

Community Engagement Lab: Assessing Interest in a Participatory Conservation Blog

Introduction: The current culture of education values learning and memorization of an arbitrary and prescribed curriculum, sometimes lacking in engaging activities. Our children can easily graduate from school with no sense of their connection to the natural world, or to a diversity of cultural perspectives. Kessler (2000) suggests the need for education that supports children's yearning for deep connection, creative drive and their search for meaning and purpose (p. 17). Swaisgood and Sheppard make a plea for honoring positive rituals and including the public in scientific research in order to promote a sense of hope in the conservation biology community (2010). Promoting understanding and chronicling conservation work through "storytelling" to encourage broader environmental protection is an emerging area of social media (Voices for the Lake website). The KidSpirit blog embraces these fundamental ideas to connect students, teachers and researchers in various communities throughout the world, encourage and honor student creativity, and enhance the search for meaning and purpose while honoring community-based conservation efforts. My hope is that it can reinforce hope, encourage environmental action and help to heal the emotional wounds inherent in a way of life disconnected from nature (Buzzell, 2000).

Goals: The goals of this phase of the project were as follows: determine audience interest in using the KidSpirit blog, assess audience knowledge and beliefs about conservation, gauge the sense of hope or despair of the audience concerning the current state of the environment and conservation, and determine which types of on-line activities the audience thinks they would most benefit from in their conservation and education work.

Audience: The audience was eighty percent Earth Expedition participants and in-country partners and twenty percent other conservation professionals, including teachers, scientists, conservation professionals, and others.

Tools: The tools used were the KidSpirit blog (<http://kidlnks.blogspot.com/>) and the Conservation Values Survey (Appendix 1).

Predictions: It was predicted that Earth Expedition alumni would support the use of the blog as a means to connect throughout the world, teachers would report interest in using the blog as a place to spread and post stories from their classrooms and projects, and other conservation professionals would report some interest in using the blog.

Methods: The KidSpirit blog was created to initiate a participatory blog for sharing successful conservation stories. A brief story and pictures of a community based hawksbill sea turtle conservation project in Belize were posted on the blog. Earth Expedition participants in the Belize 1, 2011 trip took part in this project. The Conservation Values survey (Appendix 1) was created using a free version of Survey Monkey and following Survey Monkey Guidelines (Survey Monkey 2010). A project description with links to the blog and survey was sent out to fifty Earth Expedition alumni and posted on several GFP online cohorts. The same email was sent to about twenty colleagues in the education and conservation fields who are not Earth Expedition alumni. Thirty individuals completed the survey. Data were analyzed using available tools on Survey Monkey and through study of individual responses.

Results

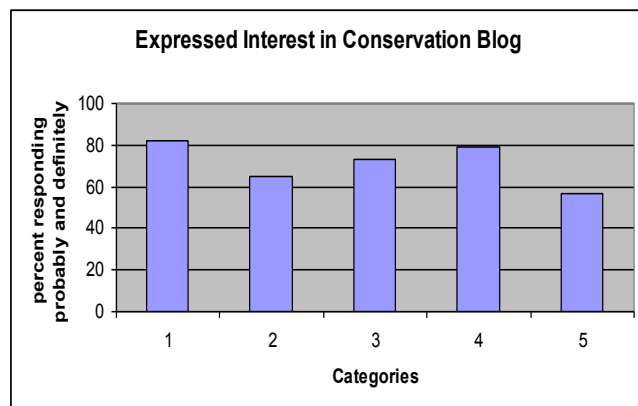


Table 1: Results of Conservation Values Survey

Table 1 Key: Survey Question #10
Categories
1. Reading about and viewing photos and video of international small scale conservation efforts.
2. Having a platform to share your own positive stories about conservation.
3. Meeting people (in an online format) with similar conservation interests.
4. Gaining access to information to help guide your students or other stakeholders in conservation efforts.
5. Participating in online dialogues about selected conservation topics.

Results

The survey results show a high level of interest for five possible ways to utilize the blog (Tables 1). The highest interest aligned with the main purpose of the blog, to share positive conservation stories (Table 1, Category 1). Interest in accessing information rated nearly as high (Table 1, Category 4). Making connections to people with similar conservation interests also rated high (Category 3).

