

EDUCATION, NOT ADVOCACY at the 2002 ANROE Conference

Laurel Devaney (USF&W) and Lilly Goodman (ADF&G) delivered a well received presentation on “Education, Not Advocacy” at the 2002 ANROE conference “Discovering and Defining Environmental Education in Alaska”. The subject of the talk was the inspiration of Robin Dublin and focused on ensuring that presentations in environmental education are not used to push an agenda or a set of values. The talk concentrated on 1) exploring differences between “environmentalism” and environmental education; 2) determining what are the goals of environmental education; 3) exploring how bias and advocacy can appear in education; and 4) giving participants an opportunity to discuss and practice tools and ideas presented during the talk.

After a brief introduction, Laurel launched off the presentation with a spirited educational game in the style of “The Wheel of Fortune”. The object of Laurel’s game was to obtain as much money as possible, a goal achieved by spinning a chance wheel and answering questions. A spin of the wheel could land a participant the opportunity to answer questions like “which of the following has the smallest footprint on the environment? a) tourism on the Kenai peninsula, b) drilling for oil in Prudhoe Bay or c) salmon fishing in Bristol Bay?” and “which of the following is a benefit of oil drilling in Alaska? a) better sanitation in rural villages b) more money for schools c) more jobs for Alaskans or d) all of the above?” The answers were of course b and d respectively. If a player was so unlucky as to land on “Regulations”, he or she would lose large amounts of money. Landing on “Law Suits from Environmentalists” was even unluckier and more costly and allowed the participant ample amounts of sympathy from Laurel the game host. Meanwhile, the rest of the audience held up signs that read either “BIAS!” or “BALANCE” when so inspired. The participants enjoyed the game, as well as Laurel’s brilliant acting and afterwards were able to discuss what sort of red flags alerted them to the fact that the presentation was biased.

Lilly then followed up Laurel’s game show with a different approach. A seemingly less biased presentation on caribou used both Power Point and a Project Wild activity (“Migration Headache”) to push an agenda that was anti-oil drilling in Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. This more subtle advocacy-oriented presentation elicited more discussion from the participants, many of whom realized that most of us have been guilty at one time or another of using education to push an agenda.

The remainder of the time was spent critically evaluating education materials for their use in a quality environmental education program. The participants were broken into five groups, each of which evaluated materials about a relevant Alaska issue: oil drilling in Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, wolf control, catch and release fishing, land use ethics and the Pollock fishery. The groups were given a set of questions to guide their exploration of the materials and then presented key points of their discussion to the entire group. During this discussion, participants discovered some key issues such as the importance of realizing one’s own individual biases, the importance of identifying sources of facts, being wary of subjective language and pictures that target emotions and being aware that some materials can target a narrow range of values and cultures.

Overall, the presentation was very well received. Many participants remarked that they had never thought about these issues before and that they were inspired to reevaluate their own presentations. Several also noted that the presentations could have benefited from even more time. We look forward to the opportunity to explore these issues with others again and bring in even more viewpoints to extend the discussion.