

# The Importance of Communicating Well (Newsletter)\*

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We have all suffered through highly technical presentations where our interest in the subject degraded as our eyeballs glazed and we frequently checked how much time remained before we could escape. The more complex and contentious the subject, the more important it is that the complexity be clearly and effectively explained in order to serve the client's interests. This clarity and effectiveness is critical when the audience is non-technical decision-makers.

This need to communicate well is constant when discussing the natural environment. It comes up when addressing county planning or commission meetings, state legislators or federal congressmen, lawyers and judges and juries, and regulatory agency staff. Communication problems in these venues are common when permitting projects in the mining, timber, and energy industries; when discussing water quantity, quality, and fish for ranching, farming, and other agricultural activities; and when defending against plaintiff claims in the courtroom.

Most technical and scientific degree programs (undergraduate and graduate) do not offer courses in speaking about the student's major subject. Most professional communications are with others having similar backgrounds and expertise. Jargon is used because it is a common language that validates membership in the tribe and sets members above the non-tribal individuals. It is no wonder that when it is time to explain scientific complexity to those lacking the same education and experience the speaker falls back on familiar and comfortable patterns.

The situation commonly called "the battle of the experts" often turns out to be legitimate differences in interpreting uncertain or highly variable observations or measurements. (This is not to deny that far too often project objectors find a credentialed "expert" to justify their position when objectively it is not justifiable.)

Resource allocation, permitting, and land use planning decisions are frequently based on the output of numeric models used to predict natural environments many years in the future. These models all have limitations and

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they all make assumptions. Those limitations and assumptions must be thoroughly understood by all who read the resulting reports in order to give those results appropriate weights in their consideration of the situation.

All of us feel uncomfortable making a decision when we do not have experience and a lot of knowledge in the subject. We are afraid of making a bad decision; one that costs us money, makes us look foolish, or raises questions of our ability to hold the positions we do. It is easy in these conditions to put off making a decision, particularly suffering paralysis by analysis. A competent, clear, and objective presentation of the situation fulfills the needs of project proponents and decision-makers. Such communication is as important—sometimes more so—than the technical information conveyed.

Each time you are in a situation where you need both technical expertise in environmental impact assessments, watersheds, or the rivers that drain them remember that we are highly proficient and experienced in clearly and effectively communicating complex scientific issues to non-technical audiences, and call us to discuss your needs.