



**NATURE
CONSERVATION
COMMUNICATION
101**

This work was completed as part of the project NaturallyEst-LIFE, „Pilot Activities for Natura 2000 Communication in Estonia“ (LIFE16 GIE / EE / 000665), 2017–2022. The project was funded by the European Union's LIFE program, the Environmental Investment Center Foundation and the project partners. This publication does not necessarily reflect the official views of the European Commission.



This booklet is a report to the public (a layman's report) on the results and conclusions of the LIFE project NaturallyEst (Piloting Natura 2000 communication in Estonia). The aim of the project was to improve the conservation communication of the Natura 2000 network in Estonia. During the project, we gave legal advice for people on Natura 2000 issues, organized open-air community events, communication trainings, study trips and citizen science campaigns. Based on these, we have drawn conclusions and made recommendations for communication with the general public and target groups on nature conservation issues.

***We wish you joy in communicating with nature and nature conservation.
Silvia, Mari, Kertu and Maie***

Authors: Silvia Lotman, Mari Kaisel, Kertu Hool, Maie Kiisel

Layout: Jane Kõnno

SA Eestimaa Looduse Fond

<http://www.elfond.ee>

Tartu, 2022

TABLE OF CONTENTS

- Communication strategy and planning 4
- Examples of communication purposes 4
- An idea how to plan strategic goals for the Month of Conservation 6
- Organizing events and joint initiatives 7
- A practical example of the planning and coordinating of the joint initiative of the World Wetlands Day 9
- Involvement/engagement 10
- A public meeting – how to avoid hell?..... 11
- Listening is a prerequisite for communication 12

COMMUNICATION STRATEGY AND PLANNING

It is obvious that the implementation of nature conservation activities must have a clear purpose, whether they are related to the restoration of a habitat or the approval of a conservation management plan. Similarly, when planning communication to support this activity, the purpose of the communication must be formulated. Although in the long run they are the same - in order for ecosystems to be restored and preserved - in order to plan activities, it is necessary to know what public communication is planned to achieve during the project.

Examples of communication purposes

For example, if you are planning to restore 200 hectares of wetland in a specific area and create opportunities for biodiversity recovery and carbon sequestration, you also need to think about the communication goals. The objectives may be to prevent the resentment of local people, to consult with the coordinating officials or, to ensure that people interested in ecological restoration have easy access to project information. The purpose of public communication for a salmon spawning project may be, for example, to provide adjacent landowners with adequate information and answers to their questions. However, the same project may also have a much more ambitious communication goal: to empower local landowners to be active spawners and advocates of the restoration works.

NB! Communication indicators and purposes are often confused: the goal of communication activities is not to reach 300 000 people in social media, but to inform, persuade, build lasting relationships and communication practices, and so on. Don't start chasing numbers, just focus on meaningful goals!

Without setting a good purpose, you may find yourself in a situation where you have put a lot of effort into communication and, for example, organized drawing competitions for kindergartens, but you are helpless in a situation where an hostile article appears in a newspaper. Or vice versa, you put too much effort into writing articles, but the local families you want to interact with don't read these pages and would prefer involvement through well organized family events.

Sometimes, when you are trying to set your purpose, you might realize that there is no need for doing any more communication than just informing the public - the project team might have all the necessary approvals and relations and there is no need to involve the public. That is okay and you do not need to do communication for the sake of commu-

nication. However, nature conservation is usually a rather difficult topic to understand, and any nature conservation project could at least aim to make information about the project available to those interested and the activities carried out in a way that helps people better understand and support nature conservation objectives. When you have all the power you need, it may seem faster to make actions and decisions, but this will lead to long-term problems, which can sometimes be seen in the attitude of landowners to nature conservation in Estonia.

