

The Florida Natural Resources Leadership Institute¹

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Program Background

We are all dependent on Florida's natural resources for jobs, health, and our quality of life. Decisions about the management and conservation of the State's environment involve complex sets of issues and stakeholders. Expensive and time-consuming disputes often emerge over topics such as endangered species, land use, coastal and marine resources, and water quality and quantity. Effective leadership in managing such issues requires a specialized set of skills, tools, and strategies to build trust and promote innovation and collaboration among competing interests. To meet these needs, the Florida Natural Resources Leadership Institute (NRLI) was founded in 1998 to bring together professionals and stakeholders from diverse natural resource sectors to develop the skills required to engage the public and one another in collaborative decision-making. NRLI seeks to create a network of trained individuals from throughout the State prepared to effectively address natural resource challenges through conflict management and collaborative leadership. NRLI is a University of Florida Extension program; the training and leadership it provides help to bridge the divide between experts and laypeople, regulators and the regulated, and producers and consumers. The skills and concepts taught do not provide traditional Extension education solutions but instead focus on creating a climate for innovation by engaging stakeholder groups

who can work together to seek solutions to the complex problems we face today.

Program Purpose

Fellows in the NRLI program navigate challenging natural resource disputes in their jobs and in their communities. NRLI recognizes that complex disputes in the environmental arena often produce unsatisfactory outcomes for some or all concerned. Conflicts most often occur because of:

- Inadequate understanding of complex environmental issues
- Inadequate understanding of stakeholders who affect or are affected by complex environmental issues
- Lack of financial resources to address the problems
- Lack of enthusiasm and skills for engaging citizens and affected stakeholders
- The diverse values in our society today
- Gaps in communication among agencies, organizations, and the public
- Overlapping or incomplete jurisdiction and responsibilities of governments and agencies that leads to confusion

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- Laws and policies that compete with political priorities
- Leadership that is inadequately skilled in dealing with these complexities

A core assumption of NRLI is that these problems persist not because we lack leaders, but because leaders are often unfamiliar with the full range of strategies and choices available to address the problems. With broader awareness about themselves, about others, and about the various approaches for resolving environmental (and often interpersonal) conflict, leaders can achieve more productive and innovative outcomes.

History of NRLI

The Natural Resources Leadership Institute was an outgrowth of discussions among IFAS Extension faculty on the role of outreach education in addressing public issues regarding management of Florida's natural resources and environment. It was apparent that, in most cases, there was no single, scientific, "correct" solution to challenges that were complex and contentious. Upon what body of knowledge, then, should Extension educators base educational programs that offer "answers" to public environmental issues? Was there an educational approach that contemplated the need for collaborative leadership in natural resource management? The answer was found in a model developed by the North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service in the form of the North Carolina Natural Resources Leadership Institute. The North Carolina NRLI recruited fellows from a diverse cross-section of natural resource and environmental interests and provided six three-day training sessions over six months featuring skills in meeting facilitation, mediation, effective communication, and related components of collaborative problem-solving.

The North Carolina template was subsequently adapted to other states and regions, including Alaska, Florida, Indiana, Kentucky, Maryland, Montana, the Pacific Northwest, and Virginia. These programs have met with varying degrees of success. While each state tailored its own program, the Natural Resources Leadership Institutes have shared core design principles including participation from many sectors with diverse perspectives, a series of multi-day sessions over a period of several months, a curriculum emphasizing process as well as substantive content, and efforts to transfer learning to participants' communities and organizations. The Florida NRLI is supported by UF/IFAS Extension, the UF Department of Food and Resource Economics, the Department of Agricultural Education and Communication, and those who attend the Institute.

Who Participates: NRLI Fellows

In Florida, each NRLI class is composed of approximately 18 fellows representing a broad array of natural resource professions. From its founding through 2014, the program has trained over 240 people from 93 organizations and all parts of the state. The fellows are nominated by employers, alumni, and supporters of the program or can self-nominate through the website. Fellows represent the following constituencies:

- The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers
- The USDA Forest Service
- The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
- The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission
- The Florida Department of Agricultural and Consumer Services
- Water Management Districts
- Local government
- The Miccosukee Tribe of Indians of Florida
- Non-governmental and community organizations
- The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA)
- Agricultural producers
- The Florida Farm Bureau Federation
- Engineering, law, and consulting firms
- Academia
- UF/IFAS County Extension

The work of these fellows has included natural resource management, food production, policy development, planning, law, education, communication, and environmental activism, among other subjects. They work on issues throughout the state such as water quality and quantity, forestry, agricultural BMPs, boater conflicts, mangrove and beach dune protection, urban forestry, fertilizer regulations, wildlife management, community engagement, and stakeholder collaboration.

