

Communicating with Extension Clients about Water¹

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Introduction

The conservation and preservation of natural resources is one of the most pressing issues facing the nation today (Gregory & Di Leo, 2003). Among these natural resource issues are the issues of water quality and quantity. Water is one of the most important resources in the United States, and is especially important in Florida. Not only is Florida a specialty crop state, but the Florida economy also depends highly on tourism and recreation, both of which thrive on water. Water impacts Florida's tourism, agriculture, retail, and real estate development industries, all of which significantly contribute to Florida's economy (Odera, Lamm, Dukes, Irani, & Carter, 2013).

As the U.S. and Florida populations continue to increase and the demand for fresh, clean water rises, water quality and quantity issues will become increasingly important. Extension faculty should understand public opinion surrounding water issues and identify the information that needs to be communicated to the public about water issues, as well as the best mode for this communication. By understanding public opinion and topics of interest surrounding water quantity and quality, as well as Florida residents' preferred communication methods, Extension faculty will be able to communicate more effectively with clients about water.

The issues associated with water quantity and quality are of ever-increasing importance, and are considered a priority

by UF/IFAS Extension. Enhancing and protecting water quality, quantity, and supply is considered a high-priority initiative in the 2013–2023 Florida Extension Roadmap. This EDIS publication will provide an overview of how to communicate with Florida residents about water, including information about their preferred communication method and what topics surrounding water Florida residents find of interest. This publication will better equip Extension faculty to discuss water quantity and quality issues with Florida residents.

Background

The UF/IFAS Center for Public Issues Education in Agriculture and Natural Resources conducted an online survey of Florida residents in December 2013. A total of 516 completed responses were collected from Florida residents 18 and older (Odera & Lamm, 2014). To ensure that respondents were representative of the 2010 U.S. Census, the data were weighted to balance their geographic location in the state, age, gender, and race (Kalton & Flores-Cervantes, 2003; Odera & Lamm, 2014). The survey included questions about Floridian's water conservation behaviors, the importance of water, and perceptions of water quality and quantity.

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Results

The Importance of Water in Florida

Respondents were provided with a list of different issues currently facing Florida: the economy, health care, water, taxes, public education, food production, climate change, environmental conservation, housing and foreclosures, and immigration. Respondents were asked whether they considered an issue to be *not at all important*, *slightly important*, *fairly important*, *highly important*, *extremely important*, or *unsure*. Eighty-three percent of respondents rated water as a highly or extremely important issue in the state of Florida. Water was the third-most important issue, behind the economy and health care.

Engagement in Water Conservation

In addition to being asked about issues facing the state, respondents were asked to indicate what water conservation behaviors they currently engaged in, as well as the frequency of their engagement, by selecting *never*, *almost never*, *sometimes*, *almost every time*, or *every time*.

Respondents showed moderate to high levels of engagement in indoor water conservation behaviors (Figure 1). Although 72% of respondents indicated they turn off the water while brushing their teeth *almost every time* or *every time*, 43% indicated they leave the water running in the kitchen when washing and/or rinsing dishes *sometimes* or *almost every time*.

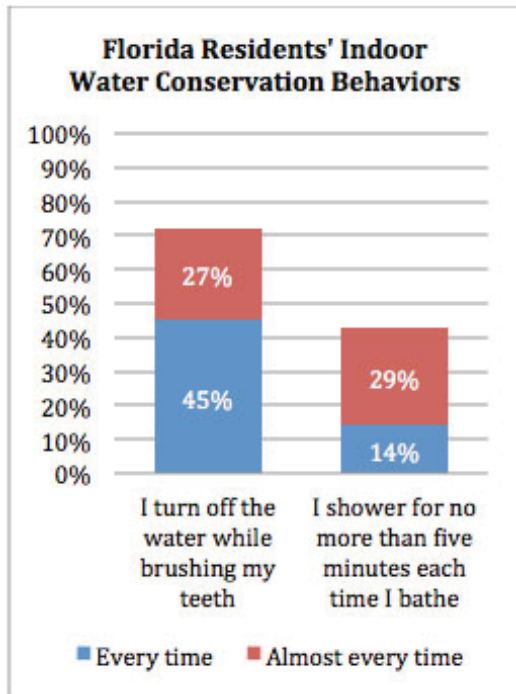


Figure 1.

Respondents showed higher levels of engagement in outdoor water conservation behaviors (Figure 2). Respondents indicated they *never* or *almost never* hose down their driveways (66%), let their sprinklers run when it is raining (56%), or let their sprinklers run when rain is predicted in the forecast (51%).

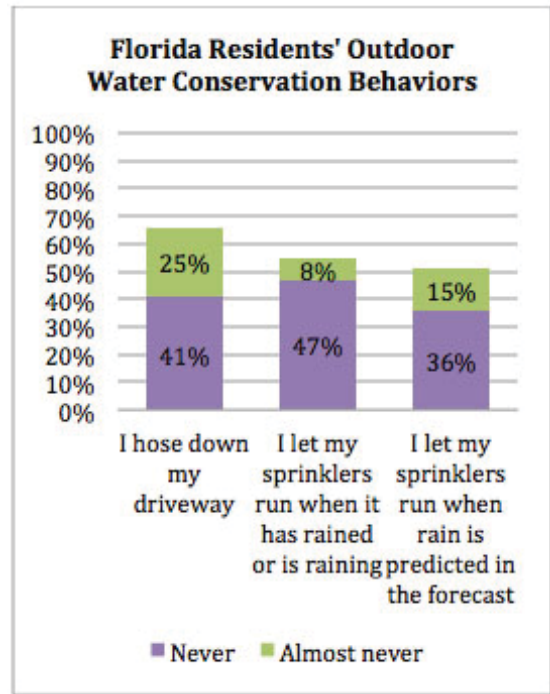


Figure 2.

