Building Common Understanding: Story and Dialogue as Tools for Deepening Public Involvement[1]
David Sale and Sandra Davis, ECO Resource Group

Public involvement professionals are seekers of knowledge. Through media and meetings, phone calls and emails, web sites and workgroups, we bring forth the public's knowledge to merge it with the knowledge of the policymaker, the planner, the scientist or the engineer. But each group we work with may hold different values and perspectives on the nature of the issue at hand. They may even speak different languages, both literally and figuratively, and often do not or will not understand each other well enough to find the common ground on which to build solutions.

Imagine a farmer with a high school education, working land his family has lived on for generations. Through the property runs a stream that has seen a healthy salmon run in the past; now, dwindling stocks and the need for protection have brought a Ph.D. fisheries biologist to the land. The two both see fewer fish than before and they both understand that the salmon are important. They may even agree on a solution, though they are more likely to get stuck in misunderstanding, each trying to get the other to hear their point of view, unable to see the common ground they are standing on. Working on public issues, more often than not we find people are saying the same thing, just in different "languages". In this case the farmer's language is born of experience, the biologist's of education.

As facilitators of public involvement, we must balance the tensions between the public's experience and their varying levels of education and training, statutory requirements and the professional standards of agencies and consulting scientists and engineers, political expectations, and the need for action. Yet despite all our best efforts to involve the right people and groups, to seek the best science, and to listen carefully to what is being said there often remains a chasm between what various members of the public "know" to be true and what scientists tell us is the case. How do we bridge the gap, and merge these different ways of knowing?

By inviting, including and learning from the stories people create from their experience we can strengthen and complement scientific analysis with local knowledge. In addition, we can create a pathway for true collaboration and improved decision making.

Public debate about the management of natural resources is often stymied by our inability to incorporate the personal, community, and cultural experiences, knowledge and values of disparate stakeholders. Recognizing that there are many "ways of knowing" can assist us in overcoming what often appear as insurmountable obstacles. Experience "ground-truths" learned knowledge. Just as scientific models must be verified in the field, our comprehensive and management plans must consider the connection between human and natural ecologies. And, at some point, science must meet cultural values, and the way people know the world personally, in order to create effective public policy for the diverse patchwork of human needs and expectations related to economic necessity, environmental protection, and community safety. Story and dialogue bring cultural values and the way people know the world "to the table."

There is valuable information in the blending of learned and lived experience, a wisdom that can inform our collective ways of knowing the world. This wisdom enfolds facts, experience, values, and tradition and is often expressed in story. Much as the scientific method is based on a peer system of comparing results, including "local knowledge" provides us with a way to test the facts by experience and test the experience against the facts.

---

[1] **Sale, David**, and Sandra Davis, 2002. *Building Common Understanding: Story and Dialogue as Tools for Deepening Public Involvement*. Interact: The Journal of Public Participation, International Association of Public Participation.

The Power of Story

We have found personal and cultural stories to be a powerful tool in integrating scientific and experiential knowledge to create mutual understanding and shared meaning. Story is the language of experience and knowledge, wrapped in a richly textured fabric of meaning. Story is a way of collating, sorting and communicating the information and experience in our lives, and placing it in a meaningful pattern that both describes and validates how things fit together.

Inviting personal and cultural stories allows communication of information, complex perceptions, understandings, assumptions and biases. In a way, our lives are a series of stories with which we make sense of our experience.

Our natural resource management policies must ultimately be a collective story of place, environment and culture that includes not only science, but also personal stories and beliefs. We must blend the "know-how' with "know-that" in a 'pattern that connects', imbued with the richness of combined experience and knowledge. Even the most objective scientific findings must still be fit into a policy framework (i.e., what we do with the information) that is inherently subjective, with the issues defined in a matrix of social, biological and physical components.

