Sea Grant Michigan
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# Tips for a Successful Integrated Assessment Research Project

Research projects that follow an Integrated Assessment approach have big goals. The collaborative research process and the information generated by Integrated Assessments can benefit people, policy and the environment. However, these projects can be complicated to manage. This fact sheet provides tips for scientists and project coordinators to help maximize the impact of Integrated Assessment.

## Goals of Integrated Assessment

- Clarify a complicated environmental issue, including the history, causes and consequences
- Foster collaboration and build consensus
- Identify and evaluate options for solving the problem
- Develop information and tools that help guide decisions

## Observed Benefits

- Credible source of information, useful research products
- Modified perspectives
- New partnerships
- Changes in process and policies
- New opportunities and resources

## Outreach Tips

### Outreach Is Important — Sea Grant Can Assist

Keep your outreach plan simple and targeted and be sure you've budgeted enough time and money. Seek advice and support from your policy contacts, Sea Grant staff, and outreach specialists. Develop partnerships whenever possible.

### Why Engage Stakeholders?

The most important reason for the research team to work with relevant stakeholders is to ensure that the assessment process and results are useful and influential. Stakeholders can help you:

- Focus on the right question
- Understand policy as well as the social and political landscape
- Collect the data, local knowledge, or technical or industry insights necessary for an informed assessment
- Be perceived as credible or legitimate
- Engage the right people
- Test out preliminary results
- Improve the presentation of results

### Who are My Stakeholders?

Identifying and engaging key stakeholders can help ensure the success of an Integrated Assessment. Early in the process, identify the stakeholder groups most affected by or interested in the issue. These are people most likely to contribute positively if they are involved — or impede the implementation of new ideas if they are excluded. Representation should be diverse and balanced. Recruit respected people as representatives of multiple sides of the issue. Remember, if you want someone to read or use your assessment results, consult them early and often in the process.

## Types of Stakeholder Engagement

Each project will develop its own unique outreach strategy. Keep your plan simple, authentic and targeted to ensure that information flows in two directions. Tap into Sea Grant outreach specialists to assist with planning. Consider why you are engaging people, what information you need, and how you will use their feedback. Sample engagement strategies include:

- **Advisory Committees.** Invite the most important decision makers and stakeholder representatives to participate regularly throughout the project. Meetings can be simple project updates with an opportunity for feedback. Be flexible, as you may need to add or drop advisors. This strategy has worked particularly well for several regionally focused assessments.
- **Project Fact Sheet and Website.** Sea Grant communications and research staff will develop a project fact sheet and web page for each new research project. The fact sheet may be used by your research team, your university communications office, and others. The web page is a great place to include the project timeline, relevant documents, and information from meetings. These outreach tools will help ensure project transparency, as documents will be readily available for media, stakeholders, and the research team.
- **Email.** Develop a list of people interested in the topic. Sea Grant can assist with email software to develop email lists, collect stakeholder information and assist with communicating with stakeholders (information about upcoming meetings, announcements, etc.). It's important to provide semi-regular updates via email to let stakeholders and others know about project events, new presentations, reports, or recent news articles.
- **Social Media.** You don't have to be an expert to engage in social media. Sea Grant and university communications offices offer many resources and options to engage participants in topics, facilitate discussions, and inform people about activities.
- **Surveys, Interviews, or Focus Groups.** These can be used to systematically solicit more detailed information from a broader group of people. We encourage you to add these participants to your mailing list and follow up with them later in the project.
- **Public Meetings or Workshops.** Short meetings can raise awareness, attract media attention or provide a venue to facilitate a larger dialogue. Longer workshops foster collaborative groups and encourage creative brainstorming. Even if the event is open to the public, consider how and who you invite. An event flyer is probably not enough to engage the right people. Sea Grant can assist with automated event registration and the collection of participant contact information via database capabilities.

## Tips for Public Outreach

- Explain what you do and why you do it; tell a story that communicates why you find this subject or project interesting and use analogies or metaphors that are concrete.
- Minimize jargon and clearly define technical terms.
- Discuss the different stages of your project (e.g., analyzing existing data, evaluating a suite of options).
- Ask if media is on a deadline and call them back, if possible. If contentious, contact Sea Grant or your university communications specialists for advice.
- Use photos and easy-to-understand graphics for the public and media.
- Determine the scope of outreach activities carefully:
    a. How does the activity benefit my project?
    b. Develop specific goals for outreach efforts that reinforce the benefit to the project.
    c. Identify primary audience for events and information (e.g., city planners, residents, state government).
    d. Will results be disseminated broadly? Should results be presented differently for certain audiences?
    e. Who will receive or use the information or product?
    f. How will they use it or benefit from it?

