

## **Community-oriented Policing in Conservation Work—Project “Water Watch”**

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*Abstract:* Continued urban development and concurrent increases in population have created new challenges and opportunities for conservation agencies. These challenges stretch the traditional role of conservation agencies and their respective enforcement staff. To meet these challenges, agencies must develop innovative programs that generate new customers and public support for their mission while meeting the needs of their traditional customers. One such approach is developing partnerships with community groups. In May 1997, the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission's Division of Law Enforcement embarked on a project to evaluate the possibilities of community-oriented policing work. The project, entitled “Water Watch,” is a partnership designed to benefit both the community and the agency.

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Community-oriented policing has been defined by the Community Police Consortium<sup>1</sup> as a “collaboration between the police and the community that identifies and solves community problems. With the police no longer the sole guardians of law and order, all members of the community become active allies in the effort to enhance the safety and quality of neighborhoods.” The Consortium is a federally-funded organization, made up of state and federal law enforcement representatives charged with reviewing and promoting community-oriented policing techniques. The Consortium goes on to say “community policing does not imply that the police are no longer in authority or that the primary duty of preserving law and order is subordinated. However, tapping into expertise and resources that exist within the community will relieve police of some of their burdens” (Community Policing Consortium 1994). Expertise and resources exist in the form of residents and their knowledge of their community as well as their desire to make their own community a safer, more enjoyable place to live. Agencies, burdened by increasing demands and limited resources, can train residents in community policing techniques to assist in

1. Web site: <http://www.communitypolicing.org/chap/fw.html>

this task, allowing agencies and officers to apply limited resources in ways that have proven most productive.

Although the concepts and techniques of community-oriented policing are not new, their application has gained broader support and popularity in the past decade. Increases in population and social trends toward community living create situations that lend themselves to such policing methods. In 1990, the U.S. Census Bureau reported that approximately 75% of America's population inhabited urban communities (U.S. Census Bur. 1991).

While law enforcement complaints often originate from urban communities, these concentrations of constituents provide areas that can be targeted for education and interaction. By educating residents, agencies can improve the accuracy of complaints and the quality of witnesses. With community interaction, agencies can develop partnerships to assist both the agency and the community. Through partnerships with communities, agencies can begin programs that assist in problem solving and prevention. Such programs offer special opportunities to conservation agencies for addressing problems and prevention in the areas of boating safety, fishing, and wildlife related complaints.

In Florida, the development of communities with access to waterways and an extended boating season contribute to increases in boating traffic. Boaters share waterways with residents who live in communities along Florida's shorelines. The amount of use, in conjunction with the diversity of interest among users, often leads to concerns among boaters and residents. These concerns are often supported by statistical evidence of boating accidents and operator training. Such concerns, coupled with illegal operation, are the basis of many law enforcement complaints.

While boating continues to grow in popularity, Florida's waterways also provide fishing opportunities. Angler dissatisfaction is often a source of complaints. The quantity and quality of fishing opportunities usually impacts operational revenue of agencies charged with its protection. Many anglers relate fishing success to habitat loss or the illegal practices of other anglers. These concerns are often conveyed to agencies in the form of law enforcement complaints.

In addition to boating and fishing complaints, many Florida residents are concerned with the impact of development on wildlife and habitat. With increasing interest in wildlife viewing, some residents are looking for opportunities to feed and view wildlife. Although the creation of backyard habitat is popular, other measures produce less desirable results. Improper practices often create nuisance wildlife and are the basis of other conservation-related complaints. In 1996, the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission (Commission) developed a pilot project designed to address such complaints and foster community partnerships. It was evident from the beginning of the project that many different divisions of the agency could contribute to various portions of the project. The Division of Law Enforcement headed the project by preparing a concept proposal for review. The proposal was distributed to the agency's different divisions as well as several homeowner's associations. After being collected, the input was used to design a package to offer community groups.

