

Science in society

Alan Thorpe, Chief Executive

NERC is rightly proud of how its science is communicated – *Planet Earth* being an exemplar. Science communication is part of a range of activities called science in society, which increasingly is about public engagement. This is a move away from the limited one-way communication previously considered satisfactory. It acknowledges the need to have a dialogue with the public; to listen and take account of their views. However, research pressures, and the sometimes negative reaction of colleagues and employers to public engagement, can turn scientists away from these activities.

Why should NERC-funded scientists engage with the public? There are many good reasons but I will pick out three. First, the public pay for environmental research through the Science Budget – £1.2 billion over the next three years. We must involve the public in what we do with that money and how we develop the scientific agenda. Second, society now faces considerable environmental challenges; a better informed public makes it easier for scientists to address these challenges. And third, public input can make our research better, not least by shaping the areas researchers need to pursue. These are compelling reasons to be proactive about public engagement.

Since 2000, three surveys on public attitudes to science have been published – the latest report came out a couple of months ago. These have shown not only that the public are very positive about science but that this approval has increased over the last eight years. This is perhaps counter to the opinion that science and scientists are not well regarded by society – this simply is not the case. Indeed, this latest survey found that of all groups of researchers,

independent environmental scientists were trusted the most – high praise for the NERC-funded community.

On issues such as nuclear fuel, the public remains sceptical about whether their voices are heard. They also have concerns about scientific developments in fields such as genetic modification. Here, there are grounds for concern but policy-makers need to make difficult decisions, and to do that



they need the best independent scientific advice. The scientific community needs to engage closely with both the public and policy-makers to ensure we communicate accurate information.

This leads me to the new Beacons for Public Engagement. Research Councils UK, the higher education funding councils and the Wellcome Trust have come together to support six beacons in universities throughout the UK and a national coordinating centre (see www.rcuk.ac.uk/sis/beacons/).

One of the beacons' goals is to promote a culture change within universities creating an environment where public engagement is valued and part of promotion criteria. I think there is a strong case that a well-balanced successful career in science will include excellence in research and teaching, plus excellence in public engagement, be it with

the public, business or policy-makers. Of course, public engagement requires skill and practice, which is why I'd like to see more training included as part of our post-graduate courses. This will ensure the next generation of scientists have all the skills and encouragement they need to succeed.

The recent survey showed that television remains the main way people find out about science. Public engagement via the media is an area of intense debate and contention. Should we take part in interviews where we are pitched against a sceptic when doing so misleads the viewer into believing the weight of evidence on each side is evenly balanced? It is interesting to note that senior journalists at the BBC now accept that over-representing the opinions of sceptics 'will distort the issue and risk misleading or confusing our audience.'

So, how proactive should we be in seeking out media opportunities? Clearly not everyone can be active in the media, or indeed be good at it. But there are many other ways to discuss our work. It should be part of every scientist's life to engage with the public in one way or another.

Public Attitudes to Science 2008 report:
www.rcuk.ac.uk/sis/pas.htm

NERC's communications team organises six two-day courses a year on communicating science to the public. These courses are run by professional journalists and are aimed at staff, post-graduate students and grant-holders. Email: requests@nerc.ac.uk