Moving beyond the past: a grant-maker's vision for effective environmental education

Whitney Tilt

This paper focuses on grant-making lessons gleaned by the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation from 10 years of first-hand experience in developing a strategic position for its grant-making programs in general and for environmental education (EE) grants specifically. The paper also provides insights into successful fundraising for conservation projects.

Growing up

At my first environmental education conference in 1974, I was an earnest practitioner seeking improved tools for use in sharing the wonders of the salt marsh, quaking bog, or otter trawl with the eager minds of school children. In 1993, I came to the North American Association for Environmental Education (NAAEE) conference as a director of grants for a national foundation, seeking funding priorities, proven delivery systems, and assessment capabilities.

Comparing the 1974 and 1993 conferences, it seems that only the years have changed. The participants and issues being discussed were the same. The EE faithful were still a band of dedicated individuals fighting the establishment (variously defined) and each other for funding and recognition. The results are as predictable now as they were in 1974. The impact of environmental education on the general public has been that of a series of projectiles fired in all directions, briefly startling, sometimes amazing, but causing little lasting impact, except in those scattered areas that reside directly beneath an EE explosion.

The challenge

After more than 2 decades of effort by the environmental community, the nation's environmental IQ still appears too low to achieve an environmentally responsible citizenry. Countless studies and surveys have determined that the American public is more informed about, and supportive of, programs and actions that improve environmental quality (Hausbeck et al. 1992, Gigliotti 1992). Yet this is not environmental literacy. Literacy means more than the ability to write one's name or read a simple sentence. The National Adult Literacy Survey, a Department of Education sampling for literacy, asks respondents to read a bus schedule and fill in a simple form correctly (Kirsch et al. 1993). Similarly, environmental literacy should be judged, not by the ability to recite by rote the popular

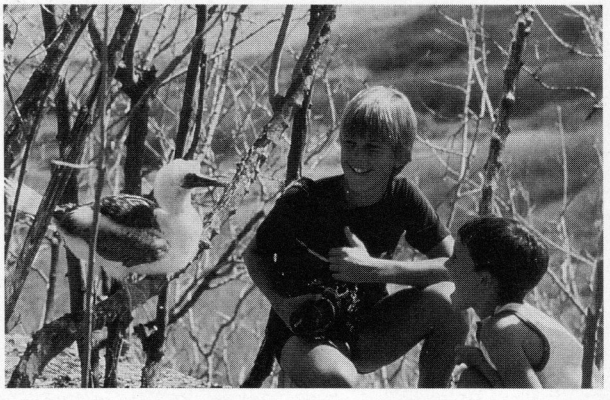

Photo by Robert Shallenberger, courtesy of U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Author's address: National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, 1120 Connecticut Avenue, NW, Suite 900, Washington, DC 20036, USA.

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refrains of *recycle, acid rain,* or *global warming*, but by the ability to understand the fundamental principles of how the environment functions. Effective programs designed to increase public knowledge about the environment are already in place throughout the country. However, a lack of coordination, sustained investment, and commitment have prevented these programs from achieving their full potential.

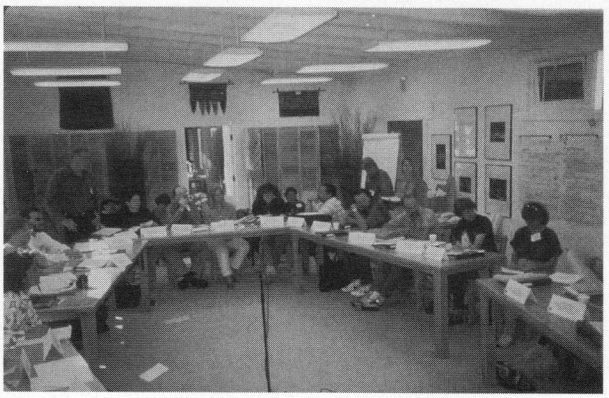
The classic film, *Bambi*, is illustrative of the challenges of achieving environmental literacy. Ralph Lutts (1992) examined the impact on American culture and concluded that *Bambi* is an empty symbol because the concept of nature that Disney's fawn represents is impoverished. The film moves the viewer, but does not educate; it may stimulate reaction but not understanding, and ironically, *Bambi* offers little hope for humans to be anything other than destroyers of the environment.

