Meeting the Challenge of Mobilizing Grassroots Advocacy in Support of Clean and Abundant Water

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ABSTRACT
Motivating citizens to become politically active on behalf of environmental issues has long been a challenge for the conservation community. The problem is that while public opinion polling consistently demonstrates widespread support for clean water, the public has yet to make the vital connections between water quality, water quantity, and the impact of population pressures. To begin to address this challenge, this paper will examine how the public views environmental concerns in general, and water issues in particular. It will analyze what motivates an individual to take action and which spokespeople they most trust. Finally it will discuss the types of advocacy messages that resonate with the public and the challenges we face to rally around water quantity.

ENVIRONMENTAL VALUES
Much research has been devoted to studying the values that Americans apply to environmental concerns. According to Belden, Russonello & Stewart Research and Communications, “values:
• are limited in number and shared by most Americans;
• usually endure across a person’s lifespan, and only change slowly from generation to generation; and,
• are organized by people into groups and arranged hierarchically, with some values taking precedence over others.”1

In their publication, Communicating Values, Talking about the Environment, Belden et al. divide values into primary and secondary values, i.e. by level of importance. According to Belden and her colleagues, primary values include responsibility to family and self, personal liberty, commitment to work, spirituality, honesty, and fairness. Secondary values include responsibility to others, personal fulfillment, respect for authority, and love of country. When environmental concerns are fitted into this matrix, the values “represent a mixture of primary and secondary values...but often lean toward the secondary values group.”2

Indeed, public opinion polling has historically supported the view that the environment is a secondary value or “tier two” concern to most Americans. Yet when we discuss water, the numbers begin to change. Each year, Money Magazine conducts a poll to determine what factors Americans consider when deciding where to live. In the April 2000 survey, clean water ranked as the top priority, above crime rate, available health care, and taxes.3 In a Greenberg-Quinlan/Tarrance Group poll conducted after the 2000 elections, 69% of the respondents placed clean water and clean air among their top three concerns, surpassed only by education (76%) and health care (75%). This was higher than taxes (60%) and Social Security/Medicare (67%).4

The public’s concern for clean water is further highlighted when Americans are specifically questioned regarding their feelings about a broad range of

2 Ibid.
3 Money Magazine, April 2000.
environmental issues. A CNN/Gallup/USA Today poll conducted in January 2000 gave those surveyed a list of eight diverse environmental problems and asked how much they personally worried about each problem. Seventy-two percent said they worried a great deal about pollution of drinking water. This was followed by pollution of rivers, lakes, and reservoirs (66%), and contamination of water and soil by toxic waste (64%). Environmental concerns like damage to the ozone layer, global warming, and urban sprawl all polled below concern about water. A Princeton Research Associates' poll asked those surveyed which issue was the most important environmental problem facing the world today. Water and air pollution were at the top of the list for 19% of those surveyed. Global warming, protection of endangered species, and acid rain all fell at the bottom of the list. Finally, a Peter D. Hart Research Associates poll found that clean water and clean air are “very important” to 74% of Independent voters, forming a swing block of 14% of all voters. Thus, when the public is asked specifically about environmental concerns, water is at the very top of their list.

FROM AWARENESS TO ACTIVISM
Although the public is thinking about water, thought does not directly translate into action. This merits a discussion of what motivates people to act. According to the Midwest Academy, a renowned training center for grassroots organizers, people take action when they are aware of a problem, when they understand the problem easily, and when they believe they can make a difference. Most people first become aware of a problem because they believe it is affecting them personally. However they do not normally take action unless they understand the problem intellectually, see its cause and effect, and believe that they have a role in a solution.

For example, the conservation community has made great strides in convincing citizens to recycle. People know that throwing things away wastes materials and energy, and contributes to our overflowing landfills. They also understand that when they recycle a can or jar, rather than throwing it away, it will be used to make new products. Participation in recycling is second nature to most Americans. By contrast, the environmental community has not been as successful in its battle to combat global warming. Most people do not understand the issue. They do not understand how their actions contribute to it, and they do not believe that they can help to stop it. In the polling data previously discussed, global warming consistently polled at the bottom of the public’s concerns.

