

WESTERN EXTENSION AND SUSTAINABILITY OUTREACH

WHERE HAVE WE BEEN AND WHERE DO WE NEED TO GO?

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BACKGROUND

How important is sustainability outreach to Extension educators in the West? How supportive are state Extension leaders in sustainability education? In January 2017, the National Network for Sustainable Living Education (NNSLE), an initiative of the Association of Natural Resource Extension Professionals (ANREP), administered a national survey seeking answers to these and related questions. Extension directors in every state along with four national Extension associations received a request to send all Extension educators a pre-notice, first survey link, second survey link, and thank you/final contact, following Dillman's Tailored Design Method (2007) for online surveys. Over 1,600 responses were received on the national level, with 1,395 usable responses. When asked to list the top five emerging sustainability issues for their state's respective Extension programs to address, water quality, climate change impacts, and water quantity were ranked highest nationally. This article will take the reader through the results and analysis of the survey for the Western region and show the broad spectrum of responses, and compare them to the rest of the nation.

INTRODUCTION

Sustainability education and outreach have been a hallmark of the National Network for Sustainable Living Education (NNSLE) and its Extension-based members since its inception in 2004. At the beginning, many members were the only Extension professionals in their state working in sustainability programs; but since then, many states

have developed excellent programs that focus on multiple aspects of sustainability, as well as climate science and climate change. NNSLE wanted to gauge the importance of, support for, and emerging issues in sustainability outreach to Extension educators throughout the nation. To understand the extent of and support for these programs, NNSLE administered a national survey seeking answers to these types of questions in January of 2017.

METHODOLOGY

The Sustainability Outreach in Extension: National Survey was developed with input from colleagues attending the 2016 National Extension Sustainability Summit in Portland, Oregon, the Community Development Extension Institute in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, and the National Association of Community Development Extension Professionals conference in Burlington, Vermont. The survey was sent to Extension directors in every state, and also the chairs of the Association of Natural Resources Extension Professionals, National Extension Association of Family and Consumer Sciences, National Association of County Agricultural Agents, and the National Network for Sustainable Living Education. All contacts were made during the month of January, 2017. To ensure that Extension colleagues were all working from the same understanding of sustainability and its attendant principles, the survey included this preface:

"For the purpose of this survey, sustainability is defined in accordance with the National Network for Sustainable Living Education (NNSLE): 'an ethic of stewardship in which

our desire for fulfilling and productive lives is thoughtfully and consciously balanced with the social, economic, and environmental security of life on Earth, now and for future generations.'

Sustainability may have subtle differences in meaning to different people, but it boils down to some very basic concepts:

- *Activities or practices in any given discipline are undertaken with the objective of continuing that activity indefinitely in a way that doesn't deplete the resource(s) the activity depends upon.*
- *Sustainability takes into equal account the social, environmental, and economic consequences of every practice, so that a positive, win-win-win result is most closely approximated.*
- *Nearly every activity or practice, regardless of how small, is related in some degree to a larger issue – such as ground-water depletion or the loss of agricultural lands."*

Of the 1,693 responses received, 1,395 agreed to participate and completed at least 75% of the survey. Almost all respondents were either county/regional educators, state specialists, county directors, or regional specialists. A complete report on the national results including the survey questions asked can be found at https://issuu.com/usuextension/docs/national_needs_complete_report. Of the national respondents who identified their state, 21.12% (n = 252) were from the Western region. This includes Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Hawaii, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming.

RESULTS – WEST VS. NATION

While the questions in the survey and responses attempted to capture as much information on sustainability outreach in Extension as possible, this article will focus on a few key lines of inquiry.

What Are We Doing Well?

When asked what topic areas their state Cooperative Extension system is currently doing a good job at addressing, while taking into account dedicated staff time, programs, curriculum development, fact

sheets, etc., Western states have much in common with the national results. Seven topics were in the top 10 of both the West and nation as a whole. Those included: Nutrition Education, Water Quality, Soil Health, Local Food Systems, Environmental Education, Increasing Youth's Interaction with Nature, and Consumer Education. The top three selected topics were the same for both the West and the nation (Nutrition Education, Water Quality, Soil Health). Nutrition Education was the top selected topic and received almost an identical overall percentage (74.73%, n = 890 and 74%, n = 185 respectively). Three topic areas were different; Western results included Grasslands Stewardship and Management (fourth-most selected), Urban Agriculture (eighth-most selected), and Forest Stewardship and Management (ninth-most selected) whereas, national results contained Health Education (seventh-most selected), Food Access (ninth-most selected), and Economic Development (tenth-most selected).

What Are the Emerging Issues that Should be Addressed?

In listing the top five emerging sustainability issues for their state's respective Extension programs to address, the Western and national results contained four of the same top five topics: Water Quality, Climate Change Impacts, Environmental Education, and Economic Development. The top emerging sustainability issue in the national results was Water Quality (38.70%, n = 442) which was number three for Western states (28.81%, n = 70). The top emerging issue in the Western results was Water Quantity (38.68%, n = 94) which was not in the top five of the national results. The national results included Nutrition Education at number five (24.17%, n = 276).

What Are the Biggest Challenges to Educating About Sustainability in Extension?

Given a pre-set list of possible challenges facing Extension educators throughout the country regarding the topic of sustainability, respondents from the West and the nation ranked the challenges virtually identically. The top five challenges Extension educators felt they faced around the topic of sustainability were:

1. Communication - this included maintaining a clientele base while talking about politically charged issues, how to tie in sustainability with

- various clientele values, etc.;
- 2. Lack of community interest/competing priorities;
- 3. Community collaboration - this included having time to engage and find what is important to communities, a two-way feedback loop between an Extension office and the community;
- 4. Lack of staff professional development;
- 5. Overcoming institutional barriers - this includes needing upper administrative support and the need to expand Extension's traditional role.

