

Pledging and Prizes for Environmental Education

By David Goldstein, Ventura County PWA, IWMD

Robert Wyland became famous for his environmental art, starting in the 1980s with life-size murals of whales in their natural environment. The mass appeal of these “whaling walls” later extended to his work in photography, sculpture, and painting, bringing hundreds of thousands of people into his luminescent perception of underwater life. His art empire now rivals Thomas Kinkaid in its application to commercial-scale production, with art products on his web site ranging from tee shirts to funerary urns.

Graciously, Wyland has also extended his influence on environmental education. One of his initiatives, the Wyland National Mayor’s Challenge, in partnership with Toyota, pits cities against each other to see which can get more residents to pledge implementation of conservation activities. These pledges range from more recycling to shorter showers.

The top city in various population categories wins a prize and also qualifies its residents for prizes. The City of Ventura won last year, resulting in Ventura residents winning LED light bulbs, low-flow shower heads, and one \$1,000 Lowes gift card. As the city’s prize, the Wyland Foundation (with support from The Toro Company) is currently re-landscaping the entrance to City Hall, replacing grass and shrubs with drought-tolerant options thought to still be compatible with City Hall’s neo-classical architecture, according to Craig Jones, Public Information Officer for Ventura Water.

Jones describes a “hardening” in promotion of conservation. The public has already heard the basic message enough times to know what is right. The job of increasing conservation behavior is becoming harder.

Like Wyland’s artistic light rays illuminating details under a churning sea, Steve Creech, Executive Director of the Wyland Foundation, responds to the “hardening” dilemma by explaining the strategies behind the contest. People drawn in by a “reward mindset” might be moved to an “environmental mindset,” Creech theorized, by the “cognitive dissonance” they will feel if they pledge to do one thing but then do another. Also, a contest creates excitement, and the limited timeframe for pledges to count (make pledges in April) creates a sense of urgency.

Finally, by requiring city leaders to join the free contest before initiating their community’s participation, the Foundation is counting on “social modeling.” For example, perhaps more hosts will feel peer pressure to set up a recycle bin at the next barbeque event they host if they think their neighbors and leaders expect recycling.

How does the Foundation know any of the pledges people make to help their city (and themselves) win prizes are actually resulting in any additional conservation behavior? It turns out the Wyland Foundation does a follow up survey of those who pledged each year. Of about 50,000 who pledged last year, 2,171 responded to the survey.

Only 573 survey respondents had taken the pledge in a previous year, showing the program, now in its sixth year, is expanding involvement. While 81% of first-time pledgers included “helping the environment” as a reason for making the pledges, 88% of repeat pledgers listed that as a reason. Creech, the Executive Director, said he hoped this showed environmental awareness building in people who participated, but he acknowledged this was not a statistically significant difference and could be due to a variety of factors.

Similar conclusions could be read into the drop from 4% to 2% of respondents saying they were not very interested in water conservation prior to taking the challenge. However, the opposite conclusion would have to be reached if one were to try to figure out why only half a percent of first time pledgers said they were unlikely to implement their pledges over the next year, while more than three-quarters of one percent of repeat pledgers provided the same negative assessment. Perhaps those five survey respondents were just being contrary, or perhaps they are the hardest of the “hardening” described by Jones.

You can keep your eye on the environment by getting your mayor to enter your city in the contest, and you can make your pledge during April at www.mywaterpledge.com