



The Role of the Environmental Commissioner in Public Education:
Accomplishments and Challenges

**A Background Paper for
Public Participation and the Environment
Five Years of the *Environmental Bill of Rights* in Ontario
February 15, 1999**

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Introduction

The mandate of the Environmental Commissioner of Ontario (ECO) — to “provide educational programs about this Act to the public” — offers unique opportunities and challenges.

The education programs of the ECO enhance the goals of the *Environmental Bill of Rights (EBR)* by helping the public to participate in protecting their environment. Public participation, in turn, helps to ensure that the government of Ontario implements the *EBR* in an effective, timely, open and fair manner. The structured opportunities for participation provided by the *EBR* — including the right to comment on proposals by using the Environmental Registry — also enhance the public’s awareness of the complex tradeoffs that are faced when environmental decisions are made. This is particularly so because of the unique requirement of the *EBR* that prescribed Ontario government ministries must explain how they will integrate environmental considerations with the social, economic and scientific considerations when they make environmentally significant decisions.

The goal of the ECO’s educational programs is a well-informed public, armed with the tools of public participation provided by the *EBR*. A well-informed public can help to ensure that the decisions made by Ontario ministries reflect the environmental values of Ontario residents. And that’s one of the major challenges at the ECO. ECO staff often encounter well-intentioned members of the public who are concerned about the environment — but who have yet to learn about Ontario’s *Environmental Bill of Rights*. This is not difficult to understand. The ECO has a small staff . . . and is faced with the task of reaching the 10 million residents of Ontario. Nevertheless, each year ECO staff make substantial progress toward that goal.

Accomplishments

Over the past five years, the ECO staff have made hundreds of presentations to large and small groups across the province, including comprehensive community visits to major population centres. They have distributed print, video and other materials through various means, including the Internet. They have talked to Rotary Clubs, municipal councils, community groups, conference participants, and faculty members and students at Ontario high schools, colleges and universities. They have met with business and municipal leaders, chambers of commerce, environmental groups, and provincial MPPs and government staff members. As well as education staff, other ECO staff are also part of the in-house Speakers’ Bureau available for public

presentations. In fact, to date, ECO staff have made educational presentations about the *EBR* to approximately 30,000 people in Ontario.

The ECO has responded to more than 2,000 inquiries per year for publications and information. Staff members have set up displays and distributed educational brochures and made full use of the informational video about the *Environmental Bill of Rights* they produced in 1996. Workshops were held at colleges, universities and public libraries to demonstrate how people can use the Environmental Registry to find information about the environmentally significant proposals and decisions that ministries are making about their own communities.

It is always a challenge to reach all of Ontario's residents. In order to stretch the ECO's staff and resources, the ECO established an Education and Communications Advisory Committee made up of experts from across the province. With their help, ECO education staff developed a resource entitled "Teaching the *EBR*," which is available to teachers throughout Ontario.

Community Visits

One of the most successful educational programs is the Commissioner's community visit, which consists of a one-to-three-day swing through a community. In the last four years, these visits have taken place in Thunder Bay, Peterborough, Kenora, Ottawa, Windsor and London, along with several other centres. During these visits the Commissioner and her staff hold information sessions about the *EBR* and talk to residents about how they can use their *EBR* rights to address particular environmental issues in their communities. This interaction with the residents of Ontario has been among the most rewarding of the Commissioner's work. In the visits, the ECO has heard about each community's own environmental concerns. The ECO has also discovered that people are eager to learn how the *EBR* can help them tackle local as well as provincial environmental problems. Coverage of the ECO's visits by the local media has made the task of reaching everyone that much easier.

Resource Centre

The ECO's Resource Centre is open to the public and is home to a growing collection of environmental resource materials, focusing primarily on environmental law and policy. During the past five years, the Resource Centre has acquired many new reference works, ranging from landfill engineering to the principles of environmental economics and hazardous waste incineration. The collection includes Ontario government publications, federal government reports, environmental management literature, publications of non-governmental organizations, and a range of environmental periodicals. The ECO's library assistant answers questions, directs visitors to the material they're looking for, and helps with the use of our on-site computer terminal that allows people access to the Environmental Registry.

