

Case study: Values-based communications

Understanding beliefs, perceptions, and values of end users increases the potential for reserve-based science to make the greatest impact on surrounding communities. A project led by the Wells Reserve used communication audit and mental mapping techniques to understand the collective beliefs about riparian buffers among reserve staff, their partners and stakeholders. Based on this research, they identified which communication and engagement strategies should be collectively prioritized.

SUSTAINING COASTAL LANDSCAPES AND COMMUNITY BENEFITS IN MAINE

Project team's approach

Through a communication audit, the project team generated an inventory that captured key audiences, messages, techniques, available resources, and program evaluation related to the Wells Reserve's outreach to project end users.

The team conducted 22 mental mapping interviews to assess how end users perceived the complex, uncertain issues related to shoreland protection and riparian buffers. They used these to create mental models that reflected what participants believed to be true about York County, Maine, residents and riparian buffers.

Lessons learned and analysis

To explore the wider relevance of the mental mapping results, the team added seven questions to an existing survey that was administered to nearly 1,200 residents within the watershed. They found that:

- More than 50 percent of residents did not understand shoreland protection regulations;
- Residents with higher incomes felt more mistrust for regulation than those with lower incomes;
- Long-time residents cared about environmental protection more than new/seasonal residents;
- Residents believed individual rights and environmental protection must be balanced; and
- 90 percent of residents, particularly those with lower income and less formal education, believed private property rights were as important as environmental protection.

Ultimately, this analysis indicated that the project team should: target communications about shoreland regulations to younger audiences who may not own land, but may in the future; communicate the usefulness of reserve research to residents; recruit residents for stewardship activities to help educate other residents; work with municipal officials to strengthen messages about community stewardship; use messaging that shows an integral relationship between protecting one's home and natural resources;



and communicate with landowners to promote protection of riparian ecosystem services, while simultaneously honoring property rights.

The analysis also suggested future avenues of research to understand why less affluent and less educated residents are particularly interested in protecting the balance between their property rights and environmental protection, and why regulation is not as important to more affluent residents.

Key advice

Understanding the values of your end users is key to effectively targeting communications. For example, becoming a steward and taking personal responsibility might be more powerful messages for a more affluent audience rather than messaging about rules and regulations.

To learn more about this project that was initiated in 2010, 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.

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