

Case Study 10: Communicating Water Conservation to a Community

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July in Georgia is hot. It was hot in 1864 when General Sherman torched Atlanta before his infamous March to the Sea. The population of Atlanta, about 20,000 then, has grown to more than 3 million today, with the metro area sprawling across 17 counties. All the while, Atlanta, situated in the upper Chattahoochee River basin, has remained dependent on the smallest flow of surface waters to supply any city of its size in the United States.

The Making of a Crisis

The summer of 1988 was notably hot, and Georgia was suffering the cumulative effects of a rainfall deficit that had been building for three years. Because roughly one-half of peak summer water demand in the area is for outdoor water use, local governments began to impose water restrictions to conserve limited reserves. As summer progressed the restrictions were tightened until a total ban on outdoor water use was imposed. The inevitable protest that arose from the landscape industry and others who felt the ban's economic impacts fell on deaf ears in local government, which placed paramount importance on supplying drinking water and pressure for health and fire-suppression needs.

Water shortages are slow-building crises that do not capture the public's attention until a significant number of people are affected directly. That is when individuals and organizations become receptive to learning about conservation and about what they can do to help alleviate the crisis. The Georgia Water Wise Council was born in response to this 1988 crisis, when the issue was front-page news.

LESSON LEARNED: *Capitalize on these "teaching moments" of opportunity.*

Forming a Coalition

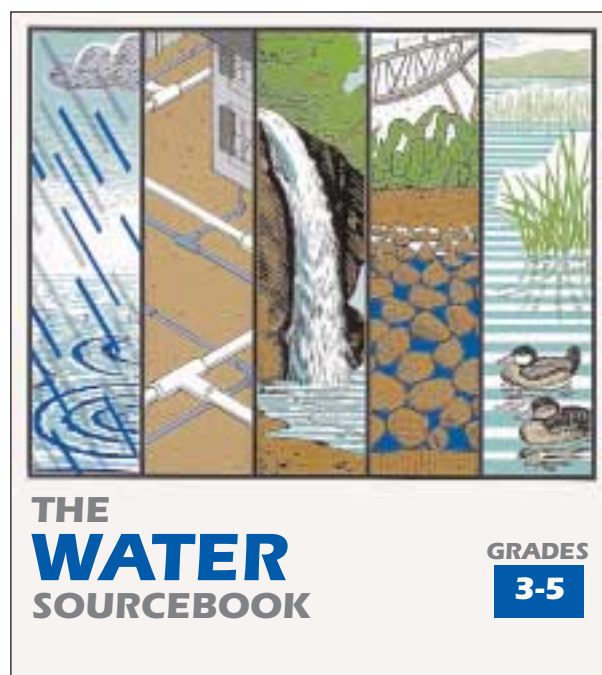
The key to building any successful organization is having the right players involved from the onset, each with an equal voice. In this case the Cooperative Extension Service of the University of Georgia took the lead. It began by holding ad hoc public committee meetings to form the Georgia Xeriscape Council. Attending were representatives from the extension service, the state's green industry, state and local governments and the water utilities. Consensus was reached that long-term public education for landscape water conservation was needed to avert future crises and to allow for future population and economic growth. As a result, in December 1989 the more-encompassing Georgia Water Wise Council (GWWC) was established and registered as a non-profit education corporation.

From its inception the GWWC maintained political neutrality, focusing on education goals while providing a forum for the exchange of ideas and information. Its members share an interest in water across political boundaries and economic sectors. This allows them to better appreciate each other's concerns. Invaluable informal bonds have been created and expertise freely shared.

And the members have learned from each other. Ten years ago, there was tension between the green industry and water producers due to a mutual lack of understanding. Now there is cooperation and accord. Fox McCarthy, a founding member of the GWWC and a former water-conservation coordinator for the Cobb-Marietta Water Authority, put it succinctly: "These utility guys pay attention to the green industry and conservation now.

...They're no longer old water buffaloes who just want to sell water."

LESSON LEARNED: *A balanced coalition yields a consistent message with minimal controversy.*



Materials in the Water Sourcebook series are in the public domain, so teachers can photocopy and distribute any part of them as needed.

Communication components

- **Water Sourcebooks:** The Water Sourcebook series is a set of four curriculum guides that are divided by grade-level ranges from kindergarten through high school. The books contain hands-on water education activities and science-lab demonstrations that are easy for teachers to present using readily available materials. These lesson plans are designed to enhance existing curricula through interdisciplinary teaching of mathematics, science, language arts and social studies. Correlation sheets guide teachers to water-education activities with the emphasis they feel their students need.

The Water Sourcebooks were funded primarily by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (Region 4) and developed with the Alabama University System Colleges

of Education. The materials are in the public domain, so teachers can photocopy and distribute any part of them as needed. But it is less expensive and easier to buy the sets from the GWWC, which contracts for inexpensive printing and sells the sets for approximately \$23 each.