Survey respondents rated their knowledge of domestic conservation issues high, but knowledge of international conservation issues much lower (Appendix 1, questions 4 and 6). Respondents reported being generally hopeful about their personal role and the role of current students in conservation, but less hopeful regarding more specific aspects of conservation, namely protection of endangered species and preservation of biodiversity (Appendix 1, question 9). Numerous respondents had the highest level of hope for all categories. Conversely, no respondents reported the lowest level of hope for all categories.

Discussion

The purpose of the survey was to determine whether a blog presenting examples of successful small scale, community-based conservation efforts was of interest to the target audience, and moreover if respondents felt that use of the blog would promote a more hopeful outlook towards conservation. It also sought to gauge the extent to which teachers would use this blog with their students. The data suggest that the goals of the blog are aligned with the interests of all demographics of the audience.¹ Over fifty percent of those surveyed were teachers, suggesting a high level of interest for integrating this type of blog into educational programs. Though the original goal of the blog was sharing stories to promote positive thinking and action, other benefits may be achieved. For example, student motivation for learning increases when technology is integrated into the curriculum, including outdoor and environmental education learning. Cheng et al (2011) found quantitative gains in learning for students in an environmental education program when coupled with a WebQuest² component. This suggests that not only can the blog provide a positive forum to encourage conservation efforts, it may result in a platform to increase student learning of environmental issues.

Reflections

The Survey data offer support for the goals of the participatory conservation blog and suggest that awareness of the successful efforts of others can promote positive thinking and action. This in turn bolsters further development of the KidSpirit blog. Next steps in the project will focus on creating conservation stories with my own students and guiding them to produce stories to post on the blog, reaching out to schools in Belize through Earth Expedition partners to encourage participation, and using other social media tools, such as Facebook, to broaden the base of participants. A challenge to this project will be finding ways for rural communities in developing countries to participate when they may not have access to the internet or computer technology. The use of mobile phones may hold some promise. Increasing the impact of the blog will depend also on making connections with other researchers and organizations engaging in social media, for example, Hawksbill Hope, a nonprofit supporting sea turtle research in Belize.

References Cited

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¹ Because of limitations on my Survey Monkey account it was not possible to disaggregate data enough to know which audience groups supported which uses of the blog, i.e. if the 82% of respondents who were Earth Expedition alumni correlated to the 81% with high interest in Category 1. It suffices to know that across all audience categories, there was a high interest in this and several other categories.

² WebQuest is an internet based student driven program that allows students to follow leads to gain information on line.

Appendix 1: Conservation Values Survey (<http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/ZMVCTKD>)**Demographics****1. Which description best fits who you are?**

Teacher K-12

Teacher University

Conservation Professional

Scientist

Other: _____

2. Choose the answer that best describes what you do.

I teach students about conservation.

I do conservation research.

I create conservation policy.

I teach something other than conservation.

Other _____

3. Where are you from? Please type the City and Country.**4. How much do you know about conservation issues in your country?**

little knowledge

average knowledge

a lot of knowledge

expert level of knowledge

5. Have you ever participated in an Earth Expedition?

Yes or no

Page 2:**Knowledge and Interests****6. How much do you know about conservation issues in other countries?**

little knowledge

average knowledge

a lot of knowledge

expert level of knowledge

7. How much interest do you have in the following?

	no interest (1)	some interest (2)	average amount of interest (3)	a lot of interest (4)
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Learning about local conservation issues

Learning about international conservation issues

Sharing your knowledge about conservation issues

Learning about how other cultures value conservation

Other:

8. How much interest do you have in the following areas?

	no interest (1)	some interest (2)	average interest (3)	a lot of interest (4)
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Leading student conservation projects

Guiding students in writing about conservation

Sharing conservation projects with students and teachers

Learning about other projects

Other (please specify):

Page 3**Conservation Values****9. How do you feel about the following aspects of conservation?**

	Hopeless (1)	Somewhat hopeless (2)	Somewhat hopeful (3)	Hopeful (4)
protection of endangered species				
preservation of biodiversity				
the role of current students in conservation				
your personal role in conservation				
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10. Rate how much each would make you more hopeful about the state of conservation in the world?				
	not at all (1)	possibly (2)	probably (3)	definitely (4)
Reading about and viewing photos and video of international small scale conservation efforts.				
Having a platform to share your own positive stories about conservation.				
Meeting people (in an online format) with similar conservation interests.				
Gaining access to information to help guide your students or other stakeholders in conservation efforts.				
Participating in online dialogues about selected conservation topics.				
<i>Other (please specify):</i>				