Grant-makers and EE practitioners should keep *Bambi* in mind when appraising their educational efforts. The environment is a complex system in constant evolution. Complete understanding of it is beyond human capabilities, yet EE materials are replete with the same brand of simplistic absolutes that we find in *Bambi*. For example, recycling is good but wearing fur is bad. Educational experts constantly remind us that we must work to teach children *how* to think rather than *what* to think; EE programs must avoid simplistic representations of the environment that impoverish rather than enrich.

The example of *Bambi* may also illustrate the need for responsibility inherent in producing EE materials. After seeing *Bambi*, a child might be led to believe that nature and its creatures (in the absence of humans) is benign while man (hunters in particular) and forest fires are evil. The goals of EE should be to present a balanced view of the environment, to provide basic building blocks on which personal preferences and opinions can be developed. When we forego the building blocks stage and lunge straight to opinion, we are no longer educating–we are lobbying for the mind of the student.

The Santa Fe agenda

The National Fish and Wildlife Foundation has struggled with issues inherent in the *Bambi* syndrome. How do we, as grant-makers, help foster effective education programs? How do we select programs for funding that provide the target audience with accurate, unbiased information that excites and motivates them to become active and involved with conservation issues, yet stops short of telling them what to think?



Environmental Education Summit, Santa Fe, New Mexico, May 1993. Photo by Whitney Tilt.

Since the Foundation began its grants program in 1986, it has recognized education as an important component of fish and wildlife conservation. Beginning in 1991, the Foundation conducted a strategic overview of its educational grants. This effort was undertaken for 2 reasons: first, to help focus and direct our ongoing grant-making to ensure that our grant portfolio was as effective as possible, and second, to narrow grant guidelines and focus grant applications. In seeking to define its role in conservation education, the Foundation drew on experience gained in launching comprehensive programs for wetlands, Neotropical migratory birds, and fisheries, including research, consensus building, and seed grants for innovative programs.

In 1993, the Foundation hosted a conservation education summit in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Attended by 35 representatives from conservation organizations, land management agencies, EE networks, and teachers, the summit sought to identify priorities for conservation education. The Foundation pledged, in convening the Santa Fe summit, that if the collective group could agree on priority needs, the Foundation would make those needs a priority for funding. The summit defined a number of principles the Foundation refers to collectively as the Santa Fe Agenda:

1. Ensure that educators have ready access to high-quality, value-neutral educational materials about fish and wildlife conservation;
2. Ensure that educators and resource managers have strong backgrounds in fish and wildlife conservation;
3. Promote the inclusion of education about fish and wildlife conservation in state curricula, and build grass-roots support for such education;
4. Promote cooperation among federal, state, and local agencies and other organizations to maxi-

mize use of resources that these agencies and organizations can provide; and

5. Ensure equal employment opportunities at all levels in the fields of environmental education and resource management.

These goals are formally presented in a publication prepared by NAAEE (North Am. Assoc. Environ. Educ. 1994).

Lessons and opportunities

In developing the Santa Fe Agenda, the Foundation has come by the following lessons and opportunities.

Teach teachers

To date, the philosophy of EE material development appears to be based on the movie *Field of Dreams* and the theme, "if you build it, they will come." Discussions with educators, however, make it clear that such a laissez-faire approach does not work.

Educators will use only those materials with which they are familiar and comfortable presenting to their students. The mere appearance of well-prepared EE materials on their desk will not result in their use. Educators, in general, need the following 4 things to teach EE effectively:

1. Access to quality materials in sufficient quantity and at a cost they can afford;
2. Professional development (training) in the principles and methods for presenting the target materials;
3. Financial support from school systems to allow their participation in professional development (e.g., substitute teachers and stipends); and
4. Administrative support from school districts to incorporate EE materials into class plans.

These points are central to the success of any EE effort and should form a basic check-list for applicants and funders in evaluating the potential effectiveness of EE programs.

