

## **Handling Controversial Natural Resource Projects through Strategic Planning**

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*Abstract:* Information and education (IE) staffs are frequently requested to handle the public relations of controversial natural resource projects. The key to successfully neutralizing negative publicity and generating positive support for such programs is the strategic planning which must compliment the design of the natural resources project.

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In September 1978 in one of the most popular fishing embayments on Lake Barkley, a U.S. Army Corps of Engineer (USCOE) impoundment in western Kentucky, one of the most ambitious and potentially controversial fisheries studies took place. The handling of this study changed public perceptions, perhaps radically, toward the public relations methods of numerous state and federal agencies.

Under the direction of the American Fisheries Society's Reservoir Committee, this author, working closely with information specialists from the USCOE and the states of Kentucky and Tennessee, undertook a comprehensive and strategically planned public relations assignment. The project site of the assignment was Land Between the Lakes, the Tennessee Valley Authority's (TVA) 170,000-acre national outdoor recreation area.

Despite the fact more than 3.1 million fish—90 tons total—were rotenoned, overall public and media reaction to the event was favorable or neutral. But how does one kill 90 tons of fish in a popular fishing embayment on a nationally-known lake in the height of fall bass fishing season and neutralize the negative publicity? The answer is relatively simple but often improperly considered by public information specialists. You must strategically plan for the worst case scenario and begin the planning of the public information campaign at the initial discussion stage of such a project.

Too often, public information-education (IE) specialists are brought into the design of projects at the end of the design phase and told to "take care of the public

relations of this and make sure we get some good publicity. . . .” Simply stated, the information specialist must be involved from the beginning to design and implement a successful public information strategy. Let’s examine specifically the American Fisheries Society’s (AFS) 1978 Crooked Creek Study as an example.

I would caution that too often other professionals perceive public relations as a “soft” area of expertise. However, as you will see from this paper, public relations is anything but “soft” and requires the same basic skills most professional capacities require with perhaps even more emphasis on the areas of inter- and intra-personal and public communication skills and understanding. A practitioner of public relations must be able to anticipate all foreseeable and unforeseeable situations and have a defined plan of action to accommodate any situation that might arise. Let’s examine the development of this strategic plan and the public information time-line designed to accommodate the study.

Initial conversations with all the IE staffs involved in the study indicated the need to design a comprehensive media package to accommodate the study demands. This package included material for radio, television, public speaking engagements, magazines, and newspapers. We also recommended and were granted a public hearing to disseminate to the various area constituencies the nature and importance of the study and receive public feedback to aid in refining the IE strategic plan.

However, in the elementary development stages of the IE plan, the development team insisted on and received utmost confidentiality from all involved. We felt this was essential so as to not “leak” the details to the public or the possible opposition until we were ready to pursue the plan of action. This permitted us to maintain the offense in the strategy and at no time were we in a position where we had to defend what we were undertaking.

Discussions with staff acknowledged the major concerns we felt the public would express were the threat of the rotenone escaping from the study area and killing other fish in the vicinity, and the perception of tons of dead fish being wasted as a result of the study. Staff also recognized the concern about future fishing potential of the embayment and the perception this might somehow impede future successful fishing expeditions at Crooked Creek.

Following successful negotiations and resolution of each of these concerns with the designers of the study and determinations on how to best handle them, we began developing a time-line for implementation purposes.

### **Time-Line Development**

After extensive deliberations and discussions with the project managers, the following time-line was deemed appropriate for implementation of the campaign:

Newspapers were notified of a scheduled public hearing two weeks prior to the hearing. We wanted the announcement via news release to appear in the weekly newspapers at least twice and in the dailies two days consecutively just prior to the hearing.

Radio stations were notified two days prior to the hearing and were provided

with "actualities" and, where possible, personal interviews to ensure the announcements were aired according to our strategic plan.

We suggested meeting with key constituents and opinion leaders the night before the hearing. These carefully selected people, some of whom would be favorable toward the study, others whom would not (we thought), should be advanced in their understanding and knowledge of the situation to help us "set the tone" for the hearing.

The public hearing was scheduled for a Thursday night. This night was chosen because in western Kentucky you don't interfere with Monday night football; too often on Tuesday nights, schools and PTAs meet; Wednesdays are church nights; and no one would want to meet on a Friday or Saturday night. Obviously Sunday night is verboten in this part of the country.

We complemented the public hearing afterwards with a barrage of personal interviews and actualities via the radio and television stations and newspapers the following day.

On Saturday the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources (KFWR) aired their "Kentucky Afield" television show which was devoted to the study and on the following week the IE staffs released radio interviews prepared by staff in-house to the radio stations in the area affected by the study.

### **Matrix Utilization**

Using a matrix system altered to meet the needs of the planning process, the project managers and the IE staff determined the possible areas of opposition might come from the tourism industry, chambers of commerce, the area development districts, local fishermen through individual protests (don't ever under-estimate the voice of one lone opponent), and area sportsmen's clubs.

