

Don't Mess with Mother Nature: Using the Environmental Argument



One way to approach smoke-free outdoor policies is to frame the argument around the dangers of secondhand smoke exposure. However, working strategically in the local political climate for some tobacco control projects means approaching smoke-free parks and beaches by focusing on the ecological issues caused by cigarette litter.

One such project is the Nevada County Tobacco Use Prevention Program (TUPP). Below, Director Felicia Sobonya, describes a few of the innovative tactics her program has used to demonstrate the toxicity of cigarette butts.

Going Green

A key reason Nevada County chose this approach was to involve the local youth. Felicia clarified, "Developing a youth coalition is TUPP's objective. Our campaign emphasis is tobacco litter and the kids that have signed onto the campaign are environmentalists."

This focus also allowed the project to team up with a local organization, the South Yuba River Citizen's League. Felicia stated, "They got a grant to work with young people, so TUPP helps by getting the youth coalition to participate, as well as by recruiting youth teams to pick up tobacco litter along the river banks during the annual clean up."

Felicia added, "Tying cigarettes to the environment is important because the impact on the environment irritates everybody. People don't want to be told where they can and cannot smoke, but everybody hates seeing butts on the ground."

Getting the Message Across

TUPP started collecting cigarette butts in the 2007-2010 project period when it was working on a smoke-free parks campaign (successfully). Armed with thousands of cigarette butts, high school youth coalition members, and a little creativity, TUPP used a variety of methods to convey the message about the toxicity of tobacco litter. Here are a few of them. . .

- To tie into Earth Day 2011, the youth coalition members created posters with the cigarette butts, making a powerful environmental statement. These posters continue to be used as educational tools at community events as well as meetings, e.g., with Environmental Film Festival organizers to discuss making the upcoming festival smoke-free.

- Also to tie into Earth Day, "We put cigarette butts in jars of water and displayed them at various stages of contamination-after 3 days, 5 days, 30 days and 1 year," Felicia stated. "These jars visually demonstrated that cigarettes continue to float in our streams, rivers, lakes and oceans, and do not biodegrade."



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- To publicize the results of the annual Yuba River CleanUp, TUPP created a tabletop display titled, "How Many Butts Are At Your Favorite Swimming Hole?" It shows the total number of cigarette butts collected countywide, as well as a breakdown of tobacco litter collected at each site. Currently exhibited at local coffee shops, the displays will also be used during the upcoming Environmental Film Festival in January 2012 to educate the thousands of people who flock to Nevada City for the festival.
- Bookmarks will also be used to carry an environmental message during the festival by listing the number of cigarette butts collected during the 2010 Yuba River CleanUp on one side and the 2011 numbers on the other. These bookmarks will be distributed at the tables where people pick up their film festival tickets.

How have these tactics worked? Felicia replied, "Responses from the public have been extremely supportive. People like that we are bringing a consciousness to both smokers and non-smokers, doing something for the environment and addressing a bigger problem than simply litter."

Efforts have garnered several articles in the local press about the youth coalition and its work, including front page coverage. Twenty-two people have called the office to express interest in the campaign and lots of young people were recruited to participate in various program activities.



The movement is engaging the youth as champions for the environment and educating the community about the danger of tobacco litter. The message, she explained, "is that cigarette butts end up in our streams, rivers and oceans, and the toxicity is leaking out with every rainfall and snowfall."

The Path Forward

Felicia encouraged more tobacco control projects to employ the environmental angle to pursuing policies for smoke-free outdoor areas. Nevada County was able to partner with local environmental organizations to conduct river clean-ups, but other projects wanting to take this approach don't have to limit themselves to local groups, she advised. There are many organizations already in place on the state and federal level that have an environmental focus: the Sierra Club, Fly Fishermen of America, Ducks Unlimited, Natural Resources Defense Council, and Rivers Without Borders, just to name a few.

Photos provided by: Felicia Sobonya