Once you have clarified your purposes and goals, it is usually quite easy to see who are the parties and people you need to communicate - in the official language - who are your target groups. Hence the following very important task after formulating the goal: make a thorough research of your target groups to find out how it is best to start a relationship with them. Unfortunately, this step is often too lightly discarded. To help you can involve professional and neutral specialists who can help to organize surveys, polls or focus group interviews. The neutral party hears things that might otherwise escape you, professional researchers also know how to ask questions that are meaningful and important. For example, there is a tendency to study people's attitudes in a way that may not actually be true in real-world behavior and decision-making. It is important to ask in a way that you know people's knowledge, communication channels and other preferences that will help you understand and approach your target audience. Good questions make you think, questions that start with the words „what“, „how“ are preferred. A bad example is the Eurobarometer question: 'Would you say that you are personally making an effort to protect biodiversity?', which does not really get us closer to how people make their decisions.

Here is the right time to consider outsourcing the communications service. There are good communication offices everywhere and it seems easy to organize a procurement and order „one set of strategic communication“. Unfortunately, strategic communication is not a commodity that can be ordered as such. When outsourcing the whole service it is often resulting in a situation where neither the contractor nor the supplier finally knows why and where you want to go. The communication office might do a lot of work, but lack the resources and skills to carry out the whole project. If the wrong strategy was chosen, you cannot change it because a new procurement can no longer be organized, etc. A warm recommendation is that you need to formulate the communication goal for yourself, and hire offices for specific tasks where their expertise can help. Be it researching and mapping the background of target groups or designing advertisements, creating websites, articles and videos, designing content for social media channels, planning media spaces, etc. The office can also help moderate the goal-setting meetings within the team, but the goal and purpose of the communication activities must remain your responsibility.

The content of the strategy is to build relationships (if you don't already have them), improve and maintain them, and it's up to you, not the communication agency. Relationships are the foundation of everything, and there is no trick or magic wand communication. Also, campaigns and advertisements alone are not enough to communicate nature conservation activities, there must be a constant sense of the background you create with your communication and activities. A relationship does not have to mean being in agreement, a relationship means that people are in the right amount of contact.

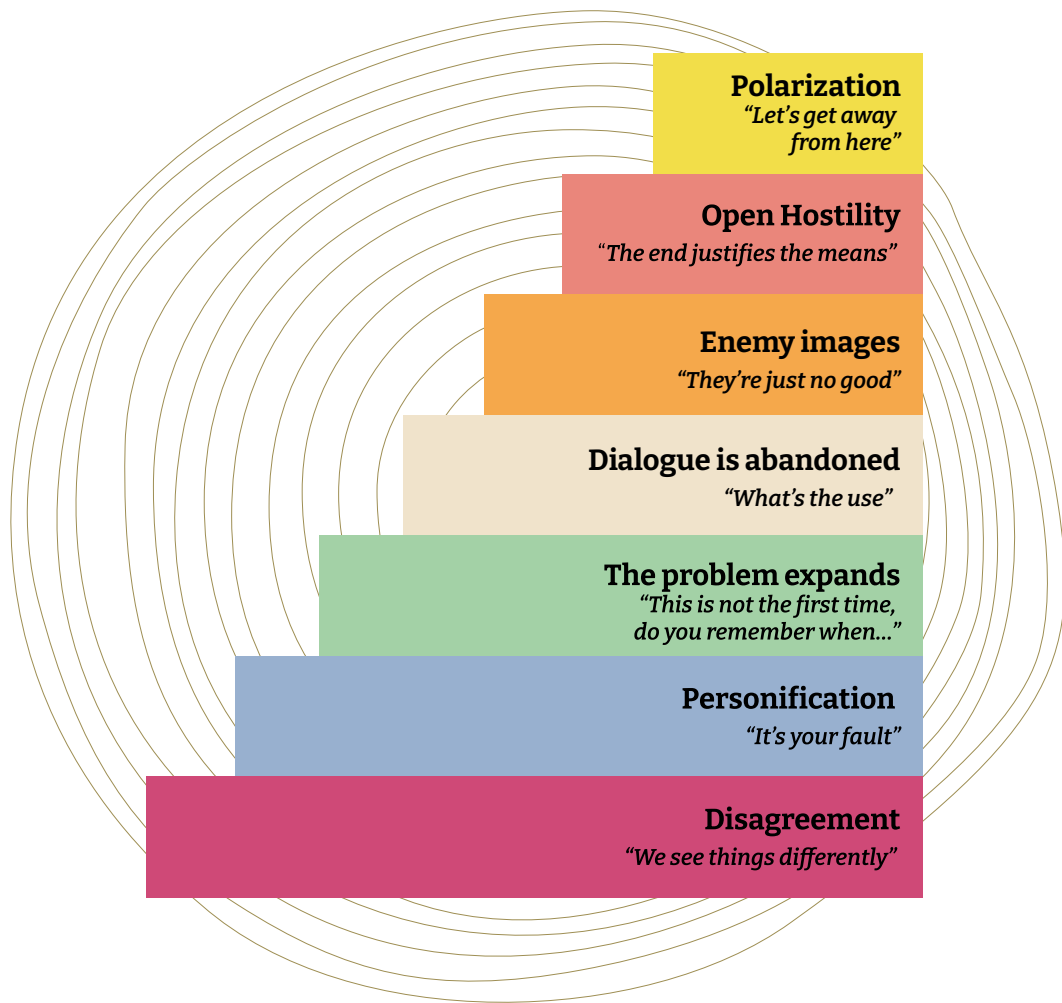
When you have set clear goals and have made confident decisions for yourself then it is also easier to explain them to partners. However, an unmanaged and decision-free process produces confusion and disruption. If you involve people in the planning and implementation of the project over a long period of time, it is important that the participants understand not only the ecological and practical content but also the process. It is necessary to ensure that your milestone decisions are also clear and understandable to people. You need to show how the issues raised by the people have been used in your decisions. Agreements with people and adherence to them are very important - for example, you could present the progress of the project once a year and review the plans together.

