# COMMUNICATING NATURE

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The Greek countryside, with its wealth and variety of ecosystems formed the backdrop for Greek history and civilisation. It has always been a source of inspiration. The interplay between nature and creativity has given Greek civilisation a profound unity throughout its history. The importance attached to Greek coastal zones confirms the need to protect a group of ecosystems that has recently aroused worldwide interest.

Everywhere in Greece we find proof of man's close connection with nature down through the ages. Prehistoric settlements, monuments and public works from all historical periods, traditional farming and fishing techniques adapted to the pace of life of the ecosystems, until recently maintained the close relationship between man and nature.

Man has been altering nature since the beginning of history. For example all irrigation works have an effect on wetlands, but large-scale projects have become possible only in this century.

In Greece larger changes for the worse started in the 1920s, when the need presented itself and the technology was available. The need was to settle one and a half million refugees from Asia Minor and Eastern Thrace, and also to increase agricultural production, and rid the country of malaria. At the same time the technical means and equipment were available to facilitate this change. Within two generations Greece had drained two thirds of the wetlands, diverted rivers, constructed flood-control works and dams for drinking water, irrigation and hydroelectric power generation. Nearly all the riparian forests were cleared, catchments basin deforested and airports and roads built. The country became self sufficient in food production and a food exporter, while widespread use of DDT wiped out malaria.

Judging the actions of the past with today's scientific knowledge, we could claim that the same, if not better, financial and social result could have been achieved on a better scale without sacrificing the wetlands and the environment in general. Previous generations, however, had to work with what they knew. The question is not what they did but what we are doing today. Have we learnt from the mistakes of the past? It would appear not, the causes of nature degradation are still with us.

Are dams, land reclamation, roads, airports and hotels degrading the natural ecosystems? Industrial and domestic waste, land clearance, overgrazing, illegal hunting and logging, over-fishing, fertilisers and pesticides? For most of the people the answer is yes. Others, however, see all these as symptoms of the root cause: the creed of economic growth and the policies implemented in its name. These policies were aimed at the fastest possible development in farming, power generation, industry, housing, fishing and recreation by exploiting the country's natural resources to the full. The concepts of sustainable use of renewable resources and careful exploitation of non-renewable were unknown. Agricultural, fishery and other renewable resources are treated as throwaway consumer goods.

On the other hand, the application of any policy cannot be successful without adequate scientific knowledge, co-ordination of beneficial activities as well as the educating and raising awareness to those societies that live and work near nature, and that of corporate managers and decision-makers.

Raising awareness and education are considered to be very prominent steps towards nature conservation and management. It could influence people's attitudes and activities, thereby promoting the demand for nature conservation.

There is no more effective way of protecting nature in general then convincing all citizens of the fact that nature is important, that they should not damage it in any way, and should do everything within their power to protect it. In such a situation, virtually no legislation or regulation would be needed. This of course is an ideal, which probably never be reached. Greece, like every country in the world, needs laws and rules to protect nature. But creating even a limited level of acceptance of nature conservation among the public makes it much easier to implement these rules, gives access to financial and other resources for nature conservation.

**The purpose of a public awareness project**
Every society has a large number of issues (problems) that could or even should be discussed, decided upon and solved. Not all these issues get the attention of the public, politicians and the media; often they are not identified as being problems at all. The issues that are recognised and addressed can be said to be on the "*agenda*". Issues appear and disappear on the agenda. The level of awareness for one specific issue is not constant.

The first step of public awareness raising campaign or activity is assessing whether the topic is "on the agenda" and to decide how to get it on the agenda if it is not.

Getting issues on the agenda is not as easy as it sounds. Different groups of people have different interests within society. These different interests can be (and often are) conflicting. The *stakeholders*, the groups of people who have different interests in a certain issue, not only disagree about what the problem is and the best way to solve it - they can also disagree about whether there is a problem.

