

DRAFT - ERF Strategic Planning - Overview – Membership

Vision

The very essence of the Estuarine Research Federation is its members. It is of utmost importance that the Federation has an active membership. To continue to advance coastal and estuarine science, the Federation must address both quantitative and qualitative aspects of membership. It is important that we maintain steady, smart growth of the organization and find ways to enhance diversity within the organization.

Introduction

We are a strong society, continually making strides toward the goals of promoting estuarine and coastal research, supporting education, and facilitating communication, as expressed in our Mission Statement. The resources---both fiscal and otherwise---that propel us toward these goals emanate from our membership. However, our membership, like the scientific and communication environment in which we operate, is continually changing. For example, some sectors of our membership are highly unstable, oscillating with the biennial conference cycle; some other sectors are declining slowly. New disciplines and sub-disciplines relevant to coastal and estuarine science continue to emerge; some may be currently well served by our society and others may not. We face paradigm shifts in the methods of and access to scholarly publishing; although such changes may offer opportunities, some approaches could also demotivate potential members. Technology is enhancing the ways and extent to which scientists communicate, resulting in science becoming increasingly global and, for our society, making a more geographically broad---though still cohesive---membership a possibility.

How can we harness these changes to enhance our membership and minimize risk? How can we strengthen our membership, not only in number but also in terms of intensity of involvement? We have many strengths on which to build. Our conferences are extremely successful. Our journal continues to rise in prominence. Our current membership is relatively diverse and increasingly comprised of interdisciplinary scientists at the cutting edge of their fields, many outside of North America. These are resources which we can tap, analyze, and strengthen toward building a stable, forward-looking society of the future.

The benefits of such enhancements to our membership would be multifold. Serving new emerging disciplines would inform and broaden our members' scientific perspectives. Since comparative study is an important way to better understand one's own backyard ecosystem, broadening the geographic scope of our membership, conferences, and journal can only strengthen the science of our members. Disciplinary and geographic broadening of our journal and conferences would likely increase the quality of these benefits to members. A strong membership means a strong ERF to advance the wise stewardship of coastal and estuarine ecosystems, to promote research, and to facilitate the exchange of scientific information amongst scientists, educators, decision-makers and the public.

Background

The changes in technology, communications, and scientific disciplines described above represent external factors to which we need to respond. A significant internal factor which must be considered is the looming retirement of numerous members of the “Baby Boomer” generation. We must develop a plan to serve and attract young coastal and estuarine scientists to our organization to compensate for attrition and to build a strong society of the future. If we do not think about our society, its members, and its products in new ways---morphing our organization to serve young scientists, educators, and decision-makers with their new interests, technologies, and concerns---we could ultimately become irrelevant.

Another internal factor which actually opens up new membership opportunities is the decision to add “Coasts” to our journal name and the possibility of adding “Coastal” to our society name. Numerous coastal scientists, educators, managers, consultants, fisheries workers, and special interest groups currently represent an isolated pool of professionals without a “home” society. Our new journal title “Estuaries and Coasts” explicitly communicates a message of *welcome* to these professionals and an opportunity for them and current ERF members to broaden themselves professionally and to, collectively, work toward ever wiser stewardship of coastal and estuarine ecosystems. One factor which may influence some limit setting with respect to the size of our society, however, is the social aspect of our organization. There may exist thresholds for the sizes of our society and our conferences above which we could lose the intangible though important social characteristics of our organization.

Our Year 2000 membership survey indicates that ERF members are looking for:

- more scientifically diverse contributions to our journal and conferences
- more geographically diverse contributions to our journal and conferences
- more rigorous review of journal publications
- smaller (e.g. single topic) meetings, workshops
- increased advocacy and outreach by the society
- more job information available to members
- decreased costs of membership and services

There may be limits to our ability to deliver on some of the above items (e.g. costs). On the other hand, several of the above desires of current members are consistent with strategies for expanding and strengthening our membership (e.g. scientific and geographical diversity). Therefore, it is certainly possible that a vision for the future membership of ERF will serve both our “classic” members and the new membership segments we hope to attract.

Objectives and Strategies:

The strategic plan focuses on two aspects of membership: (1) maintenance of steady, smart growth of the organization and (2) enhancement of diversity within the organization. These are addressed through 5 specific objectives:

- Increase involvement of core/faithful members
- Increase member retention
- Increase disciplinary diversity of membership in areas growing in importance for coastal and estuarine science
- Increase international membership
- Increase student membership

The general strategy for enhancing membership is to form an ad hoc membership committee that is willing to invest the time and energy needed to (1) understand the issues and (2) propose specific steps. Steps that might be appropriate include the following:

- Identify clearly and succinctly the value of joining ERF – What are the benefits for our members?
- Communicate membership benefits.
- Understand the importance of retention.
- Locate conferences to draw in new and keep existing members.
- Examine current membership and plan for future composition with respect to discipline, geography, membership categories, sector, and changing demographics.
- Determine how to tap into various segments and categories of the community, including transitional (recently post-graduate) members.
- Determine the emerging disciplines.
- Determine how to reach out to potential members in developing countries. These efforts may involve the following:
 - a. incentives, such as the offer of free or reduced memberships,
 - b. active participation of our international members in promoting ERF,
 - c. development of a sponsorship program.
- Develop a campaign through professors to attract students.

Timelines for action

The organization of the ad hoc Membership Committee can take place during early 2006 with the charge of a report by the Fall 2006 ERF Governing Board meeting. The various proposed steps can then be evaluated and implemented over the following couple of years. The Committee should stay in effect for at least three years and be charged with assessing the steps in 2008.

Resources needed

The initial resources are minimal for the conference calls and paperwork of the ad hoc Membership Committee. The costs beyond that will depend on the steps implemented. Most costs are likely to be in decreased revenue for categories of members who might be asked to give less for membership than currently requested. However, if the efforts are successful, there should be an overall increase in membership revenues.

Measuring success

Success can be measured in several ways. They include the following:

- A steady (perhaps slow) increase of membership that minimizes the differences between conference and non-conference years,
- An increase in the diversity of disciplines/sectors of members,
- An increase in the number and percentage of international members.