An idea how to plan strategic goals for the Natura 2000 Day

If the purpose of Natura 2000 Day is to achieve the goals of the Birds and Habitats Directive and stop the loss of biodiversity, then once a year during Natura 2000 Day the general public could be given a mid-term review of the progress: which fronts are succeeding and where there are obstacles. These summaries could also be visualized in a way that helps to see if things are getting better or worse. In this way, the general public can feel participation and get back on track even if it is not part of their everyday life. It would be good to show, for example, the measurable indicators and goals of biodiversity strategies and to communicate how we are moving towards them on a regular basis.

Don't forget to measure the success of your communication. Write down which indicators you review once a year: whether website visits, social media clicks, the number of accusation letters and calls, or whether conversations about nature conservation in the public media have become more meaningful or not. You can decide yourself what is the best way to measure your goals.

A common problem in nature conservation is that it is often necessary to state prohibitions and orders, not the positive call to actions. However, if you really deep dive into the issues, it is possible to frame your message differently. It is clear that with unlimited consumerism, nothing will be left of nature. We do set boundaries in our own lives on a daily basis, and we understand the benefits of boundaries as well. Driving with a seat belt has become the norm for us, it is no longer seen as discrimination against human rights, but as a primary safety measure in traffic. Similarly, we should be able to see the limits of nature exploitation as useful norms. We just need to think about who is a suitable spokesperson to present such a norm. For example, if a well-known gardener abandons an alien species, setting such an example will enable people to follow it, without perceiving it as a restriction. When thinking strategically about communication, it is worth thinking separately about which topics are already present in society today and suitable examples that support your messages. Here, too, professional aid from among social scientists and communication experts can be involved.



If you don't invest in good relationships you end up climbing the conflict ladder.

ORGANIZING EVENTS AND JOINT INITIATIVES

As stressed out before, the basis for achieving the goals of communication is good relationships - establishment and maintenance of relations. Clearly focused short-term events and joint initiatives are a good way to warm up relationships, create new ones, gain support, or bring new people into your field. These initiatives are sometimes referred to as communication campaigns, but one may ask whether such a term can be used in nature conservation. We can't do a classic nature conservation marketing campaign, because the topics are more complicated than choosing one brand or another in the store. Nature conservation activities require significant personal input in acquiring information, making choices and implementing activities. Therefore nature conservation cannot be sold as a product. However, one-off focused events or joint initiatives consisting of events are sometimes quite useful tools.