Delivery, not development

The Foundation has learned there is a plethora of existing materials. The problem lies in delivering these materials to teachers and other educators. Reasons for this abundance of good teaching materials awaiting effective distribution range from the absence of a distribution plan to a lack of attendant funding. Entire budgets often are directed at developing and producing materials without a view toward distribution. Commonly the distribution plan states "10,000 copies of the curriculum will be printed and mailed to all school superintendents in the greater metropolitan area."

In addition, potential funders are more often interested in putting their name on a new product rather than providing operations and management money to distribute existing materials. Funders and applicants need to take a proactive role in ensuring that proposed materials developed under their grants program fill a demonstrable need, do not duplicate materials already developed, and include a complete and adequately funded distribution plan integral to the project's design and development.

Target the white space

When a business develops a marketing plan for a new product, the greatest opportunity for product success lies in targeting the "white space"—areas where the particular line of products are absent, rather than areas where a host of similar products compete for market share. If the goal of EE is increased environmental literacy nationwide, then EE efforts must target those areas where EE is needed most. Rather than supplanting one EE curriculum with another, the goal should be to ensure that EE, in some form, is distributed nationally. Following removal of white space from the national map, competition among various EE materials can provide educators with increased alternatives and variety.

Targeting white space requires a systematic analysis of EE on a state-by-state basis. Factors to track in a state-by-state needs assessment include:

1. Existence of state legislation mandating the incorporation of EE into school curricula. Such legislation currently exists in at least 24 states (A. Ruskey, Univ. Wisconsin, pers. commun.).
2. Identification of existing EE programs and materials appropriate for presentation in the target state. Assessment of existing materials allows subsequent evaluation of the need for new materials.
3. Development of action plans that identify barriers to EE implementation and provide concrete actions to address them.
4. Development of EE partnerships among federal, state, local, and private interests to implement steps 1–3.

Teachers not currently incorporating EE into their class plans must have support from their school districts and the states. There is little chance that EE will become more than an extracurricular activity without a state mandate to incorporate it into existing academic structures and the infrastructural support to allow teachers to get the needed training.

Seeds, not models

It is a common practice for grant-makers to frame support for local programs as models for implementation elsewhere. Although the goal is laudable, too often it results in short-term support for programs that are left to linger when grant-makers go in search of other models. In evaluating a proposed program's utility, grant-makers should focus on providing seed money to programs that meet the goals outlined above while assisting grantees in establishing programs that are sustainable over the long term. As grant-makers, we must recognize that if we are not interested in supporting a particular project for more than 1–2 years and there is little hope that other sustainable support will be forthcoming, then the program should not be supported in the first place. This is an uncomfortable and difficult decision for funders to make, but it is a necessary one if we are to maximize the utility of EE efforts in an era of increasingly competitive budgets.

Stick to the basics

The Foundation receives numerous proposals relying on emerging technologies—everything from virtual reality to state-of-the-art interactive technologies. Though these high-tech vehicles make for exciting presentations, the grant-maker must ask "is it deliverable to the classroom?" EE is frequently absent from classrooms because teachers do not have the time or expertise to effectively deliver these high-tech programs. Too often, computers sit unused in classrooms because teachers lack training, a modem line, or subscriptions for on-line services and databases.

While there can be little doubt that the information highway is ahead, grant-makers should keep in mind that we need to distinguish between the allure of new technologies and the ability to fill the "white space." In addition, if we assist in the placement of new, exciting technologies in the classroom, will we stand by our grantees and provide training, fund the steady stream of upgrades, pay the on-line fees, and cover the repair bills?

EE is science and math

Too often EE is viewed as an "activity," not a science. As educational reform in this country places an increased emphasis on science and math proficiency and as corporations become concerned about where their engineers and scientists will be coming from in the years ahead, the math and science principles inherent in EE need to be recognized and promoted.

