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“We must educate the public.” Few mantras have been used as often in the wildlife management profession. In an era where people increasingly are separated from the natural world, many have noted a lack of basic understanding about ecological systems among the public. In response, the wildlife profession has created a plethora of educational programs, and yet continues to call for more.

Amid the calls for education are regular trips to the altar of science. The wildlife profession is full of people who understand science, and we believe everyone else should be as committed to the scientific process as we are. If people would only listen to scientists, all would be right with the world.

The truth of the matter, though, is that a person’s decision making is influenced by many factors, only a portion of which involve scientific “facts.” In reality, our thinking is shaped by things like prior experience, social pressure, intuition, genetics, expediency, and others. Robert Cialdini, in his landmark book *Influence*, describes the complex tapestry that is human behavior; in short, people make judgments in complex ways that belie the assumption that simply providing science-based information will lead them to good decisions.

Scientists are not immune to this phenomenon. A few years ago, a colleague dropped by my office to chat and noticed that I was sniffing and obviously had a cold. “You should get some echinacea,” he mentioned, “it works great.” This colleague—who, by the way, is an accomplished scientist—has been trustworthy in the past, so I stopped by the local pharmacy later that day and

picked up a bottle of echinacea, an herbal remedy purported to cure upper respiratory infections.

For several days I religiously swallowed the recommended dosage. By the fifth day, I felt worse. As I struggled to concentrate on work, I took a break by Googling echinacea to look for reports of its effectiveness. I discovered echinacea has been studied many times by medical researchers, and their conclusions have been remarkably consistent: echinacea does little to cure upper respiratory infections! Of course, I had to challenge my colleague with this new information. At the next opportunity, I summarized for him all the studies reporting the ineffectiveness of echinacea. Upon hearing my summary, he shrugged and said, “I don’t care what science says; I’ve used it and it works.”

The common use of deer whistles further confirms the tendency for people to make decisions counter to reliable information. If a graduate student somewhere ever wishes to research strategies to market useless products, deer whistles would make an excellent case study. Deer whistles—little plastic devices that can be mounted to the front of an automobile and supposedly emit a high-pitched whistle to frighten deer away from oncoming traffic—are quite simply a sham. Scientists unanimously report they don’t work.

Regardless, one can easily find vehicles with deer whistles in most parking lots. What’s more, some reputable organizations, like insurance companies, police departments, and rental car companies, actually promote their use. I once visited an insurance agent with deer whistles installed on his car. When I suggested how ineffective such devices are, he shrugged much like my echinacea-hooked colleague and responded “My brother has had them for 10 years, and he’s never hit a deer.” My observation that his reasoning was a bit like me saying “I have a green truck, and I’ve never hit one either” didn’t resonate with him.

These simple stories of echinacea and deer whistles have profound implications for scientists. If the public doesn’t trust wildlife professionals about the efficacy of deer whistles, how can we expect them to listen to us about bigger, more significant issues? Public relations and education will continue to play an important role in our work, and we need to understand the difficulties of reality.

Our first and perhaps most difficult task is to understand that the public, by and large, will not accept our expertise without question. To manage this reality, we must begin engaging our publics in ways that create long-term relationships based on trust, acceptance and collaboration. Indeed, as resource management issues become more complex, we will need better and better lines of communication with the public. Plastic whistles bolted to your local sheriff’s cars to serve as a first line of defense may only be silly and a bit amusing, but future problems are likely to be far more serious. When those serious issues arise, a trusting relationship with our publics will be essential to our success.