

**A VISION FOR ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH**  
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**VISION: *An image produced by the imagination.***

The articulated vision for environmental health within communities varies widely from no concept, through a short sentence such as “Healthy People in Healthy Communities,” to well developed statements. Like many similar issues in environmental health, this remarkable variation may be due to lack of a common definition and understanding of the field of practice, or possibly a paucity of imagination on the part of the individuals involved in leadership and policy roles. The following quote from *Alice in Wonderland* is instructive for all of us regarding the need for a vision:

*“Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?”*, asked Alice.

*“That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,”* said the cat.

*“I don’t much care where,”* said Alice.

*“Then it doesn’t matter which way you go,”* said the cat.

As we consider elements of a vision for environmental health, it may be that, like Alice, many people either don’t know or don’t care where they want to go. For them, it certainly doesn’t matter whether they have a vision or not.

My charge today is to focus on some basic elements of a vision for environmental health that are applicable to our nation, our states, and our communities. We are all important participants in developing and pursuing a vision that should be more than blurred imagination. In this presentation, I have attempted to stress the principles involved rather than delving into the manifold details and complexities of the various goals, objectives and program design elements.

Should we envision communities in which environmental health measures contribute substantially to preventing disease and disability, as well as reducing health care costs?

Should we envision communities in which environmental health is considered to be an important entitlement for the common good of all residents and visitors?

Should we envision communities in which environmental health problems are measured and defined prior to designing and implementing control measures?

Should we envision communities in which environmental health efforts are based on sound risk assessment, public health assessment and epidemiology?

Should we envision communities in which the primacy of environmental health prevention measures is understood and practiced?

Should we envision communities in which environmental health measures are designed for optimal net impact rather than zero risk?

Should we envision communities in which ecological considerations are understood to be components of environmental health because, in the long run, a deteriorated environment is a threat to public health and the economy?

Should we envision communities in which the citizenry understand that a quality environment is an important factor in economic vitality and productivity?

Should we envision communities in which environmental health outcomes contribute to minimizing social problems?

Should we envision communities in which the quality of the environment contributes to educational achievement?

Should we envision communities in which quality of life is enhanced by effective environmental health services?

Should we envision communities in which environmental health practitioners possess the broad array of competencies necessary to lead in addressing the community's environmental health problems?

Should we envision communities in which broad environmental health communication bridges are constantly traveled by the public, the media, and policy makers?

Should we envision communities in which public policy leaders seek the input of environmental health practitioners prior to developing policy impacting environmental health?

Should we envision communities in which environmental health agencies have missions of protecting public health and environmental quality rather than missions of protecting and promoting the interests of a limited segment of society?

If **communities** embrace the foregoing as integral components of a viable environmental health vision, then environmental health goals, objectives, program design, priorities and public support should be based on such elements.

If **environmental health academicians** embrace the foregoing as integral components of a viable environmental health vision, then graduate and undergraduate students should be inculcated with the competencies necessary to pursue the vision.

Environmental practitioners possessing and utilizing the necessary competencies are basic to the relentless pursuit of a comprehensive vision of environmental health. Such effective pursuit will only be possible with the targeted contributions of academics to incubating and nurturing environmental health practitioners.

When referring to the state legislature, one of the Governor's for whom I worked frequently quipped, *Blessed are those who expect little for they shall not be disappointed.*

Much is expected of environmental health practitioners and academicians. We should not disappoint our communities and our students by failing to aggressively pursue a vision for environmental health.

Unlike Alice in Wonderland, we must show that we care deeply where we want to go by embracing and pursuing a comprehensive vision of environmental health.