In our deliberations, we often assume that somehow the validity of plans and public knowledge is enhanced by excluding personal experience and feelings, as reflected in the bias toward objective analysis and an emphasis on credentials and degrees. Yet in our hurry to avoid the effect of these biases on our policy, we make the error of trying to eliminate values and emotions altogether. As anyone who has witnessed a contentious public meeting can understand, values and emotions will be present whether we allow them a voice or not, affecting what is said and done. This is particularly true with issues such as restoration of ecosystems (which is really about restoring and reclaiming "place," a very personal issue).

We have realized over many years of public participation work that to develop plans and policies that succeed you must include the inherent wisdom of place and experience, much of which is communicated through personal and cultural storytelling.

The Art and Science Of Story

History records no community without storymakers and storytellers, however sanctioned (God, gift, heritage, power, intelligence or election). Storytelling in modern terms is frequently seen as a specific art or profession, reserved for the writer, the elder, or the professional bard. But if we are willing to recognize story as a way to organize our experience and learned knowledge, we come to understand we all speak in stories. Indeed, both scientific investigations and the daily experience of our senses are told as stories, varying in style, intent, content, validity, accuracy and coherence. Scientific theories, published papers, and treatises are "stories" that weave together facts and figures in the context of the experience, education and training of the researcher.

Storytelling as it is commonly accepted can evoke archetypes of ancient myths and fables, of tales told around the campfire. Or it can remind us of our grandfather's lap, and the smile that created both wonder and doubt.   Certainly, story can carry an aura of fantasy, of untruth, of distortion: many of us carry the memory of a parent scolding us for "telling stories".   Any story may become a victim of embellishment and bias, in the spirit of the Trickster. Indeed, it can be argued that no form of human communication presents uncontested truths.

But how can we verify the "truth" of stories? Told well and honestly, a story can reach deeply into an almost inexpressible understanding of truth, not in terms of facts and figures, but through a language of metaphor and relationship. Growing from roots of keen observation and actual experience, stories contain kernels of truth - though we must often look carefully among the added foliage of other experiences, feelings and beliefs to find them. Oral traditions contained the cultural structure for eliciting, understanding and incorporating these truths from stories, of sorting the "wheat from the chaff". We need to rebuild this understanding.

Defined more objectively as narrative, stories contain their own "science" and methods of evaluation. For example, theories of narrative rationality are grounded in the nature of humans as narrative beings, as storytellers. With an inherent awareness of narrative coherence, whether or not a story hangs together, and narrative fidelity, whether or not the story rings true, people judge the value and truth of stories. Narrative coherence tells how the immediate story deals with other stories that deal with the same subject (there is no story that is not embedded in other stories), and whether the characters are reliable both as narrator and subject. Narrative fidelity is measured by weighing the elements and values of a story to determine whether the facts of a story are indeed facts, the reasoning is sound, and whether the story allows us to test those values against our own experience or the lives and statements of others, and whether the values provide a reasonable basis for human conduct.

Narrative theories imply that people do judge the stories told for and about them, and that they have a rational capacity to make such judgments. And these theories also suggest a common-sense way to incorporate stories into public participation. As stories are told, they engage both the teller and the audience. They are the basis for dialogue.

Creating the Space For Stories: **Dialogue**

When people tell rival stories about a given issue, they participate in a larger story about how disputes in a democratic society should be conducted, with a plot line of respect for the dignity and worth of all people. Acting in accordance with the larger story transforms the dispute into dialogue. It is in this trading of stories that we begin to get at the truths inherent in each, much as peer review allows for testing of scientific ideas and theories.

To understand the meaning in stories about place and resources requires us to create a space where storytellers can feel free to express themselves, where the stories can come forward in their own way, with all of the power and feeling of connection to place, deep emotion and values.

