Introduction

In Western Resources Issues Education Series (No. 1), the public issues education approach to natural resource questions is described in general terms. It is explained in terms of: how to begin the process; who to involve; and possible drawbacks and benefits. In No. 2 of the series, we consider one example of a public issues education process; the role education plays in the process; and how to move through the process.

Selecting a Process

Phases of Issue Evolution

To organize public issues education around natural resource questions, it is useful to have a process in mind. A process provides an outline for citizens to follow to optimize the benefits of group communication and collaboration in problem solving. Figure 1 illustrates a step-by-step process for working through a public issue. The stages advance clock-wise to illustrate the growth or evolution of an issue, with respect to citizens' exploration of an issue. The outside circle represents the idea that educational experiences can occur at any stage in the issue evolution cycle.

In stage 1, citizens with an interest or stake in an issue (stakeholders) increase their awareness of the issue. Awareness emerges through informal discussions, sporadic complaints, or in extreme circumstances, litigation forcing action on an issue. In the awareness stage, the process offers the public an initial opportunity to exchange viewpoints about a concern(s). This exchange helps citizens clarify concerns by:
- legitimizing their complaints,
- hearing about how others are affected by the same issue, and
- separating rumor from fact.

In stage 2, involvement, other stakeholders are identified who are affected by the issue but are not yet involved in discussions. Citizens may also identify information specialists to provide facts about the issue and who might help identify other stakeholders.

Clarifying the concern and framing it formally as a public issue is the goal in the third stage of the issue evolution cycle. Stakeholders may exchange individual perceptions of the problem through focus group interviews, panel discussions, public forums (whole group input), and/or study groups. Knowledge-based experts on the issue may be invited to conduct or coordinate scientific research and share research results with the public.

As the issue is clarified through the educational process, in stage 4, stakeholders identify and/or create alternatives to resolve the issue. In addition to scientific or technical information provided by subject matter specialists, stakeholders may conduct their own research to identify alternatives.

Citizen research may include:
- reviews of journal articles, books, videos
- citizen surveys, and
- case studies of areas with similar issues

Ideally, the alternatives generated are based on factual, objective information combined with an effective exchange of individual views, ideas, and values.

In stage 5, citizens examine carefully the consequences of the alternatives created in stage 4. This involves looking at the measurable costs and benefits of alternatives in terms of, for example, time, dollars, technical feasibility, and human and physical resources required. In addition to economic consequences, social consequences must be considered as well. Potential losses to public welfare are difficult to measure, but provide important information to consider when weighing consequences of public action.

After careful consideration of alternatives and consequences of a particular action, in stage 6, stakeholders make a choice as how to address the issue. In making a choice, stakeholders learn or improve their understanding of how public choice is shaped into public policy. This may involve learning how to influence elected officials as well as individuals who influence decisions behind-the-scenes.

Ideally, stakeholders are in agreement that the choice represents the best possible way of addressing the issue. They must be open, however, to working through conflicts that might arise among disagreeing interests. Hard-line advocates of a particular choice must learn that there are advantages in negotiating and collaborating with their opponents. If they refuse to negotiate, the issue may end up unresolved. Therefore, striving for a solution that satisfies all interests is of interest to all stakeholders.

In stage 7, the choice is implemented in the form of a policy or formal agreement of understanding. Stakeholders need to understand how the agreement or new policy will be implemented. They need to look for changes in public opinion that might occur during its implementation. Individual concerns may arise during implementation that include, for example, possible third party injuries. This possibility emphasizes the importance of including a broad
and diverse array of stakeholders in the awareness and involvement stages of the issue evolution cycle. It also underlines the importance of examining carefully the consequences of given alternatives.

The final stage (8) of the issue evolution cycle evaluates the effectiveness of the choice or implemented policy. At this stage stakeholders may ask:

- is the policy or action is taking care of the problem?
- does the public agree that the policy is effective? why?
- is it perceived generally as ineffective? why?
- what can be done to improve it?

The final stage offers an additional opportunity to evaluate the entire issue education process. Stakeholders may ask:

- what happened at each stage?
- why did this happen?
- what else might have happened?
- has the situation improved?
- what can we do to improve the situation?

In a sense, stage 8, offers a chance to begin the cycle anew—with more information and experience begin clarifying concerns.

**Moving through the Process**

In addition to information specialists that may be invited to share technical facts on an issue, stakeholders may enlist the help of educators to facilitate the process. Effective facilitation ensures smooth movement from one stage of the process to another and/or within each stage of the process.

A facilitator may intervene at various stages of the cycle or remain involved for the duration of the cycle. In stage 1, for example, a facilitator may help establish a cooperative atmosphere to begin clarifying concerns. (S)he may accomplish this partly by helping stakeholders establish ground rules for discussions so that issues can be clarified in an organized and mutually respectful manner.

Creating and maintaining a cooperative atmosphere for communication from the beginning helps curb blame-seeking behavior. Such behavior may surface naturally in initial stages but does not honor a process for learning nor for building consensus to confront a complex question.

Stakeholders may create the following rules, for example, to enhance discussions during meetings:

- do not repeat your statements
- do not interrupt others speaking
- one person may speak at a time
- give others a chance to be heard
- respect individual viewpoints
- phrase statements of concern with "I" or "we" rather than "you" or "they"
- stick to the prepared meeting agenda and the time restrictions
- document the process

Early on in the issue evolution cycle, the facilitator's goal is to have stakeholders develop a sense of mutual respect. That is, individuals begin to acknowledge that the process can be a safe place to have their concerns and ideas considered without premature judgment. Ideally, this quality of communication is maintained through-out the cycle.

In stage 2, a facilitator may help structure meetings so that individuals and organizations involved represent diverse viewpoints on the issue. The facilitator may ask stakeholders, for example:

- who has the authority to make decisions about this issue?
- what decisions are possible?
- who is likely to support these decisions?
- who is likely to oppose these decisions?
In stages 3, 4, and 5 the facilitator may assist stakeholders in clarifying the issue, identifying alternatives, and analyzing consequences. (S)he may be able to help identify information specialists to provide objective insight on an issue. Similarly, a facilitator may help stakeholders identify when information presented is biased toward one particular policy direction or another.

In the choice (6) and implementation (7) stage, a facilitator may assist in mediating conflict that might arise from the choice itself or the way in which it is implemented. (S)he may, for example, remind advocates of a particular action to enter into open discussions with opponents to encourage a more collaborative atmosphere for decision making. In the final evaluation stage (8), a facilitator may remind stakeholders to monitor the implemented policy to check its effectiveness and be ready to intervene if necessary and begin the process again.

Choice of educators to facilitate the process should be given careful consideration. It is vital to the integrity of the learning process that a facilitator remain devoted to helping stakeholders consider each other's views and related information objectively in order to later make informed yet personal choices. It is inappropriate, for example, for the facilitator to advocate a particular alternative or policy resolution. A facilitator is more effective in helping varied interests if (s)he remains impartial and instead tries to maintain a level playing field for all stakeholders. Although the goal for many may be to find a solution to the problem, the questions asked and the quality of learning experience are more important to the facilitator.
