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ALTER-Net

A Long-Term Biodiversity, Ecosystem and Awareness Research Network

Communicating biodiversity to policymakers and a wider audience

TELL ME AND I WILL FORGET
SHOW ME AND I MAY REMEMBER
INVOLVE ME AND I WILL UNDERSTAND

Confucius

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CONTENTS

Short summary
This paper provides a general overview of issues involved when communicating biodiversity to policymakers. It is an output of the ALTER-Net subproject on 'Aggregating indicators for policy purposes: sense or nonsense?'

1   Introduction

Biodiversity is a subject that generates weighty research reports backed up by painstaking research. These reports have only a small impact on policymakers and the general public. In part, this is because of the information overload: there are so many reports, so much information, that people are no longer willing or able to absorb them all. Generally speaking, between 20 seconds and five minutes are spent on research reports on which people have sometimes worked for years.

That means that research reports are not the end, but the beginning, of intensive communication activities in which the message has to be conveyed to the target group. The target group may consist of policymakers or the general public.

2   Case

This paper provides a guideline for setting out a communications strategy. As an example, we have adopted a recent publication, EEA Report No 5/2006: Progress towards halting the loss of biodiversity by 2010. ISBN: 92-9167-846-5
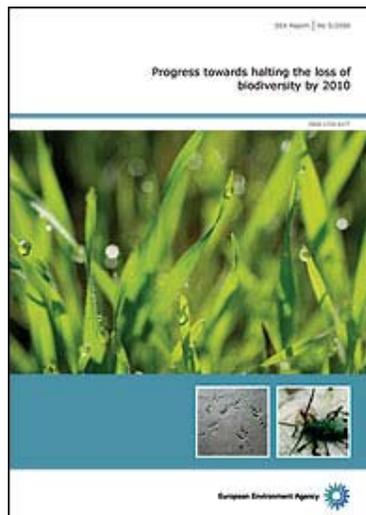
Brief description of content:
The continuing loss of biological diversity and its components, genes, species and ecosystems, is an issue of global concern. Research has shown that both the diversity and the identity of the various species have a fundamental influence on the magnitude and stability of the ecological processes that occur at the ecosystem level. There are significant interrelationships between the degradation of ecosystems, the loss of animal and plant species, market globalisation and poverty. Europe's high *per capita* consumption and waste production means that its impact on ecosystems is felt well beyond its own borders. Biodiversity loss is inextricably linked to the degradation of the ecosystem services described by the 2005 Millennium Ecosystem Assessment.

3   Core message

Communications start with the formulation of the core message. It is better if researchers do not do this on their own; rather they should call in the help of both colleagues and people from outside. In the Netherlands, the Scientific Research Council (WRR), for example, always calls in a freelance journalist. The journalist puts questions to the project manager about the how, what, why and when of the research results until a clear and powerful core message emerges. This process can sometimes take days. Not every research project justifies a major investment of this kind but it is always useful if people from the outside ask questions. For them, the subject matter is new, and not something they

can be assumed to know about. It is also useful to try out the message on representatives of the ultimate target group. Is this sentence comprehensible, is it complete and does it get to the heart of the research report?

Possible core messages for the report *Progress towards halting the loss of biodiversity by 2010*:

- Biodiversity in Europe is declining, some aspects are improving or stable.
- Biodiversity in Europe is declining, and implementation of measures needs to be intensified.
- Progress achieved so far with regard to the 2010 target.
- Still problems in achieving the goal of stopping the loss of biodiversity by 2010.

4   Images and music

Once the core message has been formulated, the challenge is to package it in such a way that it reaches the target group. A quick look at neurolinguistics teaches us that words are the first thing people forget. They remember scents, music and images for much longer. Scientists who manage to transform the core message into a scent are guaranteed success. But images and music are also powerful and tested ways of conveying messages. As with the core message, it is important to determine carefully which carrier is best for conveying the message. Sometimes, a combination of sound and images is chosen. At this stage also, it is important to test whether the images selected evoke the associations one wants to convey with the central core message. There are good reasons behind the extensive investments of time and money in testing images for the marketing of consumer goods. Different variants of an image are often tried out to see which associations are evoked in the target group. Doing this early makes it possible, in many cases, to use the image on the report cover, so that communications and background documentation become a unit.

5   Target group

In general, communication is not a linear process. The stages described in succession in this paper are, in reality, often intertwined and they affect each other. In this paper, for the purposes of clarity, we describe the stages in succession. That means that the target group is determined after the establishment of the core message and image. That can be a small group of stakeholders; it can even be a single person (such as an EU commissioner or a minister); it can also be a large group. It is important to determine precisely to whom one is targeting.