Recognizing these as the key areas of concern, staff utilized the conservation officers, project managers and the IE staffs to make special follow-up visits to these various groups and to explain in detail the development of the study and particularly the benefits the study would have for specific groups.

This strategy was designed and employed to minimize any opposition encountered in the process of conducting the public hearing.

### **Development of Media Related Material**

To minimize opposition on all fronts the following specific efforts were undertaken:

Staff developed a comprehensive question and answer sheet for use by all participants in the study. This was especially beneficial, since we had a number of people in the field making public presentations, as the Q-A sheet addressed candidly many of the controversial questions we felt could arise. The sheet was written in simple and easily understood laymen's language.

A slide presentation was prepared that explained in detail the anticipated re-

sults and benefits of the study, addressed frequently asked questions, and defined clearly the limits of the study area and the special precautions that were being taken to conduct the study in a publicly and environmentally sensitive and acceptable manner.

We suggested representatives from the regional and state game and fish commissions be available at the public hearing, especially those from Kentucky and Tennessee, to reiterate their support of this project publicly. These representatives were also briefed and prepared to handle in laymen's language any of the concerns and answer any of the commonly asked questions. We utilized these respected commissioners to allay the fears of the public. Especially, we wanted sportsmen who were in a public capacity to explain to their friends, neighbors and colleagues the extent, nature, and need of the study and what they believed it would do to help improve sport fishing in Lake Barkley.

Feature material, newspaper, radio, and television releases were prepared well in advance of the public hearing for use during and after the hearing. Extensive packets of information were available to all interested parties and not just confined to use by the media. We believe the full dissemination of all information to all interested parties helped us "sell" the study to a broad array of constituents.

An intensive information "blitz" was conducted following the public hearing to encompass all groups potentially affected by the study. In this segment of the campaign, we utilized a film on a similar (albeit much, much smaller study) conducted on Douglas Lake, a TVA reservoir in east Tennessee. This visual provided the public an opportunity to relate and associate with the experience that was about to occur at the Crooked Creek embayment. This dated file was used in conjunction where possible with the slide-tape presentation that had been previously developed.

We insisted on a close, cooperative, and central control of all publicly released information. Although we were in no way attempting to control the information, we wanted to ensure we were all using the same language and that no improvisation or creative interpretation of the information was occurring.

We stressed to all personnel the need to refer to the prepared material in discussing or explaining the study so they would become intimately familiar with the information and would be using the language agreed upon by the IE staffs and AFS committee. Further, we stressed any information released must be accurate, complete, and consistent with established guidelines.

The IE staff, in keeping with its mission and responsibilities, worked closely with Project Manager Jim Axon, with the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources (KFWR) and the Information staffs of retired director of KFWR Hope Carleton, and, most notably, with John Wilson. We also worked very closely with the designers of the study and their subcommittees to ensure we had a thorough understanding and working and talking knowledge of the project.

I cannot emphasize too strongly the need to work on a continuing basis with the actual field representatives involved in the project. It is this style and degree of interaction that builds confidence between the IE staffs and the other professional staffs and provides a wealth of valuable information for use in the strategic devel-

opment of the campaign. When you work closely with the field staffs and project managers and start listening creatively to their concerns, suggestions, and needs, you find the IE effort becomes a much more viable and welcomed part of the process. The professional acceptance of the IE staff by the other professional staffs is critical to the successful implementation of a strategic plan such as this.

Biologists and technicians enjoy doing what they do best and are usually content leaving the handling of the public and media to the IE staffs, but to gain an appreciation of their problems and have them gain an appreciation of yours, you must get out amongst them. The benefits gained are simple: mutual respect for each other's professions, involvements, problems, and perspectives.

The basic premises in handling potentially controversial natural resources projects include: strategic planning, creative and skillful implementation, and comprehensive and objective evaluation.

## **Observations**

These observations were made by the various staffs during and following the project study and the remarks are significant, we believe, in the development of future IE programs of this type.

### **Press Conference**

Subject press conference was held with 25 of 51 invitees participating. The conference was held at a group camp less than 1.5 miles from the study site. Invitations and credentials were mailed two weeks prior to the conference with an RSVP utilizing a self-addressed and stamped postal card for reply purposes. Special parking was provided for those attending and having appropriate previously distributed credentials. As other media arrived they were handled individually. All transportation to the site for special media requests was handled by staff.

### **Central Information Point**

An information table was manned throughout the study by qualified and well-briefed IE staff. At the suggestion of one of the fisheries biologists, a table and ice-chest were located adjacent to the information table to store freshly collected fish. This display was popular because it provided media with photographic opportunities. A public address system was also provided for communication with the crowds and staff.

