

A New Class, a New Journey for NRLI in 2020

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Class XX of the Natural Resources Leadership Institute was finally able to meet October 14th in Gainesville, Florida. From navigating a group training session during a global pandemic, planning around the unpredictably-Floridian conditions outdoors, and diving headfirst into new topics we were able to come safely together and begin learning how to be more effective leaders for our environment.

While face masks and social distancing may make communication a little harder, the expectations of the new team members were heard loud and clear. The common theme among team members is we want to become better collaborators, learn more effective strategies and place more “tools in our toolbox” to achieve effective results. The new protocols were freely accepted by team members and will allow for everyone to enjoy the NRLI experience safely.



Overall, the first session taught us about things most of probably assumed we already knew. Most of us work with stakeholders every day, of course we know about their motivations and goals! As with most things in life, however, there is always more to learn. It's not enough to take notes and analyze the process. So much of being a leader and participating in the conservation and/or management process involves empathizing with others' points of view and life experiences. Good leaders (and in turn, good stakeholders) can do this by practicing empathic listening, where we sit with what others are saying and try to truly understand it, without bias and without jumping to conclusions or injecting our own life experiences into the conversation. As we learned during our exercise, this is an on-going skill we should seek to build during our careers. It's not just about reading strategies off a piece of paper; at the end of the day, to truly practice and hone these skills takes work!



Aside from more participatory forms of listening, we also need to seek to understand the motivations of the stakeholders we interact with while performing our job duties. We both felt that the positions vs. interests stakeholder discussion was of importance from our first session. Each stakeholder in a collaborative process will have certain positions, i.e. what outcomes do we want or don't want, and interests, i.e. why we want or don't want those things, that motivate those positions. It is important to differentiate between the two, so we can start to move forward on collaboration while hoping to reduce conflicts that may arise.

For instance, Jason works to encourage others to advocate on behalf of our state's farmers and ranchers, it is important for him to understand why a person believes the way they do. Through focusing on their interest, we are more likely to find common ground and a path forward. While we both work in the agricultural field, we both often find ourselves fielding concern from groups outside of agriculture. A lot of the time, we hear that agriculture and the environment are opposed; you can't support both. Yet we have learned during our careers that growers are often very interested in protecting the environment and natural resources.

As with most things, the process of collaborating among groups with different interests will be multi-faceted and we should seek to understand all the pieces of the puzzle whenever possible. This was exemplified by the Triangle of Needs and Interests discussion – showing fellows that while much of our work may be guided by rules, statutes, precedent, or other legislative or rigid processes, often there is more at play than just procedure. Procedure matters, but so do relationships and the substance of the ideas we're trying to promote.

We both found that our NRLI fellows were interested and supportive of the various issues facing our natural environment, growers, and the other stakeholders we interact with. Like us, they wanted to find collaborative solutions to improving our environment. Through practicing empathic listening and "first seeking to understand before seeking to be understood," we have started this productive journey together as a team.



We were able to consider many of these techniques during the session itself, even though many of us come from different lines of work. We were able to discuss resource issues facing our state while also listening and trying to truly hear and learn from those around us. We are already learning useful skills for our careers and we look forward to the coming years and to learning together. The year 2020 will be one to

remember for many bad things, but our hope is that it will be remembered by NRRI Class XX as the start of something great.