A joint initiative is a great effort for all the cooperating participants. The aim of such a campaign is to make a clear leap to a new level in the public - to get a number of people to watch your activities or notice topics in the media, etc. Ideally, you need the new people to stay with you and think about your topics also in the next, calmer communication period. For the campaign, you need to look for allies to amplify the message and bring new people and organizations to the nature conservation landscape, who will be able to introduce their topics through your goal.

So you have decided to make a campaign. The first step, of course, is to get back to what your communication is about and whether or not it's time to „campaign“ now. For example, if the issue is conflicting, it is not sensible to go widely into advertising spaces with simplified messages, but instead focus on finding solutions to the parties to the conflict. The lack of resources and partners can also be a reason to start with building partnerships and seeking resources instead of campaigning. It will give you and your partners' time and possibilities to prepare well and present your team as capable and active in the future instead of organizing a mediocre event.

Nevertheless, your messages are always amplified to a wider public when you collaborate with other institutions and people. The more partners you can consciously put together for one goal, the better. However, you need to make sure that this goal is clearly common to all the partners and everybody understands their roles in the same way. For example, if we are looking for partners to protect the sea, we may have so many institutions and people with different profiles and objectives behind one table that a joint initiative will not work. Then it might be better to look for partners on a specific topic, like those willing to contribute to better studying of coastal birds in order to nudge marine planning. It is good to state clearly from the beginning whether you as the initiator intend to lead and coordinate the whole cooperation. If you do not have coordinating capacity, it is worth waiting with the initiative until you have found capable partners. In addition to coordination, it is necessary to make clear to the partners what activities you have already planned yourself and for which ones you are looking for new ideas and support. It is very important to plan things together early in advance - if a spring campaign is planned, advertising photos may have to be taken last summer, if your plans involve creating complicated websites, it may take several years to find funding and almost a year to organize procurements. Partners must also be able to plan the time of their employees during the campaign - an active public campaign means that the people in charge must be able to focus 100% on the campaign for a few weeks, including the weekends. While some flash ideas might go well with one month planning, it is a rule of thumb that all larger initiatives need at least a year or even several years of joint planning and preparations.

If we want to involve the general public, the planned joint action must not be limited to flashy slogans or campaign sentences. If our goal is to bring in more people who have a relationship with nature conservation goals and activities, then there must be a clear action or solution to which they can contribute. Parts of the activity can be more entertaining or demonstrative, depending on the purpose. In nature conservation communication, it is only logical that we invite as many people as possible to nature. It is often said that you need to make everything easy for people.

A practical example of the planning and coordinating of the joint initiative of the World Wetlands Day

In October, an idea arose to organize a series of nature trips on World Wetlands Day in February. Estonian Fund for Nature, the Estonian Wetlands Association and the Estonian Nature Tourism Association found that the idea is good and meets the goals of all partners. A plan to involve all relevant government agencies and freelance nature guides was jointly established. In order to be involved, it was decided to: a) hold an initial meeting with the authorities to present the idea and ask who would become the official partners; (b) call on nature guides and invite those interested to an online training course on wetlands and Natura 2000. The course's aim was to get acquainted and also talk about practical issues and ensure everyone has similar understandings.

Potential cooperation partners were contacted in November and both meetings were held in December. A common Google Drive document was created, listing the contacts and spokespersons of all participating agencies, and the roles were shared. It was commonly decided which partner covered which topic in the media. The shared document provided a table of media coverage and social media posts that the partners were able to complete on an ongoing basis. In this way, everyone had a constant overview and, at the end of the event, a joint report on how many events took place, where and what coverage appeared.

In a similar way it is possible to coordinate the celebration of, for example, Heritage Meadows, Natura 2000 or Estonian Nature Conservation Day. For special skills required for the campaign (such as graphic design, language editing, etc.), it is worth including a communication or design agency in the campaign. Or map partners' own skills and strengths and take advantage of them.