Get outdoors

Ultimately the greatest teaching aid we have for EE is the outdoors—whether it be a vacant lot or national forest. Videos and CD-ROM adventures may attempt to bring the outdoors to the classroom, but there is no substitute for actually getting outside. Our system of national and state parks, forests and refuges in the United States is the envy of the world. While some of the best-known areas are over-used, most are under-used. State and federal natural resource agencies have a range of high-quality materials and on-going programs available to the public. Often, however, these programs represent the commitment of a few staff members, rather than the agencies themselves, and EE programs are the first to go in times of fiscal constraint. In schools, money for field trips is often an early victim of budget cuts.

Teachers are not alone in their need for greater support from their organizations. Natural-resource professionals widely acknowledge that future resource-management decisions will be profoundly impacted by public opinion and attitudes. Many also would acknowledge that, given the impact of public opinion, environmental education is important. Yet few of these natural-resource agencies recognize EE as part of their core mission and therefore fail to place EE programs on a par with their other programs.

Evaluation

One of the most difficult aspects of EE is evaluating a program's impact (Stout and Peyton 1988). Unlike projects that involve habitat acquisition or research, where results are more easily quantified, evaluating the impact of a particular EE grant can be difficult. Funders are often tempted to divide the project cost by the number of students served or by the number of curricula distributed. An ideal evaluation method would track a student from the moment of EE exposure to a point at which he or she makes a life-style question that affects the environment. Obviously, such an evaluation would take years to complete and would be enormously difficult and expensive.

An evaluation tool that many teachers have found useful is an assessment. In its simplest form, an assessment is an informal evaluation that examines the how, what, and where of a project. An assessment might list the places visited, materials used, and partners who contributed everything from chalk to computers. It gleans comments, positive and negative, from the participants and examines ways to improve the process. Although not necessarily a scientific instrument, an assessment can be an effective and efficient tool for evaluating a project's impact.

Moving beyond the past

Given the challenge of teaching teachers, delivering effective programs, getting outdoors and targeting the white space to boost environmental literacy in the United States, it becomes obvious that business as usual will not do. Moving beyond the past will require the increased use of partnerships (Manage. Inst. Environ. Business 1993, Trauger et al. 1995); it will require grantsmanship (see box); and it will require increased competitive cooperation on the part of EE interests and the funding community.

A grant-maker's view of proposals

There are no magic bullets in fundraising, but some general guidelines form the foundation of successful and accountable fundraising. In addition, a number of manuals and publications are available (Deimer and Welheimer 1982, Howe 1991, Manage. Inst. Environ. Business 1994), and the Foundation Center provides information on private, philanthropic giving and has reference centers located throughout the country (1-800-424-9836).

Start early. The cycle for action on funding requests ranges from 3 months to 2 years, with a mean of 9–12 months. Starting fundraising early in the project development allows you to most fully integrate the interests of the funder(s) into the project, including optimizing publicity.

Proposal guidelines. Request a copy of the funder's guidelines, and follow them. While you can use a generic template as the basis for a series of appeals, it is important to customize each appeal to the specific interests and procedures of the funder being approached.

Funders are individuals. Like people, donor organizations have different personalities. Personality traits run from formal to informal. Some funders will prize timeliness of a submittal over content, while others will pour over a proposal in minute detail. It is important to ascertain and respect a potential funder's personality. Research the prospective donor, and then apply the findings to your appeal.

Fundraising is low-tech. There are few effective short-cuts in fundraising for worthy projects. Do your homework, and be prepared to follow up and follow through. Just as in a job interview, a funder's perceptions of you and the project start with the first contact.

Be concrete. Present a clear and concise description of the project, including time line, deliverables, evaluation, and budget. Be sure that the application package contains all elements requested by the grantor. The chances of a project receiving funds diminishes with each additional page that needs to be read to gain an understanding of the project—the reviewer should be able to determine the general purpose of the grant and the funds being requested by the end of the first page. Avoid using technical jargon, statistical analysis, or other scientific banter—if vital to the proposal, place it as an appendix.

Be accountable. Do not overstate potential impacts and benefits—such claims may result in 1 grant, but they will likely prevent a second. Do not understate the costs of doing the work—it is better to come in under budget than to return to the funders, hat-in-hand, requesting additional money or a revision of grant deliverables.

