

# Seven Habits of Highly Effective Lake Science Communicators

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The title for this article is adapted from Stephen R. Covey's popular, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, first published in 1989. The book has sold more than 15 million copies in 38 languages and was ranked by *Time Magazine* in 2011 as one of the 25 most influential business management books. Covey presents seven character principles that he considers universal and timeless. We offer seven suggestions for lake science communicators that will sound familiar because, like Covey's habits, they are timeless and widely applicable. The trick is to apply them in combination and build them into a community-based social marketing campaign that leads people to take positive actions to benefit lakes. The goal is to *change cultural norms* when it comes to lake stewardship. For example, maintaining a vegetated buffer (rather than a lawn) should become the only accepted shorefront option for residents of a lake, regardless of local shoreline regulations.

We will start by explaining each of the seven "habits" and end by showing how collectively they can become an effective campaign that makes a difference.

## Science Communication Habit #1: Keep it Short

An *effective* message is a *simple* message. The goal is to have listeners understand and remember an action they can take to protect water quality. Think in sound bites, because sound bites work. Occasionally it is useful to cite scientific notations, but this information will not be part of the take home message that the shorefront stakeholders remember. In the case of reducing phosphorus runoff, we want to emphasize actions such as "Restore your Shore" or "Mimic

Mother Nature," rather than loading on the detailed specifics of the phosphorus absorption capacity of soil! Slogans need to be short, catchy – and fit on a T-shirt (Figure 1).

Another example of a punchy slogan is "Great Lakes, Great Stakes!," the heading for a series of stories inspired by the Institute for Journalism and Natural Resources, an independent, public interest nonprofit group running training expeditions for journalists. The short slogan serves as the hook to get people to read the journalists' stories on invasive fish species, endangered native species, and water quality. Most importantly, the slogan "Great Lakes, Great Stakes!" is positive. Negative tactics can work against success. Furthermore, if people think an issue is a lost cause, and their actions won't matter, then they likely won't bother.

Perhaps we should take a lesson from political campaigns that use signs along roads to convey information. Why not promote, "My wooded shoreline protects the lake and property values"?

## Science Communication Habit #2: Keep it Simple

Few people know the word "eutrophication," nor do they need to in order to become lake stewards who role model effective behavior. As lake communicators, we

don't need to use technical or scientific words when selling an idea about how to care for lakes. Regarding the process of eutrophication, the point is that no one wants "smelly water and fish kills" or "green and slimy beaches" – these words paint a picture everyone – legislators, kids, the media, and local policymakers – can imagine. And the simple message that prevention costs a lot less and works better is all you need to say

## Science Communication Habit #3: A Picture is Worth a Hundred Words

The main point of habit three is that most people are visual learners. Paragraphs of text are either a turnoff, or are ignored. Use a photo that draws the reader's attention, and use a short



Figure 1. Create and wear a logo to foster stewardship behavior (or best practices) on your lake.

caption (Habit 1, *Keep it Short*) to convey your message (Habit 2, target the *Keep it Simple*). Consider replacing paragraphs in your existing water quality brochure (i.e., 100 words) with a photo and caption. Images speak to us in multiple ways: suggesting renewal, relaxation or contemplative experiences, excitement, or fun with family and friends. Although images of nasty algal blooms can convey an important message for stewardship, emphasizing the positive with images of happy people taking care of the lake will win more friends and get across what we want folks to do. Professional marketers have found that people are attracted to photos that emphasize faces. Communication consultants recommend using pictures of people solving problems, especially in the company of friends and family, all with smiles on their faces (Figure 2).

**Science Communication Habit #4:  
Tell a Story**

Stories link ideas, concepts, objects, and relationships in memorable ways that stimulate interest. Stories are important

marketing tools (check out one man's experiment to measure the monetary value of stories: <http://thedoublethink.com/2010/05/the-value-of-stories/>). By attaching stories to objects for sale, the seller was able to fetch a much higher price. Good marketing stories have the following characteristics:

1. A clear message is embedded upfront.
2. Interesting, identifiable characters are featured.
3. A predicament or a problem is posed.
4. A relevant, timely context connects the characters and actions.
5. Causality or effects (both intended and unintended) of actions, or surprises or unexpected elements are used to capture attention.
6. They are short (Habit #1) non-technical (Habit #2), and photos help illustrate key concepts.

An example of an inspiring story involved a Maine lake association where one member was proactive during the decadal comprehensive plan process in

his town. This individual was appointed to the Comprehensive Plan Committee. The lake had water quality in the 90th percentile for Maine, but long-term monitoring data suggested a decline in deep water dissolved oxygen and in transparency as measured by Secchi disc readings. At first skeptical, the association voted unanimously to propose a dramatic building setback from 100 feet to 250 feet. So, first a committee proposed this increased setback, then the lake association members voted to add this to the comprehensive plan, and lastly the town then voted unanimously to accept the restriction. This dramatic story shows shoreline owners do recognize that stricter regulations are in their best interests.