It is true that the participant must understand what is being provided to them and why. However, this can not mean that complex issues should be simplified and diluted. It may happen that we take away all the interesting things from the topic and the essence of the activity disappears. In most cases, the language in which researchers, experts and officials present topics needs to be simplified. For example, in some places it may be appropriate to say land instead of cadastral unit, lichen instead of thallus, bunch instead of population, and so on. More detailed definitions can and must be added in the texts introducing the initiative and you can explain them in simple sentences. The rule of thumb, however, is that with the first incomprehensible word, the mind of the casual reader travels elsewhere. So, in short, simplify the language, but don't miss out on exciting links and stories during the simplification.

Step-by-step implementation of the joint initiative could look like this:

- *When you have an idea, formulate with your team exactly what purpose you want to co-create;*
- *give a short and clear summary to potential partners and invite partners to show interest;*
- *create common space – a shared document or folder with a clear structure;*
- *create a common schedule, negotiate budgets and roles;*
- *make regular meetings during the preparation of the joint initiative, during an active campaign meetings can be replaced, for example, by a chat window where the whole active editorial team is in contact;*
- *keep up-to-date data or a log of the entire initiative: when did the new entrants join, what coverage appeared, how much was reacted on social media;*
- *at the end of the campaign, give the public a clear summary of how it went. It is good to use the log for this purpose. The summary may initially consist of simple participation statistics or other easily collected data;*
- *finally, sit down with the team again and compare the achieved goals with the set goals, think about the long-term impact of the campaign and what are the signs that the participants' relationship with nature has improved, what can you observe together over time.*

INVOLVEMENT/ENGAGEMENT

Involvement is a concept that is talked about a lot, but is often understood in very different ways. Involvement could be seen as a door to nature conservation. For example, we might involve landowners in the decision making to plan a nature reserve. More broadly, this involvement might be the first contact with nature conservation. It is like a door that we want to open, invite someone in and also accept the point of view of the entrant. Everyone has the right to enter and participate in nature conservation with their knowledge and skills. Unfortunately, there are very few such doors in nature conservation today. Webpages are anonymous, often with complex logic, and do not allow direct contact with people. They do not give the impression that there is a safe person at this door to welcome and help you.

Involvement is one of the ways we ensure whether people's attitudes towards nature conservation are understanding and participatory or, conversely, conflicting. The prevention of nature conservation conflicts is first and foremost about having good contacts with key people, knowing what landowners, land users, farmers, hikers and other target groups need. A good relationship starts with listening.

One of the problems in the communication of nature conservation has been considered to be official letters sent to people from the environmental authorities. Complicated letters cause boredom and defiance, the recipient of the letter feels that something is

being hidden instead of being informed. Solving this problem should not be difficult. The author of each letter can prefer a beautiful language in which to summarize the content of the official legal text. Try to say things as precisely and accurately as possible, state the actual purpose of the activity and show how the restriction contributes to that purpose.

In addition to official letters, a meeting is a typical way to involve people. As many processes seem to require public meetings, the organizers of the meeting tend to forget that before organizing, they still have to sit down and think about what the purpose of the meeting is and what form of the meeting would support that purpose. Here are some thoughts.

If you want people to have their say on a specific topic, make sure people are well informed. It is difficult to guess about something you do not know anything about, therefore if people are not well informed unjustified reluctance can arise. However, good information does not mean that you flood people with all kinds of knowledge. Again, it starts with listening - what information people need.

