WHITE PAPER: SPARKS! IGNITION GRANTS FOR MUSEUMS AND LIBRARIES

1. Administrative Information

Institution: Lake Champlain Basin Science Center, dba ECHO Lake Aquarium & Science Center
Project Name: Stewardship Stories
Amount Awarded: $24,670
Total Project Cost: $177,048
Project Dates: July 1, 2011 – June 30, 2012
Project Director: Molly Loomis, PhD, Director of Education

2. Project Summary

The Stewardship Stories project, a collaboration between ECHO Lake Aquarium & Science Center (ECHO) and NBC News affiliate WPTZ NewsChannel 5 (WPTZ), presented an innovative solution to two critical needs: 1.) public audiences need real opportunities to take responsibility for stewardship of the natural environment, and 2.) museums need tangible 21st-century solutions for meeting the rapidly evolving social and educational needs of public audiences.

Over the last 100 years, humans have radically altered the natural environment and resources in which we live and on which we depend. Scientific research and management organizations cannot steward our natural resources alone; we must cultivate an environmentally literate public to ensure the long-term sustainability of society and the planet (NOAA, 2009). However, according to the National Academy of Sciences (2005) the U.S. is failing to build a workforce literate in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics and prepared to face the environmental challenges confronting our planet. Learning research has established that schools alone cannot prepare youth to serve as stewards of our natural resources and that informal learning settings, such as museums, play a critical role in supporting youth interest, engagement and learning in science (Falk, 2001; National Research Council, 2009).

As entertainment and information resources have become increasingly accessible and distributed, and public demographics have diversified, museums have had to re-conceive their contributions to today's knowledge economy. Museums have issued urgent calls for transformation toward "relevance" (Association of Science and Technology Centers), "technological innovation" (American Library Association) and "21st Century Skills" (Institute of Museum and Library Services). These calls advocate for public education organizations to become more facile at adapting to the changing needs of the public by focusing on audience engagement, aligning with community needs, and co-creating content in partnership with multiple stakeholders (Institute of Museum and Library Services). However, as National Leadership Grants and other funding initiatives indicate, museums and libraries have struggled to develop tangible, replicable solutions that adapt available and emerging resources to meet the needs of a continually evolving public.

The Stewardship Stories project prototyped an innovative approach for museums to meet the changing needs of public audiences in order to better address environmental challenges. With the help of a 2011 Sparks! Ignition Grant, ECHO Lake Aquarium and Science Center (ECHO) implemented a successful museum-media partnership that combined the interpretive expertise of a science center, the mass public appeal of a television news station, and the accessibility of social media, to engage audiences in regional environmental and conservation issues. The project extended a stewardship message beyond ECHO's visiting audiences to over 20,000 television-viewing households by creating weekly news

segments, educational programs, and a web archive that provided real options for citizens to do their part stewarding their local environment.

3. Process

The project built on an existing partnership between ECHO and the local NBC affiliate, WPTZ. For over 5 years, representatives from the two organizations, including both Executive Directors, met semi-annually to brainstorm and implement collaborative activities. Successful previous projects included live, monthly broadcasts from the science center, and the creation of a mini television studio exhibit at ECHO, where visitors can be "watershed weather reporters" alongside WPTZ's Chief Meteorologist. As a result of these successes, the partnership was primed to develop a sustainable model for co-create content relevant to both organizations' audiences. When ECHO hired an educator with experience as on-air talent, as well as background in local and regional natural history and conservation issues, the opportunity to create a hybrid "Conservation Correspondent" position was conceived.

The Conservation Correspondent position had obvious, mutual benefits for the partnering organizations. WPTZ, which was seeking to build its reputation as an environment-focused news station, garnered credibility by associating with a trusted science center, as well as gaining consistent access to an environmental expert. ECHO, looking to build its audiences and extend its stewardship message beyond the museum's walls, was guaranteed prime time access to the living rooms of thousands of potential learners as well as fresh, weekly content to use for educational programming. The clarity of these mutual benefits helped both organizations negotiate the challenges revealed during the project: such as sharing costs, defining ownership, cross-training, and coordinating schedules.

The Conservation Correspondent was already working as a full time educator at ECHO. Rather than create a new staff position, it was decided that WPTZ would pay a licensing fee for the Conservation Correspondent to produce one segment each week--an arrangement that was consistent with the news channel's existing content acquisition process. A licensing agreement signed by both organizations stipulated that, due to ECHO's nonprofit status with charitable purposes, ECHO would be exclusive owner of the content and would license WPTZ content to use at its discretion provided that use was consistent with ECHO's charitable purposes. ECHO had rights to use the content for any and all educational purposes and content would be co-branded across organizations.

