

Case study: Leveling the communications playing field

Using language that resonates with stakeholders is critical to an effective exchange of information. See how a team at the Weeks Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve investigated and adopted the language preferences of their stakeholders in project-related communication.

THE DOLLARS AND SENSE OF MARSH RESTORATION IN ALABAMA

The goal of the *Dollars and Sense of Marsh Restoration* project was to develop a decision-support tool to improve cost-effective marsh restoration efforts along developed estuaries. Facilitated conversations with stakeholders during the initial project workshop made team members realize they needed a better understanding of their stakeholder audience before starting to develop an appropriate decision making tool.

Project team's approach

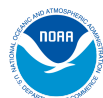
To address this need, the team designed and administered a stakeholder survey modeled after The Nature Conservancy's [Language of Conservation Memo](#) to determine end users' understanding of conservation and restoration concepts, their values about wetland conservation and restoration efforts in the Gulf Coast region, and what terminology had the greatest potential to improve understanding of conservation and restoration efforts in coastal Alabama.

Lessons learned and analysis

Using survey results, the team refined its language choices in communicating with stakeholders. When developing the decision-support tool and other project materials, the team used **phrases and definitions that stakeholders were familiar with** and preferred. The team learned that shared phraseology in collaborative environmental science initiatives needs to accurately capture the scientific definition, while simultaneously connecting the concept to the cognitive structures of a diverse range of stakeholders.

With simple, intuitive, and **mutually understood terminology**, people were able to better understand concepts such as ecosystem services. By discussing and using language that resonated with stakeholders, the team hoped to encourage the shared knowledge building necessary to sustain public engagement in environmental decision making.

Overused and misunderstood environmental terms and concepts can gradually lose their impact and subsequently make stakeholders believe that environmental issues are not important, do not affect them, or are such an overwhelming problem that nothing can be done.



Key advice

To avoid pitfalls, take time to learn how your stakeholders describe the resource and the issue, understand their values, and explore what they know about your project's goal. Then use what you've learned to begin to develop a shared language for your project.

To learn more about this project that was initiated in 2012, visit their [Project Page](#).

To access other case studies and resources for conducting collaborative science projects, visit: [A Guide to Collaborative Science](#).

This case study was developed in 2015 by the NERRS Science Collaborative team when the program was hosted by the University of New Hampshire. This case study was originally featured as part of the Collaborative Project Toolkit.

