NOAA Communicator

Tips for Effective Communication *Issue 9 - October 2011*

"It's deja vu all over again."
~ Yogi Berra

Meet our staff

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Oceanographer, NOAA Atlantic Oceanographic and Meteorological Laboratory

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On Oct. 6, Evan Forde received the NOAA Administrator's Award for outstanding communication of NOAA science, sharing the joy of science with students, and helping to foster a science-literate society. He is an oceanographer with the NOAA Atlantic Oceanographic and Meteorological Laboratory in Miami. He is also, as far as we know, the only NOAA scientist for whom the city of North Miami and Miami-Dade County held honorary "Evan B. Forde" days – Feb. 10, 2009, in North Miami, and April 21, 2009 in Miami-Dade County. These honors acknowledged the efforts he has made to share NOAA science in his community, particularly with local school students.

He has degrees in geology and marine geology and geophysics (bachelor's and master's) from Columbia University in New York City. Forde is a recognized authority on the formation, evolution, and sedimentary processes of U.S. east coast submarine canyons.

1. Why is your research important?

My current research is intended to help identify the moisture environment around hurricanes (past and present) with the goal of improving hurricane intensity forecasts. This is important because these major weather events threaten lives and property.

2. How do you help wider audiences to understand and appreciate NOAA science?

I observed many years ago that most citizens had no idea of who NOAA is or what it does. I decided to personally do my part to grow NOAA's constituency by speaking to children who would hopefully remember NOAA when they became old enough to vote. My current strategy is much the same, and I believe our agency will thrive through our dedication to serving, our persistence, and making sure we get credit for what we already do. The NOAA logo has a shape that is memorable, so when I make public appearances, I repeatedly show the NOAA logo and usually wear NOAA gear.

3. Why is it important to inform broad audiences about NOAA science and research?

Since most people have little idea of what NOAA is and its role in science and research, it is crucial that NOAA friends and family help give our agency a voice in our communities and with our elected officials. Others know who we are, but wonder why NOAA is needed since they believe, for example, that The Weather Channel is responsible for conducting weather research, creating daily weather forecasts, and flying into hurricanes. I believe it would make a huge difference for NOAA if we were to simply get credit for the valuable science and research we do each day as a part of our mission.

4. What do you enjoy the most about your work?

I enjoy the thrill of being a sometimes-geeky, technology-based detective who is seeking the answers to unanswered questions about our world. I often begin the process with just a hypothesis, and I never know how any given scientific inquiry will wind up. It is that uncertainty, along with my thirst for knowing the truth, and making a difference, that drives me.

5. What are the challenges associated with communicating about a lab program as part of the larger NOAA organization? What successes can you tout?

The biggest difficulty in this realm is getting folks to see the bigger picture and realize that each specific lab program will address a part of what's needed to fully resolve the broader important questions. It's also challenging to have folks envision OAR as not just a research entity, but also an irreplaceable team within the larger NOAA team.

I created a Severe Weather Poster for NOAA that was distributed nationally to 50,000 teachers and is seen daily by an estimated 8,000,000 students per day. I have personally spoken to nearly 40,000 Miami-Dade students during career days and other school presentations with my NOAA career being the focus of my talks. I take pride in having helped spread the word about NOAA research and the joy of science to many.

6. What in your office could you not live without?

I could not live without my computer and connection to the Internet, which is the world's largest library and database. I have been able to access data from ships and satellites, and use these data to conduct meaningful research, without leaving my office.

7. If you could invent any tool to make your work more efficient and cost were no object, what would it be? Why?

I would create a vehicle that could essentially hover in the earth's outer atmosphere and continuously monitor the important parameters related to hurricanes and their environments. I would build this vehicle so that it would also have the capability of mapping and exploring the depths of the oceans. If we could improve our knowledge and

forecasting ability for hurricanes and complete our exploration of the oceans with the same vehicle, I would be in "scientific heaven."

8. When did you know you wanted to pursue a career in science?

By the time I was in the third grade, I already had a microscope, telescope, and chemistry set. I was not a good student at that point, but I was magnifying tiny animals, taking things apart, putting them back together, and occasionally blowing things up. I was fascinated by the world around me and later as I blossomed academically, I was able to create larger explosions and gave up on the concept of putting things back together. I believe I was destined to be an alchemist, or wizard, but was simply born in the wrong century.

9. How did you become interested in communicating about science?

One of my earliest bosses insisted that I go out and speak about our lab and its research in our community. I didn't feel I had the time for school visits and simply didn't understand why outreach was important. My boss prevailed, and I made a presentation at a single school that first year. Months later, I got a letter back from a teacher that said my appearance at their school had made a huge positive difference in one of her student's interest and behavior. I was touched and inspired to do more presentations. The rest is history.

10. What's at the top of your recommended reading list for a young person exploring career options?

How People Learned to Fly by Fran Hodgkins. This book provides a look at the persistence and ingenuity that led to the development of the airplane. It is a true testament to the will and ingenuity of mankind.

11. What part of your job with NOAA did you least expect to be doing?

I had no idea that so much of the world's oceans were unexplored and uncharted. I spent much of my first few years with NOAA going to sea and making bathymetric and geophysical maps of the seafloor by hand. It would sometimes take me up to three months to create a detailed contour map of, for example, a 300 square mile section of the seafloor. Much of the world's oceans are still unexplored and uncharted in detail, but technology has advanced and we are slowly exploring and mapping the entire ocean floor.

12. Do you have an outside hobby?

I love to swim, play golf, and I am an award winning photographer.

13. What would you be doing if you were not working for NOAA?

During my senior year of high school a local paper featured me as the "Teen of the Week." The last line in the piece stated, "Evan would like to either become a scientist, or a professional football player." Had I gone to the NFL, my pro career would now be long over, and I would likely be the poster child/spokesperson for some company selling prosthetic joint replacements. Or, I'd probably be blowing things up and doing other science experiments in my kitchen sink and perfecting my golf game in my spare time.