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Relationships with the News Media

'The press is running the country' (Andy Warhol)

'Advertisements contain the only truths to be relied upon in a newspaper' (Thomas Jefferson, 1743-1826)

Two of the objectives of Science Division are:

- To communicate to managers in the Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC), the knowledge, information and other insights obtained through scientific investigation in Western Australia and elsewhere.
- To show that the Division, as an integrated part of DEC, contributes to meeting the need for knowledge on conservation and environmental management matters by the public of Western Australia.

It is important that we communicate information to the general public as well as to scientists, policy makers and managers. Many of the subjects we research are of interest to the public and representatives of the news media will want to use our information, knowledge or expertise. The studies we conduct are paid for by the public via taxation and the results are not our private property.

In recent years, interest by the news media in conservation and the environment has increased. Positive articles about our achievements help maintain support for conservation. As well, articles in newspapers or magazines or features on television can benefit you and DEC considerably. On the other hand, the news media have the power to embarrass you, DEC or the Government if they present stories that are incorrect, or stories suggesting incompetence or inefficiency, or articles criticising Government decisions or policy.

Dealing with journalists, whether from the print or electronic media, is often difficult. We, as scientists, want to help the public understand the facts behind conservation and environmental management issues, but the journalist may just be interested in the tip of the iceberg and/or in presenting a simplified version of the truth. The journalist's need to meet a deadline may not allow time for the subject to be discussed as fully as you would have liked. The story quoting you may not 'get it right', either because the journalist didn't listen to you or because a sub-editor has cut parts

of the story to fit available space or time. The journalist may even be trying to use you in a story designed to embarrass the Government or DEC. All staff should be familiar with the Media Policy of the Department available on the DEC website at: http://calmweb.calm.wa.gov.au/drbcrd/media_relations_policy.htm.

Although common courtesy and common sense are the best parameters when dealing with the news media, there are certain guidelines to follow:

1. If contacted by a journalist who asks for technical information or who is checking whether information of a technical nature is correct and the subject appears to be non-controversial you should provide the information or advice. You should then advise the Director or your Program Leader of the approach; they may ask you to contact the Media Office in the Division of Strategic Development and Corporate Affairs to keep them informed (WMB.media@dec.wa.gov.au).
2. If you have doubts about whether the subject is controversial you can tell the journalist that:
 - a) you can not help him/her,
 - b) you wish to look up information and will ring him/her back (you then have time to think about it or get advice from senior staff), or
 - c) s/he should contact the Director Science Division, Strategic Development and Corporate Affairs or the Director General.
3. If you know the subject is controversial, and particularly if there has been an instruction for media contacts on a particular subject to be referred to the Director General or to Media Office in the Division of Strategic Development and Corporate Affairs, say that you are unable to comment and refer the journalist to the Media Office.
4. Keep all conversations with media people brief and to the point.

5. Always assume that everything you say is on the record. Never say anything to a reporter that you are not prepared to see on the front page of a newspaper or hear as a lead story on television or radio. Most reporters don't want to deal with off the record information and some may refuse to accept the confidence.
6. Avoid opinion; stick to the facts.
7. When you promise to provide information, keep your promise as soon as possible. Promise nothing unless you can deliver.
8. Never lie to a reporter. The public will not tolerate dishonesty and the media will never forget it.
9. Avoid jargon. Speak to the public in language it understands. Technical information must be explained in simple language; errors can occur when a reporter makes an honest attempt to translate jargon into something readable.
10. Don't tell reporters how to do their jobs.
11. Get to know which journalists are willing and capable of dealing with science and scientists

in a factual way and try to deal only with those people. If a journalist has misquoted you in the past, tell him/her so if s/he contacts you again. Try to get print journalists to read the story to you over the telephone before it is printed so you can correct any mistakes.

12. Remember: the media has the last word.

DEC, through the Media Office in the Division of Strategic Development and Corporate Affairs, often tries to get stories about conservation and environmental management into the various news media. You may be contacted by staff from the Media Office to help with a particular subject. If so, co-operate and follow their suggestions about procedures.

On occasions the Minister will want to have his/her name associated with 'good news' stories. If you know of a high profile story that the Minister may want to use, discuss this with the Director. If contacted by the Minister's Media Secretary you should provide any information asked for and then contact the Director and advise of the request.

The controlled version of this document is on the DEC web. Previously printed versions of this document may not be current. This document was last amended in August 2009 and can be located at the following URL address:

<http://calmweb.calm.wa.gov.au/drb/science/docs/guidelines/>