If you just need to provide information, you can record a presentation that is fast-paced and supplemented with illustrative material. This can be viewed at any time that suits people. If you plan to let people ask questions so that others can see both the questions and the answers, you can open an online forum where all the questions are answered one by one. If you are planning to listen to people, it is worth taking the time to meet people with similar interests. It might be worth it to invite only a certain village or company, for example, and to listen to the worries and joys related to this topic. In this case, participants feel that they are talking about topics that are important to them and do not have to compete with other participants. If you are planning to build a relationship, it is worth organizing joint workshops, study days and trips to nature, where communication is more informal and people are less busy in their work roles. We definitely recommend keeping an easy-to-find e-mail address or other channel open to people. People can write and ask on various topics and they are answered privately - a nature conservation advisory helpdesk. Here, too, the principle applies that, above all, applicants must be actively listened to and supported. Advice will be given only then when the background of the problem is clear and the problem has been fully mapped out.

A public meeting – how to avoid hell?

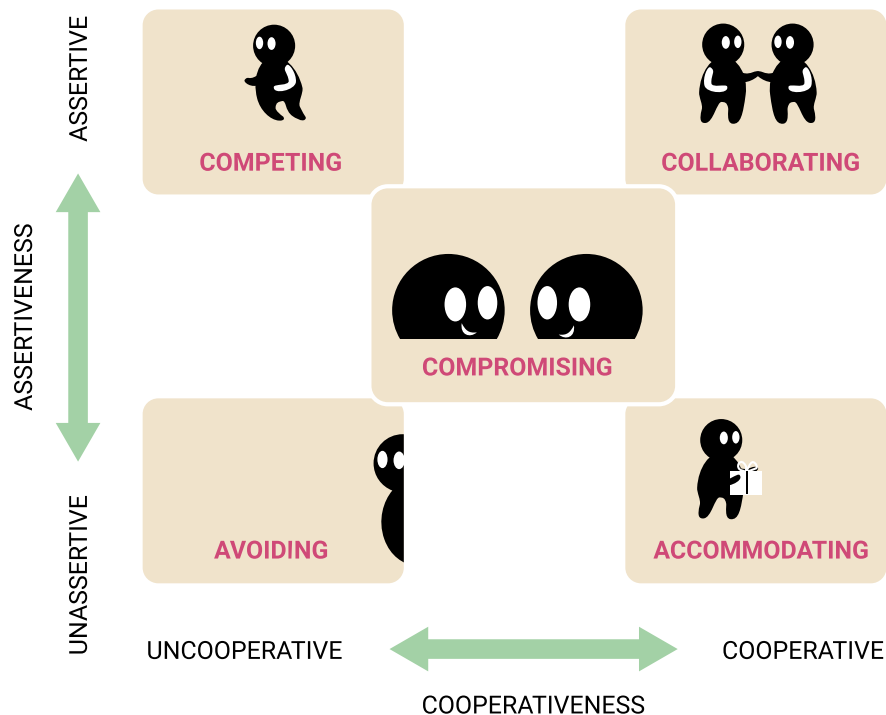
Before deciding what form your discussion might be, try to answer the following questions. What is the purpose of your meeting? What kind of people do you invite there? What do you need from them? Can you think of any points of cooperation with these people - what could you do together in the future? Can you solve the problems of the people who came, can they help you solve your own problems? Answering these questions honestly and thoroughly also clarifies the possibilities of which communication channel and method to use.

Listening is a prerequisite for communication

Listening is a prerequisite for communication. At a conference on nature conservation in 2022, Bas van Dijk, a landscape architect from the Dutch Environmental Association, said that they would never start a new project, bringing ready-made solutions to landowners. Instead, they ask people what their wishes and dreams are about their home landscape. There are moderated chat rooms where they listen and help structure people's future desires. Then the first practical steps are taken and gradually a common vision of the future is reached. It always really means that a person wants to live in harmony with nature. This vision of the future can only become a reality through joint trust between scientists and land users.

For example, we might ask questions that help us better understand those involved. These are the people whose answers are worth listening to:

- Please describe what activities you do in the landscape of your hometown throughout the year?
- Imagine that you are an artist who can put together the most important things in the nature of your home. Please mark / draw what you want to put on your picture!
- Please describe to me why you highlight such things?
- Which elements of nature you describe are in danger of disappearing?
- How would you start investigating / addressing this threat?



How the process will turn out depends on participants empowerment and cooperational possibilities you create to the process.