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How to Be an Effective Forestry Advocate

There is so much going on in forestry today that only short-timers can afford to ignore the scene. It's easy to let others worry about the fate of forestry; what ever happens will happen and one more voice can not possibly make a difference. But nothing could be further from the truth. Every voice counts and if you're in forestry for the long haul, you simply can't afford to let others make decisions for you. Showing up is important, but decisions are affected by those who *speaks* up.

Getting involved is more than just showing up. People who want to make a difference learn how to become effective advocates. In other words, they learn how to support a cause and argue in its favor; to clarify the positions of others, especially of those who are like-minded. Effective advocates know their 'cause' well enough to speak clearly and convincingly about it on a moments notice. It isn't necessary to remember a speech, or to fall back on over-used clichés. The trick is to quickly organize your thinking, in three parts, before taking the floor: 1) Tell them what you're going to say, 2) Say it, and then 3) Tell them what you said. No matter the issue, or your position on it, if you always organize your comments to conform to the three-part formula that every student of public-speaking learns, you will never get stuck at the podium trying to remember what you wanted to say. And, even those who disagree with you will appreciate your organization and clarity.

Every one of us has witnessed the poor soul who takes the microphone, riled with well-meaning intentions. He starts out fine, but within moments it is clear that his brain has disengaged from his mouth, he begins to back-pedal, repeating himself, trying desperately to find the thread he's lost. What starts out as an opportunity to make a solid point ends up an embarrassing, aimless mission of a man trying to save face.

'Tell them what you're going to say, say it, then tell them what you said.'" Works every time.

Another tool of the effective advocate is to understand opposing views and the perspective of those who disagree with you. It is not necessary to agree with someone in order to understand his or her point of view. But it is helpful to attempt to understand why someone does not see the world the way you do. Some years ago I was involved in a statewide forest planning process during which we asked participants to select a series of 'outcomes' they would like to see concerning how we use and manage forests. Although we expected to discover some very drastic differences between those representing forest industry and those we would characterize as 'environmentalists,' we were astounded to discover that both groups want the same thing: healthy, well-managed forest ecosystems, now and for future generations. This discovery underscores another aspect of an effective advocate: someone who emphasizes the similarities -- not differences -- of groups that are expected to oppose one another. It is much easier to win public opinion on points that bring people together than on points that divide.

A good advocate always takes the high-ground in a dispute. In other words, when discrepancies evolve into name calling, finger pointing and other divisive moods, the opportunity to negotiate is over, and a wise advocate will walk away rather than get sucked into the fray. Remember, the types of disputes that are apt to engage those who depend on forests are disputes that happen in public settings. Usually only one or two people, certainly no more than a few, are arguing in front of an audience. What observers remember most is the behavior of the disputants, not what they said. For this reason, a smart advocate knows when to disengage and

walk away, and what observers recall is that the person who took the high-ground avoided a nasty attack, and in doing so came out looking like the ‘winner.’

A well-known trick of highly effective advocates is the always predict the outcome of a meeting, or hearing, or whatever is to transpire. Know the people who will be there; figure out who will be sitting next to whom, and try to play through in your mind exactly what is going to happen. It isn’t always possible to predict the outcome, but taking the time to mentally prepare is the best way to avoid surprises. Another way to look at it is this: it is impossible to exert control over something that is as much a surprise to you as it is to others. By attempting to predict the outcome, you have at least considered a series of alternatives that no one else has. The result: you have much greater control than others, able to quickly seize opportunities and avoid traps.

Some other tips:

Is the cause you’re advocating for worth your effort? Sometimes people get involved in disputes because others tell them to. But being an effective advocate takes time, so choose your battles and learn how to say ‘no.’

Think about how you want people to change as a result of understanding your point of view. Failure to do this is one of the primary reasons advocacy fails. Make sure people are clear about the message and how you expect them to use it.

Never, under any circumstances, take an argument to a personal level. When a disputant starts making personal attacks, it is usually an admission of defeat, and it is time to walk away. Remember, the vast majority of people are watching, not arguing, and they’ll remember that you didn’t take the bait.

It is OK to accept positions that are different from your own (one of the great things about America). In other words, a constructive way to tie things off when the debate comes to an impasse is the ‘agree to disagree.’

Always think before you speak. Don’t ever allow the brain to disengage from the mouth. And if it does, say ‘thank you’ and take your seat.

Make your points clearly and concisely, and always speak with passion and enthusiasm. People remember demeanor, but they forget content.

Never threaten or bluff. Most people today are sophisticated enough to figure out when bluster begins to cloud reason. And, a threat may work in a bar brawl, but it is inappropriate in a setting where people are trying to understand and resolve environmental issues.

Don’t get into fights you think you can win if you’re not sure the other guy will give up. In other words, it does not matter how powerful and persuasive your points of view, some people refuse to give up so there is absolutely no point engaging them in the first place.

When advocating for your position on forests and forest use, lead the debate don’t follow, and always speak up if someone is not adequately speaking for you. Speak only for yourself unless you can clearly state the positions of others and you have been authorized by them to do so.

Finally, it is easy to question authority without being authoritative. You don’t need to preface your comments by telling the audience that you’re a logger or a forester, you get up every morning at four, and your life is difficult. Believe it or not, people want to know what you think, but not after you have ‘washed your laundry’ in front of the group. The most effective advocates I have ever seen are people who are not afraid to *show* who they are, faults and all. Why? Because they know the way to a person’s head is through her heart, and a good advocate easily reminds us that we’re all human and -- like it or not -- we are in the same boat.