

Wailing the Information Blues

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Most environment groups have too little information.

Most environment groups have too much information.

And both of those statements are true.

We frequently don't have the information we need, and we're snowed under with information that might or might not be useful, but is mostly in the way.

This brochure will try to provide some guidance to how to get the information you want, analyze the information you get, and organize the information you want to keep.

Sources of Information

For most of us, the information problem isn't too little, it's too much. We are bombarded with information almost every waking moment from radio, TV, newspapers, magazines, newsletters, pamphlets, brochures, press releases, studies, reports, responses, proposals, critiques... not to mention e-mail, Facebook, Twitter, and RSS feeds! Getting on to mailing lists is usually easier than getting off them.

As a sometime information addict — for a period in my earlier life, I regularly read six daily newspapers, just over two dozen weeklies, and about the same number of periodicals of lesser frequency — I blow hot and cold about the usefulness of wide access to information. A real danger for people running environmental organizations, particularly volunteers, is information overload.

Getting more and more information isn't an objective. Getting the right information is. And the less fluff, piffle, propaganda, and outright boring dreck we have to wade through to find what we need, the better.

Of course, one of the best research tools available to environmental groups is the Internet. Knowing how to search the Internet effectively can eliminate a lot of wading through useless or irrelevant information.

Here are some tips for effective and efficient Internet searches:

Use a well-recognized search engine, such as Google.

Before doing a search, figure out what you're looking for and what you're NOT looking for. This will help you define your key words.

Use up to six or eight nouns as key-words to begin your search. This may seem like a lot of words, but it will help the search engine narrow down the search results. For example, searching for *legislation* will result in millions of hits. However, searching for *water protection legislation New Brunswick* will likely get you to where you want to go much faster.

Phrases should be entered in quotation marks. For example, searching for "New Brunswick" will be more effective than searching for *New Brunswick*.

Don't forget, many local libraries have good reference sections and librarians who are trained in research techniques. If you get tired of looking at your computer screen, head on down to your local library.

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Not all information comes from published sources. If you have a specific question, chances are you can find the answer by phone: your environmental colleagues in the NBEN, its caucuses, the CEN, and its caucuses are, collectively, an immense pool of information. There may be new and different answers, but there are very few new questions; chances are the ones you ask will have been asked by others.

It's probably unnecessary to remind community-based environmental groups of this, but we all should stop action occasionally and remember that our members and our own communities are among the best sources of information we'll ever be able to identify. Neither information nor knowledge gain anything through being acquired at a distance.

Getting Information from Government

Both levels of government have legislation providing access to information. For most groups, trying to get information this way should be a last resort.

New Brunswick has a **Right to Information and Protection of Privacy Act**. The Act and its regulations are available from the [Queen's Printer](#). There is no handy guide available to using the legislation, nor is there a central method of seeking information under it. Each department is responsible for complying with the Act, and should have someone assigned to fielding requests for information under it. You have to know which department has the information you want and you have to be able to describe what you want. Be as specific and comprehensive as possible in your request. For example, if you are seeking emails, memoranda,

and correspondence about a particular issue, request these items specifically. For reports, ask for any draft copies of the report, by name if you have it. Each request for information costs \$5.

If the Minister of the relevant department ignores your request or refuses to comply, you can ask the Court of Queen's Bench to order the Minister to get his/her Act together or you can appeal to the Access to Information and Privacy Commissioner. There is also a further court appeal process if necessary.

The onus is on the Minister to show that the information being withheld falls into the legal categories for refusal.

The federal government also has an Act, but getting hold of federal information which isn't publicly distributed is much more complicated than it is with the provincial government. The federal legislation is for "Access to Information" which should warn you what awaits: you are not presumed to have a right to information. Federally, most isn't available, and you more or less have to show that you have a right to what you're seeking and there's no good reason why it should be held back. The onus is on you to prove you should get it rather than on the government to prove they should keep it secret.

Which is to say that seeking information not already made public from the federal government is far more difficult, frustrating, and time-consuming. Guidance on specifically how to go about it is beyond the scope of this publication, as is detailed instruction on using the provincial legislation.