ECHO retained overhead costs for the position, with the exception of camera, editing and other equipment necessary production equipment. Partners estimated that the Conservation Correspondent would require 10 hours/week to produce one story; therefore, the licensing fee was set at 25% of the position's existing salary. To provide clarity for both organizations, the Conservation Correspondent designated a regular day for filming, when everyone knew she would be working at WPTZ. Additional time throughout the week was spent researching story topics and scheduling interviews. Although efforts were made to maintain this schedule, issues such as the availability of WPTZ videographers, the timing of breaking environmental news, and ECHO project deadlines, required that both organizations be flexible with scheduling and weekly requirements.

After three months of weekly training sessions, the Conservation Correspondent began producing stories with the help of a WPTZ videographer. Because her work at ECHO involved conservation and natural history, the Conservation Correspondent was able to select news story ideas over the course of the week. On WPTZ days, she'd present the idea at the newsroom meeting, take to the field to capture footage for the story, and return to the newsroom that afternoon to put it all together for the evening

news. Weekly stories were posted on ECHO's Facebook and Twitter feeds, and one story per month was selected to integrate into an educational program for ECHO's visiting audiences. Additionally, news stories were linked to ECHO exhibits through quick response codes that visitors could access using smart phones while visiting ECHO and archived online on WPTZ's website and ECHO's Voices for the Lake website.

There were two significant, mid-course corrections to the hybrid position. First, the original concept defined the Conservation Correspondent as a "one-man-band," combining the roles of videographer, script writer, and story editor into one. It became evident that, without further training, it was best for the Conservation Correspondent to be paired with a videographer who would cover the filming and editing of the story. This led to a higher quality story in terms of visual richness and and content development.

The original concept also positioned the Conservation Correspondent in the role of a traditional "objective reporter." At WPTZ, reporters identified outside experts to legitimize and editorialize content. In our case, however, the Conservation Correspondent had the content knowledge to be both reporter and expert due to her background in local natural history and environmental issues. The transition from reporter to reporter/expert happened gradually as WPTZ became more comfortable with the skills and expertise of the Conservation Correspondent. Ultimately, the shift allowed for a new kind of story that integrated news and editorial comments on the topic. WPTZ also began to see the Conservation Correspondent as an in-house environmental expert who could comment on a variety of topics. In these ways, the hybrid position both provided content for the nightly news and and served as general, go-to resource for the news station.

The project also grappled with how best integrate news story content into the ECHO experience after it aired on television. Originally, we planned to turn one story per month into an educator-led demonstration for ECHO visitors. This was a challenge because of the ECHO's slow timeframe for developing demonstrations from concepts to professional, floor-ready programs. In general, it took two months to create demonstrations from news stories, at which point the "breaking news" was frequently outdated. Therefore, we looked for alternative ways to feature news story content at ECHO. One solution was use of quick response codes, or scannable bar codes. Using a smartphone, visitors scan a barcode that links directly to video of a news story. These codes were placed near an exhibit that had content related to the story. For example, after a story about the State of Vermont deciding not to list the mud puppy as a threatened species, we placed a QR code of the story near the live mud puppy exhibit at ECHO. A second solution was to use a flexible exhibit platform, called Current Waves, to feature news story videos and create interpretive content to complement the video (see photos below).

Photo: Demonstration with live wood turtle using WPTZ story on tracking wood turtles in the wild.

Quick response code to WPTZ story on Lake Trout.

Photo: Current Waves flexible exhibit with WPTZ story on breeding birds on Lake Champlain.

4. Project Results

During its first year, Stewardship Stories created 40, 2-minute news stories on local conservation issues, seasonal happenings in nature, and local groups and individuals working to protect the Lake Champlain Basin. Twelve of these stories were integrated into educational programming for ECHO's visitors, including educator-led demonstrations, quick-response codes, and the Current Waves exhibit. All of the stories were archived as videos on WPTZ's website at http://www.wptz.com/tv/conservation and ECHO's Voices for the Lake website at http://bit.ly/l5f09t. An additional, unanticipated product of the project was the development of a social media strategy to extend the reach of each story segment and to efficiently manage sharing of content between WPTZ and ECHO (see section 5: Resources).

Overall, the project allowed an established partnership to advance to a new level by taking a risk on creating a hybrid position that ultimately satisfied the needs of both partners. Several key lessons were learned in the process, including the importance of strong relationships and communication, the challenge of working across organizations, and the clarity of a social media plan.

The ability to take a risk on an innovative, hybrid position was built on strong professional and social relationships between ECHO and WPTZ. Success of previous collaborative projects over time allowed both organizations to take a risk on this bigger, boundary-pushing project. We started from a position of mutual respect for one another's expertise, where good intentions and professional integrity were assumed. This foundation allowed both organizations to trust each other, commit to the project, and take the risk required to be successful. It is hard to imagine that the risks and challenges inherent in the position would have been possible for a fledgling partnership.

