

The Development of the South Carolina Coastal Information Network and Portal Site: Bringing Training Opportunities and Educational Resources to Coastal Community Officials and the Public.

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History and Background Information

The South Carolina Coastal Information Network (SCCIN) emerged as a result of a number of coastal outreach institutions working in partnership to enhance coordination of the coastal community outreach efforts in South Carolina. This organized effort, led by the S.C. Sea Grant Extension Program, includes partners from federal and state agencies, regional government agencies, and private organizations seeking to coordinate and/or jointly deliver outreach programs that target coastal community constituents. The Network was officially formed in 2006 with the original intention of fostering intra-agency communication, coordination, and cooperation. Network partners include the S.C. Sea Grant Consortium, S.C. Department of Health and Environmental Control – Office of Ocean and Coastal Resource Management and Bureau of Water, S.C. Department of Natural Resources – ACE Basin National Estuarine Research Reserve, North Inlet-Winyah Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve, Clemson University Cooperative Extension Service and Carolina Clear, Berkeley-Charleston-Dorchester Council of Governments, Waccamaw Regional Council of Governments, Urban Land Institute of South Carolina, S.C. Department of Archives and History, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration – Coastal Services Center and Hollings Marine Laboratory, Michaux Conservancy, Ashley-Cooper Stormwater Education Consortium, and the Coastal Waccamaw Stormwater Education Consortium.

Motivation for the project was to foster collaboration amongst agencies and institutions in order to avoid duplicative efforts. Doing so would minimize the number of meetings /workshops that community leaders and staff are asked to attend while maximizing program benefits and expected outcomes, and leveraging scarce resources. The underlining goal has been to maximize the efficient delivery of quality training and educational material to coastal decision-makers, community planners, local officials, and the public. To facilitate communication and coordination, in 2006 Network partners created a member listserv and developed a database of projects, programs, workshops, and other outreach events.

The database of projects was later developed into a Web site with a searchable calendar of outreach events for the eight coastal counties in South Carolina. Initially the Web site was intended for internal Network use, however, after further consideration, it was made user-friendly with plans of making it accessible to the public. Providing training and educational opportunities, as well as resource materials to community officials, staff, and the interested public became a new goal of the Web site.

In order to meet this goal the Web site was expanded to include a resource portal of outreach and research materials that were linked to each Network partner's Web site. The addition of the resource portal was an attempt to streamline the process for people seeking information on a specific coastal topic.

Creation and Design of the SCCIN Web Portal

An independent Web designer was hired, three Web addresses were bought (sccoastalinfo.org, -.com, and -.net), and a third-party hosting site was used to house the Web site. Using a third party hosting site eliminated any potential burdens of a single partner being responsible for the maintenance of the site; it was also found to be economical and an inexpensive security feature for spiders.

The Web site was divided into four sections: a homepage, events calendar, resource portal, and partner and links page. The homepage introduces visitors to the Web site, states the purpose for the Web site, and provides contact information where questions about the site or the SCCIN can be answered. The bottom half of the homepage uses lists to summarize the number of events by type and location and provide examples of past event titles. Current events are highlighted along the side of each Web site page. Additionally, the right side of each Web page conspicuously displays direct links to other sections of the Web site for ease of navigation. Each page also displays an 'E-mail Us' link in addition to a link where visitors are given the option to sign-up for e-mail notifications when new events on topics of their interest are added.

The events calendar is organized with the most current events displaying as default. The calendar includes current, future, and past events, and is searchable by type, keyword, location, lead organization, and date. The resource portal is set-up similarly; however as default it displays resources in alphabetical order by title, and is searchable by category and keyword.

The partners and links page provides the contact information of the representatives for each Network partner, as well as a direct link to each partner's Web site. Each agency/institution name is also a link. Selecting a partner name leads to the Network partner directory of service that provides a general description of each partner organization, including responsibilities, missions, and target audiences served.