After collecting and reviewing the proposals, a pilot project was scheduled for 1997. Officers identified communities that might participate in the project. In considering communities, officers wanted an area with a wide diversity of interests related to the mission of the agency. Officers decided on Lake Padgett Estates. The community's homeowner's associations voted unanimously to participate in the project, which was kicked off on 18 May 1997.

## **Methods**

Lake Padgett Estates, located in Pasco County, Florida, is a community of 1,200 homes and more than 3,000 residents. The subdivision encompasses about 1,000 acres of land and has 4 lakes totaling approximately 500 acres of navigable water. These lakes are used by residents for boating, fishing, and wildlife viewing. Each of the community's lakes has at least one boat ramp and several community parks. The community is surrounded by other communities similar in nature and is rapidly experiencing additional development.

The project began with area wildlife officers surveying users in the community to document compliance with and knowledge of boating and fishing laws. Survey results were used to identify educational needs as well as provide a means for measuring the success of the program.

After initial survey results were compiled, officers met with representatives of the homeowner's association to discuss the findings. The homeowner's association then formed a Water Watch committee to work on the project and provide the agency with feedback. A committee of 35 resident volunteers divided into 3 teams, based on their personal interest. The teams were formed to address boating, fishing, and wildlife viewing issues within the community. Members of each team and the homeowner's association selected a team captain. Each team, working closely with local wildlife officers, identified problems, goals, and strategies to address concerns within their respective area of interest. Teams with related problems worked together to develop common solutions. Teams then assessed the resources available and developed plans to address some of the problems identified by the teams. Under the supervision of the homeowner's association and the Commission, significant results were obtained.

## **Results**

### **Boating Safety Team**

The boating safety team identified boating education as a priority issue after reviewing user survey results and U.S. Coast Guard statistics. Volunteers felt that vessel operator instruction would decrease the possibilities of boating accidents and violations of boating laws. In cooperation with the team, Commission staff trained 10 local volunteers as boating safety instructors. These instructors, under the direction of the homeowner's association and the Commission, offered 3 commu-

nity boating safety courses to area residents during the pilot period. These courses were designed for family participation and were eventually expanded to include surrounding communities.

Local officers also trained the community's boating safety instructors to do courtesy boat inspections. Inspections were conducted at a resident's home or community boat ramps. Both the boating safety team and the Commission used the community newspaper and fliers to remind residents about boating safety issues and changes in boating laws.

In addition to education programs, members of both the team and homeowner's association identified swimming area, canals, and blind corners where boating speed should be controlled. Armed with this information, the homeowner's association contacted county officials to post selected areas as "Idle Speed" zones. To complement this action, an emergency plan was developed to facilitate quick access by emergency personnel in the event of an accident. Through form letters, the homeowner's association designed a plan to ask residents in problem areas for assistance in identifying boaters who failed to obey the rules of the road and state laws.

### Fishing Team

Based on the results of surveys and the team members' knowledge of the area, concerns were identified. These concerns involved anglers' knowledge of laws and the possible over-harvesting of fish. The team also felt that destruction of habitat was a factor to be considered in the quality of future fishing in the community. In addition, the area residents often complained about anglers trespassing, littering, and keeping undersized fish around the community's 4 lakes. Residents believed that lack of recreational opportunities added to some of the community's drug and vandalism problems among youth.

The team began by proposing that the community build 2 fishing piers to increase angling opportunities. The homeowner's association, along with local merchants, supported these projects. Upon completion, the piers were equipped with Sweeny automatic fish feeders, which were provided through a merchant donation. Fish feeders increase angling opportunities and work toward providing a better angling experience. Residents felt the piers would provide an excellent place to teach youth and single moms the sport of fishing.

Commission personnel trained 8 local volunteers to conduct fishing clinics and derbies. Instructors offered clinics to teach angling techniques, ethics, and laws. Two fishing clinics were offered during the pilot period. In conjunction with these clinics, the team and the homeowner's association stocked 2 community lakes with channel cats to provide an additional fishery for young anglers. Team members felt these fish would increase the quality of the angling experience, while relieving fishing pressure on some of the lake's native species. Members visited one of the Commission's fish hatcheries and spoke with a biologist about ways to increase chances of reproduction in those stocked lakes.