The sourcebook material is being converted to CD-ROM format for easier access, storage and use. Distribution of Water Sourcebooks through the GWWC provides an added value: the availability of hands-on teacher-training workshops. These affordable sessions guide teachers through activities provided in the books. The experiments, games and demonstrations are applicable to all geographic areas — and they provide a public-education component to complement the education efforts of governments and public utilities that buy the books for teachers in their school systems.

LESSON LEARNED: *Make educational materials affordable and easy to use. Multiply your impact with "train-the-trainers" workshops.*

- **Print media:** Over the years the GWWC and its members have written dozens of articles for publication in newsletters and trade journals. Drawing on the specialized knowledge of council members, articles on topics including balanced landscapes, efficient irrigation and drought-tolerant cultivars are offered for publication at no cost. One well-written article can serve numerous newsletters. The Georgia Green Industry Association Journal ran a series of 28 articles by GWWC members in four issues.

LESSON LEARNED: *Use existing systems to spread your message.*

- **Trade associations:** Green industries have supported the GWWC's conservation-education efforts by providing free exhibit space at their annual conventions since 1990. In return, these industries can count on the council to provide speakers and articles to help inform industry members about water conservation. The arrangement is mutually beneficial and broadens the forum for

conservation efforts. A video about water conservation for landscapers, recently produced by the Cooperative Extension Service in English and Spanish, can be played at conventions on a continuous loop. Booth space has been donated by the Southern Nursery Association, the Georgia Turf Association, the Georgia Green Industry Association and the Georgia Water and Pollution Control Association.

LESSON LEARNED: *Groups with related interests can help each other to achieve mutual goals.*

● **Scholarships:** The GWWC established a \$25,000 endowment for permanent funding of four 4-H Regional competitions that are judged by the Cooperative Extension Service. Students who make water quality or conservation a part of their project are eligible to compete for \$500 scholarships. The council also recently established a similar program providing four annual \$500 grants to teachers in order to support the use of Water Sourcebooks as the basis for conservation projects. The program is administered through the Georgia Science Teachers Association, and the GWWC is not involved in judging for any of its grants.

LESSON LEARNED: *Leverage your message exposure by creating well-publicized competitions.*

● **Xeriscape:** Teaching the seven principles of xeriscape – quality landscaping that protects the environment and conserves water — has been the centerpiece of the GWWC's landscape-education efforts. To complement those efforts, the Cooperative Extension Service produced a user-friendly 40-page reference guide, *Xeriscape: A Guide to Developing a Water-wise Landscape*. The guide, which has a companion video and scripted slide set, was published with sponsorship arranged by the GWWC, which then served as a primary distributor of these low-cost teaching materials.

Any governmental or other organization wishing to promote water conservation through sound horticulture can easily adopt this ready-made material. All of the Atlanta-Fulton public libraries have received copies of the books and videos for use by the general public.

In addition to these educational materials, the GWWC provides training and advice to organizations that want to start programs of their own.

The message comes to life at state-owned xeriscape demonstration gardens in Griffin and Savannah that were built in part with financial support from the GWWC, and in live presentations given by council members. Thousands of people

have been exposed to the concept when visiting a xeriscape booth at the annual Southeast Flower Show.

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LESSON LEARNED: *Successful organizations support the initiatives of their members.*

● **Internships:** Water utilities that promote conservation can turn to the GWWC to connect them with interns from the University of Georgia School of Environmental Design. Once trained and supplied with materials, the landscape-architecture interns conduct audits using checklists, and they advise homeowners as a public service. The interns get credit toward their degrees as well as a rewarding experience and summer income. Cobb County, Georgia, runs a highly successful landscape-audit program.

LESSON LEARNED: *Interns can turn to their local cooperative extension agent for backing if they hit any snags.* 💧



An example of rainwater harvesting using retention ponds. This photo is a scene from the Carter Center in Atlanta, Georgia, where the water is used to irrigate the landscape.

Pointers from the Georgia Water Wise Council Experience

- Cultivate in-kind services from member organizations to leverage funds.
- Keep your message clear, simple and apolitical. Make it easy to replicate.
- Learn from each other to refine the message. For example, early xeriscape programs urged minimal turf usage, whereas current programs emphasize the strategic use of high-quality turf areas, i.e. "practical turf areas," for the most functional benefit.
- Maintain continuity and retain organizational memory by mentoring newer members.
- Encourage involvement and contribution from all players to make everyone feel valuable.
- Encourage networking within the organization. Helping each other freely benefits all.
- Whenever possible, use existing systems such as neighborhood newsletters, trade associations, 4-H, etc. to spread your message. More exposure generates more requests for programs and information.
- Take advantage of moments of opportunity. For example, GWWC supported the creation of the Georgia State Xeriscape Demonstration Gardens.
- Establish your group as one that gets things done. Try new programs, then evaluate and refine them.
- Like any successful promotion, communicating about conservation requires a sustained effort.