A key challenge of the project was learning to work across organizational cultures. Broadcast journalism is a fast paced industry that responds to events as they arise, moment to moment. Story topics are identified and produced daily, frequently in matter of hours. ECHO's programs, in contrast, are typically developed over time with a great deal of testing and refinement before being deemed visitor-ready. Unlike the slower, tinkering cultural at ECHO, the WPTZ pace required the Conservation Correspondent to translate complex scientific concepts into a two-minute story created in less than a day, which created a great deal of initial stress. We reconciled the differences between the two work cultures by giving the hybrid position room to grow and evolve, finding where the strengths were in the new hybrid and focusing on those strengths. One such evolution was the Conservation Correspondent moving from the role of "objective reporter" in her stories to one of "content expert." This change indicated a merging of the news channel's reporter and the science center's educator into a truly hybrid position.

Key to the evolution of the position was open communication to evaluate and adjust the project, often on a week-to-week basis. In this regard, the Conservation Correspondent was a literal boundary crosser, who checked in weekly with each organizational supervisor to clarify the position's goals and challenges. Leadership teams from both organizations also convened quarterly for "partnership lunches," to build social rapport and to discuss and clarify the project activities. Both organizations also conducted surveys to identify the types of environmental content that were of interest to their audiences so that mutually-beneficial story selections could be made.

Finally, ECHO learned a great deal from the project about leveraging digital content to engage visiting audiences and for social media. Fresh, weekly content from the field provided ECHO a unique opportunity to integrate current events to the floor experience. This required the Conservation

Correspondent to accelerate ECHO's program development process so that a program was floor-ready before the story topic became "old news." Successes on this front included linking story videos to quick response codes, using a flexible exhibit platform to rotate in project content, and developing a seasonal strategy for educational programming. The Conservation Correspondent also worked with the WPTZ web manager to develop a social media strategy that clarified the procedure for each organization to post and share story content digitally. Once the strategy was established, it was simple to implement each week after a news story aired.

Based on these lessons learned during the first year of the Stewardship Stories project we recommend these five things for institutions looking to foster a media partner relationship:

- Build a strong and trusting relationship first, based on mutual needs. Then look at ways to innovate together;
- Be aware of inherent differences in workplace culture, communication and flow. Work to find commonality where there is overlap and build on each others strengths;
- Consider an iterative process while developing a position, with frequent check-ins and the flexibility to change course when things don't quite work out; and
- Imagine creative ways that digital content of real time local events can be integrated into floor experiences at the museum/science center and online with a defined social media strategy.

As an indication of the success of Stewardship Stories' first year, ECHO and WPTZ have signed the Conservation Correspondent's contract for an additional year. As a partnership team, we've also begun to imagine and implement next steps for the project, including:

- WPTZ NewsChannel 5 has already established a new Environmental Beat franchise of nature, environment and conservation related stories complete with its own branding and promotional campaign;
- Rebroadcasting Conservation Correspondent stories during the WPTZ morning show to reach a different TV-viewing audience;
- Public service announcements with seasonally related stewardship tips;
- Building on new relationships with individuals and groups in the environmental community to focus on regional research, stewardship related volunteer projects, and citizen science projects;
- Flexible, new platforms at ECHO that integrate news stories as a foundation for demonstrations and activities for the public.

5. Resources

Websites:
WPTZ Conservation Correspondent story archive
ECHO'S Voices for the Lake Conservation Correspondent collection

Conservation Correspondent Story Social Media Strategy:
The following is a strategy for sharing the WPTZ Conservation Correspondent segments with ECHO networks through various social media tools. All segments will need to be tracked so it is important to always use the bit.ly link described in the strategy below.

1. Each WPTZ segment is copied to disk and kept in a collection at Conservation Correspondent's desk

2. Create a trackable url through bit.ly for each story posted on the WPTZ webpage
3. Post to ECHO's Facebook page using trackable url the Friday or Monday after the story has aired. Post to Voices for the Lake Facebook page using trackable url day or so after posting to ECHO.
    a. Always ask an engaging question related to the story to provoke response from followers
    b. When possible, always link interviewed organizations Facebook page in the post
    c. When possible post pictures from the story to a Conservation Correspondent photo folder
4. Post to ECHO Twitter feed using the trackable url, with catchy phrasing and/or probing question the day the story is posted to WPTZ. Follow up with second posting of same content 2-3 days later.
    a. When possible, live-tweet from location while filming story. Use Instagram when possible, and post to Facebook and Twitter when posting to Instagram. Instagram photos can then be used to create a Facebook album as well.
5. Using the copy of the story on disk:
    a. Upload to the Voices for the Lake website. Use ECHO Conservation Correspondent and WPTZ NewsChannel 5 as tags.
    b. Create a bit.ly for the story originating from Voices for the Lake website
    c. Use this trackable url in the ECHO eBlast and ECHO blog post