

Wheel-of-Water: Turns heads toward terrific new behaviors to protect aquatic treasures



Introduction

Water Quality is our name, getting attention to polluted waters is our game. But how can we catch the public's eye at fairs and other events where we have to compete for attention with kettle corn and shiny objects? Let's see... more black and white printed materials? Graphs on a display board? There's got to be a better way!

Ecology's Northwest Region Water Quality (NWRO-WQ) staff is often invited to participate in educational events. Our audiences range from large crowds of people to smaller, more casual one-on-one encounters. We are also asked to reach both young and older members of the public. Through all these experiences, our continuing challenge is to engage our state residents with information

to which they'll give their attention—and hopefully act on.

Problem

Washington's water quality problems did not occur overnight. Adults have made numerous decisions and actions over many years that resulted in polluted waters. Because children learn from adults, they are likely to carry on the practices of their parents. Both children and adults need to learn new ways of accomplishing day-to-day activities in a more environmentally-friendly way. At events that provide learning opportunities, Ecology NWRO staff needed something fun and informative for both adults and kids.

Project or event goals

Fortunately, NWRO-WQ's Watershed Unit is composed of some pretty creative thinkers. Our first effort led to the "Fishing for Pollution" display. This turned out to be very popular with kids, and gave us the opportunity to talk with parents as well. However, the display was large in size and required close supervision by several staff. We then designed the attractive and popular "Is Your Street a Stream?" stormdrain model. Although the Unit used it several times with excellent results, it was simply too heavy and cumbersome to conveniently pack up and haul to events.

These problems led us to conceptualize a "Wheel of Fortune"-type of device to engage people at events that happen around Puget Sound each summer. The idea was to have something that caught the attention of adults and children and could be transported, set up, and operated by one staff member. Working as a team, several staff put their heads together to further refine the idea.



Milestones and outcomes

The group's initial inspiration led one member to use his woodworking skills to produce an impressive 30 inch spinning 'Wheel-of-Water'. But what to put on it? The team looked within Ecology's outreach toolbox and settled on messages crafted in the "Washington Waters, Ours to Protect" Campaign. Working with Ecology's graphics designer Tom Leonard and a local print shop, we adapted a series of eight light-hearted photographs and illustrations, and then we were ready to take our "show" on the road!

The solid and attractive "Wheel-of-Fortune" format, combined with brightly-colored spinning graphics, was a winner! The Wheel-of-Water immediately proved itself to be a real attraction and exceeded our expectations.

The team developed a series of graded questions for each graphically-depicted problem. That way, both young and old (yes, even oldsters like to spin the wheel!) could be challenged to learn. The interactivity fostered by the Wheel-of-Water also provided a terrific chance to poke fun at the outrageous portrayal of everyday activities displayed in the pictures. The display includes additional accessory props like brake pads, organic fertilizer, car wash soaps, and other commercial products to provide examples of the best ways to accomplish modern living in the most environmentally friendly way possible.



Project highlights

The Wheel-of-Water makes the subject of water protection fun and engaging. It's not unusual for folks to hang around the wheel, and some kids just want to keep spinning it over and over again—more opportunities for learning! NWRO-WQ now has a highly sought-after attraction that allows us to compete for the attention of the public at local festivals and educational events.

Partners

The NWRO-WQ team of Sinang Lee, Ralph Svrjcek, and Douglas Palenshus were assisted by graphics specialist Tom Leonard to construct the wheel and turn it into a successful outreach display.

Funding

Due to the current budget crisis, the team spent a modest \$60 to build the wheel, in addition to hours in the shop. Graphics were produced by NWRO's local high-quality contract shop, Repro-Graphics, for about the same amount. It is estimated that a commercially-produced wheel of about the same size would cost about \$300 plus graphics production, and could be even lighter and easier to transport to and from events.

For more information

If you'd like to know more about what is involved in do-it-yourself construction of a wheel like ours, Ralph Svrjcek (425-649-7165) would be willing to talk with you and Douglas Palenshus (425-649-7041) could refer you to the photo files, provide a template for cutting the flat artwork, and instructions for assembling.

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