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Communicating geological hazards: assisting geoscientists in communication skills

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Communication is important in all aspects of the geosciences but is more prominent in the area of geological hazards, as the main audience for scientific information often lacks a geoscience background; and because the implications of not communicating results effectively can be very serious. Geoscientists working in the hazards area face particular challenges in communicating the concepts of risk, probability and uncertainty. Barriers to effective communication of geoscience include the complex language used by geoscientists, restriction of dissemination of results to traditional scientific media, identification of the target audience, inability to tailor products to a variety of audiences, and lack of institutional support for communication efforts. Geoscientists who work in the area of natural hazards need training in risk communication, media relations, and communicating to non-technical audiences. Institutions need to support the efforts of geoscientists in communicating their results through providing communications training; ensuring access to communications professionals; rewarding efforts to engage the public; and devoting sufficient staff and budget to the effort of disseminating results. Geoscientists themselves have to make efforts to change attitudes towards social science, and to become involved in decision making at a community level. The International Union of Geological Sciences Commission for "Geoscience for Environmental Management" established a working group to deal with these issues. This group is holding workshops, publishing collections of papers, and is looking at other means to aid geoscientists in addressing these problems.