Other members of the team volunteered to do angler surveys to provide themselves and the homeowner's association with more information about angler's opinions

on volunteer limits, catch and release, and future projects. Through the community's newspaper, residents were informed on community projects, laws, and other related issues. Through this same paper, the agency was able to distribute information about Commission programs such as the toll-free license sale system and specialty vehicle tags.

#### **The Wildlife Team**

The wildlife team identified education and the destruction of habitat as 2 major issues in their community. The team felt that although many residents enjoyed feeding and viewing wildlife, most did not know about replacing habitat to attract species. The team also identified practices that often created nuisance wildlife. These practices included the intentional or incidental feeding of alligators as well as the introduction of exotic species. Members felt that through lack of information, many residents had labeled some species as non-desirable.

Plans were made to educate residents in these areas. Guest speakers were invited to the annual community picnic. More than 500 people attended. Speakers exhibited bats, snakes, and alligators and discussed their importance to ecosystems, allowing residents to learn identification and correct erroneous beliefs about such species.

The team planned a community photography contest to help residents appreciate species of wildlife in their own community. The team also began plans for a birdhouse building contest as well as classes on backyard habitat. Through these events, the community paper, and volunteers, the team worked toward educating residents.

### **Discussion**

The Commission discovered that while the project was initially implemented in a waterfront community, future applications could vary greatly. The modular structure of the program allows sections to be applied in a variety of communities, based on individual community needs. As the Commission's project continues to evolve, Lake Padgett Estates continues to expand their program. Their boating safety team has planned 3 fishing clinics and several fishing contests and events. Their wildlife team is planning several new events to educate residents about the importance of habitat and responsible wildlife viewing. All teams and the Commission continued to use the community's newspaper for educating and informing residents. Based on the success of their program, participants from Lake Padgett have volunteered to assist in expanding the program to other communities.

Past experiences have shown that residents are not always aware of the challenges that agencies face in the performance of their mission. Lack of information often causes frustration with regard to constituent expectations. These feelings often make residents feel that they are on different teams than those public service agencies protecting the resources. Through community partnerships, residents can become a vital part of the team. Established community groups provide a vehicle for such partnerships and the application of community oriented policing programs, which benefit both the community and the agency.

The community benefits include an avenue to channel resident's concerns and energies in the areas of conservation and boating safety, allowing residents to take a more active role on problem solving in their own community. Through volunteering, residents can address issues before they become problems. Community participation in problem solving and prevention promotes community pride. Older members of the community can share their experiences while teaching stewardship. This exchange of values lends itself to future generations of conservation-minded constituents. Through interaction, residents become more aware of the challenges agencies face in performing their mission. Armed with this knowledge, residents are better equipped to make informed decisions in the future.

Agencies, through such programs, are able to introduce themselves to groups of constituents not normally reached by the traditional programs. These introductions allowed them to see the services our agencies provides as well as the challenges. Through these relationships, we are given a more direct line to assist in determining our customers' needs, helping us to better serve them. These relationships also teach prevention. By educating residents about how to avoid the creation of nuisance wildlife or the threats of exotic species, agencies not only protect the resources but also save man hours associated with such complaints. Through the use of community policing techniques, agencies decrease the number of invalid complaints, increase conviction rates, and save man hours associated with investigation and response. Through boating safety classes, agencies may impact the number of boating accidents and reduce the loss of lives. These proactive methods save the agencies limited resources, allowing maximum return on investments.

As the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission prepares to expand this program statewide, other agencies may consider the benefits of community-oriented policing programs in conservation law enforcement. Community-oriented policing programs allow agencies to use all available resources in the performance of their missions, while making communities a vital part of the team. A team that encourages participation in conservation-related activities, is dedicated to customer service, and is rooted in community involvement will benefit both constituents and agencies.

### **Literature Cited**

U.S. Census Bureau. 1991. The U.S. Census Bureau Report, U.S. Census Bur., Washington, D.C. 12pp.