Respondents were also asked to indicate the types of water-efficient products and infrastructure they currently own. A majority of respondents indicated having low-flow shower heads installed in their homes (54%), or having water-efficient toilets installed in their homes (58%). Approximately one-third (36%) have low-water-consuming plant materials in their yard.

Florida Resident's Interest in Water Topics

A portion of the survey asked respondents about their interest in learning about a variety of topics related to water quality and quantity issues. Respondents indicated moderate levels of interest in water-related topics, having the most interest in topics related to home water use (Figure 3). Respondents had the most interest in learning about home and garden landscaping ideas for Florida (36%), fish and wildlife water needs (32%), water policy and economics (27%), restoring fish and aquatic habitat (25%), fertilizer and pesticide management (23%), and community actions concerning water issues (23%).

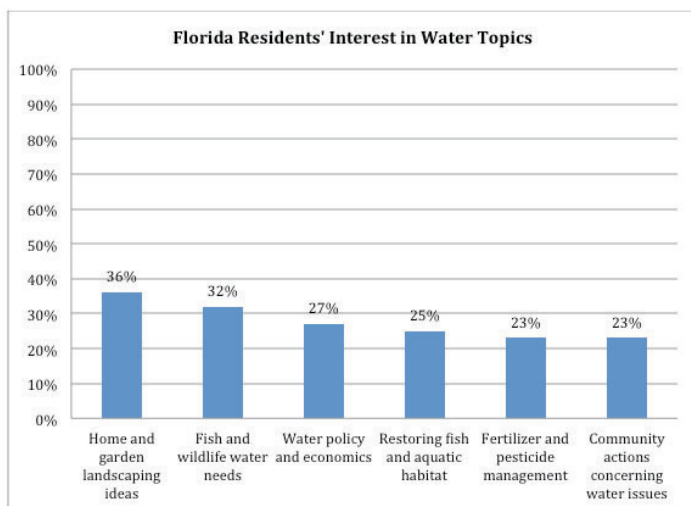


Figure 3.

Learning Opportunities about Water Issues

Respondents were asked to indicate which types of learning opportunities they would most likely utilize to learn about water issues (Figure 4). Respondents had a strong preference for digital communication, with 69% indicating interest in a website and 33% indicating interest in watching a video. Respondents were also interested in more traditional communication, which could include fact sheets or brochures (46%), a newspaper article or series (36%), and television coverage (55%).

Respondents showed a lower level of interest in learning opportunities that would require their attendance, with only 14% indicating interest in attending a short course or workshop, 12% indicating interest in attending a seminar or conference, and 8% indicating interest in getting trained for a regular volunteer position.

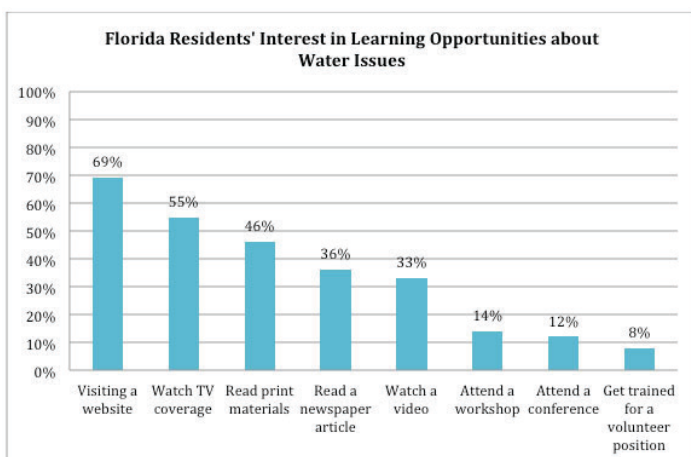


Figure 4.

Recommendations

As water becomes an increasingly important issue in the state of Florida, the role of Extension in delivering water-related programming will also become increasingly important. Extension faculty can use data from this study as a form of needs assessment to inform their program planning. Extension faculty should consider what the public is interested in learning about, and then target their educational programs to address the subject matter needs of their clientele accordingly. These public opinion surveys will be conducted annually, and therefore can be used to adjust programming as public needs change over time. In addition, the information presented about programmatic format can also be used to inform the ways in which Extension faculty communicate with their clientele and design educational programming.

When communicating with the public about water, it is important to make the topics relatable and reflect their interests. Respondents expressed the most interest in learning about home and garden landscaping ideas, fish and wildlife water needs, and water policy and economics. Respondents also expressed interest in learning about fertilizer and pesticide management practices. By tailoring existing programming to better reflect these topics, Extension faculty can better communicate with the public about water. Additionally, all Extension faculty interact with water issues because all Extension programmatic areas directly or indirectly deal with water. By emphasizing the importance of water quality and quantity issues in traditional programming, Extension faculty can continue to indirectly educate the public on water issues.

Although traditional programming is encouraged, digital communication was the most preferred form of communication by respondents. Simple modifications to traditional programming, such as making handouts available online or posting recorded videos of classes, are ways to incorporate both traditional programming elements and digital communication. Utilizing multiple communication channels will also assist faculty in reaching a larger and more diverse audience. By putting information online, members of the general public that are interested in topics but are unable to attend programming will have access to the information. Additionally, a large online database of water conservation programming can be created over time and become the leading source for information on water issues in Florida.

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