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## The Oneida County 4-H Conservation Field Days Conflict

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### Abstract

In its 30-year history, New York's Oneida County 4-H Conservation Education Field Days program generated no known controversy. That trend changed radically when a citizens group shot undercover video footage portraying the event as "children being brainwashed into thinking guns, hunting and trapping are okay." The video aired statewide and resulted in a national controversy. Oneida County 4-H responded by trying to build consensus among the organizations involved, but discovered that this was not possible. This article relates the events that precipitated this conflict, and examines the various perspectives on the conflict held by the three major organizations involved.

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**Authors' Note:** This article describes a highly contentious conflict that played out over the mid-1990's. Publication of this article was purposely delayed at the request of an involved party so that it would not contribute to a worsening of the situation. The names of people involved have been changed at their request. The authors would also like to recognize the significant contributions to this article of Dr. Susan Senecah of the State University of New York College of Environmental Science and Forestry.

In the fall of 1994, Cornell Cooperative Extension of Oneida County, New York, conducted its 30th annual Oneida County 4-H Conservation Education Field Days. In its long history, the Field Days program had created no known controversy in Oneida County. The biggest problems usually experienced by its organizers were logistical.

The status quo was challenged when a small group of local activists came together to form the Citizens for Balanced Environmental Education (CBEE). Their goal was to change the format and content of the Oneida County program to encompass the views of CBEE. The conflict began when Bart Schnee of CBEE attended the 1994 Field Day program and shot undercover video footage of the presentations containing subject matter that the group considered inappropriate. The videotape was given to the staff at *Broadcast New York*, who edited its contents and aired it on television statewide. The result was a heated environmental conflict between Citizens for Balanced Environmental Education, Cornell Cooperative Extension of Oneida County, and the Federated Sportsmen's Clubs of Oneida County that lasted for several years.

Conservation Education Field Days (CEFD) have been a regular part of Cornell Cooperative Extension 4-H programs statewide for 30 years (Volk, 1995). It is the single largest 4-H educational event in the state. Because no curriculum is formally instituted by Cornell University, individual counties are primarily left to their own resources to organize the program if they choose to participate. Although the lack of a statewide curriculum allows counties to address local needs, it also makes the program particularly vulnerable to local influence. At the time of the conflict described in this article, few counties conducting CEFD's had clearly stated goals and objectives for their programs. This was something CBEE would exploit to its own advantage.

In 1994, more than 26,000 youth in 31 counties were involved in CEFD's. In Oneida County, approximately 1,000 children attend the program annually. The format, sponsorship, and name of CEFD's vary widely from county to county, but all share the common theme of a hands-on outdoor event involving exposure to environmental topics, concepts, careers, and/or recreation. It is important to note that different sides of the Oneida County conflict debate the definition of "environmental." For the purposes of this article, it is used to mean any topic, concept, career, or recreational pastime that involves agriculture, wildlife, ecology, biology, or the out-of-doors.

At the Oneida County field days, children hear presentations from volunteers and from professionals at various stations in a local state park. It is the goal of many CEFD's to introduce students to environmental careers, and the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) personnel are usually presenters. The DEC achieves many of its wildlife and forestry management goals through harvesting activities. Therefore, fishers, hunters, trappers, and foresters are also common presenters. This is the case in Oneida County.

4-H volunteer Ernie Boerman conducted the presentation CBEE found most objectionable. Boerman was also a politically active member of the Federated Sportsmen's Clubs of Oneida County. His presentation, "New York State Furbearers: History & Stewardship," covered the topic of animal population management practices. The trapping aspects of Boerman's program and wildlife management practices promoted by the DEC were what CBEE found objectionable. CBEE claimed that they did not seek to eliminate these programs. Instead, they wanted a "balanced" viewpoint offered. If a presentation on wildlife management focuses upon hunting and trapping, then CBEE feels it should be balanced with another program on alternative management techniques that do *not* use hunting or trapping.

The videotape edited by *Broadcast New York* portrayed the CEFD as an event where youth are "indoctrinated" by sportsmen into believing that guns, trapping, and hunting are okay. Indeed, by watching the video, one would get the impression that the entire event was about trapping, hunting, and guns. In relatively conservative Oneida County, the conflict was now perceived as a polarized dispute between animal rights activists and hunters/trappers/fishers.

