

June 7, 2008 Chapter Council Meeting Notes

Afternoon Session: Public Relations Strategies for Local Conservation Issues

Three of seventeen people in attendance answered positively to the survey question: Who here has successfully used public relations to build support for CNPS local conservation issues?

Part 1: Carol Witham spoke about using media relations to support conservation for issues that she encountered in the Sacramento region.

Best strategy is to file and win two lawsuits. Set up action group so that you can get 150 people to show up at a Board of Supervisors (BOS) meeting. With Habitat 2020, comments improved natural resources conservation plan. Build a personal, ongoing relationship with the media and editorial staff at least two-three months prior to when the event/issue comes to a head. Give exclusive interviews to reporters. Keep in touch every 2-3 months so the contact is ongoing. Be ready to act quickly. Carol gave an example where a potential BOS action was discovered on Thursday, got on phone with SacBee reporter, article came out on Friday, an editorial on Monday, before the BOS meeting on Tuesday. Get meetings with City Planner and City Council to fix policies that are incorrect or lacking in natural resources conservation. Find common grounds and workable solutions. Get to the point where developers even ask for meetings with you.

Any publicity is better than none. Publicity enabled a group of organizations to negate original deal on UC Merced. Provide honest, straightforward, science-based input and a personal relationship with media contacts. Give good quotes that help them understand the issue. Work with all the organizations to give talks about natural resources conservation. Spouses of local politicians can be valuable resources. Build ownership. Use booths at fairs, pretty pictures of plants.

Part 2: Brad Jenkins spoke about building a supportive conservation alliance for a huge urban park

Public Relations Strategy for Contentious Issues: Collaboration

Synopsis: Collaboration

Assemble organizations having similar goals for your project. Speak as one voice. Then reach out to the protagonist of the project/issue. Be useful in ways that show the benefits of your goals and strategies. Speak softly, knowledgeably, and with solutions. Selectively use carrots and sticks (incentives.)

Examples Where Used

Orange County Great Park: The city of Irvine is creating a large urban park in Orange County on the scale of Golden Gate Park at the old El Toro Marine base.

UC Merced Campus: The University of California had placed many years in the complicated planning process and was not open to more changes. Many environmental issues existed, most notably the loss of prime vernal pool habitat. Several strategies including collaboration were eventually used by the environmental groups and the University to get to a very forward looking plan.

A Common, Non-Collaboration Approach that Backfires

Walk in and tell government or builder groups their plans must show consideration for native plant and habit issues. Example: Some people in the Great Park hierarchy were open to environmental input, but there were many competing constituencies overall. Our first un-aligned meeting to push native plant issues was essentially met with, "you are just another bunch of whiney special interest groups jumping on the bandwagon to influence the design of the park. You have no idea how much work we have put into this project to make it viable and how much more work is needed to make it happen."

The Collaboration Plan

1. Build a Strong Environmental Coalition

- a. Create a friendly yet powerful force of organizations that want a common outcome. Sometimes unexpected groups will share this goal with you. Look for local groups as well as local chapters of organizations with state, nationwide, or global presence.
- b. Determine high level goals that all organizations can support. List additional goals that most organizations can support, or at least no one is against.
- c. Identify a central contact person who has access to all coalition groups.
- d. Speak as one voice on the major goals.

2. Initiate Collaboration with Protagonist

- a. Provide protagonist easy access to the central coalition contact person.
- b. Find any common ground with protagonist. (Examples: the general plan allows for housing in this area, so we agree some amount of building will occur... water quality solutions will help downstream habitat and keep protagonist within legal zoning/building/environmental requirements... Social services are needed within the county... solutions must be financially feasible... Old oaks can raise the value of property in new neighborhoods.)
- c. Make sure protagonist is aware of the number and breadth of aligned groups.
- d. Make all communication clear, honest, and non-combative.
- e. Be supportive of actions protagonist makes that help goals. Stand firm on coalition goals, while being flexible on how to arrive at the goals.

3. Help Build Solutions

- a. Make all communication useful and directed at solutions.
- b. Always provide timely responses during public comment periods.
- c. Give protagonist instant access to resources for any environmentally supportive direction they show interest or question. (People, books, websites, laws, successful examples, classes, plant lists, etc.)
- d. Where problems exist for protagonist, say why, and briefly describe an environmentally supportive alternative. Leave detailed solutions to paid professionals.

- e. Gently remind protagonist and appropriate officials of water supply issues, spending restrictions, long term maintenance costs, public love of butterflies and birds and salmon, energy issues, global warming, etc, and how environmentally sustainable concepts (including smart use of native plants) provide solutions.

