

## **My Point of View**

### **Can Educating the Community Really Help Improve Water Quality and Reduce Demand?**

#### **Introducing Education**

It is clear that we have reached a point in our history that water, our most precious natural resource, just cannot be taken for granted anymore by the Australian community.

How do I know?

I know because I monitor the press fairly closely and I have noticed a marked increase in the number of mentions that water receives. I know because ordinary people are talking about the falling dam levels, about when they can water the garden and about using greywater. I know because the NSW Government's study *Who cares about the environment 2004?* indicates that water is the environmental issue of most concern to the NSW community. I know because people have accepted water restrictions with little complaint and have made significant changes to their personal behaviour to improve water quality and to reduce demand.

Seeing water as an important issue is a good first step towards change. Continued education and debate, sensible pricing and regulation are all essential to driving the behaviour changes that are so obviously necessary. In my view however, a significantly enhanced level of education activity is vital if we are going to achieve the degree of change required. There are still significant gains to be made through high quality, targeted education efforts.

#### **What is Education?**

By education I don't really mean the formal teaching that goes on in the school curriculum, although that is clearly a part of the game. Education need to be aimed at adults and include: social marketing [mass media based approaches]; print, signage, PR material and other prompts; face-to-face community education and industry training; and community events and activities. This variety of educational approaches should attempt to influence people to vary behaviour; for example; to have shorter showers, to water their gardens less, to buy front loading washing machines and AAA rated shower heads, to use an ashtray rather than butting their cigarette on the street and not to dispose of house paint into the stormwater drain.

Quality education needs to be specifically targeted at a problem and a population. It must aim to increase knowledge [or awareness], improve skills and explore attitudes, feelings and motivations in order to establish appropriate behaviour. Education is the responsibility of everyone involved in water management; from the engineer working on a drainage problem, to a council bushland regenerator, to a water authority policy officer. Every gross pollutant trap, stormwater drain and bush track is a potential water education site; every water bill and water authority website can contain education messages.

### **Why Not Just Use More Restrictions and Regulations?**

It is not that water restrictions or pollution regulations don't work. It's just that they don't work well enough on their own to solve our water problems. For example you:

- might restrict how often people water their garden but try to get into their showers or toilets and restrict their use of water by regulation.
- can implement a star rating system for products that use water but you can't restrain trade. Price and convenience will still be significant factors in choice.
- could price water more realistically but the nature of our economy means that price is not a lever for change that works universally.
- can fine people for polluting the waterways or breaking the water restrictions, but you have to catch them at it first.

All of these issues require a complementary and well communicated education approach designed to improve knowledge and skills and attitudes, certainly; but more importantly designed to influence behaviour so that people pollute less and use less. For example educating people about the regulations has a major deterrent impact and should form a major part of the introduction of new law or regulations about water demand or quality.

### **What Evidence is There that Education Works?**

In NSW, education has resulted in reducing water demand and increasing sales of AAA rated shower heads [see evaluation of the *Our Environment - It's a Living Thing Program* [www.epa.nsw.gov.au](http://www.epa.nsw.gov.au)]. It has reduced pollution going into the waterways [see evaluation of *The Drain is Just for Rain Program* [www.nsw.gov.au](http://www.nsw.gov.au)]. It has reduced water used in the garden [see evaluation of Sydney Water's *Every Drop Counts* program [www.sydneywater.com.au](http://www.sydneywater.com.au)]. Quality education that is planned, targeted and evaluated well still has much potential to impact on people and their water related behaviour.

### **Who Should Deliver Education?**

You should! Every member of the AWA who reads this *point of view* [and anyone else involved in the water industry for that matter] would make an old educator very happy by considering how an education component might enhance the impact or the uptake of their project, infrastructure or policy.

Grahame Collier is the Director of T Issues Consultancy. He was previously the Director of Industry and Community Education at the NSW Environment Protection Authority and prior to that he was the Manager of Education and Prevention at the AIDS Bureau in NSW Health. He has also worked for the World Health Organisation and in the non-Government sector. Grahame was recently involved in establishing the education strategy for the AWA.