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Toward More Effective Water Resources Information/Education Programs: Lessons Learned from Health Communication

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Abstract Text:

Public health communication programs have for decades led environmental/natural resources programs in (1) Breadth and depth of theory-based programming; (2) Empirical examination of research questions and testing of hypotheses; (3) Application of social science research tools aimed at formative, process, and summative evaluation efforts; and (4) Direct application of theory and research findings to program policies and strategies. Reasons for this include the longer tradition of and far more extensive support system for public health, greater personal public interest in and thus financial support for health issues, and greater coherency among the multitude of health organizations at all levels.

Previously the authors outlined key ways in which the knowledge gained from health communication programs could be applied to natural resource programs. The proposed presentation specifically examines such applications to water resources programs, with primary focus on water quality programs. It provides an overview of theoretical approaches, program strategies and tactics, and quantitative and qualitative assessment methods to gauge program impacts. Recommendations are offered for more effective transfer of health program techniques to water resource issues.

Among the issues examined are how current social science theories applied to health programs can serve water programs, including recent advances in social marketing, risk communication, community readiness, reasoned action/behavior, and the like. Equally important are new ways of looking at communication strategies, e.g. from tailored messaging, community involvement in communication tactics. Health programs have also led the way in choice of communication channels and other tactics, in particular moving to more interactive and individual-centered efforts made possible by computer-mediated communication. Lastly, significant gains in program assessment techniques have been enriched by health-based statistical modeling, particularly new advances in qualitative and ethnographic research methods, and continued refinements in quantitative measurement of knowledge, attitudes and behaviors.

Impact Statement:

The authors have conducted and published numerous studies assessing the impact of state and national water quality programs from a human dimensions perspective. Each round of studies has led to greater knowledge about how various populations use and respond to such information programs. Recently, planning has turned to external examples of public information programs, particularly those in health communication, to guide greater effectiveness. We believe that summarizing the value of such research transfer from health to water programs, and recommending perspectives on how to accomplish that, can add considerably to greater effectiveness of water information and education programs.