According to the three main groups involved in the incident (Cornell Cooperative Extension, The Federated Sportsmen's Clubs, and CBEE), this was not a fair review of what actually occurs at the CEFD. It was evident the video galvanized attitudes on the issue; Cooperative Extension felt they had been "blindsided" by CBEE, having no previous indication that elements of their CEFD were objectionable. The Federated Sportsmen's Clubs felt that CBEE was attacking their practices in general. And from CBEE's viewpoint, this was not an animal rights issue but rather an issue over balanced environmental education.

In the following weeks and months, concerned parties on all sides sent letters to local newspapers and public officials. Locally, Cooperative Extension was flooded with letters from national environmental and vegetarian groups via email or facsimile. At least two Freedom of Information Act requests were filed with Cooperative Extension. There was also speculation that "spies" had been employed to find out what the "other side" was planning.

At the same time, staffing changes at Cooperative Extension, unrelated to the conflict, created confusion and heightened CBEE's belief that Cooperative Extension was stonewalling in addressing their demands. When Cooperative Extension invited members of CBEE to participate in the planning process for the 1995 CEFD, the Federated Sportsmen's Clubs refused to participate, believing that Cooperative Extension had caved in to CBEE demands. Fearing that without their presence Cooperative Extension would eliminate any presentation not approved by CBEE, the Federated Sportsmen's Clubs later returned to the planning table for the 1995 event.

Cooperative Extension, seeing itself in the middle position of the conflict, tried to achieve consensus between the Federated Sportsmen's Clubs and CBEE. The Oneida County legislature then heavily criticized Cooperative Extension for legitimizing CBEE on this issue. Due to increasingly negative public opinion and legislative pressure, Cooperative Extension abandoned the participatory planning effort.

Cornell University, realizing it knew very little about what was occurring in the counties running CEFD programs, conducted a survey of counties to find out how they prepared and implemented local CEFD's (Volk, 1995). This led Cornell to conduct a statewide workshop entitled "Increasing the Effectiveness of Conservation Field Day Programs" in June 1995. Their hope was that the workshop would prevent other counties from becoming embroiled in similar controversies by forcing them to examine the quality and objectives of their own CEFD programs.

## **Perspectives on the Conflict from the Organizations Involved**

One of the most interesting aspects of this conflict is the varying perspectives of the situation held by the three major organizations involved. The following sections describe the conflict over Oneida County CEFD as seen from the three primary parties involved.

### **Citizens for Balanced Environmental Education**

The following perspectives were obtained through personal interviews with Bart Schnee, Bill Grinder, and Clara Palmese, all representing Citizens for Balanced Environmental Education (CBEE).

Like Cornell Cooperative Extension, CBEE saw the *Broadcast New York* report as the initial event that sparked the conflict. They were disappointed that the tape was edited to frame the controversy as an animal rights issue. Cooperative Extension assumed that Schnee had done the editing to portray the CEFD as against his interests, but the editing was actually done by *Broadcast New York*. Schnee said that had he done the editing, he would have framed the report differently. CBEE feels that Cooperative Extension and the Sportsmen used the edited video to portray them as radical animal rights activists.

CBEE noted several important flashpoints of the conflict. The first was the airing of the report previously mentioned. The second were the alleged incidents of harassment by members of the Federated Sportsmen's Clubs. One member of the Federated Sportsmen's Clubs discovered a nail in his car tire and accused Schnee of planting the nail. According to Grinder and Schnee, no acts of violence were perpetrated by CBEE. When Grinder discovered a nail in *his* tire, he made no such accusations.

There were also incidents in which members of CBEE allegedly received "prank" phone calls and answering machine messages. According to members of CBEE, the source of these calls was identified through Caller ID. CBEE claims that the identified phone number matched a phone number on a presentation application belonging to a member of the Federated Sportsmen's Clubs (the *same* member who discovered a nail in his tire). CBEE brought this evidence before the planning committee, but felt that it was disregarded.

