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Multifaceted Approaches to Outreach in a Natural Resources Agency

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Abstract: The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) is developing a new National Outreach Strategy to provide focus and guidance for its communication, education, and public relations efforts. In the process of implementing the new strategy, questions arise regarding what outreach is and what it can do for the FWS or any natural resources management agency. Is outreach a public relations tool, a means of informing our publics about what we do and generating support for our wildlife conservation programs? Is it a management tool for addressing the human dimensions of wildlife management, influencing human behavior, and managing conflicts between people and wildlife? Is it strictly an educational process, designed to increase knowledge and skills about wildlife, its needs, and the threats it faces? We think outreach includes all of these things. We present specific examples drawn from

diverse and widespread field experience that illustrate how these different outreach approaches have helped the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service accomplish its mission. We propose some general lessons that have been learned from FWS experience, and suggest a few common principles of effective outreach. Finally, we list some steps that could help natural resource agencies close the "gap" that often exists between the potential of their management actions to generate public controversy and level of outreach required to prevent or control such controversy.

Key words: outreach, public relations, environmental education, behavior change, human dimensions of wildlife management

I. What is Outreach?

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) has defined "outreach" as "two-way communication between the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the public to establish mutual understanding, promote involvement, and influence attitudes and actions, with the goal of improving joint stewardship of our natural resources." (National Outreach Strategy, 1997; National Outreach Team & Pocket Guide, 1999, in press) The FWS National Outreach Strategy acknowledges that outreach "means different things to different people," but seeks to define it in a broad way. It points out that two-way communication is the heart of "outreach," and that this communication can be with very diverse constituents, "customers," and partners, including the "public"; "communities" and neighbors of FWS properties; constituent" groups, including conservation organizations; state and local governments; state fish & wildlife agencies; other federal agencies; Congress; corporations; news media; users of FWS properties and resources; and school children.

Communication with all these partners, constituents, or "audiences" is intended to build good relationships, awareness, involvement and support for the FWS and its management actions. In many cases the desired outcome of outreach is behavioral change among these audiences that will make stewardship of fish and wildlife resources more effective.

In several places the National Outreach Strategy calls itself a "national communications strategy." Because of the diverse groups with which the FWS must communicate, however, communication can take on dramatically different forms, from environmental education curricula for school children to messages about the laws regulating international trade in endangered wildlife products.

In this paper we will consider three major aspects or "facets" of outreach:

- public relations outreach, in which two-way communication seeks to inform the diverse "publics" with whom the FWS interacts about what we do, and generate support for our wildlife conservation programs
- management outreach, to influence the behavior and actions of resource users, partners, constituents, and others via two-way communication; this could be thought of as "people management," and would include minimizing people-wildlife conflicts
- educational outreach, designed to increase knowledge and skills about wildlife, its needs, and the threats it faces among "audiences" of all ages

We believe that outreach is all of these things. In some people's minds, however, "outreach" is associated most closely with "public relations" or "external affairs." A few people might even think of "outreach" and "public relations" as synonymous. This old view seems to be changing, however, and a broader view taking its place, in which public relations, management of behavior, and education are seen as different aspects of outreach.

II. Outreach Examples

Our objective in this paper is to illustrate the diverse uses of "outreach" in the FWS with examples of success. We wanted to find examples of the three main types of outreach: public relations outreach, outreach for influencing and managing people's behaviors, and educational outreach. We sought examples from the different branches of the FWS--the divisions of Refuges and Wildlife, Ecological Services, Fisheries, and Law Enforcement. In addition, because of the relatively recent adoption of the "ecosystem management" approach, we were especially interested in some

examples that illustrate how the FWS is using outreach to address issues at the ecosystem scale. We wanted a representation of the geographic regions in which the FWS operates. Length restrictions prevent us from even summarizing any of these examples in this paper, but they are discussed in a longer version of this paper available from the first author.