The term dialogue comes from the Greek *dia* and *logos*: through meaning. Thus dialogue is communication that allows meaning to evolve naturally from the interchange of ideas. And though meaning is frequently different for each of us, people share many values and perspectives. Dialogue is a tool that can help us get beyond different opinions and perspectives to shared meanings - the shared needs and values of a group. Dialogue is about gathering or unfolding meaning, and developing and strengthening environmental, cultural and community connections. Dialogue seeks to bring out the assumptions and judgments we carry as part of personal patterns that make up the core of who we are: our emotions, feelings, past histories, sense of place, personal biases, and factual knowledge. Dialogue allows a group to tap into the innate "wisdom" of individual and collective ways of knowing, to discuss the personal and cultural stories (the "know-how") and the technical stories (the "know-that"). And, as a group builds cohesiveness, people begin the "truthing" process of narrative rationality, with dialogue creating both a safe place to share deeply held beliefs, and a forum for testing the stories themselves.

The way of dialogue is applicable for any situation requiring the bringing together of diverse perspectives towards a common goal. Dialogue allows for constructive, energetic conversations about issues we care deeply about with people who have differing viewpoints and positions. Dialogue is not simply conversation. Nor is it debate. Debate points toward a single goal, to "hammer" out an agreement, to try and solve a problem, or to have one's opinion prevail. In those cases where people are debating an issue, there is often:
- rampant positioning
- attempts to persuade,
- breaking down the problem/issue into parts
- justifying
- elimination of options
- forming and locking of opinions

Several factors are crucial to effective dialogue. There must be equality among participants, who must listen with empathy, and be willing to bring out assumptions, while simultaneously

suspending judgments and being respectful even when disagreeing. Erroneous assumptions lead to misinterpretations of the motives and meanings of other people's actions and words. A main benefit of dialogue is in developing mutual understanding.

Mutual understanding develops out of using a common set of operating agreements that we call the 'Ground of Dialogue'. This list represents a compilation and sifting of the work of many people and our own experience.

THE GROUND OF DIALOGUE
1. Listen to deepen understanding
2. Don't interrupt
3. Pause before responding
4. Look for natural points of flow in the conversation
5. Restate silently what a person said
6. Don't be afraid of silence. Don't talk just to fill the spaces.
7. Suspend judgments
8. Inquire and reflect
9. Identify and suspend assumptions
10. Balance inquiry and advocacy
11. Respect differences. Seek mutual respect.
12. Suspend roles and status
13. Speak to the group
14. Share responsibility in leadership
15. Speak for yourself: make "I statements".
16. Communicate only within the group, not through "side conversations"

In addition to the basis for dialogue that the group must shape and agree to at the beginning of the conversation, these suggestions will help guide the group:

- Intend to pursue the highest purpose the dialogue may serve.

- Suspend certainties and be willing to be influenced. [What this means is that when you are upset by what someone else says, you have a genuine choice between (1) voicing your *reaction* and (2) listening more deeply with the intention of finding common ground.]

- Listen to your listening. Pay attention to what you are listening to, what you are listening for, and what you are not hearing.

- Slow down the inquiry.

- Examine your thoughts, and be willing to share the assumptions, which underlie and shape them.

- Notice points of frustration, and look for ways you can share responsibility for providing what is needed.

- Maintain an awareness of the group's needs and processes, and look for ways you can share responsibility for providing what is needed.

By attending to these suggestions, the group creates a framework for exploring and reflecting on beliefs, assumptions, and self-talk, and for speaking these realizations or simply choosing to

become aware of them. This creates the respect and safety necessary for the sharing of personal and cultural stories and the space for finding common ground - the collective story.

Awareness of and sophistication in one's own reasoning are essential for social and political empowerment: all must take responsibility for their own perspective and the effects of their own stories. Creating a space for these stories in the dialogue assumes the rationality and reasonableness of all normal persons, and strengthens the public's participation in policy discourse, where experts have so often dominated. The interaction of dialogue also provides a method for moving from public opinion to true public knowledge.

