



Employing collaboration and innovation to develop CWD education and outreach

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Wildlife management is always based in science. Oftentimes, there is a disconnect between those who shape wildlife management policy and the public. Data shows that beliefs, not scientific data, shapes people's attitudes and guides behavior; and there is a fundamental lack of trust between those who are conducting scientific research and the public. Because of this, social scientists Holly Madill, Michigan State University and Dr. Emily Pomeranz, Michigan Department of Natural Resources, and their team are addressing those challenges through a strategic public engagement process called a charrette.

Funding from Michigan Public Act 207 of 2018 was awarded to this team to test the effectiveness of using a charrette approach to involve stakeholders in the co-creation of a CWD education & outreach plan for use in Michigan's CWD management zone.

A charette is a multiple-day community engagement event where affected stakeholders and decision makers work alongside experts to co-develop solutions to difficult problems. Charrettes can build trust and provide the space for people to work together to resolve high-conflict issues. Structured engagements within a charrette create shared understanding and aim to develop consensus toward a plan of action. These facilitated engagements include focus groups, interviews, and both small and large group workshops to move participants through exploring a wide range of ideas and working them into a feasible plan. Despite the challenges posed by COVID, the research team has been able to assemble a steering committee that includes representatives from public health, local government, tribal government, state agencies, hunters, conservation organizations, agriculture, and youth organizations. This steering committee, working alongside the researchers, planned the in-person charrette and will be reaching out through their own internal networks to identify and invite participants to the charrette and focus groups that will precede it. The broad representation of stakeholders on the steering committee will help ensure that a wide range of viewpoints will be incorporated, making the end product, an education and outreach plan, more relevant to its intended audiences.

Steering committee members worked hard during the end of 2019 to develop the charrette, which included learning about the charrette process and identifying goals, objectives, and metrics for a successful charette. They identified stakeholders and crafted focus groups and a charrette schedule.

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The researchers were just about to begin meeting with focus groups in March of 2020 when the pandemic brought all activities to a halt. Although the researchers and steering committee considered the possibility of virtual focus groups and/or a modified socially distanced charrette process, the group decided against this approach for several reasons. Chief among these were concerns about reduced participation and that alternate plans might exclude some stakeholders. Given pandemic fatigue and other stressors, the research team was concerned that participation and turnout would not reflect the intention of being inclusive or reach a broad set of stakeholders with wide viewpoints. The charrette process will likely continue in the fall of 2021.

Constructing and implementing an effective process that involves the whole of the conservation community and others affected by wildlife management decision-making and policy is key to building trust, establishing a common basis in fact, and implementing sound, science-based wildlife management. Better public involvement in the management of CWD is a case study drawn from this more general principle. The charrette process tested here might well lead to more effective, efficient, and publicly endorsed management of all kinds in the future.