### **Staffing**

Although more than 400 eminent fisheries biologists and scientists from 14 state agencies, 3 federal agencies, as well as numerous universities were needed to actually conduct the fisheries study, the entire information and education effort was staffed with 4 salaried personnel and three intern students. This author and a staff member from KFWR formally conducted the administration of the campaign while

the intern students assisted two USCOE staff members with the video-taping of the entire study.

### Video-taping

To ensure the study was documented for future reference and use, staff undertook a comprehensive videotaping of the project. Staffed by two USCOE employees, George Green and Lynn Bowden, and two TVA interns, Barb Vetsch and Pat Slattery, the production was determined to be one of the most successful aspects of the campaign. Documentation was accomplished from land, water, and air. Activities were documented daily and edited to a 45-minute comprehensive documentation. Subsequent edits reduced the length of the tape to a 25-minute and a 12-minute version for continuing public and agency use.

This documentation was designed to serve as a historical record of the study and was available for agency and public use within 30-days following the study. IE staffs have extensively used the production in the past several years for various public interpretive and environmental education programs.

This was the first time an extensive video-tape documentation had ever been attempted on such a grand scale at Land Between the Lakes. Several members of the American Fisheries Society Committee considered this documentation of historic value, since it was the general consensus that a study of this magnitude and scale would probably not be accomplished again soon due to cost restraints.

### Spokesman Availability

Although IE staffs, and this author in particular, handled most of the media relations on-site and functioned as key and principal spokespeople, the need was recognized to have the project manager available to assist IE staffs with technical questions. Prior to study, IE staff made arrangements with the project manager to handle technical questions at his convenience. The project manager was consulted on an as-needed basis each evening and, when absolutely essential, during the study. Every effort was made to keep interference with the study participants to a minimum.

### Information Station Personnel

Because Land Between the Lakes is a public outdoor recreation center and has information personnel located throughout the project, it was essential all staff interacting with the public be briefed on the study and the most frequently asked questions. This was accomplished in a special session where all personnel who would be manning public information stations were informed. They were instructed to direct specific questions from the public and the media to the IE staff. The IE staff was directed to respond to those questions within 24-hours after receipt or, when feasible, at the time of the question. On each occasion when the IE staff was directed a question, the question was radioed to us in the field and we handled it promptly.

### Media Gallery and Assembly Point

Staff provided the media and visitors a cordoned gallery so they could view the study at the launching ramp and minimize interference. The media had access to the information table, to this author, and the KFWR spokesperson at all times. Questions and requests from the media were handled personally, promptly, and without reservation. We believe this was vital to ensure a professional approach to the situation which could have, at times, seemed to be ordered chaos.

Individuals from the media who requested specialized information and assistance were escorted by the staff and information and assistance rendered in accordance with IE staff policy. The media had controlled-access to the study area to reduce interference with the study and its participants, but every possible effort was made to assure complete and total information dissemination.

### Special Media Assistance

A pontoon boat operated by a representative from the staff was provided for media personnel who wished to enter the study area and photograph the event from the water. This boat was also available to the video-taping crew for their use as well as other television crews from nearby stations. There were no complaints from the media in the decision to restrict the study area to controlled-access.

To further enhance the opportunities of the media, staff provided a "gyroplane" to allow photographing of aerial footage of the Crooked Creek embayment study area. Various video-tape and film crews used this service.

TVA, USCOE, and the KFWR agencies also recorded the study in 35mm black-white and color transparencies utilizing the above accommodations.

### Summations and Observations

Based on evaluations made by the study group, the staffs involved, feedback from the media and the various constituency groups associated with this project, it was the unanimous opinion that from a public relations perspective, all aspects of the study were more than adequately covered and basically there were no significant constituency or public relations problems.

It should be noted that all staffs conscientiously referred to this project from the outset as a fish populations study and every reference to a "fish kill" was deleted from any public discussions. We believe this was instrumental in allaying many potential problems and fears. Only in a few rare instances did the media refer to the study as a "fish kill."

Jim Axon, project manager of the AFS study best summarized the overall perception of the public relations effort when he stated: "Overall, it is our opinion . . . that the public relations effort for the Crooked Creek Fish Study was comprehensive and overwhelming positive."

Gordon Hall, retired Director of the Division of Fisheries for TVA said, "This was the most comprehensive and well-executed public relations effort I have ever been involved in as it relates to a fish study of this magnitude . . . I am pleased to

see the more than 18 months of strategic planning has reaped numerous rewards for all of us associated with this study. You and all your staff are to be commended for such an outstanding display of professionalism in a job well done.”

The concepts used in the strategic design and subsequent implementation and evaluation of this information and education program are relevant to all IE staffs that work with controversial natural resource projects. Throughout this paper I have attempted to carefully guide the reader through the meticulous planning required to be successful in such a venture. The future professional development of the field of information and education hinges on our abilities as IE professionals to share our mistakes and our successes.