All the different stakeholders will try to raise awareness and mobilise support for their point of view. The groups they approach to get support are called *target groups*. Target groups can be groups who are not yet aware of the problem or who have not taken sides yet.

With regard to the problems of nature conservation, the following stakeholders have a direct interest:
- Professional nature conservationists: researchers, protected area managers, policy makers, and politicians
- Non-professional conservationists: NGOs, activists
- Nature exploiters: businessmen who exploit nature for economic reasons
- Non-economic nature users: tourists, visitors

- Other businesses, professionals and decision-makers: they develop economic, non-nature related activities that are not directly related to nature, but which have an impact on nature.
- Those who have non-commercial but economic interests which will harm or destroy nature, e.g. the building of a house.

The way different stakeholder looks at an issue is the *problem definition*. For nature conservation two problem definitions are most common:
- Nature is in danger and needs to be protected against harmful human activities by maintaining national parks and protected areas.
- Nature protection through national parks and protected areas means restrictions and regulation, which form an obstacle for human (economical) activities.

   All stakeholders will try to find support for their point of view. To do this, they will identify target groups, who could help them, or oppose them.
- Supporters: nature conservationists
*Reason for targeting*: they can help to achieve a solution.
- Opponents
*Reason for targeting*: trying to influence them can decrease or avoid problems and conflicts, and open the possibility of co-operation or compromise.
- Mixed interests group: people who use nature for recreation (they have an interest in keeping nature beautiful but they also have an interest in having no restrictions imposed on them), local residents, landowners and decision makers (they can have a negative perception of nature conservation because it reduces economic opportunities. On the other hand some of them may participate in local groups for nature conservation).
   *Reason for targeting:* communicating with these target groups can help them accept nature conservation policies and stop them from becoming outright opponents.
- Target groups with no direct interests: some people do not have an interest in the issue of nature conservation or are not aware of their interest. They are often described as the "general public". Children (can find nature interesting and exiting), parents (can find it important for their children to have contacts with nature and to leave them a proper heritage), people living in the city (can be aware of the importance of nature opposed to the built environment they live in), decision makers who do not have a direct interest in nature conservation but are involved in sectors that are related to nature conservation.
   *Reason for targeting:* By making nature conservation important for them, these people can become more supportive. Dealing with these groups is very relevant, because they can also be mobilised against nature conservation by stakeholders who are opponents.

To reach the target groups and achieve the target (to raise awareness, find support and deal with people who have other interests) *communication* is needed. The term communication and public awareness refers to the exchange and sharing of information, attitudes, ideas or emotions. Communication is there in what people say to each other, how they say it, etc. But it is also there in less obvious ways, like regulation or giving a subsidy. This term overlaps in many aspects the terms education and training.

When communicating with a target group we have an objective. In general communication can be used with three different intentions:
- *Giving information*

Communication can be used to give well-structured and adequate information to those people who have a question. This means that it mainly applies to target groups that are already aware of the issue of nature conservation and want to know more. Giving information does not create awareness as such.

- *Educating people*

Communication can be used to educate, to increase the abilities of people to decide and act in line with their own needs. This is usually a long-term, ih-depth investment.

Here too, it can be said that people have to become aware of the need for nature conservation before they will be interested in taking part in educational activities. Introducing lessons on nature conservation into the national curriculum for school children will introduce them to the subject because they have to go to school and have to tale part in the lessons. For adults the question is different, only those already interested will go to a lecture about nature conservation.

- *Influencing*

When communicating to influence a target group, the aim is change their attitudes and/or behaviour. This is persuasive communication and is the mst difficult to reach of all the goals of communication.

**The communication process**

Traditionally, communication is explained in terms of: *sender - message - channel - receiver.* For example: the sender (National Park X) aims to produce a message (opening of new educational trail) and distribute it among certain persons (receivers-local teachers), via a certain channel (leaflet).

