

Summer Challenge – Discover Your Inner Teacher

By Michele Grzenda, Weston Conservation Administrator

What I love about being a Conservation Administrator is the myriad of ‘hats’ I get to wear. On any given day, I can be a regulator, a scientist, a land manager, a wetlands police officer, a negotiator, and a mediator. But one of our most important jobs is being an educator. Many homeowners, landscapers, and even some developers have little knowledge of the role of the Conservation Commission - not only in terms of administering the Wetlands Protection Act but also regarding the stewardship of conservation land. Getting people excited about and engaged in making small changes in their life that benefit the environment is my lifelong goal. Having previously worked as an environmental educator for Massachusetts Audubon Society, I enjoy finding various ways to deliver an environmental message - through the media (local paper and cable station), personal interactions (school classroom visits, slideshows, site visits, nature walks) and of the course, the internet.

Why should Conservation Commissions focus on educating the public? I suspect most of us on our board with this one - by spreading a conservation message; we are providing tools and resources to help inform our local community about matters we are passionate about. Obviously we can't reach everyone but we can try to promote a better understanding of various environmental issues throughout the year. It's also easier to work with residents during a permitting and enforcement issue when you have had an opportunity to interact with them in a non-regulatory setting first.

How do I possibly find the time to add ‘education’ to my daily to-do list? Well, this is probably the toughest question to answer. The short answer – every time we interact with the public, we have an opportunity to educate. This doesn't have to be a monumental task – start small.

Lights, Camera, Action! I encourage you to find one small way to provide education to your community this summer or fall. Here are some ideas:

- Consider augmenting your standard message you give when someone inquires about building on their property. You could incorporate the importance of planting native vegetation or fighting weeds with eco-friendly herbicides.
- Identify a Commission member, associate member, volunteer resident, or staff person willing to write an article in the local paper. It could be about wetland protection or perhaps a seasonal topic such as how to protect nesting turtles, what to do with yard waste, the importance of vernal pools.
- Find a high school or college student willing to produce a display board about the Conservation Commission. This board can then be displayed at a library or local community event. (I'm happy to email you sample signs I created and laminated for Weston's display board.) A display is even more exciting when you incorporate some fun touchable items – a deer antler, feather, sample of a native plant (or invasive plant).
- Create a brochure about wetlands permitting in your town. Many towns have already produced wonderful samples so you don't have to re-invent the wheel.

- Connect with a scout leader, group of realtors, science teacher, or garden club. Offer to come and talk with them about the role of the Conservation Commission.

Sample Resources - MACC's Electronic Resource Center has some great examples of educational tools – brochures on the Wetland's Protection Act, sample power-point presentation on the role of the Conservation Commission, sample newspaper articles on 'living with beavers' & 'mission of the Conservation Commission' and various handouts to distribute at events such as "10 Tips for an Environmentally Friendly Yard". These and other documents can be downloaded at www.tinyurl.com/MACC-OutreachEducation. Feel free to modify the message to meet the needs of your community and use any of this information as you like.

Summer Challenge: Share Your Environmental Outreach Message – If your city or town creates or has a sample newspaper article, brochure, handout, slide show etc. that you would like to share with others, please email it to MACC (preferably in a format which can be edited – Word Document, PowerPoint, etc.). We will upload it to MACC's Electronic Resource Library. Please also provide the author's name and information you would like included when anyone reproduces it. We are seeking sample outreach material on composting, planting a rain garden, proper draining of swimming pools, importance of deadwood to the forest, and much, much more! The sky's the limit. What are you waiting for - Discover your inner teacher today!

Michele is MACC's Vice-President of Education and Weston's Conservation Administrator.