Not all the huge quantities of information held by government require legislation to pry loose. A great deal of it, in fact, can be obtained with a phone call or two. The trick is knowing who to call and having a good reason to want the information.

On the Department of Environment website, there is an [organizational chart and employee directory](#). For Environment Canada staff, it is a bit tricky as their [on-line organizational chart](#) is separate from [the government of Canada employee directory](#). However, a call to the Atlantic Regional Office in Halifax is often fruitful (902-426-7231).

You may be able to get the information you want from a friendly bureaucrat,

If you don't even know where to start, both the federal government has a toll-free number that can give you the numbers of other departments. The federal number is 1-800-O-Canada (1-800-622-6232).

particularly if you are specific. A lot of the people who work in environment departments are potential allies. If the first one you try doesn't have the answer, always ask if they know who might. But, keep in mind that they, just like the friendly journalists, have different agendas from yours. Like all information, information provided by bureaucrats should be carefully analyzed.

Finally, don't forget your MP and MLA. They can, if they're willing, help you find information or at least help you find where to look. Whether they're willing or not will depend on what sort of relationship you've developed with them. But it never hurts to ask and, when you ask, always ask in a

way that implies you assume they will be willing to help.

Analyzing Information

The first question you should ask about any specific piece of information is: "Whose information is it?"

All information is published (I use "published" here to also cover broadcast or other distribution) for a reason, with a purpose. Your analysis must take this into consideration. Subdivide the question:

- Who compiled it?
- Who paid for it to be compiled or published? Why? What self interest do they have? Information in an article on global warming produced by an environmental organization may be radically different from that in an article on global warming produced by, say, a research organization largely funded by coal-burning utility companies. This doesn't necessarily mean that one will have "true" information and the other "false", but their selection of information and the interpretation they put on it will almost certainly be different. Knowing the self-interest of the publisher makes it easier to analyze the information.
- To whom is it directed? Who is the audience? Information in a corporate annual report prepared for shareholders, say, should be interpreted and analyzed differently than if it had been in, say, a brief to a government regulatory agency.

- Why? Why is the information being made available to its intended audience at all? Information being circulated to keep scientists and researchers abreast of the state of the art in a certain area requires different interpretation than information being circulated in the hope of influencing opinion.
- How recent is it? Once released publicly, information may have a long lifespan, continuing to circulate, like the hobbits' mathoms, far beyond its original use. There may not be anything on the surface to show it's outdated, but before you place a lot of reliance in it, make sure it's not ten years old and superseded. (Some information, of course, is timeless...)
- How does it apply to your conditions/needs? I once created the short-lived but worthwhile Society for the Promulgation of Useless Interesting Information (SPUII: an acronym pronounced with a nice blend of disgust and amazement). Not all information is applicable once removed from its original context: don't try to force it to apply to yours unless it actually does.
- What doesn't it say? What is missing from it? Just about any piece of information you read should leave you with questions. It may be incomplete because of a number of reasons: lack of space, incompetence or ignorance in whoever wrote it. It may also be deliberately incomplete. When you're analysing information, always look for what isn't there.
- What does it all mean? Information is often presented in ways which make it difficult for average readers to understand. This is not usu-

ally a deliberate conspiracy on the part of whoever is producing the document, not an attempt to conceal or obscure. But it is notoriously true that specialists tend to write for specialists: engineers, scientists, and civil servants write for other engineers, scientists, and civil servants. If you're part of the club, you understand the language; if not, you may feel like you're fighting to try to extract the information. (Sometimes, of course, the report is merely badly written and probably confuses the hell out of the primary readers let alone the non-specialists.)

To understand the information, you need to learn the language — this is part of becoming a “citizen researcher” — Elizabeth May used to say that if you could pronounce the names of the chemicals right, you could talk about the issue with anybody, scientists or no.

In most cases, analysing information requires close, attentive reading: concentration and focus. It may also require specialized knowledge: if you don't possess it and can't readily acquire it, you may be wasting your time trying to extract meaning from gobbledegook. Find a gobbledegook specialist.

Finally, a few maxims regarding information that every environmentalist should have pinned to the wall:

There are three types of lies: lies, damned lies, and statistics.

Definition of propaganda — their lies.

Definition of information — our lies.

Freedom of the press belongs to the person who owns one.