## Avoiding Common Challenges

### Who is in Charge?

As with many complex, multidisciplinary projects, research teams sometimes struggle to define roles and make decisions efficiently. Define roles and responsibilities at the beginning, including the following project aspects:

- Project Management – organizing project team meetings, keeping project on schedule, making sure all the pieces are integrated, maintaining communication with Sea Grant.
- Stakeholder Engagement – building a stakeholder list, distributing information, receiving RSVPs, fielding inquiries, maintaining contact between events, and planning and facilitating meetings.
- Technical Assessment(s) – gathering needed datasets, presenting preliminary findings, soliciting and responding to feedback, modifying analyses as needed.

### Conflicts Between Stakeholders

Anticipate any political or personality issues by talking to local outreach specialists, project advisors, and other contacts. Even if you can't change the dynamic, you can avoid making the conflict worse by being transparent and balanced in your own approach.

### Perceived Bias

If discussions surrounding the project issue are very charged, some people may perceive that you are biased. Integrated Assessment projects are meant to provide a neutral forum for discussion and science-based information. Be aware of your own opinions going into the project, even if the science is clear (e.g., climate change is happening, coal causes damaging pollution) there are many legitimate policy approaches. How you frame the issue can turn off or engage different stakeholders.

### Prepare for Iterative Analyses

Stakeholders will appreciate seeing early versions of your analyses and offering feedback. However, you may need to modify these analyses based on stakeholder suggestions, integration with other aspects of the assessment, and the time lag between initial presentation and final report. Allocate time for you and your team to prepare and revise project materials.

### Avoid Reporting Surprises

*Annual Online Reporting:* Your research projects are an integral part of our strategic plan. Each year, we will ask for a progress report with some specific information that helps us prepare our annual report to NOAA. Please keep track of the following activities during your project:

- Public and professional presentations and workshops, and number of attendees; both those you host and others at which you are a presenter
- Students supported by grant or matching funds
- Publications – scientific or outreach
- New tools or services developed to aid ecosystem-based management, such as maps or predictions
- Natural resource managers that participate, including people that work at federal, state or local agencies, parks or land conservancies.
- Communities that participate
- Volunteer hours
- Any additional funds the project helps raise for you or a project partner
- Economic benefits, including jobs or businesses supported

*Integrated Assessment report***:** In addition to the annual online reporting forms, you will be required to prepare a full narrative report at the conclusion of your project. As a scientific report, this document should describe the project's background, methods, and results such that an expert external to the process could understand and evaluate the quality of the work. This report should be submitted before the project end date to ensure adequate time for a peer review and revision process, which typically takes about four months.

### Ensure a Graceful Exit

By working closely with Sea Grant and other outreach partners you can help ensure continuity for stakeholders after a project ends. Outreach partners can continue to discuss the issues and support the implementation of new ideas. This will minimize any frustration with the end of a research project.

## Support from Michigan Sea Grant

We encourage you to stay in touch with Michigan Sea Grant throughout your project. Add us to your mailing lists and don't hesitate to call or email at any point. If you'd like help with particular aspects of your project, please contact us to discuss your ideas; we area available to consult with you regarding stakeholder engagement and other aspects of your project.

| SEA GRANT CONTACT | ROLE |
|---|---|
| **Catherine Riseng**<br>Assistant Director/Research Program Manager<br>criseng@umich.edu | • Research program oversight<br>• First point of contact for research projects<br>• RFP development and proposal review<br>• Liaison with National Sea Grant Office and NOAA<br>• Management Team Member |
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**For a complete list of Sea Grant funded research projects, see our Michigan Sea Grant website.**

**Additional Resources:**

- Research Approaches: Integrated Assessments
- Tackling Wicked Problems through Integrated Assessment: A Guide for Decision Makers, Project Leaders and Scientists
- Benefits of Integrated Assessment: Information for Decision Makers, Project Leaders and Scientists
- National Science Foundation, Merit Review Broader Impacts Criterion, Representative Activities
- COSEE NOW, Broader Impacts Wizard
- COSEE Pacific Education and Public Outreach Guide for Scientists
- Guest Editorial: It's Time To e-Volve: Taking Responsibility for Science Communication in a Digital Age