of Maine by ensuring that UMaine is an institution that meets their educational, social, cultural, and economic needs and aspirations.

—University of Maine 2006-2011 Strategic Plan

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. All of them require communication skills 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 stakeholders in science-based policy and management planning and decisions that will affect them, directly or indirectly. Levels of participation vary. Examples: task force, citizen committee, public hearing.

Engagement: The collaboration between institutions of higher education and external communities for the mutually beneficial 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. Example: collaborative problem solving, visioning.

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)

Who is your audience? When designing outreach projects, it is important to identify the audience (or “stakeholders”) for your research results. The level of public interaction will depend on the nature and focus of the research. Audiences for current Sea Grant activities include commercial fishermen and aquaculturists, natural resource agency leaders and staff, municipal officials, coastal property owners, tourists and tourism-related businesses, and state and federal legislators.

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The following are links to documents and resources that may be of help.

Maine Marine Extension Team

<http://www.seagrant.umaine.edu/extension>

Public Participation in Environmental Assessment and Decision Making, National Academies

http://www.nap.edu/catalog.php?record_id=12434

Education and Public Outreach, A Guide for Scientists, Centers for Ocean Sciences Education Excellence

http://www.cosee.net/files/coseenet/epo_guide2.pdf

Introduction to Stakeholder Participation, NOAA Coastal Services Center

<http://www.csc.noaa.gov/stakeholder/>

Engaging the Scientific Community with the Public, Rick Borchelt and Kathy Hudson

<http://www.scienceprogress.org/2008/04/engaging-the-scientific-community-with-the-public/>

Framing Science, Matthew Nisbet, Professor of Communications at American University

<http://scienceblogs.com/framing-science/>

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