PUBLIC POLICY EDUCATION FOR ENVIRONMENTAL AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT ISSUES

James C. Barron
Washington State University

The nature of environmental issues and economic development concerns has changed significantly in the last ten to fifteen years and the types of policy education programs that once were appropriate now need to be reexamined. These changes also have important implications for the skills required of extension faculty involved in such programs and the methods they will use to carry them out.

The environmental awareness movement in its modern form dates from about 1960 and has grown in intensity and complexity since then. General public support for a clean environment is widespread, but there is no clear consensus on how clean clean should be. Beginning with the debate over banning DDT, there has always been an element of tradeoffs between improved environmental quality and economic activity. For the most part, the major concerns of agriculture and industry about the adverse consequences of the environmental movement have not been fulfilled. Technology in production of goods and services that had the potential to inflict damage on the environment advanced rapidly and economic growth continued without severe interruption. There was ample room for continued economic development and a satisfactory environment. The situation has begun to change, however, and it now appears that much of that flexibility may be gone. Many of the emerging environmental issues are such that there are clear tradeoffs between economic activity and the environment.

Extension policy programs on environmental issues in the 1970s and 1980s generally followed the public policy education process that was well described as the issue cycle by Gratto and elaborated on by House. Likewise the public policy education process has worked well for economic development, particularly when the intent was education rather than promotion. The educator evaluated the issue in terms of understanding by the interested publics and marshalled resources to prepare and deliver information through various means. Identifying alternatives and assessing their consequences formed the basic framework for public policy education.

What has changed? While the general principles of public policy education remain useful, the world around us has changed and new models and approaches are needed. There is a growing assortment of interest groups concerned with various aspects of the environment and another set (sometimes overlapping) concerned with economic development. Not only are the interest groups proliferating, many of them are well equipped with legal and financial resources to pursue their aims. Activist members are highly motivated and not nearly so prone to seek consensus as were their predecessors a few years ago. Conflict is often pursued as a deliberate strategy and the courts are a preferred alternative rather than the legislative or administrative process.

The educational establishment, including research and extension programs, are viewed by some interest groups with suspicion rather than respect. Colleges of agriculture are often assumed to be too closely aligned with commercial agriculture to be objective about environmental issues. On top of this is a growing distrust of science and the scientific community. There are several reasons for this distrust. One is the low level of scientific literacy in the United States. Another is that with more and more knowledge available, the complexity increases dramatically, making broad understanding difficult. The ability to raise plausible questions has outpaced the capacity to provide answers.

Another important change is in the expectations of the interest groups involved. In the past, if industry or agriculture was harmed by environmental policy decisions it was considered tough luck and everyone went on about their business (or were forced out of business). More recently those who may be adversely affected expect the government to solve the problem and mitigate the damages through compensation or other programs. This creates a situation in which groups have an incentive to portray the expected damages to themselves in the worst possible way.

The result of these changes is that environmental issues are much more contentious, scientifically complicated and legally messy than they were even a decade ago.

Implications for Extension

What are the implications of these changes for extension public policy education programs? There appear to be six major public policy education areas affected:

1. The decision process.
2. Information providers.
3. Decision criteria.
4. Objectivity.

5. Educational program delivery.
6. Needed skills.

Decision Process

The decision process has changed in at least two important dimensions. First, decisions are being made with incomplete information. Pressure is on legislatures, executive agencies and the courts to decide before the facts are all in. Decisions made under uncertainty are inherently tough calls, based on value judgments as well as facts. Policy issues become public more because of the uncertainty of differing interpretations and valuations of fact, and less because people lack available information.

Second, beyond legislative actions, the decision process in many major issues is increasingly likely to hinge on administrative regulations promulgated by executive agencies and/or legal decisions by the courts.

Under the Endangered Species Act, for example, the law lays out very clearly what factors are to be used by administrative agencies in making decisions, but even then they often wind up in court. While the issue will involve conflict, a legislative or administrative rule-making process will be greatly aided if the conflicting groups or interests can reach any kind of agreement, even if only on part of the differences.

Some other environmental disputes may be resolved by the stakeholders themselves with assistance from the educator. The educator must be sensitive to the nuances of these decision processes in a way that was previously avoided because it was always argued that the educational role stopped short of the decision. This is not to suggest that the educational process be designed to influence or make the decision in a certain way, but that the educational program may extend all the way through the decision making.

A first step may be to include content that can help those likely to be affected understand the decision making process and how to effectively participate in it.

Information Providers

Who has the right facts? Extension educators need to realize they will not be the only ones with a broad overview of the issue or have any monopoly on information or analytical skills. There is apt to be plenty of that available to interest groups through consultants, membership or legal counsel. In many public policy education efforts in the past the educator from the university was widely accepted as an objective observer with the research and knowledge base upon which choices might be made. The university no longer commands

that level of respect and the educator must recognize there will be many information providers.

Decision Criteria

In the absence of needed facts, what rules or criteria hold in choosing when to decide and what to decide? Which party should bear the burden of proof as to what might occur with or without a decision? For example, do opponents have to prove that irreconcilable consequences will occur from a proposed action or do proponents have to prove the contrary? What are the costs of either type of decision error and who bears them?

Objectivity

Objectivity, or at least neutrality, has always been the aim of extension policy educators, but it takes on a new urgency in the current setting. Extension programs broadly have had a tendency to encourage development whether it was of agriculture, rural communities, local businesses or other groups. In a time when environmental pressures are in clear conflict with economic development, it is critical to be perceived as unbiased. Educators can focus on the definition of objectivity, teach criteria or tests of objectivity and contribute to the establishment of ground rules for evaluating the accuracy of information brought to bear by all parties (Johnson and Zerby, p. 13 and pp. 222–227).

Program Delivery

Perhaps the major implication for extension is in program delivery methods. The old method of identifying the problem, gathering information, identifying alternatives, assessing consequences of each alternative and getting out of the way is no longer sufficient. What is also needed is conflict resolution and negotiation which suggests a different approach involving frequent back-and-forth interaction among the various interests who may not be willing or able to talk to each other. Holding conferences or large meetings to deliver the education are unlikely to work well, if at all. Preparation of background material in publications, videos or other means is still appropriate, but it will only be part of the information base upon which decisions are made. The interest groups are one part of the equation, but a wide array of public officials from local, state or national government agencies are also keenly interested and involved. The educator has to be known to and accepted by people in the governor's office as well as the local grange hall.

The skills needed for the processes described above are very different from those needed by the traditional policy educator. Here the educator is not the main source of information or analysis, but

plays a brokering role instead. A successful application of this approach is described by Fiske. Leadership ability is a crucial requirement for the educator in this role. It demands the kind of leadership that empowers others by giving them information and skills to take responsibility for their own decisions and to work productively in group decision making in areas of uncertainty and conflict. Extension people have received much training in group process facilitation, but the leadership ability and skills required for mediating conflict resolution are well beyond what most extension staff have been exposed to. Great patience, ability to listen, ability to synthesize, a sense of humor, tolerance for ambiguity and insight to see the major issues and separate them from the minor ones are all required.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it appears that for some important issues of environmental concern there are clear conflicts with economic development that leave little middle ground. The issues are incredibly complex and have a tendency to extend over wide geographic areas with many interested and competing interest groups. All of this complicates the decision process and poses challenges to the extension educator. It is evident issues like this will be around for some time. If extension wants to make a positive contribution to their resolution it will need to develop new models, explore new kinds of training for both specialists and agents and seek new types of people.

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