

# Communicating Nature Conservation

## 10 frequently made mistakes

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**Frits Hesselink**, Chair of the IUCN Commission for Education and Communication explains what are the 10 main obstacles that can occur during nature conservation communication activities. His own favorite nature is contemplating about the paintings by Caspar David Friedrich while drinking a good glass of wine. Or watching the sunrise above the Amazon river from a hammock on the ferry. Or walking through a winter storm along the Dutch coast. Understanding the real nature of things is for me the purpose of life, says Frits Hesselink

## 1. Communication without a proper analysis of the issue

I feel that that very often nature conservationists do not define their problem properly. For example quite often when designating a new national park they communicate by producing posters or leaflets as means of communicating the message how important the park is. This is in fact nothing more than pure propaganda. And in most cases not very useful. Peoples perception of a new park is that of a lot of restriction on their normal way of life, business or recreation. It is this perception which is the communication problem. It is this perception which nature conservationist should adress. You do not do so with mass media. Quite often hearings, roundtables and open negotiations are much more effective. In short often conservationists communicate in a way that is not targeted at the real communication problem. We jump to some means without proper definition of the problem, or of the people to whom we should actually communicate. And without realizing what role communication can play in the situation at hand.

## 2. Proper research on the target groups

Instead of listing all stakeholders we should focus on the main target group, on those people who can really make the difference. Secondly we need to take into account the stakeholders' point of views, to try to understand their motivations and understand how they relate to our issue. We should forget about trying to convince them. Reality is more complex. We should realize that for any given topic - including nature conservation - there will be always more people not interested in the topic than there are people who take an interest in it. That people have different views, or contrary views to ours, does not make them morally inferior to us or makes them bad people. They might have quite legitimate views. So it is more constructive to see stakeholders in nature conservation not as enemies, but as interest groups as legitimate as we nature conservationists are ourselves. To reduce the risk of not reaching target groups at all, and to be really effective we should see them as key agents for change, and treat them that way in our communication.

## 3. Objectives

It often happens that the objective of the communication activity is not exact enough defined. We have to know what we want to get done within a certain target group. Is it knowledge they are lacking, practises or do we aim for attitude change? Mostly we want to change others people's behavior and values. But do we realize how behavior change takes place? We have to understand that people need social, economic or any other benefit for any kind of behavior

change. So only communication cannot do the job. Connected with this mistake in formulating a too ambitious objective is that we often do not realize an objective is only an objective when it contains a result. So it is important to define exactly the indicators for reaching our targets. Because nature conservationist often don't define their objectives properly, but in a vague way (e.g. we want to educate the people about the importance of this protected area), they also have often such a difficult time in evaluating their progress.

#### **4. Unrealistic goals**

The message we try to convey to our audience is a translation of the communication objective for the target group in easy understandable words. If we look at conservation posters, leaflets and other means, the messages of nature conservationist seem often to be very unrealistic. If for example we ask people to stay out of parks and protected areas for the rest of their lives, well, nobody will pick up that message. Even if we ask them to come less and make only a restricted use of the area, they will ignore us. It is maybe more realistic to ask them when they come to discuss together how to make best use of the area. In setting objectives - if there are internal or external barriers to behavior change - we have to realize that it is unrealistic to think that communication alone can work. Quite often more is necessary to make the cost benefit analysis, which our audience undertakes when they reflect on what we ask from them, result in the behavior change we would like to see: economic incentives, taxes, regulations, infrastructure etc.

#### **5. Appropriate planning and time frames**

To really benefit from communication, to discuss with stakeholders, to establish mutual trust and to make stakeholders feel that they become the co-owner of a joint venture with us, we need enough time. Quite often we are setting out on communication exercises without setting up realistic time frames. Here we can learn a lot from project management. So for effective communication good management procedures are vital.

#### **6. Realistic budget**

Naturally the budget has to be adapted to the project, it will just make people more irritated when things are left half way. It is interesting to realize that quite often large sums are spent on mass media campaigns, which have not much effect. And that most decisionmakers tend not to be willing to invest money in more effective stakeholder management approaches, which might take longer than the production of a film, video or TV show, but might cost less.

#### **7. Evaluation and performance indicators**

It is difficult to evaluate the improvement of knowledge, attitudes or practices. So it is very important when setting up the communication objectives that we formulate at that time the right indicators for evaluation. It means also that we have to plan it as a normal project activity and budget it in advance in time and money. Although it seems very logical, in practice evaluation is often forgotten. If we do not plan it realistically no real feedback can be expected, and we do not learn from our experiences.

#### **8. Too high ambitions**

Conservation people mostly think that society as a whole is not a natural supporter of nature conservation. And that is so, because society has the wrong values. So we think that we need to educate society towards the nature conservation values. This is a major mistake. Of course every society should have proper ecological education, but we can not expect more from education than that people are better equipped to take decisions. We cannot expect from education (unless it is straight indoctrination) that people will make the right (that means our) decisions. People take decisions after looking at the costs and benefits for them. Values play some role in their decisions but we should not have too high expectations in this field.

## **9. Means and media**

Using the mass media, posters, illustration materials are frequently used communication tools in nature conservation. But they are produced without proper analyses of the real means for solving a certain problem. Which communication tool is the proper means to use can vary enormously from situation to situation. In fact we often forget that the most powerful tool is a face to face conversation. So leaving your protected area, your zoo, or university study and talk to (the right) people might prove to be very a beneficial and cost effective tool.

## **10. Communication seen as information**

In conservation communication we often tend to supply our audience with as many facts and information as possible. Maybe because we think the more information, the more facts the easier people will be convinced. We do not realize that our expert information is not asked for by our audience. And that it is often too scientific and not appealing. So our quite often our audience decides that our information is not relevant for them. So before giving just information we should realize the following: "what we say is not necessarily heard, what is heard is not necessarily understood, what is understood is not necessarily acted upon, what is done is not necessarily repeated". If we realize this, we might find ways for effective communication.