

President's Message: Science, Politics, and Policy: Environmental Nexus

Paul B. Looney

The theme of the 2012 NAEP Annual Conference—Science, Politics, and Policy: Environmental Nexus—was developed as a local initiative. Like all previous themes, there are also national and international aspects. This is a great theme for the National Association of Environmental Professionals. We pride ourselves, after all, with being a multidisciplinary association impacting all aspects of the professions. A review of membership reveals scientists, as well as lawyers and engineers. We are educators and we are policy makers. I can think of no other professional association that covers as many aspects of the environmental professions. No other single-issue association can provide the audience of NAEP with the information we need to do our job. Even the associated Certification as an Environmental Professional embodies the multidimensional aspects of the profession.

The message of the conference is simple; the use of the word *nexus* provides a good starting point to better understand all we are and all we do. Defined as either a link or tie or alternately as a core or center—*nexus* makes clear the intertwined nature of science, politics, and policy in our daily practice. The NAEP and our membership really do act as a core or center for the expertise that is present in the environmental professions in this country. Our tie or link to nearly every aspect of life in these United States is also something that cannot be denied.

The topics covered in the conference also provide an excellent example of the variety of aspects of the environment that we professionals are responsible for as we practice our craft: brownfields, wetlands, the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), cultural resources, visual resources, energy, land and water management, public participation, transportation, and professional development.

These subjects are only some aspects of the environmental nexus we need to understand and to implement scientifically while observing the policy implications and being aware of the political winds of change. To date, we have never actually provided the full spectrum of the professions at a single conference. The spectrum of practice is vast, the interconnections complex.

Some aspects of the professions do not receive annual recognition. In many instances, this is because of a lack of volunteers to champion a particular area of practice. I believe that any NAEP member has the capability to mine their personal contacts to put together a coherent, interesting panel discussion or set of papers on any subject in the professions. There is no limit to what is presented at the conferences. The only limitation is the number of volunteers available to assemble the best program possible.

This limitation is not just national; we have had some great representation by our international pioneers at our conferences for several years. I refer to them as pioneers because they are involved in NAEP as we are still developing an international program.

Holding a conference with all of the areas of practice represented is a goal that we need to achieve. I dream of that conference with attendance in the thousands as we grow to a membership in the tens of thousands. Those are extremely heady thoughts as NAEP currently counts nearly 1,000 members, nearly 3,000 affiliated members, and another 5,000–10,000 who are aware of our existence. We have a long way to travel to achieve that dream.

It is funny. Last week, I attended a government agency meeting in Washington, DC, dealing with environmental issues and discovered how much more visibility we still need. The number of those who did not know about us was surprisingly large among the attendees. Where are we missing in getting the message out? It is certainly not a lack of talent that restricts our message. Our members and founders are some of the most renowned names in the environmental science and policy realm.

NAEP individuals have influenced the development of environmental policy and law in this and a number of countries. Some countries are not as lucky as we, but NAEP members have worked hard to provide the basis for environmental policy and science to provide that link toward clean air, clean water, natural resource protection, and an improving quality of life in countries like the Philippines and China and in several European nations. Whether we are recognized in the media or popular culture does not matter. Our members continue to provide significant support for others.

The Zirzow Award that we present at each conference is named after Charles F. Zirzow, one of the founders of NAEP, an environmental engineer and the namesake of a mountain on Antarctica. Another famous member is Lynton K. Caldwell. One of the principal architects of the National Environmental Policy Act, he was a prominent member of the NAEP and one of the early proponents for the Association.

Our membership includes some of the best and brightest minds in the environmental field. We have prolific authors, legal wizards, policy leaders, government agency directors, and many others too numerous to mention who are part of the cadre of individuals who have contributed mightily to the progress of the environmental sciences and the recognition of the environment as a major piece of the puzzle of the amazing quality of life that we enjoy in the United States. Yet, our members are not stars of the media or household names. Our members are the quiet leaders who have helped to make this country the worldwide leader in environmental issues.

In previous articles, I have referred to NAEP as the training ground for leaders. I stand by that statement. It is an amazing thing for me to meet up with members who from year to year attend our conferences and have furthered their careers. I have also repeated that these people gain career recognition through association with NAEP. Often it is because of their added energy and enthusiasm in volunteering for some aspect of the Association that they gain recognition in their business.

These people are active in making their career amount to something important. I want to emphasize something here: These leaders have seen their share of career impasses. Many of our past directors and officers have faced unemployment and yet continued to serve the Association unswervingly. Each has been successful in making that transition to the next career level. We have had conference planners find themselves temporarily in search of employment and succeed in that search while continuing to work for their associates. Two conference planners have had to miss their own conference to give birth. These are dedicated individuals!

These leaders have made the success of the Association part of who they are professionally. I would personally vouch for them in a reference letter. I think it is important that the Association recognize these excellent individuals.

If you have not attended a conference before, these folks are the normal people roaming the halls, sitting next to you at

lunch, sharing a drink after hours. These people each have a fascinating story to tell. Each is a friend in waiting.

Several years back when Gary Kelman was president, he introduced a "speed dating"-type concept to the conference. He wanted to have people get to know one another in a way that was slightly beyond normal small talk. We all sat in chairs opposite each other and for five minutes spoke to someone who we did not know. It was amazing who was there. For me, who had just begun attending conferences, it was an immediate immersion into the culture of NAEP. Through it, I made some immediate friends. It provided me with some contacts who shared professional expertise. It also provided me with a quick understanding that I needed to just start talking to people around me.

Of all of the professional organizations I have been involved in, this by far is the Association with the broadest career interests. The professionals here are passionate about what they do, and they populate every aspect of the professions. The attendees of

each conference work in the most amazing places. Some are famous individuals, some are small companies making a big impact, some are small companies with amazing employees. I am always fascinated by the people I meet at our conferences.

Do not forget the sponsors and exhibitors. Their support makes our conferences successful. Their support also brings stimulating information to the conferences. Again, the list is long and illustrious. What I find so helpful is that each exhibitor has something new for me to see: a new innovation, a new application of technology, new project experience that is applicable to my clients. I enjoy roaming the exhibit hall and talking with the exhibitors. I also get to talk with members.

The conferences are our best benefit of membership. They are where we all understand our niche in the world. They always buoy my spirits and make me glad to be a part of this great and historic association.