The Institute

In Florida, NRLI is an eight-month professional development program. Each intensive three-day session is held in a different part of the state and focuses on a specific and contentious natural resource issue identified by the project team and alumni. Sessions include immersion in the issue/topic through first-hand experience with the resource; engagement with local stakeholders from diverse perspectives;

and experiential training in skills, concepts, tools, and strategies related to collaborative decision making, conflict management, communication, and negotiation.

Practicum Projects

To assure that the skills learned in NRLI go beyond the classroom, a practicum is built into the program. Each fellow develops a project that allows them to apply skills and concepts learned in NRLI to actual conflict, decision-making, or leadership situations in their organizations or communities. NRLI Project Team members mentor fellows as they develop and conduct their practicum projects. Practicum projects have been implemented throughout the state and have covered a diverse range of topics from planning and tourism to education and agriculture. Recent practicum projects have included:

- Assessing Coastal Resiliency in Pinellas County, Florida
- Using Community Engagement to Protect an Urban Watershed in an Underserved Neighborhood
- Perspectives on Climate Change Among Natural Resource Agency Professionals
- Creating a Dialogue Between Beekeepers and Citrus Producers
- Agricultural Best Management Practices: Perceptions and Awareness with the Santa Fe and Suwannee Rivers Basin Management Action Plan (BMAP) Areas

Professional Development

In 2013, a survey of 211 NRLI alumni was conducted to measure program impact. The response rate was 56 percent. Results indicated that 84 percent of respondents directly linked their organizational and career advancement to participation in NRLI.

Respondents also “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that NRLI helped them:

1. Act in a leadership role in collaborative group decision-making (89 percent);
2. Design and run effective meetings (85 percent);
3. Increase stakeholder understanding and acceptance of collaborative group decision-making processes (72 percent);
4. Design and facilitate collaborative group decision-making (82 percent);

5. Communicate natural resource issues (83 percent);
6. Engage diverse stakeholders in collaborative group decision-making processes (82 percent);
7. Negotiate and collaborate outside their organization (86 percent); and
8. Negotiate and collaborate inside their organization (80 percent).

Impact

NRLI strives to build connections with local communities by locating each session in a different part of the state. Local stakeholders are invited to speak during each NRLI field visit. These stakeholders have experience with contentious natural resource issues and have often collaborated to achieve positive change. Since 1998, NRLI has invited nearly 300 local stakeholders to meet and talk with the fellows. By engaging with local communities, Fellows develop a deeper understanding of and connection to Florida’s natural resource issues. They return to their profession with skills, tools, and techniques for engaging a diverse community of stakeholders. Over the course of the program, fellows also are encouraged to collaborate and develop their professional network. Many fellows continue to interact and collaborate after graduating from the program both within their cohort and with other cohorts through the NRLI Alumni Association.

The NRLI program has had an influence on natural resource management in Florida. The program has done this by building capacity among different communities of professionals and the stakeholders with whom they work. By increasing the participation of citizens in the management of natural resources, NRLI promotes the mission of the land grant institution to extend the expertise of the university to the public. Below are quotes from three respondents to the NRLI alumni survey that illustrate this impact:

“I believe the most valuable outcome is to not be afraid to seek out diverse opinions and stakeholders when trying to reach a solution. Before the (NRLI) training I would try to limit conflict by including like-minded folks that saw issues they way I did. I learned in training and have experienced how solid agreements can be when there’s open honest discussion with folks seeking to find compromise or win-win solutions for all interests.”

“I helped facilitate a collaborative decision-making process that aimed to reduce water pollution throughout the state. That would have never happened had I not developed skills and made professional connections through NRLI.”

“My most significant facilitation milestone to date was helping a disparate group of long-time antagonists to evolve into a team of eager partners, resulting in a long-awaited \$24 million project to improve water quality in the Floridan aquifer and wetlands.”

For more information, visit the NRLI website: <http://nrli.ifas.ufl.edu>.