How We Can Use Stories

Now that we have a method for eliciting stories, and even for "truthing" them, how can they be used in public policymaking? Traditional cultures have used storytelling as a form of decision-making, and many still do. Jack Zimmerman, in *The Way of Council*, tells a story about a young Native American man who left his reservation, returning many years later. His grandfather was a member of the Council of Elders, and invited him to come as a witness to a council to decide on a mineral and land proposal from the federal government. The young man respectfully sat behind his grandfather, who began by carefully unwrapping a pipestem "talking stick", and telling a story the man remembered from childhood. His grandfather passed on the talking stick, and each elder in turn told his or her story. The young man grew restless, waiting for the debate to begin on the proposal. But when the stick came around to his grandfather again, there was a long silence, at the end of which the elders, as if on signal, suddenly all looked into each other's eyes slowly and deliberately, and then got up and left without a word. When they had gone, the man asked his grandfather why they had not taken up the proposal and made a decision. His Grandfather replied that they had.
"I didn't hear any debate, and I certainly didn't hear any decision," the man responded.
"Then you weren't listening," replied his grandfather. "In council, one listens to the silences between the words with the ears of a rabbit."
"You mean the council took up the proposal and reached a decision, in the silences?"
"And in the stories."

Screening-level Data Collection

Public participation is about helping to collect information from diverse sources. Environmental monitoring programs, for example, have used volunteers for many years to collect data for water quality, shoreline inventories, pollution monitoring and other data needs. Story can enhance environmental monitoring.   At a screening level, personal stories of place provide information about historical trends and environmental conditions. A number of programs in the Puget Sound region are collecting stories of residents in watersheds as a tool for identifying ecological knowledge. Monitoring programs can also benefit from reviewing the stories of local residents before developing monitoring plans. One project found important historical population "data" in the stories of an elder native woman who knew fine details about the time when there were still many salmon in a river, and where they would be found.

Traditional Ecological Knowledge

Traditional Ecological Knowledge has emerged as both a field of study and methods for incorporating indigenous "knowing" into scientific assessments. Based in biological and physical sciences and using ethnographic techniques, TEK provides a fascinating, proven way of developing a relationship between the lived stories of place and scientific data to be used for policy decisions. Much of the groundbreaking work has been done with First Nations in Canada, particularly with northern Canadian Inuit, but also in Central and South America and the South Pacific islands.

In the 1970's and 80's, scientists claimed that Northern gray whale populations were too low to continue subsistence hunting by the Inuit. The Inuit claimed that the scientific numbers were too low, not an accurate reflection of the population, based on their indigenous knowledge through hundreds of years of cultural and hunting history. Putting pressure on the International Whaling

Commission for further evaluation of the populations resulted in a joint effort among scientists and Inuit. The combination of science and the traditional knowledge of the Inuit, at least in part stored in an oral tradition, resulted in defining whale population numbers that proved closer to the Inuit estimate, and allowed for continued hunting and better management.

Based on this and other successes, methods have been developed to incorporate local knowledge into statutory requirements such as for EIS processes. Some EIS processes have been very successful at incorporating a human ecology (social and cultural factors) into environmental assessments. Traditional knowledge-based systems possess "base-line' or historical data, often of sufficient temporal length to cover several population cycles (where time is measured in 70 or 80 year spans). And it is not only in Native American or First Nations experience that this knowledge is found: anyone who lives with the land has a story to tell. Recently we encountered a landowner during a scoping process for flood control on a major western river, who pointed out very succinctly the effects of backflow from the river on tributaries at different river levels, and how this was affecting spawning areas for fish and bank erosion, effects that were not clearly apparent from the hydrologic data.

And Traditional Ecological Knowledge contained in stories can be used to value ecosystem components; that is, to identify key species of plants, animals, water systems, etc. for use in focusing environmental assessments. Questions of value may have several answers from social, cultural, spiritual, economic and ecological perspectives. An example is in the development of siting criteria where the weighting of individual criteria has social as well as ecological components.