The third flashpoint noted by CBEE was the exclusion of Schnee and Palmese from the 1995 CEFD. On the first day of the event, Schnee and Palmese were told by a park official at the gate that they were not on the list of guests allowed to observe the presentations. The media were also excluded. Schnee responded by contacting lawyers and the American Civil Liberties Union about a possible violation of the First Amendment. On the second day of the CEFD, Schnee was permitted to serve as Grinder's presentation assistant at his booth. This also gave him the opportunity to observe and take still photographs, which ended in a shoving altercation.

Finally, CBEE questioned Cooperative Extension's commitment to reform CEFD through a committee planning process. Grinder thought that the committee members and the meeting agendas were unprofessional. He gives the example that meetings were not formally conducted according to *Roberts Rules of Order*.

As time passed, the group began to suspect Cornell Cooperative Extension's promise of reform. CBEE believed the issues approach had shifted from "anti-hunting" balancing "pro-hunting" to "non-consumptive uses" balancing "consumptive uses." This shift in definition meant that presentations like "Recycling" would balance presentations like "Hunting."

### **The Federated Sportsmen's Clubs of Oneida County**

The information on the Sportsmen's perspective was provided by a personal interview with Ernie Boerman. Boerman is very concerned about the environment and sees himself as a "conservationist" rather than an "environmentalist."

Boerman was unaware of any objection to his "Furbearers" presentation until he saw the edited videotape aired on *Broadcast New York*. The way in which this tape was edited and the negative way in which it represented his presentation enhanced his belief that animal rights activists are fanatics and cannot be dealt with reasonably. He described how Schnee of CBEE requested more information from him following his presentation at the 1994 Field Days and how Schnee falsely presented himself as a person "against those People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals types." Boerman felt that he had been fooled. He associates this kind of tactic with the "surprise attack on Pearl Harbor" and says it reinforces the belief of the Federated Sportsmen's Clubs that animal rights groups and Sportsmen have absolutely no common ground.

Boerman believes the refusal to attend any meeting with animal rights activists (CBEE) turned out to be a mistake on the part of the Sportsmen. Cooperative Extension had already held two CEFD planning meetings in which CBEE members were present and Federated Sportsmen's Clubs representatives were absent. When a local outdoor columnist attended one of the meetings, he was shocked at the new direction CEFD seemed to be taking under the influence of CBEE. He subsequently warned the Sportsmen that their failure to attend these meetings could drastically impact the program in favor of CBEE.

At the time, the Federated Sportsmen's Clubs believed Cooperative Extension was only dealing with CBEE out of "excess political correctness." They believed that in the end, Extension would fully support the Sportsmen's viewpoint. They also believed that by allowing CBEE to participate in

the planning process Cooperative Extension was displaying weakness.

The June 1995 workshop, "Increasing the Effectiveness of Conservation Field Day Programs," contributed heavily to Boerman's perception of the situation. At this in-service, Cornell University refused to condemn the viewpoints of animal rights activists. This furthered Boerman's belief that Cornell and its Extension Program were rife with "political correctness."

Meanwhile, local DEC (New York State Department of Environmental Conservation) personnel had assured the Federated Sportsmen's Clubs that if compromises made by Cooperative Extension were unacceptable to the Sportsmen, the DEC would withdraw support from the Oneida County program. In such a situation, the Federated Sportsmen's Clubs would also withdraw their support of the program. Such a combined action would have meant the loss of nine out of 12 core presenters and essentially ended the program for 1995.

Another important event was the turnover of Extension agents in charge of CEFD: veteran agents Roy DeHope and Sally Haslip had left after accepting other jobs. In Boerman's viewpoint, had DeHope and Haslip remained with Cornell Cooperative Extension of Oneida County, all of the Sportsmen's fears would have been allayed and none of CBEE's demands would have been met. Boerman acknowledged Cooperative Extension's plight and the different directions and pressures being forced upon them, but still perceived the new agents as inexperienced and therefore vulnerable to exploitation.

Ernie Boerman did see a silver lining to the controversy. He believed that the Federated Sportsmen's Clubs exposed a bad internal situation in Cooperative Extension and in Cornell University. "The animal rights people had really gotten to that place."