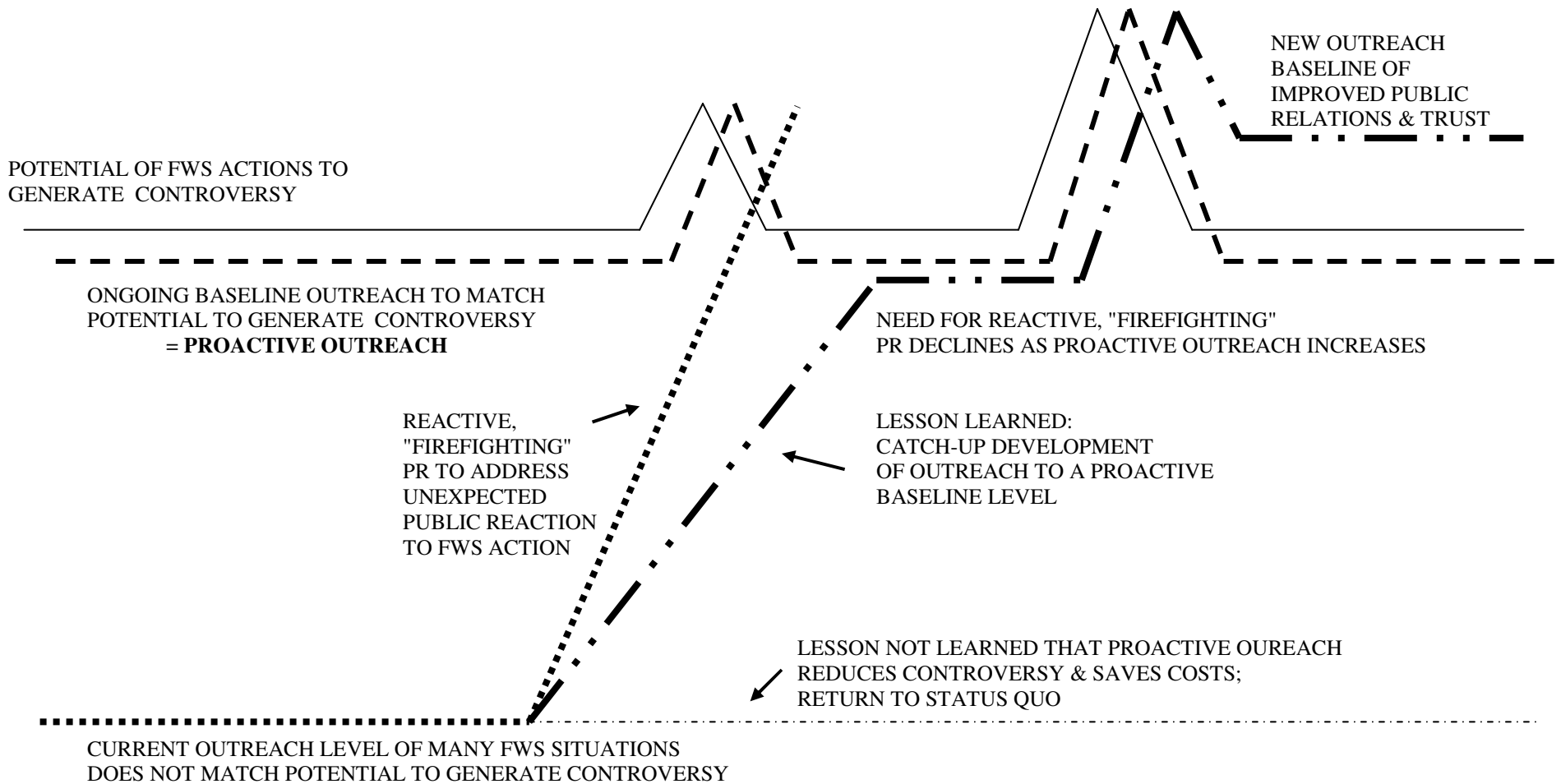
III. Lessons Learned from Experience

The cases discussed we identified suggest some general patterns in the way outreach has--or has not-- been used to address problems and fulfill the mission of the FWS. They also reveal some historical trends toward increasingly sophisticated, proactive, and effective outreach found throughout the divisions and geographical regions of the FWS. These patterns and trends are depicted graphically in Figure 3.

One all too common pattern, found in a few of the cases discussed above and hundreds of others not considered here, is of public outcry and controversy caused by some FWS action. The regularity with which such situations come up is what led the authors of the National Conservation Strategy to state that "... the Service's current investment in communication is not adequate and does not match the level of public concern and political controversy that its programs are generating." (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 1997, p. 6). This then necessitates reactive, "firefighting" public relations and educational efforts by the FWS to quell the controversy. In the cases of this kind that we identified, FWS staff "learned their lesson" from the experience. They engaged in "catch-up" development of outreach, eventually bringing it up to a proactive, baseline level that for the time being seems adequate to match the potential of FWS actions to generate controversy. Unfortunately, there are other cases not discussed here in which the lesson was not learned the first time, and outreach dropped back to the inadequate, pre-controversy level. In these cases future wildlife management actions are likely to stir up controversy again, necessitating another round of reactive public relations efforts.

LEARNING LESSONS ABOUT EFFECTIVE OUTREACH

TIME →



In summary, then, personnel from across the FWS should learn the lessons from widespread field experience: They should:

- recognize the vital role outreach plays in carrying out the FWS mission, and plan an outreach component for any FWS action "up front," from the beginning, before carrying out the action and potentially generating public or political controversy and conflict; and,
- develop and maintain a baseline of proactive outreach commensurate with the potential of management actions to generate controversy, and that will minimize the need for reactive, "firefighting" efforts later.

IV. Common Principles of Effective Outreach

The examples discussed above suggest that no matter what the situation, effective outreach efforts have some principles in common:

- The first step is to *listen* to your diverse partners, "publics," audiences, constituents, and resource users. By listening, you will get to "know your audiences" so you, in turn, can effectively communicate the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's views to them. Remember that outreach involves two-way communication based on credibility, trust, and good relationships.
- Next, choose the outreach approach that will work best in a given situation. Knowing which will work best comes from listening to and getting to know your audiences.
- Finally, recognize that the most effective outreach will usually be a multifaceted mix of public relations, efforts to influence behavior, and education. This is generally true even in reactive, "firefighting" outreach, but especially important to keep in mind when planning a long-term baseline level of proactive outreach.

V. Closing the "Outreach Gap"

Throughout the FWS it is important to close the "outreach gap"--the difference in amount and quality of outreach between what exists now and what is needed to match the potential of FWS actions

to generate controversy. A similar gap exists in many natural resource agencies throughout the world.

Some steps or actions that would help the FWS, and other natural resource management agencies, close the outreach gap include:

- Hire the right people (e.g., use outreach experts on job selection panels; write outreach qualifications into job descriptions and requirements)
- Motivate staff to do outreach and make them accountable for it (e.g., via oversight, rewards, support from supervisors)
- Provide staff with the training for outreach (e.g., public relations, education, and other training courses; media training as in the Refuge Ambassadors and Sacramento Fish and Wildlife Office examples above)
- Support outreach with resources (e.g., funding, time, encouragement from agency administrators)

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is an agency in transition. From being an agency of biologists who saw their role as protecting fish and wildlife from people ("combat biologists," as one FWS staff member called them), the FWS is in the middle of a paradigm shift toward viewing its role as communicating with the public and educating the public to be good stewards of our nation's fish and wildlife. The FWS will always need a large number of biologists on its staff, but they must also be trained to view outreach as one of the responsibilities of every FWS staff member.

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