**Science Communication Habit #5:  
Think Win-Win-Win**

Habit #5 comes directly from Steven Covey: The best way to sell an idea, product, or service is for everyone to get something from the outcome. For example, there are no losers from planting a buffer strip (except perhaps



Figure 2. Young people enjoy learning, sharing and modeling what they can do to protect water quality on their lake; here they collect plankton to study.

the lawn fertilizer industry). Buffer strips reduce rainwater runoff, protect water quality, maintain property values, protect wildlife habitat, increase privacy for the homeowner, require less maintenance, screen noise, reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and provide cooling shade for homes and near shore nursery for aquatic life. Local businesses depend on high-quality lakes and property tax revenues reflect the state of our lakes, so the vitality of the community itself is another “win.”

There is even evidence that when a forested buffer strip replaces a lawn, there are fewer leeches (as they like fresh lawn clippings) and less likelihood of invasive plants (due to more shade over the water). Recent research has even shown that Lyme disease vectors and the incidence of the disease are more common in highly developed areas, versus undeveloped or natural sites (*LakeLine*, spring 2013, pp. 8-14).

Other winners from good landscaping practices in the shorefront include the town (less work for the code enforcement officer), the state environmental agency (fewer beach closures due to bacteria levels), and the economy (maintaining better recreational opportunities for tourism). Wildlife benefits as well from vegetated buffers, as they provide travel corridors for wildlife as well as resting and nesting protective space.

#### **Science Communication Habit #6: Begin with the End in Mind**

It doesn't matter if you are a writer, classroom teacher, storyteller, marketer, newscaster, lake educator, or someone writing a love letter, you need to have a purpose in mind when you begin. It isn't enough to offer scientific facts about lakes or phosphorus or invasive plants. The bottom line is an action and an outcome. Therefore, the 6th habit is to remember that your goal is to focus on specific positive actions people can take for their own benefit (think win-win-win, Habit #5). These actions are the punchlines of the stories and messages (refer to item #1 in the list under Habit #4).

#### **Science Communication Habit #7: The Power of 7**

Research shows that people integrate and use a lesson after hearing it seven times (<http://www.smallbizsurvival.com/2010/11/repeat-your-message-seven->

[times.html](http://www.smallbizsurvival.com/2010/11/repeat-your-message-seven-times.html)). Subscribe to the old adage, “Tell them what you are going to say, say it, and then tell them what you've said.” Take-home messages need to be at the beginning, in the middle, and at the end of your lake science education campaign. There are many creative ways to repeat messages – via email, flyer, public television, and personal visits. Moreover, we typically offer the lake association or planning board or legislature a presentation once a decade, forgetting that new people move in, or are elected, and even the ones that stay, forget, unless messages are repeated annually. Communication efforts are never “once and done”; it is more like “seven times a year, every year.”

#### **Using the 7 Habits and Social Marketing to Change Community Norms on Lakes**

As lake science communicators we seek to establish cultural norms that conserve lake resources, wildlife habitat, and outdoor recreational opportunities. Making a lakefront property look like suburbia doesn't make sense for lakes, wildlife, property owners, or community well-being, but few of us recognize this until it is pointed out to us. However, once people understand, they are eager to do the right thing because they care deeply about their home lakes. Specific social marketing techniques like using incentives and prompting people to take action increase the likelihood of improved land use.

A burgeoning example of social marketing for lake and habitat protection is Maine's LakeSmart Program (Figure 3). Designed and initially managed by the Maine Department of Environmental Protection, LakeSmart is beginning its first season, 2013, under the nonprofit leadership of the Maine Lakes Society (formerly Maine Congress

of Lakes Association). Already 36 lake and watershed groups have participated and signed on to this homeowner education and recognition program; where providing key knowledge leads to desirable actions. LakeSmart is a proven program that: (1) protects lake water quality, shoreland integrity, and littoral habitat; (2) protects and enhances outdoor recreational opportunities; (3) rewards conservation action and shifts practice norms toward protection; and (4) is a peer-to-peer, hands-on means to model Maine shoreland regulations and increase compliance. Blue-and-white LakeSmart signs, presented to award winners, identify good lake stewardship. The signs raise awareness, model best practices for others, and stimulate the spread of sustainable land use throughout an entire lake community.

Complacency will not protect our lakes as development and recreational pressures continue to increase, and climate change intensifies the water cycle.



Figure 3. The LakeSmart sign recognizes best practices on the shoreline.

In economically tight times, providing incentives to encourage conservation and rewarding stewardship is not only more palatable, it's pragmatic. Combined with simple messages, graphic illustrations, a win-win-win strategy bringing all stakeholders into the outreach, and leveraging stakeholder commitment to unique and special places, we can launch a contagious set of behaviors. *Nevertheless*, the slow degradation of lake shorelines with consequent declines in water quality is not inevitable. Successfully selling naturalized norms can guide communities toward sustainable behaviors. Widespread acceptance of these win-win-win norms can lead human communities to sustainable coexistence with lake ecosystems.

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