Integrating Story: An Applied Model

Stories affect every aspect of our lives – personally and professionally. Whether we wish to learn why something has always been done a certain way or about the historical use of a resource, stories can support or challenge scientific investigations. Stories are an essential human method of communicating. They help us hold the paradox between truth and metaphor, between what we know to be true and what we experience as reality. They also allow us to communicate ambiguity. So, how can we use story and the gold mine of information it provides for environmental and natural resource research, community building, policy development and decision-making?

Below is a model we have used in our work that has proven to be effective. Imagine if you will, a circle that emulates a compass with '0' being North. For the purpose of our journey we will be traveling in a clockwise direction. Let us begin then with

Step 0. Defining the Question. This is the most important part of our work. In order to be able to identify the patterns, we need to know what it is we want to know. This may be quite obvious, or it may take some preliminary investigations to determine the question. Clarity is critical here. If there is ambiguity in your questions, there will be ambiguity in your data. For example, if you want to know people's experiences with the erosion of a certain hillside you will want to ask questions about what changes have been seen in the landscape over the past 10-25 years. However, if you are examining underlying problems within an agency you'll want to ask about how people view it now and how they would like it to be. **(N)**

Step 1. Collecting the Information. Hearing and Deeply Listening to the Stories. Discerning the Information that is Pertinent to the Question. Following some initial investigation to identify stakeholders, you can use personal interviews and facilitated dialogue to collect people's stories and research local knowledge. Leave plenty of time for this work. Several sessions may be required. This step can easily be incorporated into scoping meetings for EIS processes. Take care to keep the process from moving too fast. In some circumstances it is optimal for these meetings to be held before the EIS "clock" is started. **(NE)**

Step 2. Evaluate if Patterns Emerge. As you listen to multiple stories you will begin to notice whether or not patterns emerge. If some facts continue to be repeated they can serve as the basis for further investigations. Likewise, if there is conflicting information, further analysis may be warranted. **(E)**

Step 3. Investigate Learnings (screening information). Use the patterns that emerge as the basis for further investigations. Patterns help you to ascertain the validity of your data. The nature of these investigations will vary depending upon the type of information being sought. **(SE)**

Step 4. Integrate Results Into a Database for Decision-making.
How does the information gathered from the stories correlate with scientific data? Integrating your data sets creates a powerful tool for building consensus around issues about which people with different agendas or concerns feel passionate. **(SW)**

Step 5. Review the Information with Participants. One of the most powerful, yet often overlooked tools public agencies and organizations have is reporting back to stakeholders what it is they have learned from their interactions together and how the information they have gathered will be used. This step goes a long way towards establishing trust and goodwill. **(W)**

Step 6. Develop Policy and Plans; Incorporate Data. The final step on your journey is to develop policies and plans that incorporate both scientific and experiential data. Often this initial cycle will lead to additional questions in need of clarification, and your journey begins again at Step 0. Notice that this cycle is iterative, and thus fits into processes of adaptive resource management. **(NW)**

We have learned that the role of the facilitator/moderator is crucial in this process. The facilitator's role is to keep the conversation aligned with the initial questions, to assure that each person is heard, and to monitor whether participants abide by group agreements. While any number of methods can be used to elicit information, our experience indicates that encouraging people to share their stories in a group will stimulate a dialogue that accomplishes much of the "truthing" and screening of information that needs to occur.   Equally important is to have a broad representation of stakeholders at the table, so a natural filtering and merging of the technical and experiential information can occur. While this may appear cumbersome at first, the rapport that begins to develop as people tell their stories and build shared meaning is invaluable. We frequently find that the most difficult part of using this model is bringing the meetings to a close, as people become filled with energy when they feel someone is really listening.

Try using a "story and dialogue" format for your next meeting and let us know how it goes!

For further information, or to simply to share your stories, please contact David Sale or Sandra Davis at:

ECO Resource Group
2536 Alki Ave. SW, #160
Seattle, WA 98116
(206) 855-0590
Fax (206) 855-0591
story@ecoresourcegroup.com