Learning is a cornerstone of any society's ability to address public issues. On their own initiative, individuals undertake much of the learning about issues, without help or intervention from 'educators.' Acquiring information, developing skills, building capacity, and gaining new insights happen inevitably as part of the process of exploring issues. (D.D. Dale and A.J. Hahn (eds.) Public Issues Education: Increasing Competence in Resolving Public Issues -1994)

Public Issues Education has gained increasing attention nationally as an effective means for integrating education, facilitation, and citizen participation in a process to explore issues of public concern. Various public issue education processes are available to help citizens organize and empower themselves to address public concerns more effectively.

Generally, these processes encourage citizens to:
- have ownership of the process,
- seek perceptual information from one another to enhance others' awareness of a concern and to broaden perspectives,
- seek objective, factual information to educate and enhance capacity to identify possible solutions,
- be inclusive rather than exclusive in encouraging citizen participation, and
- maintain democratic participation during the process.
Public action on a given issue is most effective when citizens form a commitment to address an issue that they have identified themselves. Although objective information from outside the community may be necessary to help clarify issues or remedies, citizens must integrate their own individual and collective daily experiences with available technical, scientific information to keep the issue grounded in reality.

As our society becomes technologically and socially more complex, public concerns about uses and management of natural resources become more complex. Rapid urban growth has increased demand for residential, commercial, industrial and recreational space and resources in rural areas affecting their economies and ecosystems. Efforts to create and maintain economically viable rural locally-owned enterprises has challenged and continue to present challenges for rural citizens. Rural enterprises that are most affected by these changes are food production systems-farms and ranches.

The complexity of natural resource issues is complicated further by individual emotions tied to belief systems around appropriate uses of natural resources. Ideas about appropriate uses of natural resources can include:

- traditional and contemporary agriculture,
- recreational escape from urban areas,
- industrial, residential, and commercial development, and
- environmental spirituality.

Such a complex fabric of personal emotions and private and public needs often leads to tension around questions involving natural resources. A public issues education approach to these questions provides citizens with a constructive and non-threatening, process to examine questions and explore available choices. In some cases, the process may lead to consensus that reflects a sense of a Win-win" solution or even consensus enactment of a public policy.
Increasing pressure is on communities to take charge of their own destinies. Few citizens expect government solutions to these complex issues. Increasing interest in cooperative-participatory resource management tools, such as coordinated resource management planning and holistic resource management, indicate that public and private interests realize the importance of cooperating to jointly tackle tough questions about natural resources. Cooperatively negotiated agreements can offer a less expensive and often more creative alternative to legal litigation.

**Getting Started**

Initiating a public issue education process can take several paths. The _path taken depends in part upon the breadth or complexity of the issue, timing of awareness of the issue, the uniqueness of the locale, and the resources available to begin the process. Asking questions provides a simple beginning.

Basic questions to ask include:
- What is the concern?
- What information do we need to help clarify and understand the concern?
- What informed choices are available to us to address the concern?
- What are the social and economic costs and benefits of each choice?
- Who enjoys the benefits or bears the costs?

**Who Should Be Involved**

The issues education process ideally involves a diverse group of stakeholders. A stakeholder is any citizen who has an interest or stake in the identified issue. The more diverse the group, the more diverse the perspectives will be on an issue. The main goal in exploring an issue together is to encourage all stakeholders to take into account all perspectives on an issue.

There are a number of ways citizens can check their process to determine if diversity is lacking. Citizens may identify stakeholder categories and then look for individuals in these categories. Categories pertinent to western natural resource issues may include obvious _administrative agencies_, such as:
- United States Forest Service (USES),
- Bureau of Land Management (BLM), Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA),
- Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS),
- University of Nevada Cooperative Extension (UNCE),
- Farm Services Agency (FSA),
- US Fish and Wildlife Service, and others.

Additional obvious stakeholders include _publicly appointed_ and elected officials such as:
- county commissioners or supervisors,
- city and community officials, tribal administrators,
- irrigation district officials,
- state water planner,
- Federal water masters,
- grazing boards,
- others.
Other stakeholders include organized institutions, such as:
- citizen interest groups,
- university researchers
- professional consulting firms, and
- business and industry.

Individuals and families represent a broad collection of stakeholders that might include:
- those who are actively involved in the issue,
- those who are interested but not actively involved, and
- those who witness the process but remain uninterested and uninvolved.

Citizen involvement in public issues education ideally is *inclusive* rather than exclusive. Especially with complex issues or in contentious situations, there may be a tendency to think the fewer people included in the process, the more quickly and efficiently a problem might be solved. This notion tends to backfire, however, when excluded citizens get wind of a proposed solution or policy that they find disagreeable and organize quickly and efficiently to oppose or block it. Unhappy, excluded citizens can slow the process of addressing a pressing issue either through informally undermining the process or stopping it completely through litigation.

Another reason for behaving inclusively is because democratic participation is more likely to result in decisions acceptable to the community.

Following a guideline of inclusiveness helps citizens recognize the interdependence of their interests and actions. They begin to share a focus to enable them to more clearly name the issue. This builds group cohesiveness and encourages group responsibility for an issue, and consequently more responsibility for a course of action on an issue. In sum, mutual awareness encourages broad participation to occur naturally, while it provides information to help clarify issues, identify resources, list alternatives, and examine consequences of choices.

When citizens begin involvement of an issues education process they can check the level of inclusion by asking one another:
- who is missing?
- why are they missing?
- where are they now?
- how can we include them?

**Possible Drawbacks**

A comprehensive issues education process reveals many viewpoints, interests, and even public and private agendas on a given issue. It is possible that as viewpoints and information are shared, some individuals may experience more tension about the issue rather than less. Involving diverse stakeholders in issues that affect livelihoods and/or strong belief systems, for example, are likely to invoke feelings of fear, vulnerability, and even hostility.

**Possible Benefits**

Several benefits may occur from taking a public issues education approach to natural resource questions. The most obvious benefit, although it is hard to measure, is the reaming that takes place among citizens about one another, the issue, alternative actions and consequences, and how a locally created policy or action might be implemented. Specifically, this learning includes:
- first hand knowledge of building public policy at the local level
- expansion of civic leadership to the broader public
- increased ability to consider perspectives and information from diverse sources
- increased ability to see the inter-dependence of natural resource issues
- improved skills in building interpersonal and public relationships to view public issues
- increased capacity for integrating factual knowledge with personal experiences.

A list of the possible benefits is limited only by limitations imposed on the issues education process. There are those who dismiss the approach as too time consuming or does not bring about enough action soon enough. In confronting difficult questions regarding the use, conservation, or preservation of natural resources, however critical, decisions require effort, time, patience, and the creative input of many rather than few.

References