Once citizens decide to become involved, what are the venues in which they wish to take action? According to Diane MacEachern, author of Enough is Enough: The Hellraiser’s Guide to Community Activism, most people begin with steps in their own backyard. They share information with their families, friends, and communities and often start with simple actions like writing a letter to an elected official regarding a neighborhood concern. This type of behavior spurred the rise of the NIMBY (Not In My Backyard) movement a few decades ago. MacEachern contends that:

5 CNN/Gallup/USA Today poll. January 13–16, 2000. Surveyed 1,027 adults including 887 registered voters and 512 likely voters. Margin of error +/- 3% for all adults, +/-4% for registered voters and +/-5% for likely voters.


NIMBY also properly reflects a venerable American tradition: the right of individual citizens to protect their safety and way of life by uniting in a common cause. For many people, those concerns have led them to expand the concept of ‘backyard’ to include community and country.  

Many citizens who begin as community activists often either form their own issue campaign-directed organizations or join with other established groups to take action on their campaign.

Another venue for action is consumer choice. At a November 2000 presentation to the Clean Water Network in Washington, D.C., pollster Celinda Lake stated that most of the Americans that she polled after the elections would like to take action through their consumerism. Specifically, they would like to: pay an organization to “do the right thing” like The Nature Conservancy, which buys and preserves green space; or to buy “green” products with guidance from a knowledgeable national group on which products are environmentally sensitive. Interestingly, most Americans consider the ratings of their legislators to be helpful in choosing whom to elect. Many want to use their ballot as a consumer choice for an environmentally savvy lawmaker. Finally, Lake said that the public has a deep belief in the power of technology and its ability to address our environmental problems. Citizens are motivated to act in support of campaigns that rely on technology to solve pressing environmental concerns. They believe we can overcome our mistakes of the past and repair damage done to the environment.

It is also apparent that the public is more inclined to be concerned and to take action when they hear about an issue from what they consider to be a trustworthy and credible source. For example, citizens generally believe an environmental issue is legitimate if they read about it in their newspaper or hear about it on television. Fortunately, national conservation organizations are also seen as credible sources of information. In a CNN/Gallup/USA Today poll conducted in January 2000, respondents were asked how much they trusted different groups to protect the quality of our nation’s environment. Thirty-four percent of those polled said they trusted national environmental groups a “great deal.” This was followed by trust of local environmental organizations (28%) and federal agencies (27%). Ranking at the bottom of the scale was trust in the U.S. Congress (10%), and large corporations (9%).

MOBILIZING ACTION ON WATER

So the question posed is: How does water fare with the public, particularly in light of the challenges we face in mobilizing grassroots action? The polling data demonstrates that most Americans are worried about clean water. However, the majority of the polls show a concern with water quality, not water quantity. There are some regional exceptions, where discussion of water quantity is covered in the press and affects those citizens’ daily lives. For example, water shortage discussions have long been the norm in parts of California, Texas, and
other western states. More recently, the topic has come up in the Great Lakes region, since diversion of water from the Great Lakes has become an international trade issue.

Among the many hurdles in mobilizing grassroots action are educating the general public about water quantity problems and illustrating the link between quantity and population pressures. This issue must be presented in a manner that shows citizens how they personally are affected by water quantity problems and how their actions can make a difference. This means that a close connection between water quantity and its impact on individuals and families should be clearly demonstrated. The call to action should also include a consumer choice aspect that allows Americans to act through their pocketbooks. The message should come from credible spokespeople and coverage of the issue must increase in newspapers, television, and other media to ensure that the citizens understand the problem and want to help solve it. If the conservation community works through these obstacles, it will be on the road to success in mobilizing a strong grassroots base to positively effect policy change.

REFERENCES

PAMELA GODDARD has been the Senior Grassroots Outreach Manager of the National Wildlife Federation since February 1999. A long-time grassroots organizer, Ms. Goddard spent ten years working for the Sierra Club’s Legislative Office in Washington, DC. At the Sierra Club, Ms. Goddard served as an Assistant Political Director and as a lobbyist and organizer on a number of conservation issues including clean water, wetlands, takings, and endangered species. In the mid-1990s, she was the Wetlands Co-Chair of the Clean Water Network, a coalition of hundreds of grassroots organizations working for the passage of clean water legislation. Also before joining NWF, Ms. Goddard spent two years as the Campaign Manager of the National Breast Cancer Coalition, a grassroots advocacy organization dedicated to the eradication of breast cancer. She received a bachelor’s degree from Grinnell College in Grinnell, Iowa.

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