

# Conservation In Practice

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Your guide to the latest conservation research

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*“It takes three weeks to prepare a good impromptu speech.”*

Mark Twain

# Promoting Conservation Through *Effective Public Speaking*

**By Susan Jacobson**

I sat in a dark room with 100 neighbors whose homes were threatened by floods. Water Management District staff was attempting to placate fears of more flooding. The district scientist shuffled to the front of the room to put our minds at ease. He placed three illegible diagrams on the overhead projector in rapid succession. Binoculars might have made the print readable. He explained probabilistic theory in relation to a 500-year flood event in such a way that even my fellow PhDs in the room missed his point. He mumbled something about aquifer recharge and wetlands restoration and sat down.

The crowd got ugly. My normally civil neighbors raised their voices and accused the district of incompetence in dealing with their flooded yards. Yet,

the district was not guilty of poor hydrological monitoring but rather of a failure to communicate. The opportunity to explain watershed management or make a pitch for wetlands conservation was lost.

A few simple communication skills could have prevented this disaster. The scientist could have asked himself, “What is my message? Who is my audience? What vocabulary and/or visual aids will they understand?”

### **What Is Your Message?**

First, clarify in your mind exactly what you hope to accomplish. Do you just want to relay facts or do you want to change the way your audience thinks or behaves? What specific actions do you want them to take? Your answers form

the backbone of your presentation.

When most people prepare a talk, they start by listing the major points they want to make—not a bad idea, but that’s not enough. Take it one step further by thinking about what your audience cares about. Address their needs and interests.

Professional public speakers never recite dry facts and figures. Their secret is to transform the information into a story. Facts and data are abstract and need to be translated into life situations before they matter to people and make sense. For example, the statistic that 90 percent of the mortality of a threatened frog species occurs in the tadpole stage would probably mean little to most people. Instead you can transform this fact if you allow your audience to imagine if only three out of the 30 people in

the room were to survive to adulthood.

Stories must allow the audience to relate to the situation and should be told in a conversational manner as though recounting the scene to a group of friends. Instead of introducing a talk on tropical plants with a dry list of species, have the audience imagine their typical morning without a drink of coffee, cocoa, or orange juice. Lead them through a whole day with no products derived from tropical plants.

### Who Are You Talking To?

Imagine how differently the district scientist in the example above could have presented his wetlands information if he had targeted the knowledge level of his audience, understood their attitudes, and introduced his agency's management plans by addressing their immediate concerns.

Give your audience a reason to listen. Then convince them to stay by telling them something that directly relates to them: "We all drink the water from the Spring Creek watershed, but do you know where the water's been?" Or give an illustration that relates the subject to your audience: "Picture yourself without our wetlands program and the flood waters rising to your doorstep. . ."

Reemphasize your theme or take-home message and tie the conclusion back to the opening of your talk. Finish the talk in a memorable way with an anecdote, poem, visual image, or quote. If appropriate, give an appeal for a specific action and let the audience know exactly what you want them to do with the new information you have given them. Don't fade away. Conclude!

### What Visual Aids Will They Understand?

It is easy to lull an audience to sleep with a slide show: just turn out the

lights, speak in a monotonous tone, and show slides that are hard to see, out of focus, repetitive, or irrelevant.

Slides and props can provide some visual relief and make a presentation more memorable, or they can completely undermine it. The difference hinges on the quality of your visual aids. Be selective; keep them simple and vibrant. If you must use text slides and overheads, use symbols and bullets to minimize the number of words. Use simple fonts and large lettering. Avoid crowding in too much information. For a general audience, show only 25 words on a slide or 10 to 20 numbers. Graphs, such as bar graphs and pie charts, are easier to read than tables. Perhaps most importantly, talk to the audience and establish rapport before plunging the room into darkness.

Still feeling nervous about giving a talk? Don't worry. It's good to be nervous. Most people feel a sense of anxiety before a talk. This can make you seem enthusiastic and can help you to stay focused on the presentation. Your own interest in and knowledge and enthusiasm for your subject will be contagious. With a little practice, your presentations can become a potent force for conservation. 🐾

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## Speaking Tips

**Practice ahead of time.** As Mark Twain said, "It takes three weeks to prepare a good impromptu speech." Improve your presentation by asking your colleagues for critical feedback or by making a videotape.

**Stay focused.** Adapt your talk to your audience's background and interests. Simplify things and do not give unneeded detail. Stick to your theme and main goal. If you have more than 3 to 5 main points, you probably have too many.

**Talk to the audience.** Don't hide behind a podium. Stand where the audience can see you and talk directly to them. If you need to write on the board or point to a slide, stop talking while your back is turned, then continue. Maintain eye contact with the audience, not with your slide or prop. Some speakers like to pick out a few people in the audience in different areas of the room to focus on during their talk.

**Use body language.** Walk around and use gestures. Your enthusiasm will be contagious. Put your whole body into your presentation. Facial expressions can show enthusiasm or sorrow; body movements can indicate size or emphasize an important point.

**End on time.** Have you ever heard anyone say "I wish they had gone on for another 15 minutes." Leave your audience with a clear take-home message and time for questions.