

Identifying A Public Issue: Working With Facts and Values

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Identifying a Public Issue

A public issue is a matter of concern to the public at large. Typically it is of a controversial nature because it arises out of *disagreement* about how a problem *could* or *should* be solved.

As citizens explore a problem, they eventually come to a stage where they *describe the problem specifically--identify the issue*. The capacity to identify an issue arises out of a clear understanding of the concern(s) and what each stakeholder believes would be a more desirable situation. This requires stakeholders to ask:

- what is it that concerns me about the current situation?
- what are the causes for my concern?
- can the situation be improved?
- who or what do I need to improve the situation?

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Getting Specific

Natural resource questions encompass numerous public issues. Topics include, for example:

resource conservation

- resource preservation
- water scarcity

- multiple use of public lands,
- environmental quality,
- rural development,
- sustainable agriculture, and
- quality of life.

A public issue is more specific. It evolves out of discussion about areas of public concern. The issue is phrased by the public as a question. The question is asked because the public agrees that an existing situation is mutually unsatisfactory.

An example of a question may be: *What can we do to maintain economically viable food production systems that supply high quality and affordable food products and protect and enhance ecosystem diversity on public lands?* A question this specific emerges from discussion about resource conservation and preservation, multiple use of public lands, environmental quality, rural development, sustainable agriculture, and quality of life.

Working with Values

Natural resource questions unveil a range of personal ideas, attitudes, and beliefs. Each hold a place in our personal value system. Values influence the logic we use in attempting to solve simple problems. When it comes to natural resource problems, personal values held by a multitude of stakeholders with varied interests can make it challenging to nail down a specific issue, much less create mutually acceptable solutions.

Working with Facts

Although responsible stakeholders will seek facts to help identify an issue, facts alone may not provide completely reliable indicators of reality. Facts alone are insufficient to help identify an issue when they are:

- overgeneralized to the point that they do not accurately reflect a specific situation,
- based on faulty analysis and/or data,
- biased in support of a political agenda,
- miscommunicated by the researchers,
- misrepresented by public media,
- misinterpreted by the listeners,
- out of date, and/or unrelated to the problem at hand.

*Identifying a public issue
requires citizens to
balance facts about the
problem with values or
feelings about the problem.*

When results taken from a larger or similar study are applied loosely to other situations, for example, there is danger of over-generalizing the results from the original study. Erroneous conclusions may be drawn as the situation involved in the original study may actually differ extensively from the situation at hand.

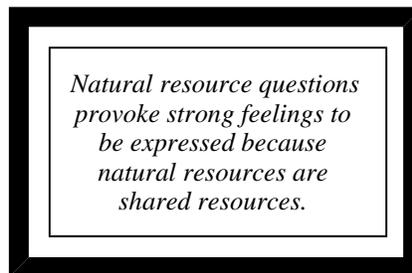
Additionally, it is possible that data used to compile the facts are incomplete, are compiled from poor sampling techniques, and/or are recorded with human error. With the high level of competition that currently exists for moneys to fund research, it is less likely than ever that faulty analysis and data are a concern. Still, citizens should inquire about any obstacles researchers themselves encounter in designing the analysis, running the analysis, and assembling quality data to use in the analysis.

Facts may intensify conflict when they are biased towards a political cause. This is true especially when facts are used to support policy solutions tied to political appointments and elections.

Miscommunication of facts is not an intentional dilemma but a frequent misfortune. Researchers who are brilliant analysts sometimes have difficulty communicating research findings in layperson's terms. How useful are technical facts if the public does not understand them or worse, misunderstands them?

Similarly, public media may unintentionally misrepresent factual information due to hasty coverage, a misunderstanding of what is said in an interview or even a misinterpretation of what is read in journal articles or press releases.

Given all the possibilities listed above, stakeholders have ample opportunity to misinterpret factual information. It is the stakeholder's sole responsibility to ask clarifying questions, repeatedly if necessary, in order to use information to identify the issue objectively.



What further complicates the situation is that factual information is subject to constant change. Facts may become outdated as natural resources change to keep in step with Mother Nature and human values and intervention change in step with societal pressures.

Finally, professional researchers often ask questions that citizens are not interested in asking. Citizens may even perceive the research questions to be irrelevant to the problem at hand.

Balancing Facts and Values

Identifying a public issue requires citizens to balance facts about the problem with values or feelings about the problem. Natural resource questions provoke strong feelings to be expressed because natural resources are shared resources. We all want clean air, plenty of clean water, panoramic views, fresh and wholesome foods, and personal space to live, work, and recreate.

To work with factual information means to seek, sort, and accept valid, unbiased research. It means to use research information to help clarify the problem at hand and ultimately identify the issue.

To balance values with facts requires citizens to be honest about their concerns--why do they feel a particular way about a natural resource question rather than focusing on how to fix the problem.

Citizens Issues Groups

A group comprised of local stakeholders can help achieve a balance between facts and values. A citizen issues group can help by providing:

- researchers with a better understanding of what questions are most useful to ask,
- stakeholders with more opportunities to express their concerns publicly for constructive purposes,
- additional opportunities to help stakeholders identify the issue specifically, and
- an open atmosphere for considering both facts and values in addressing the problem.

Ideally, when stakeholders are made a part of the effort to seek and acquire factual information, the information is more directly applicable to the unique issue identified. Combining useful, current facts with existing values may reduce conflicts that arise in identifying an issue. This kind of cooperative involvement on the part of stakeholders may also reduce conflict later in the issue evolution process--creating alternatives and considering consequences to improve a natural resource situation.

References

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