### **Cornell Cooperative Extension of Oneida County**

Cornell Cooperative Extension's perspective on the conflict was provided by a personal interview with Richard Kragen and Bonnie Rice, Agents at Cornell Cooperative Extension of Oneida County. Neither Kragen nor Rice was involved with the 1994 Conservation Education Field Days (CEFD). Both were assigned to the 1995 CEFD after the planning process had begun.

Cornell Cooperative Extension was not aware of any problems with their CEFD until the airing of the *Broadcast New York* report. They assumed that the video had been edited by Bart Schnee to promote an anti-hunting, pro-animal rights position. They objected to Schnee not coming to Cooperative Extension first if he had a problem with the CEFD's.

The "bad press" Cooperative Extension received in newspaper editorials was noted by Kragen as the flashpoint of the conflict. Cooperative Extension felt they were being "criticized for having all sorts of ulterior motives." They responded by forming a planning committee to bring all the parties together in order to address concerns. According to Cooperative Extension, the meetings were not constructive because they found it "difficult to reason with the animal rights group." This was compounded by the fact that there was no written statement of the CEFD's educational goals and objectives

Another flashpoint for Cooperative Extension was the September 1995 mailing by CBEE. According to Kragen, "several days before the CEFD they [CBEE] tried to sabotage the event and sent out flyers to all the schools with blatant misinformation and all sorts of allegations as to what was being said and done." Administrators received some phone calls, and one call was received from a concerned parent. Cooperative Extension responded with a mailing of its own. A letter was sent to school superintendents and principals, as well as county legislators, in order to refute the allegations made by CBEE.

### **Conclusions**

Cornell Cooperative Extension's consensus-building approach resulted in a backlash by both Citizens for Balanced Environmental Education and the Federated Sportsmen's Clubs. In large part, the lack of a statement of goals and objectives for their CEFD forced Cooperative Extension to try to build consensus between two groups for whom consensus was virtually impossible. If CBEE and the Sportsmen could agree on anything, it was that they disliked the way in which Cooperative Extension was handling the situation.

Even though it would seem that CBEE has achieved some measure of success in obtaining their goals in Oneida County, they remain disappointed with the "unbalanced" content of the presentations. Yet their inclusion provided them a measure of legitimacy and forced Cooperative Extension in other counties to re-examine their CEFD's. The Sportsmen remained unhappy because after 30 years of dedication to CEFD's, Cornell Cooperative Extension has, in their view, acquiesced to a minority group.

From the beginning, Cooperative Extension felt negotiation with the animal rights group would be futile. There seemed to be no room for compromise. Unfortunately, the lack of written educational goals for the CEFD forced Cooperative Extension into a situation where it had little choice but to try to build consensus.

One specific action that Cooperative Extension took in response to the conflict was the formation

of a planning committee. In the past, only a Cornell Cooperative Extension agent and a member of the Federated Sportsmen's Club planned the CEFD. The new process for the 1995 CEFD entailed planning committee meetings, input from the community, and the careful screening of all subject matter. This was a substantial increase in allocated resources for the event.

Both during and after the 1995 event, CBEE complained about the promotion of hunting at a youth event. However, Cooperative Extension maintains that this did not occur. They feel that after completing the lengthy planning process, the 1995 CEFD was "straight down the middle." The presentations were balanced, and the content appropriate. But Agent Richard Kragen admits that his definition of "balance" may differ from the other groups' definitions. Cooperative Extension agrees with a point raised by the Sportsmen that "conservation" is the balance between "preservationist" and "consumptionist" viewpoints.

Perhaps the most important lesson to be learned from this conflict is the need for any Cooperative Extension program to have clearly stated goals and objectives. Because the CEFD in Oneida County had been such a long-running and successful program, no one gave much thought to such an important statement. Had there been such a document, it is likely much of this conflict could have been avoided. As of January 2002, Cornell Cooperative Extension of Oneida County has experienced no further problems with Conservation Education Field Day programs.

## References

Volk, Timothy A. (1995). The current status of Conservation Field Days: Results of an e-mail survey of New York State counties." Cornell Cooperative Extension, Department of Natural Resources, Cornell University. Ithaca, New York: April.

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