In February of 2008 the SCCIN Web Portal was publicly launched, making it available to local government officials and staff and the public. At the time of the launch an announcement flyer was developed and e-mailed to all local government staff and officials, as well as linked to all partner web pages and tag lines. A press release was also created and sent out to various media entities throughout South Carolina.

Tracking Progress

In order to track the progress of the site for reporting and internal management a Google Analytics account was set-up to monitor the usage. Using Google Analytics, the

Network is able to view the number of times the site is visited each day, week, and month. Features of the program allow us to easily compare usage across months while also differentiating between who is actually using the site and who is merely accessing it and quickly leaving.

The Network partners have recently employed several methods to learn whether or not the SCCIN is a primary mode for informing participants about educational events.. To start with a 'Get Informed' link on the Web site was added, which enables people to choose interest categories and sign up for e-mail notifications each time a new event in their selected categories is added to the calendar. More recently, Network partners have agreed to add a question to all event evaluation forms that asks participants how they learned about the event. The resource section of the Web site is more difficult to track, however, it has been reported by at least one source that the SCCIN Web resource portal is being used by College of Charleston students.

Project Outcomes

Since the origination of the SCCIN we have experienced improved agency coordination and collaboration. Network partners have begun to capitalize on partnership opportunities in coastal South Carolina. Network partners have been discussing with one another not only what events they are planning in order to avoid conflicts, but also how they can collaborate to deliver events and training opportunities together. In addition, Organizing a SCCIN event that will be jointly sponsored by the Network partners as a whole is currently in the preliminary planning stages. A possible outcome of the formation of the SCCIN is the observed increase in participation in outreach events hosted, sponsored, or conducted by Network partners. Unfortunately, we can not provide statistics to prove that the increased participation is due to the SCCIN Web portal, because only recently have partners begun to ask their participants how they have heard about the events they are attending.

The SCCIN prototype has generated interest from other state and federal agencies that want to develop a similar network based on the South Carolina model. At the request of the North Carolina Department of Environment and Natural Resources staff the South Carolina model was presented to a variety of N.C. state agencies providing them with an overview of the project development, how the Network functions, the Web site, challenges, considerations, and project successes. In addition Maryland Sea Grant made inquiries about the SCCIN, indicating an interest in adapting the South Carolina model for agencies and organizations conducting outreach programs for Maryland constituents. Most recently the Louisiana Sea Grant staff has inquired about the network development process and the Web site design and function, because they have interest in adopting a similar Network program for coastal Louisiana.

Challenges and Considerations

To organize a Network and create a Web portal like what has been described here takes a great deal of planning. It can be difficult to secure and manage funds when working with

a diverse group of agencies and organizations. For the SCCIN Web portal initially the funding was provided by the S.C. Sea Grant Extension Program through project money that supports the Coastal Communities Extension Program. Once the creation of the Web portal was in progress, other partners contributed funds to support SCCIN activities. Planning the layout of the Web site itself is also important. The more thought-out and detailed the layout is from the start will result in a savings of both time and money because fewer changes will have to be made later on.

It is also necessary to determine who will have oversight responsibility. In this case staff from the S.C. Sea Grant Extension Program took on the role of overseer; however, in the future the partners may decide to rotate the responsibility of managing the Network. This is important because while all partners have a user name and password to enter their own information into the Web portal, there is still a need for quality control of the content before it is made viewable by the public. Separate from the Web portal the Network overseer is also responsible for setting up meetings with partners and communicating information and tasks to the group. One of the most important tasks of Network partners is to continue to add events to the SCCIN calendar; keeping the calendar populated can be a challenge. Similarly, it can also be challenging to keep Network partners engaged, and therefore, it is important to regularly survey Network partners to determine what they would like to see happen with the group, meetings, and Web site.

It must also be kept in mind that the creation of a Network like this is a work in progress. The SCCIN is continuing to make improvements to the Web site and to the Network functionality, and as a result of ongoing efforts to recruit new partners, the Network and Web portal continue to grow.