

Communicating with Decision-Makers

Tips for a Productive Exchange



ASLO

Association for the Sciences of
Limnology and Oceanography

This document was created

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2017

INTRODUCTION

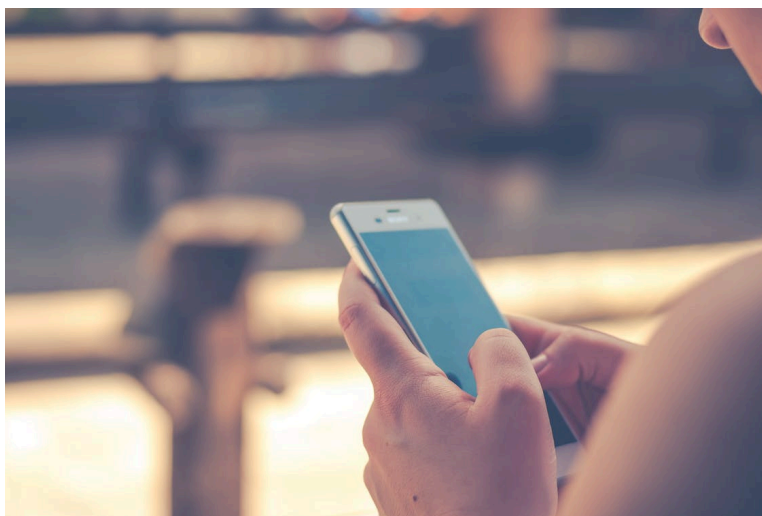
Whether you are **calling**, **writing** or **visiting** your representative, we hope the following guidelines help you have a productive exchange with them. Generally, engaging with decision-makers is a great way to make your voice heard and call their attention to important issues. Some of the following guidelines apply to all three communication mediums.

Before you call, write or meet with them pause to consider the following:

- 1) What issue are you contacting them about?
- 2) Is this matter urgent? This may help you decide on the best way to communicate. For example, if it is an extremely time-sensitive issue, a call may be your best option.
- 3) What is your 'ask'? That is, what action would you like the representative to take on the issue (e.g., support federal funding for science at \$XX level). Make sure it is within the scope of their position/ability. You *must* have an '**ask**' otherwise the exchange will largely be a pointless exercise.
- 4) The most powerful tool you have is your story (including your special knowledge), so keep it personal.
- 5) Avoid jargon! Using jargon is a sure-fire way to lose your audience's interest.
- 6) Try to frame your discussion (communication) in the following order:
 - a. Lead with the key points. Getting straight to the bottom-line helps clarify the whole point of why you are contacting (meeting with) them. It also helps avoid them having to speculate on your objectives. Remember, it is unlikely a scientist will be at the other end of the conversation, so you do not need to provide the broader context upfront as you would with a science audience.
 - b. Next, address why the bottom-line matters. This is where you bring in your story, provide a compelling narrative that supports and illustrates why the bottom-line matters.
 - c. Provide background information only if you have space/time and/or you are asked.

If you are unsure about your talking points, consult your institution's public affairs/government relations office. Furthermore, feel free to reach out to ASLO's Director of Communications and Science, Dr. Adrienne Sponberg (sponberg@aslo.org).

CALLING



As you prepare your talking points for the call try to ensure they cover the following:

- a. Why you are calling.
- b. Who you are (mention your area of expertise if you are not just calling as a constituent).
- c. Your 'ask', what you would like them to do.
- d. Provide some compelling 'facts' (facts does not mean data in this context, try to keep it personal) to support your position.
- e. If possible, offer your services as a resource for relevant legislative issues. This may help build a long-term working relationship with that office which may ultimately benefit the discipline.

WRITING A LETTER/EMAIL

Letters are a great way to educate policymakers about complex topics/issues. But please stick to one issue per correspondence, this ensures the letter/email is not convoluted and the recipient does not have to speculate about the main objective of the document.



General structure of written correspondence: Make it personal! Remember that it should have a logical, concise flow of information similar to the following format

- a. Lead with your 'ask'. Clearly, explicitly mention the purpose of your letter upfront, followed by your credentials.
- b. How is it related to the decision-maker's constituents, basically why should the lawmaker care?
- c. Present your informed opinion as an expert. Use facts but try to refrain from using didactic, declarative statements or any jargon.
- d. Highlight your concerns and try to **offer solutions**.
- e. Include your contact information and offer yourself as a resource (if possible).
- f. Thank them for reading the email/letter.
- g. If you are able to, send a thank you letter when a legislator gets something right!

VISITING

Please don't be offended if your meeting is scheduled with a staff member and not the lawmaker. Staffers assigned to your meeting will generally have some knowledge of and/or interest in the issue you are there to discuss. They also have direct access to the lawmaker so if you have a productive exchange the message will still make it to the lawmaker. Meeting in person has some added benefits: for starters you will be able to put a face on an issue, you are also able to have a two-sided conversation, provide clarifications and additional material, and potentially establish a working relationship.



Preparing for the meeting

- a. Before you contact the office to set up a meeting think about what issue(s) you wish to discuss because they may ask you for a 'purpose' for the meeting.
- b. Are you able to attend the meeting with a group of fellow scientists? There is power in numbers but if it is too large and the group wishes to discuss another matter your voice/perspective may get lost.
- c. What is your 'ask'? What do you want your representative to do and why?
- d. How has this issue impacted you and/or other constituents? Why should the legislator care?
- e. Think about the number of key points you want to bring to their attention. Don't rattle off a laundry list, stick to about 3 main points. Try to ensure your take home message is memorable.

- f. Do your homework! Where does the representative stand on the issue? Consult their past record if possible.
- g. Prepare an information sheet you can leave behind (one-page is best). Handouts and factsheets may help kick start the conversation and you can leave them with the staffers.

Day of the meeting

- a. Wear business (formal) attire and take lots of business cards.
- b. Be punctual. Try to arrive early (even though they might not be).
- c. Be friendly and respectful. Express your gratitude upfront about the meeting. Thank them for any support they have shown in the past.
- d. Be positive. Please do not lecture or complain to lawmakers or staffers about their past performance.
- e. Stick to talking points, be clear, and concise, and try to avoid jargon. Keep small-talk to a minimum because it will eat-up the limited time you will likely have.
- f. Make it personal! Your narrative at the meeting matters.
- g. It might seem overwhelming but remember YOU are the expert. You are also there to put a face on the issue not just regurgitate facts!
- h. If you do not know something, be honest and say so. Make a commitment to find out and follow-up with them once you know.
- i. After the meeting, directly follow-up with the staffer (lawmaker) you met. Thank them for taking the time taken out of their busy schedule to meet with you and offer yourself as a resource for this issue and related issues, if possible.