

Interpreting Conflict

Interpreting topics related to resource conservation may elicit a variety of responses from our audiences, including disagreement or conflict. The establishment of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) was a controversial process and interpreting these resources may also lead to occasional controversy. Interpreters should be comfortable with conflict, and should be able to use it as a tool to help the audience identify shared values. Here are some key steps to put into play when addressing conflicts with single individuals or among large audiences:

- 1. Listen, actively and sincerely.** Many people just want to have their perspective heard; they want to be listened to. Practice active listening and paraphrase or summarize what someone is saying so they know you've heard them and understand what they're saying. Refrain from interrupting them and be sure to maintain neutral body language so you don't appear to tune out or discount what they're saying.
- 2. Acknowledge their perspective; look for ways to agree.** This can take some quick and creative thinking. There are two strategies that often work:
 - Agree that their feelings and response are accurate and valid for that individual. Examples might include: *I can see that this means a lot to you. It sounds like you've put a lot of thought into this issue. You clearly have a deep connection to this issue. Sounds like you've got some very strong feelings on this. If I had that experience I might be upset too.* These are all true statements, but none of them are stating you agree with their opinion or that their viewpoint is correct.
 - Look for common ground that you can all agree on. For example: *We can agree that we all want to ensure there are enough fish in our future so our children can catch fish, eat fish, and study fish. or Fishers are hard working men and women that are trying to feed their families and pay their rent just like the rest of us. We'd all like to see them succeed in the long run, and this may include some new approaches to encourage sustainability of fisheries.*
- 3. Add some more information that may change or expand their perspective.** This is your opportunity to balance out the information that is fueling disagreement. Avoid a dispute over the facts or information, rather, try to build on it. For example: *Many fishers have been working harder and harder to catch the same amount of fish. That tells us something is wrong—perhaps too much stress on fish stocks. We don't want to see fish or fishers disappear. MPAs are one way to give the fish a break in limited areas and rebuild stocks to sustain long-term fishing. Other methods--such as boat buyouts, modified seasons and fishing methods--are also being used. We may disagree about the specifics methods to improve fisheries, but we can agree there's a need to put fishing on a sustainable basis—biologically and economically.*

- 4. Look for the best way to wrap up the disagreement.** You may agree to disagree and leave it at that. Perhaps you can agree on some next steps or other actions: *I'd like to hear more about the changes you experience in fishing success as we see how these MPAs affect the ocean over time.* or *It took a number of years to get into this situation with declining fish stocks, and it'll take some time to see if MPAs are helping us improve things. Let's both monitor how things are changing as we give this some time to work.*

Avoid these

Some conflict or disagreement can add interest to the conversation and stimulate thought. Too much conflict just turns off your audience. Try not to let disagreement and detractors get out of control:

- Don't let a detractor dominate the conversation or the rest of your audience will tune out. You may want to end the conversation at some point and invite the detractor to talk with you one-on-one at a later time.
- Don't start arguing, debating or directly confronting a detractor. This can reduce an informative discussion to senseless mudslinging.
- Don't question a detractor's personal beliefs or values, this only diminishes your own credibility. Keep the conversation objective, based on reasonable information. Keep personalities out of it.
- Separate yourself from your role as an interpreter. Remember, a detractor is addressing your information, your role in representing a particular mission. If you take this as a personal attack, you can easily become frustrated and ineffective.
- If a detractor becomes overly aggressive, offensive or threatening, end the interaction and walk away.

Conflict can be a useful tool. Some interpreters will invite part of the audience to represent or role-play opposing views to take advantage of this tool in stimulating thought.