Extension FactSheet

Introducing a New Series on Environmental Quality of Life

Joe E. Heimlich
Leader, Environmental Sciences

One of the difficulties in understanding environmental issues is the inherent conflict in language. Often, the terms "problem" and "issue" are interchanged. Yet, when we look at the complex situations surrounding questions about the environment, whether population, global climate change, water quality, energy, or others, the myriad factors and positions inherent in the question make the discussion difficult.

The series of fact sheets, called *Environmental Quality of Life,* is designed to help explain the complex environmental situations that affect all of us directly and indirectly in differing degrees. This introductory fact sheet lays out some assumptions underlying the series and seeks to create a common language that will be used throughout. Let us look at three major contributors to the difficulty in understanding environmental issues.

Problem vs. Issue as a Factor

What Is a Problem? An Issue?

First, a definition. A *problem* is generally a situation in which those involved agree that something is wrong and needs to be corrected. There may be disagreement regarding *how* to correct the problem, but there is agreement on what it means to be fixed. In other words, we can agree on the ends, even though we disagree with the means.

Much more difficult to come to terms with is the concept of an issue. For these fact sheets, an environmental *issue* is a situation in which there is not uniform agreement as to the scope, severity, or even existence of a problem. Further, there are many dimensions to the environmental situation that make agreement on a "desired outcome" problematic or impossible. Yet, most of us view environmental issues from our own perspective, and therefore we see them as *problems* and not *issues.*

Issues Are Not Problems

For example, increasingly, scientists are in agreement that there is global climate change. Yet, there is continued debate over whether or not climate change exists, if it is naturally occurring or if human intervention has increased or speeded up the natural process, if human actions can change/reverse/alter the impacts of global climate change, and what it would mean to "fix" the situation. Without agreement on the central points of the issue, the situation remains as an issue — yet any one person may believe any one component from this list and want to solve global climate change by addressing that one component. This is why understanding that issues are not problems is important.

Issues Are Multidimensional Human Constructs

Next, an issue is multidimensional, and any addressing of the issue needs to consider all the dimensions. Environmental issues are neither created nor solved solely by technology or science. Yet, science and the resultant technologies can be extremely valuable in helping address an environmental issue.

"Environment" is a human construct or idea. It is the human mind that separates what is nature from constructed or human-built environs. Because environment is a human idea, environmental issues inevitably must take into account the very human characteristics of the issue. Who is involved, who is disproportionately impacted, who is secondarily impacted, who benefits, who pays — all are part of the human dimension. Likewise, environmental issues are economic, cultural, and political — all of which are again human constructs.

To fully understand the complexity of an environmental issue so that individually and collectively we can do something about it, it is imperative that the economic, social, cultural, and political aspects of the issue be part of the discussion. Everyone has seen

a worthwhile effort fail due to lack of community support, or political support, or because the solution places undue burden on a particular segment of society.

In order to better understand the issues in this fact sheet series, these issues will be examined from a wide variety of perspectives. In this manner, it is hoped that the issues will become clearer and the understanding of the issue will include various perspectives.

Time Becomes a Factor

Few of the environmental issues facing the world today happened "overnight." Rather, issues have evolved and emerged slowly. Often, issues come to the fore when situations reach their "maximum capacity."

For example, the human body is able to flush most chemicals through the body — and most chemicals are present in natural systems in ways that they *can* enter the human body. The problem is the quantity and the ability of an individual body to flush vs. absorb, or hold, levels of the chemical. This is considered the individual threshold. Just as some people are more susceptible to certain pollens than are other people, every body varies in its ability to flush environmental chemicals. Over time, the ability of the body to move these environmental chemicals is altered due to physical changes in the body as it ages, exposure (acute or longitudinal) to various stimuli, interactions with other chemicals in the body, stress, and a host of other factors.

Seeing the Past Through the Present

Also, time becomes a factor of measurement and awareness. We increasingly know more about different effects of environmental influences on humans, and so we look at the past through our present knowledge. Similarly, our technological capabilities for measuring elements in the environment continue to improve. Fifty years ago, what we now call trace elements in the environment often could not be quantified. Measurement and knowledge about the environment have changed over time, which makes issues seem to "appear" even though they have been evolving during human history.

The final consideration in regards to time is human time vs. nature or geological time. Because we measure time against our personal experiences, what seems like a long time (a lifetime or even longer) is in the natural system, a very short period. We often expect actions taken to address an environmental issue to have an immediate effect — even though the development of the issue took generations.

Personal Beliefs Are a Factor

The final factor is that of personal beliefs. All of us hold sets of values and supporting belief systems that are unique to our own lives. Where we were born, how we were raised, our religious or spiritual beliefs, our education, our family's beliefs about different issues, our occupations, our circles of friends, our hobbies *all* shape how we view environmental issues.

As a very simplistic illustration: Some people find all-terrain vehicles to be environmentally disturbing because of noise, pollution, and resultant damage; other people find all-terrain vehicles to be important tools to connect them to nature and allow them to get to places where they can study or simply be in nature they otherwise could not reach. Who is right? There are values underlying both positions — and both positions *could be* appropriate environmental positions, depending upon the situation and a host of other factors.

Exploring Personal Views

Human nature is such that we tend to project our beliefs and our appreciation onto others. It is easy to assume that other people value what we value, and because we tend to belong to groups, organizations, and institutions comprised of people more like us than different, we tend to get reinforcement for our beliefs.

The reality is that there are scores of views on every issue, and that an individual's views grow from a wide spectrum of that person's experiences, education, background, and demographics. Attacking a person's point of view on an environmental issue is often paramount to attacking the person. Understanding an environmental issue involves looking at *why* people may believe what they believe and not trying to change the belief system, but rather incorporating new information into their understanding.

What Are the Issues?

The fact sheets in this series are not meant to exhaustively explain the science, sociology, psychology, history, politics, or cultural understandings of any environmental issue, but rather to raise the issue to a different level for discussion. Each fact sheet will attempt to lay out the complexities of the issues rather than simplify them and illustrate how individuals are part of the issue — and ultimately how we individually each contribute to addressing the issues in a positive way.

Visit Ohio State University Extension's WWW site "Ohioline"
at:
http://ohioline.ag.ohio-state.edu