It is then important to study the target group in depth. If the target group is known by name, what prior knowledge does it have about the topic and what opinions has it expressed in the past about this subject? Things can get more awkward in the case of an anonymous, larger target group such as the general public or young people. Sometimes, it is possible to draw on polls, target group analyses and target group segmentation in order to determine as accurately as possible what the target group knows and thinks about the subject, and to determine the easiest way of reaching the target group: what media do they read, watch or use? The more one knows about the target group in terms of preferences and media use, the more one will be able to reach the target group with the scarce resources available. Tests can be useful here, as can the consultation of publicly available research data. Finally, it is useful to be aware that the average target group is not interested in the data from the research report. This applies equally to policymakers, civil servants and the general public. Everybody suffers from an overload of information from which they have to make a careful selection. The more one links up to a target group's knowledge, interests and media, the better the chance of actually

getting the message across. The keyword here is empathy, the ability to see things from the other person's point of view. Empathy with the target group allows researchers to think about conveying a message from the receiver's point of view (what's in it for me?) rather than the sender's point of view (what do I want to say?).

6   Objective

Research reports are often intended not for a single target group but for a range of target groups. Not only for the group of civil servants who help an EU Commissioner, but also for the staffs of Members of Parliament, lobby groups and interested lay parties. It is important to keep the distinction between the different target groups in mind and to make sure that the objectives for those target groups remain distinct. It is possible to expect members of Parliament to ask questions, to expect lobby groups to bring the data in the reports to the attention of Members of Parliament, and to expect the general public to know the results.

Within different objectives, distinctions are made between the desired knowledge, attitude and the desired behaviour:
*   Knowledge: what do you want the target group to know?
*   Attitude: what attitude do you want?
*   Behaviour: what do you want the target group to do after you have left?

For a general target group, for example, the 'Progress towards halting the loss of biodiversity by 2010' report might define the following objectives:

*   Knowledge: species are disappearing, habitats will change and nothing will look the same.
*   Attitude: be concerned about it.
*   Behavior: environmental friendly behavior (less use of energy, etc.).

7   Media

The most successful way of achieving an objective remains the personal interview. In this approach, it is possible to present the message to the other person in stages, to inform them about the required attitude and to encourage them to engage in the desired behaviour. Personal interviews are suitable for small groups of stakeholders, as are expert meetings and discussion groups, on condition that they are chaired properly. The target group is given the opportunity to participate in the discussion, ask questions and state opinions.

When dealing with larger target groups, direct dialogue is often too time-consuming. Nevertheless, even in the case of objectives involving the general public (or sections of the general public such as younger people, older people, or environmental activists), it is often decided to use a range of media and to include a debate, seminar or meeting as part of the strategy.

The selection of the right media mix is often hampered by the available budget: paid advertising on the radio, television, in print media or on the Internet is very expensive and careful consideration must therefore be given to the question of which media are the most effective. Free publicity: generating press interest is a tried and tested approach when a large budget is not available. But press interest requires a sound strategy: news in the form of surprising messages, surprising locations, surprising forms or surprising images. The conveyor of the message can also generate news: a celebrity who expresses concern in public about the decline in animal species will generate more media interest than an obscure scientist.

Television is and remains a powerful medium, but we should bear in mind here that the number of channels has increased considerably in recent decades. In contrast with 30 years ago, there is no longer a single channel that everybody watches at a given moment. That means that airtime in a single television programme is no longer enough.

The strength of Internet is the interactive element: the possibility of recipients themselves participating and getting involved. It's not for nothing that many core messages intended for today's young people are packaged in interactive computer games that can be played on the Internet.

Radio is a relatively cheap medium and listener numbers are relatively high. The high level of interaction between radio and the Internet is striking: many listeners listen to the radio while they work and, when URLs are frequently mentioned, they take a quick look at the site in question.

8 Strategies for success

There is no fixed strategy for success. However, some strategies have proven successful over the years. Contrasts, for example, as in the example below:

Other successful communications strategies are:

- Ambassadors: the selection of one or a few appealing animal or plant species to bring up the issue of biodiversity as a whole. The World Wildlife Fund has been doing this successfully for years with the panda.
- Reversal: the inversion of reality.
- Humour: as seen in an advertisement from a Japanese conservation organisation showing Superman falling from the sky because of poor air quality.
- Location: a striking location as a place to send a message from. The location must, in this case, be relevant to the research. In other words, mountaintops should not be used as backdrops for messages about biodiversity in the North Sea.
- Benchmark: comparing different countries. This is a particularly successful strategy in Europe, because countries in Europe never want to come last.

9 Checklist

The most important thing to remember is that research reports are not read from cover to cover, that the core message can be summarised in a single sentence (1). Images and music stick in people's minds longer than words and so it is important to transform messages into images and, where appropriate, music (2). It is important to define clearly the target group that one has in mind (3) and to decide on the objective in terms of knowledge, attitude and behaviour (4). The next stage is to establish a media mix, bearing in mind that interactive media are always more successful than media in which the target group only has the opportunity to read/listen or watch passively (5). There are a number of successful strategies, such as contrast, humour and reversal (6).

1. Message
2. Visualise
3. Target groups
4. Objective: Knowledge, Attitude, Behaviour
5. Media
6. Strategy