This approach is adequate when the goals are uncomplicated and short-term. This model does not work for more complicated situations, such as making people change their attitudes and behaviour.

Communication campaigns using mass media such as television or posters in public places have often been used to influence the attitude and behaviour of the public. Research shows that the media have the ability to focus public attention on certain issues at a certain time but are much less successful in changing people behaviour or attitudes.

More effective ways to influence are:

*Using interactive communication.* This means that sender and receiver of a message have opportunities to react on each other and that the communication with others is stimulated as well.

*Using existing social networks.* Talking to each other about certain issues influences people. Communication using existing social networks is very effective.

*Creating perspectives to experience, act or become involved.* People will change their behaviour and attitude towards an issue like nature conservation more easily if they are offered opportunities to experience nature, to act and to become involved. It is necessary that people have the perception that a problem can be solved and that their efforts can be effective. People also prefer to see the result of their work. The goals we want to achieve have to be put close to the people themselves.

*Using communication as one element of a policy mix.* Communication campaigns are not very effective if they are not integrated into the overall policy of an organisation. In a policy mix, communication is used next to other policy instruments, such as legislation or funds to achieve a goal.

In general, communication will be used to support the effectiveness of the other policy instruments, but it can also be the other way around: other instruments can strengthen the effect of communication.

**Conditions for the use of interactive communication**

If an organisation wants to be successful at interactive communication it has to met certain criteria:

1. The organisation must be *flexible*: not the best solution to achieve a goal should be most important, but getting the optimum result that is still realistic. Negotiation skills are used for this. Being flexible also relates to timing: the process of reacting on each other it requires time.

2. Organisations should work according to the principle of *transparency*. Procedures, the process, and the reason for something, should be clear. People should be able to acquire insight into the problems and their possible solutions and communicate about it with other sin their everyday environment. This kind of informal communications the most powerful to diffuse ideas, from ideas and change attitudes and behaviour. Before the work of the organisation can be transparent for others, it should be for people within the own organisation as well. This means one have to share a *common vision* and have knowledge of what is going on in the organisation itself.

3. Interactive communication assumes *social learning process*. Organisations have to be prepared to learn from their public and to give the public the opportunity to learn from them. As an organisation one has to be able to place oneself in the position of the target groups and think from their rationality. Organisations are often occupied with their own insights, concepts and facts, blaming the public that they are indifferent or acting out of self-interest. It may be necessary to try to understand why the public has the perception that it has, to "*start from where the public is*"; as well as to assess the way the institution itself comes over to the public. Besides learning itself, an organisation can facilitate the process in which people learn from each other. If the organisation can facilitate that groups of people with conflicting interests can organise and negotiate themselves, it can become less involved and avoid acceptation problems.

**Communication planning**

A communication project can be of preventative or therapeutic nature; it can refer to one specialised topic or a series of topics. Communication has to be planned if it is to be successful and it has to be integrated into the overall policy of an organisation. However, in order to be effective, it has to be designed and executed following a specific plan or mechanism.

This means communication planning at three levels:

1. At the policy level an organisation has to decide about the use of communication as a policy instrument to reach its policy goals. This decision will be based on:
- the recognition and analysis of a problem,
- an analysis of the options, attitudes and behaviour of people,
-an analysis of possible solutions and
- the formulated policy goals to achieve.

2. In a communication plan one should decide upon:
-  the communication goals to achieve,
- the target groups,

- the methodology
- the themes, and
-necessary means (time, money, staff resources).
3. Based on the communication plan different communication activities will be selected, which needs to be prepared, implemented and evaluated.

A communication plan is composed of three main stages:
- *Planning* (analysing, synthesising and programming),
- *Implementation* and
- *Evaluation.*

**Planning**
Planning a communication project is the first and most important stage of all. It is comprised of analysis, synthesis, and programming all the program components towards materialising the desired goal.

