Education vs Advocacy

Introduction: The mission of Harbor WildWatch is to inspire stewardship of the Puget Sound by providing learning opportunities to the people of our local community. One way we inspire stewardship is by adding an educational stewardship message into the conversations we have with participants at Harbor WildWatch programs. While it is important for citizens to understand the environmental issues and problems facing their community and the options available in addressing them, it is also important for us to appropriately present these concerns. As an educational organization, it is important that volunteers and staff of Harbor WildWatch avoid advocating for issues. Instead we want to educate participants about issues and let them come to their own conclusions. This exercise below will help you understand the difference between being an environmental educator vs an environmental advocate.

Activity: Below are a list of statements that you might say to a visitor. For this activity, read the statement in bold and decide if you think it is an educational statement or an advocacy statement or possibly a blend of both. Reflect on how you could improve the statements.

“Single use plastics are STUPID!”
Key points:
- This statement is sharing an opinion with no educational support. There are no facts supporting this claim.
- No alternative options are offered- ex: Instead of using single use plastics try a reusable water bottle, mug, silverware etc.
- While you might indeed think that “single use plastics are stupid” a Harbor WildWatch program is no place to spout opinions. A more constructive thing to say would include some facts about why single use plastic can be detrimental to the environment with a list of alternatives that are not detrimental to the health of the beach.
- Remember to leave our personal opinions out of our conversations when we are talking with visitors. Everything you say reflects on our organization.

“One way to reduce harmful runoff is to use less fertilizer. Can you think of something else that could help protect water quality?”
Key points:
- Only providing one education piece about harmful runoff (oil leaks, soap from car washing, etc)
- You could provide more examples or facts to make this statement even more educational
- Asking open ended questions provides an opportunity for critical thinking. It allows the visitor to come up with their own solutions/conclusions.
- Qualify the fertilizer→ organic fertilizers may cost more than chemical fertilizers but adds natural nutrients to the soil. Chemical fertilizers contain only three essential plant nutrients- weigh various sides of an issue.
“Carbon emissions are harmful to the environment because they increase greenhouse gases which can contribute to ocean acidification. Stop driving your SUV!”

Key points:
- The first part of this statement is educational- we are exploring cause and effect in the first half of the statement but the follow up is a pointed judgment.
- Instead you might say “Studies show that carbon emissions produce CO2 which is known to cause souring seas, let’s think of some ways that we could reduce emissions such as carpooling, riding a bike, taking public transportation, etc.
- No finger pointing.

“Would you like a Seafood Watch card!? It can help you make ocean friendly seafood choices.”

Key points:
- While this is not the highest quality of educational statements, it is a good hook. Sometimes there is not enough time to have an in-depth conversation about stewardship with a visitor but you’ve given them a resource that they may consider later.
- Starting with a question gives the visitor an opportunity to make a choice and may lead to a more in depth conversation.
- There is also a Seafood Watch App you can mention.

“Hey! You are over your limit on oysters.”

Key points:
- We are an educational organization not an enforcement agency. We would never approach someone to tell them what they are doing is wrong.
- We are here as a resource and if harvesters have questions, we can point them to the fishing regulation guide or to the park ranger.
- If you are ever uncomfortable- get a Naturalist involved and they can contact the ranger.

Conclusion: Environmental education is a process that allows individuals to explore environmental issues, engage in problem solving, and take action to improve the environment. We provide unbiased information so that visitors are allowed to come to their own conclusions. The atmosphere should be as neutral and objective as possible. Advocacy on the other hand is promoting a single solution- we don’t do that. Environmental education does not advocate a particular viewpoint or course of action. Rather, environmental education teaches individuals how to weigh various sides of an issue through critical thinking and it enhances their own problem-solving and decision-making skills.