People give to people. When funders contribute to a project, they are likely supporting the individuals they have met—they are underwriting their energy and enthusiasm, not merely their proposal. Make sure your appeal contains these selling points.

Don't forget to ask. You will not get the money unless you ask. As obvious as this sounds, too often, wildlife professionals feel that fundraising is (a) beneath them, (b) too hard, (c) someone else's job, or (d) all of the above. Foundations, corporations, and individuals must give their charitable donations to someone—it will not be you unless you ask.

Like all businesses, EE providers are in competition with each other for limited funds. While such competition is beneficial in helping to provide an innovative, fresh, and cost-competitive product, it can also be detrimental. If EE applicants work too hard at bending demonstrable needs to fit the perceived interests of potential funders (i.e., tell them what they want to hear rather that what needs to be said), environmental education overall suffers. At the same time, funders often are forced to make decisions in an informational vacuum in which they have neither the time, nor the in-house expertise to evaluate the merits of grant requests adequately.

A popular advertisement claims that "the educated consumer is our best customer." Given time constraints and the broad array of subjects with which grant-seekers and grant-makers are presented, sharing of collective experience can foster a better grants process. For example, an educated grant-maker will create an incentive among applicants to reach beyond their personal interests in advancing new initiatives for EE. When grant-makers and grant-seekers are asked to address a common set of criteria (such as demonstrated need and delivery systems), the result will be competitive cooperation, rather than uniformity. Then, I believe we will see the white space begin to roll back and our collective environmental literacy increase.

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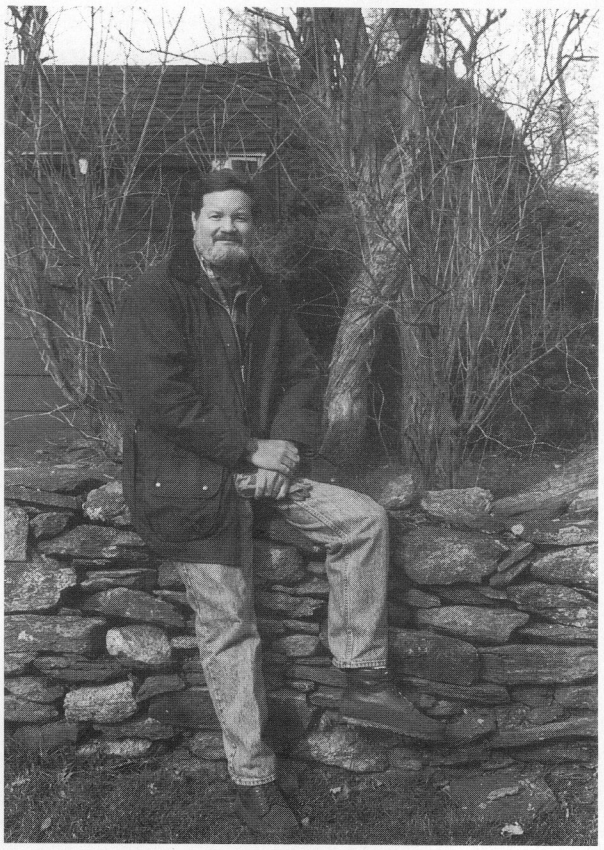

Whitney Tilt is Director of Conservation Programs for the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation in Washington, D.C. His primary responsibilities are to oversee the Foundation's grants program which in 1986–1996 numbered more than 1,400 projects valued in excess of $213 million. Prior to joining the Foundation, Whitney served as a Wildlife Specialist for the National Audubon Society in Washington, D.C.; Executive Director for the Long Island Sound Taskforce of the Oceanic Society; Bald Eagle Specialist and Refuge Assistant for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; Environmental Educator on Cape Cod, Massachusetts; and cattle rancher in the Tetons of Idaho. Mr. Tilt earned his master's degree in Natural Resource Policy from the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies and his B.S. degree from Hampshire College. Mr. Tilt lives in Washington, D.C., because he has to. Spiritually his home is in the Teton Valley of Idaho.