

A Plea for Eco-Media to Cover Eco-Problems

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The normative roles of the mass news media are not to tell us what to think, but what to think about; not to educate, but to inform. This is generally true regarding environmental reporting.

In order for the news media to properly inform the public of ecological issues, thereby taking a meaningful role in preservation, restoration or management, the author contends that news media must work and report in an ecological manner, or become "eco-media". The media must expand coverage of broad and complex scientific, social and natural interrelationships (i.e. environmental issues) in a comprehensive way that attends to nature itself.

Environmental journalism is often crisis-oriented and focused on the political and legal context of environmental issues, rather than what is happening to natural ecosystems. This has been criticized as "covering the world, ignoring the earth." Only rarely do the news media show us the beauty, wonder and complexity of threatened ecosystems. Without taking sides, or advocating positions, "eco-media" can show us what we stand to lose and take on "the task of interpretive leadership."

Solid environmental reporting demands more time and space than most media vehicles provide. Most news beats require an understanding of only local or perhaps regional issues, and familiarity in only one discipline. Most, if not all environmental reporting is local as well as regional, if not global in scope. Good environmental reporters must be familiar with biological, economic, medical, statistical, legal and other concepts. Perhaps environmental reporters should be encouraged to explore and "use" marshes and tidal flats as "sources" much in the same way that sports reporters use locker rooms or political reporters use polls.

Even in an intensely studied and scientifically understood area such as the Chesapeake Bay where journalists have easy access to information and sources, and where a concerned audience uses a wide array of regional and local media, the ecological "big-picture" is often missed, misunderstood or poorly communicated to the public. The author urges consideration of this "eco-paradigm" role for the same mass media which manages to devote endless attention to every minute detail of political polls and campaigns or to the president's new haircut. There certainly is room for improved and expanded "eco-media."

Some suggestions for improvement include more prestige and training for environmental reporters, better cooperation between scientific and media institutions and the establishment of secure environmental beats, columns and programs.