

SCIENCE AND JOURNALISM: GETTING INFORMATION TO THE GENERAL PUBLIC

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As science becomes increasingly crucial to environmental protection via policy decisions, public understanding of science becomes increasingly vital. Yet, the majority of people (at least in the US) do not understand what research means. Even well-educated people are intimidated by the mystique of the academic research process. To make matters even more difficult, most people still blame big business for environmental problems but rarely realize that the actions of individuals collectively can be just as environmentally damaging. How do we inform the general public given these obstacles?

A particularly effective means is through the news media. Most Americans get most environmental information from the news media. In fact, the vast majority of science education takes place informally through mass media. The impact of a single interview can be enormous. Amplified by the press, information has the potential of reaching people across the nation.

But bringing scientists and journalists together to produce a better informed citizenry takes tolerance, understanding, and goodwill on both sides. Journalists, for example, must learn how to become translators of science jargon and educators as they compose articles based on interviews with scientists. Scientists, on the other hand, must learn to communicate their work in simple terms so that the general public can understand and care about the research.

Public Relations can make this process happen more smoothly. From targeting the appropriate media to pitching the story, they act as conduits ultimately connecting the general public to science. Three examples of successfully reaching the public with scientific information (in order of conceptual difficulty) include:

- The management of a single species - striped bass research in the Chesapeake Bay
- Problems with the local environment - erosion and rising sea level in Chesapeake Bay
- Ecological Economics - placing a value on nature's services

Neal Lane, Director of the National Science Foundation, has said that scientists today need to assume the role of ambassadors for science. A future in which our natural resources are protected requires a general public that is well informed. The challenge is to have good scientists and good journalists share a responsibility to provide clear, accurate, and timely information.