Is It Important to Educate Clientele About Sustainability?

Respondents were then asked, "Why do you think it is or isn't important to educate your clientele about sustainability?" There was a wide variety of open-ended responses provided by Extension educators from around the West largely supporting the idea of sustainability education. The 194 open-ended responses were coded via Python and four major themes were identified. These included:

1. Sustainability in terms of using resources.

- "Resources are increasingly becoming limited and negative externalities are increasingly far-reaching."
- "We do not have an unlimited supply of resources so sustainability is important for reducing waste and preserving the resources we have while meeting our needs."
- "We are running out of resources."

2. Sustainability for the future.

- "Because we need to be sustainable so we have enough resources in the future."
- "It is important because resources are limited and we must make a conscious and concerted effort to approach sustainability to the extent possible for the future generations to come."
- "It is important for the environment and future generations."

3. Sustainability to help clientele.

- "I feel that educating clientele about sustainability supports them in their pursuit of a high quality of life, and protects us all."

- "I think it's important (to) our job, as Extension professionals, to let our clientele know their options, and associated ramifications (positive or negative) of their decisions. In other words, it's our job to help the public be life-long learners, make informed decisions, etc., which includes sustainability."
- "Teaching the concepts of sustainability in agriculture is essential for the long-term success of clientele interested in pursuing or continuing to farm."

4. Sustainability for economical and profitability purposes.

- "Resource conservation and economic sustainability are critical to the success of farms and ranches in the West."
- "In agricultural enterprises, sustainability is intertwined with future economic viability."
- "I think it is important but that being said, I work with farmers and I stress the economics as the highest priority of sustainability. If your farm isn't profitable you are not sustainable."

Only a select few opined that sustainability outreach was not a job for Extension. For example, one respondent stated, "I am assuming the definition of sustainability used in this survey is the trendy green living programs. Most of my clientele is not motivated by this type of programming therefore I do not present much of it."

Sustainability was seen by many as connected to our programming and Extension foundation as a whole.

"Because as land usage is converting primarily to urban expansion, sustainability is more essential. Whether it's food production or energy, it's an important aspect that needs to be the basis of educational programs."

"It is important that principles and practices that lead to more sustainable and higher quality lifestyles be taught. This content has been the centerpiece of Extension education since Extension's beginnings. However, it is important that the effort be specific issue focused so as not to become politicized and polarizing in our communities."

"As Western Extension professionals, many of us are focused on a specific program or discipline, such as nutrition, range management, water conservation, or climate change. All of these programs embody the fundamental tenets of sustainability, i.e. consideration for the economic, social, and environmental impacts that may occur as a result of our efforts."

CONCLUSIONS – WHERE NEXT?

Overall, educating the public on the concept of sustainability and its attendant principles as a discrete topic may be an elusive objective. However, as noted in the article, "The Accidental Sustainability Agent," the principles of sustainability are already embedded in many of the education programs that Extension implements throughout the land grant university system (Apel et al., 2013). The results of the survey bear this out since Extension respondents both in the West and nationally indicated a wide range of programs and topics they felt they were currently addressing through their efforts – ranging from nutrition and health to consumer education. But, as could be expected, Extension programs in the West are also addressing grasslands stewardship (range management) as well as forest stewardship, since these are regionally-important natural resources to sustain.

When noting emerging issues that Extension should be addressing, respondents from the West chose water quantity over water quality. As climate change is impacting the West's water supplies, it isn't surprising that this issue would be one that Extension educators feel they should be addressing. In fact, the University of Arizona's Water Resources Research Center (<https://wrrc.arizona.edu/>) is dedicated to providing research-based information to stakeholders throughout the state in the face of decreased snowmelt and declining groundwater and surface water supplies. They accomplish this through symposiums, supply and demand studies, community facilitation, watershed scenario planning, modeling, and a myriad of other activities around water resources.

Relatedly, Utah State University (USU) offers the Center for Water Efficient Landscaping with the mission, "To promote water conservation through environmentally, socially, and economically sound landscape management practices." (<https://cwel.usu.edu/>)

Also offered is the Utah Climate Center, which has collaborated with USU Extension to design and launch an Extension Climate Change Science Essentials online training, with an emphasis on projected droughts and water scarcity. (Details available at <https://extension.learn.usu.edu/browse/climate-essentials/courses/climate/>)

As Western Extension professionals, many of us are focused on a specific program or discipline, such as nutrition, range management, water conservation, or climate change. All of these programs embody the fundamental tenets of sustainability, i.e. consideration for the economic, social, and environmental impacts that may occur as a result of our efforts. But, regardless of our individual programs, in the end the common thread that binds all of us is the objective of improving the lives of the West's communities through research-based information, including through the survey work presented here. In doing so, we are helping to build a more sustainable future for our clientele and their successors.*

REPORT LINKS

National Summary

<https://issuu.com/usuextension/docs/sustainability-in-extension-nationa>

National Results (Complete)

https://issuu.com/usuextension/docs/national_needs_complete_report

State-by-State Summaries

<https://usu.box.com/s/7otqfjipod9mtfsrlc56soxx1ddaxe3o>

National Network for Sustainable Living Education

<http://www.anrep.org/people/initiatives/nnsle/>



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