4. Carrots and Sticks (Incentives)

- a. Provide environment friendly officials (and coalition partners) with useful condensed information they can use in public and non-public meetings.
- b. Go to public council and planning meetings. Speak professionally about inter-related financial, people, and environmental benefits of coalition goals. Bring many supporters to these meetings. Consider having each coalition organization giving a separate speech.
- c. Publicize project status in each coalition group's newsletter.
- d. Write Op/Ed letters in local and regional papers.
- e. Write short articles for websites and blogs.
- f. Create press releases when mutually beneficial solutions are achieved.
- g. Look for situations that play to your advantage: new laws, water district supply concerns, public mood swings, new elected officials, IER issues, protagonist spouse interests, housing cycles, budget cuts, large donations, EPA/USFWS/CADFG recommendations, need for mitigation on current or nearby project.
- h. Be cognizant of access to and a basis for litigation.

Part 3: Amy Hoffman spoke about native plant conservation challenges that the El Dorado Chapter CNPS is having with the El Dorado County Board of Supervisors (BOS). The chapter is seeking help to develop an effective public relations campaign to build support for local natural resources conservation.

The County BOS is not following the Court Order from the General Plan lawsuit to support native plant conservation for the gabbro soil rare and endangered plants and oaks in the Oak Woodlands Recovery plan. Our chapter has filed one lawsuit over the rare and endangered gabbro soil plants that is currently in appeal. We will likely join another lawsuit over the Oak Woodlands Management Plan. If the BOS doesn't like the results of the consultants' work to develop required natural resources conservation plans, it seems like they gut the document and change the recommendations to suit their needs, which are skewed towards development. The developer for one project (Congregate Project) used the media to garner public sympathy by emphasizing it was for a Senior Care facility, even though the project also destroyed approximately 1/3 of the known population of *Ceanothus roderickii*.

Amy handed out general information from Business Wire on Tips for Writing Features (see PDF attachment). Press releases to local media outlets (newspapers and magazines, radio and television, websites of local organizations) are usually free as Public Service Announcements, although you can't always be assured of publication and timing. If you want to reach a broader audience, there are services that will distribute your press release for a fee.

BusinessWire: Membership is free. The best circuit for CNPS would be the California statewide circuit. The cost to distribute statewide for a non-profit organization is \$200 for the first 400 words plus \$52 for

each additional 100 words. Distribution is to over 300 California newspapers, 32 new services, 47 California magazines, plus California television and radio stations. Included with this the release would go to over 4,000 online websites, blogs and databases AND you may select from over 200 national trade magazine categories, things like consumer, environmental and more. For more information go to www.businesswire.com contact Trina Laird at 916-772-2570 or trina.laird@businesswire.com

ENN (Environmental News Network): Has targeted distribution to environmental contacts through their partner E- Wire to over 10,000 media points comprised of environmental journalists, broadcasters and professionals worldwide. An individual release is \$100 for a non-profit. They also offer an Affiliates Membership which gives you 1 year packages with 12 releases thru E-Wire, ENN.com, the ENN Newsletter and ENN RSS Feeds plus a link, logo and description at ENN's Partners Directory. For Non-Profits pricing is \$780 for 12 releases, 6 Releases for \$450 or 4 releases for \$320. For more information visit www.enn.com or contact Lawrence Norton at 641-472-2790, lawrence@enn.com

Part 4: The group discussed public relations successes and missteps and made recommendations for next steps.

We discussed the lessons learned from the Edgewood and Coyote Ridge articles in the recent Fremontia.

Suggestions were:

- If the local newspaper is one-sided, to use other media outlets to try to get more balanced coverage for a similar audience.
- Try not to align with a NIMBY (Not In My Back Yard) drive because the outcome is usually not good.
- Try to educate in your message, use defensible science-based facts, and find common ground.
- Get a grassroots movement going with diverse partner organizations to build greater public support to avoid being labeled as just another environmentalist.
- Don't get discouraged –It takes time and effort to build momentum.
- Try to help your local community make informed choices in elections. *Note: CNPS cannot endorse a political candidate, but you can conduct surveys of candidates to find out their stance on the environment and plant conservation and release the results provided that you treat all the candidates fairly and truthfully (equal coverage, facts about voting records).*

Recommendations for Next Steps:

- 1) Publish more success stories (similar to Edgewood and Coyote Ridge articles) in Bulletin or Fremontia
- 2) Create a Bulletin Board for the State site that supports this topic
- 3) Create an e-mail list for confidential discussion for a public relations working group and survey members for available resources (e.g., those with marketing or media experience, those who do

publicity work, those who have experience with using PR effectively to support native plants) within CNPS.

- 4) Provide training materials or a list of internet links (e.g., The Friends of the Earth at http://www.foe.co.uk/resource/how_tos/) for free materials that educate about PR
- 5) Fund a media session or workshop to learn effective PR strategies as part of the Conservation Conference in January
- 6) Issue plain language guidance as to what is allowable for press releases particularly when touching on the subject of political candidates and their platform with respect to native plants. IRS 501(c)(3) rules would apply. When (if ever) does the state need to review and approve draft press releases from a chapter prior to release?