

forum

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Reflections of a County Agent in Hip Boots. I'm not really a "county agent in hip boots," but the phrase is too poetic to pass up. It was first used by Althestan Spilhaus to describe the role of the Sea Grant Advisory Service as he saw it in the early 1960s. The Sea Grant Advisory Service would be to marine resources what the Cooperative Extension Service is to land resources. It would be like having a "county agent in hip boots," working with the sea people: marina operators, commercial fishermen, coastal property owners, and others. For the past four years, I've been a New York Sea Grant Extension specialist working as a part of Extension. During this time, I've recognized some of the potentials and problems of marine Extension work, and some of the personal satisfactions and frustrations.

Working with Extension and reading through *Heritage/Horizons* (published by the *Journal of Extension*), I've gotten a genuine feeling for the tremendous impact Extension has had on agricultural production and rural life. And now I'm at the beginning of a new Extension effort directed towards a different set of resources and people. And I can sense the potential impact. I see my efforts bring new information and techniques to people who learn to use them and put them to work. I hope that in time, Sea Grant Advisory Services can have the same kind of impact on the development and wise use of coastal resources that Extension continues to have on land resources.

Having learned the lesson from Extension, we've started with the people. Although Extension has already developed audiences, we've been starting from scratch . . . talking with the marina operators who have trouble getting permits, with the coastal landowners whose property is eroding, with the commercial fisherman who needs financing for new boats, with seafood processors who want to expand their markets and with town boards who want to provide new boat launching sites. These are the kinds of people we're trying to serve, by discovering their problems, gathering information, researching alternatives, and testing solutions.

And things are beginning to happen. Four years ago I started a fishing program for urban youth. Last week I got a call requesting additional instructional materials to replace those that have worn out.

Three years ago I was gutting white suckers caught by Lake Erie commercial fisherman so they could be processed through an experimental deboning machine. Today we're working with a commercial processor interested in producing a minced fish product.

Two years ago an advisory committee identified the need for safe harbors and boating facilities. Next week the Corps of Engineers and local property owners will discuss final plans for the harbor.

A year ago I took local community leaders interested in waterfront redevelopment to another city to view some successful waterfront redevelopment projects. Recently the local Chamber of Commerce invited the mayor of the city we visited to speak at their annual meeting about waterfront redevelopment.

It's the nature of Extension programs that efforts take a long time to get results, and that the results are often difficult to measure. I've recently written a pamphlet on how to "Make Your Own Fish Trophy." Its purpose is to stimulate recreational fishing for trophy-sized fish. This results from a ban on possession of certain species of Lake Ontario fish unless they exceed a legal trophy size. I feel good about producing this pamphlet and will probably distribute a few thousand copies. But the real test is whether the pamphlet "stimulates and enhances recreational trophy fishing."

But this isn't an essay on evaluating Extension programs. There are few people with both marine backgrounds and Extension experience. Since marine Extension work is a new field (there are perhaps 100 professional marine Extension field agents in the country), there's little experience in defining success, and more personally in finding job satisfaction.

We often think in terms of how many publications we distributed, how many meetings we held, what we helped build, or what we helped develop. These are often adequate means of measuring success and we may feel satisfied with the job we've done. However, my finest success stories occur when I can recognize change in a person. When people learn to run their organization better, their meetings become more effective, they use information sources more effectively, they learn how to fulfill their own objectives, then I feel the programs have been successful.

The Extension role is often referred to as a "catalyst." But a catalyst helps the process, it doesn't replace it. If we do the work for people, and their responsibility is removed, we might even do it better than they could. But that's not helping people, that's replacing them.

A couple of months ago, I received a flyer from a local Chamber of Commerce advertising an upcoming meeting. It wasn't a meeting I had any great input in, but I consider it a successful result of Extension efforts. I had worked with the fellow who wrote the flyer and we got to know each other well. The last meeting he held was advertised by a poorly copied letter that didn't mention the actual meeting until the last line. The letter was difficult to read, contained extraneous information, and didn't really say what would happen at the meeting. Response was so poor that the meeting was cancelled. I talked with this fellow, and he evidently took my advice. Six months later, while planning the next meeting, he contacted me to review his letter of invitation. He'd done a better job—my only suggestions were that he change it to a self-mailer, folded flyer, with an agenda, a map, and a response card.

It doesn't matter what this meeting was all about, or what program it related to. He's one of the sea people; he'll be dealing with coastal-related problems all along, and he'll be part of the decision-making process. He has gained some skill to help out, and I've gained a success that's hard to record on my monthly EMIS sheet.

So it amounts to working with people. That's what Extension's all about, be it Sea Grant, Land Grant, or otherwise. So roll on your hip boots and get out into the water with the sea people . . . or better yet, forget the hip boots and get your feet wet.