The Resource Centre is well stocked with educational materials that focus on Ontario environmental law and policy and the national and international context in which Ontario environmental policy is formed.

Spreading the Word

Each year, staff distribute ECO publications, more than 36,000 in 1997. These publications included annual reports and copies of ECONOTES — 32 different fact sheets on topics that range from the interaction between the *EBR* and environmental assessments to how Ontario residents pursue specific rights under the *EBR*.

More than 5,000 people in Ontario now receive the *EBR*rights newsletter, which carries updates on the public's use of the *EBR*, reviews of new books in the Resource Centre, and information about ECO publications and about new initiatives taken on by staff members. Each issue of the newsletter contains the "Commissioner's Message," where the Commissioner sums up her thoughts on how ministries are complying with the *EBR* and shares her views on how the mandate of the Environmental Commissioner of Ontario and the implementation of the *EBR* can best be fulfilled.

Internet Homepage

The ECO's Internet Homepage is the most recent addition to the ECO's educational activities. On it one will find many of the ECO's educational publications, as well as copies of the annual reports. In the near future, access to the ECO Resource Centre on-line catalogue and to the entire ECONOTE collection will also be available on the Homepage. On average, the ECO Homepage received about 1,000 "hits" per month in 1998.

Guidance Documents

The ECO has also developed two guidance documents for ministry staff in response to discussions with them about provisions of the *EBR* that relate to the use of the Environmental Registry. The documents clarify how the Commissioner assesses and evaluates ministry activities with regard to the *EBR*'s Registry notice and comment procedures.

Future Challenges for the ECO Education Program

In view of the limitations that come with finite staff and financial resources, a key ongoing challenge for the ECO's public education program is targeting the audience. Education staff have asked the right questions: who wants to know, who needs to know, and who should know about the *EBR*? To find the answers, they have analysed incoming requests from the public, including which sectors of the Ontario public are making use of the Homepage, who wants to be added to our mailing lists, who is requesting documents, and who is using the Resource Centre and calling us on our public information lines. Based on this data, the ECO's education programs are being targeted to those groups and individuals who have expressed the greatest interest.

Another ongoing challenge of the ECO's education program is the need to reconcile the complexity of environmental decision-making with the public's need for transparency and accountability. Consequently, the ECO strives to create reader-friendly materials, to avoid the use

of technical jargon, and to explain technical terms in plain language. Choosing the best medium for a particular audience is also an ongoing consideration which must be decided on a case-by-case basis. Thus far, the primary media for the ECO's education initiatives have been printed material, along with the Internet and personal contacts.

Unlike public interest groups and trade associations, which regularly compete for the public's attention by using the news media to spread their messages, the ECO has a legal duty to report first to the Legislative Assembly. As a consequence of this legal obligation, the Commissioner and staff do not give media interviews on any topics that have not yet been part of the report that is delivered annually to the Ontario Legislature.

As a measure of the effectiveness of all these initiatives, the demand for the ECO's educational services has grown each year, continuing to outpace available resources. As well, public recognition of the *EBR* has grown significantly since February 1994. Nevertheless, there is still a long way to go in raising the level of public awareness of the *EBR*. The ECO's commitment to its public education program is aimed at raising that awareness.

Conclusion

The ECO's mandate to educate the public about the *EBR* is a central and important part of the work of the Commissioner and her staff. Because of limited resources and a potentially large need, the programs put in place to carry out the mandate must be strategically targeted and effectively deployed. In addition to continuing to use the strategies that have been outlined above, it is hoped that this symposium will make an important contribution to the ECO's education goals. The collected symposium proceedings and papers will be released to the public as an ECO educational publication.