

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Community-based research and outreach – *Ethics considerations*

When facilitating an outreach initiative, educators and researchers are encouraged to apply an ethical approach to assessing and promoting solutions. This fact sheet suggests ethical principles that are more likely to lead to sustainable results.

Collecting information

Information about a targeted audience accompanied by data about social, economic, and environmental factors can help refine an outreach approach.

Conducting these community assessments in an ethical way requires selecting assessment tools and procedures that provide accuracy and utility; and requires applying them with sensitivity and respect. Will the research findings be valid to all involved stakeholders? Will findings and recommendations be timely, constructive, and informative towards the issues at hand? Will the study be designed in a way that protects the rights of participants to respect, anonymity, and confidentiality?

When conducting research or collecting data in preparation for an outreach event within a particular community, an ethical approach suggests that you:

1. Clarify your personal and institutional motives and interests in a manner that is open, accessible, and relevant to the members of the community of interest.
2. Obtain informed consent (written or verbal) from all potential research participants prior to each stage of the research process, and that you assure prospective participants of anonymity and/or confidentiality related to any information they provide.
3. Clarify motives and obtain informed consent with respect to:

- The specific tools or combinations of tools being used
- The kinds of data being obtained and recorded by various means
- The ways in which the data will potentially be used

Assess your skills

To assure that you are applying an ethical approach when collecting information, consider whether you can:

- *Accurately* identify ethical considerations relevant to the particular type of social assessment process being applied.
- *Take responsibility* to clearly and accurately convey personal motives and interests as well as the motives and interests of the sponsoring organization when gathering information from an individual.
- *Demonstrate in speech and manner* a respect for the individual's right to privacy *at all times* throughout the information-gathering process.

A community-based approach

Ethical considerations apply not only to particular data gathering activities, but to the situation as a whole. A community-based approach to identifying opportunities, problems, and potential solutions provides the educator with a way to integrate ethical considerations into the process. Community-based environmental education (CBEE) emphasizes selecting the education strategy in a way that also builds local skills and supports voluntary actions.

In CBEE, practitioners work in collaboration with the community to choose an outreach strategy; to consider how and when the strategy could be used; and to guide whether the strategy is applied alone or in combination with others (Figure 1). The intent is to build the skills of citizens to gather, analyze, and apply information for the purpose of making environmental management decisions (Andrews et al., 2002). Successful application of the model contributes to the *environmental policy capacity* of the community; that is, the community's ability to engage in collective action that secures environmental public goods and services (Press & Balch, 2002).

Figure 1.

Community-Based Environmental Education (CBEE)

- is locally based
- works with a coalition or group
- takes action based on information
- practices quality education with broader groups

To ensure that education activities will support long-term and/or structural change, CBEE considers questions such as those listed below (Andrews et al., 2002). There are no correct answers to these questions, but the process of answering them helps

References

Andrews, E., Stevens, M., & Wise, G. (2002). A model of community-based environmental education. In T. Dietz & P. Stern (Eds.), *New Tools for Environmental Protection: Education, Information, and Voluntary Measures* (Chapter 10, pp. 161-182). Washington, DC: National Academy Press, http://www.nap.edu/catalog.php?record_id=10401. Provides further details involved in applying the CBEE model.

Press, D., & Balch, A. (2002). Community environmental policy capacity and effective environmental protection. In T. Dietz & P. Stern (Eds.), *New Tools for Environmental Protection: Education, Information, and Voluntary Measures* (Chapter 11, pp. 183-200). Washington, DC: National Academy Press, http://www.nap.edu/catalog.php?record_id=10401
New Tools for Environmental Protection is published by the National Research Council Division of Behavior and Social Sciences and Education: Committee on the Human Dimensions of Global Change.

For more information about the Changing Public Behavior National Facilitation Project contact Kate Reilly at 1-800-WATER20; wateroutreach@uwex.edu or go to our Web site:

<http://wateroutreach.uwex.edu/CPBhomepage1.cfm>

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to ensure an ethical approach to outreach interventions.

- Are the goals of the activity determined by a bottom-up process or a top-down process?
- Is the intervention targeted narrowly to a specific audience or broadly to whole populations?
- Is the *locus of control* generated by individuals or community groups, or by marketing agents? (Locus of control is a term that refers to the source of personal empowerment. Does the person's sense of power to act come from within or from the group, or is the person affected by an external agent?)
- Is the interest group actively involved in creating information and targeting research, or is the interest group a passive consumer of information?
- Does the intervention build sustainability for its impacts by engaging people at different levels of responsibility within the community (such as property owners, political leaders, and the agency that has jurisdiction)?