Through analysis, the components that lead to the protection and conservation of the wetlands are identified. It can also be ascertained how effective informative measures can be. Existing attitudes and behaviours within social groups are researched as well as the existing living conditions, and ecological, economic and social values. Special emphasis must be given to the appreciation for information requests as well as the needs for information and their analyses. The effectiveness of the communication project depends on the success of this procedure.

The composition stage of the structure of a communication project follows the analysis stage. At this point information is joined with the existing conditions and with the desired task. The medium, which can convey information to the designated target groups, must be identified. It is also necessary to identify the personnel that are experienced enough to deal with a program of this nature. The right working relationship among these groups must be established with specific jurisdictions and limits. The needs for communication that were identified in the previous stage should translate into the application of the purpose for the project, which are that the desired attitudes are adopted and will have an immediate effect on the daily routine of the program's attendees. Determining these objectives have to happen very carefully, since this determination alone prescribes the communication project's contents as well as its evaluation. The synthesis of a communication project presumes the utmost blending of:
- factors that link the target groups (availability, educational level, etc),
- external factors (budget, experience, etc).

Organising and scheduling the program as well as all the activities that it includes follow the choice of methods, which fit the designated project.

**Implementation**
This is the stage where the actual project is materialised. Throughout the whole program, but specifically during this stage the presence of a co-ordinator will be of utmost importance. This co-ordinator will have to:
- Explain the design and the purpose of the project.
- Secure the expression of all subordinate views, expectations and needs throughout the project.
- Support the project by utilising properly the skills of all participants.

- Meet the scheduled deadlines allowing some flexibility for any positive response to issues, relevant to topics, that will arise.
- Return from time to time to the project's tasks and confirm their status.
- Resolve issues that arise from limitations or oddities that exist.
- Find ways to overcome difficulties that result from clashing interests and unforeseen events.

**Evaluation**

During the evaluation stage, which is more often than not omitted, both project managers and staff will have to be made aware of the proceedings that were executed, and the effectiveness of the project as well as its cost-effectiveness. The evaluation process can take place in various ways, in various time frames and in relation to the different parameters that compose a project of this nature. The most difficult aspect to evaluate is estimating the level of influence that the project had, either in enhancing or diminishing pre-existing problems that had to be solved with the creation of these programs. It is also very difficult to estimate the change of attitudes that the target groups might have experienced as a result of the project.

**The five frequently made mistakes**

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

Very often the conservationists do not define their problem properly. For example-quite often when designating a new national park they produce 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. Generally people perceive a new park mainly as a restriction on their normal life, business or recreation. In this perception, which is the real communication problem, which nature conservationist should address? Mass media is not the right means. Hearings, roundtables and open negotiations are quite often much more effective. Often we communicate in a way that is not targeted at the real communication problem. We jump to means without proper definition of the problem, or of the people with whom we should actually communicate, without realizing what role communication can play in the situation at hand.

**2. Research on the target groups**

Firstly, instead of listing all stakeholders we should focus on the main target group, on those people who can really make a 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 there would be always more people who are interested than people who do take an interest in it. If people have different views, it does not make them morally inferior or bad people. They might have quite legitimate views. So it is more constructive not to see stakeholders in nature conservation as enemies, but as interest groups as legitimate as us.

**3. Objectives**

It often happens that objective of the communication activity is not defined enough. We have to know what we want to get done with a certain target group. Is it knowledge they are lacking, or do we aim to change practices or attitudes? Mostly we want to change others' behaviour and values. But do we realize how changes in behaviour take place? We have to understand that people need social, economic or any other benefit for any kind of behaviour change to occur. So communication alone cannot do the job. In formulating a too ambitious

objective we often do not realize that an objective needs to specify a concrete result as well. Therefore it is important to define exactly the indicators for reaching our targets.

## 4. Means and media
Mass media, posters and illustration materials are frequently used communication tools in nature conservation. But they are produced without proper analyses of the best means for solving a certain problem. The most suitable communication tool 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 our protected area, our museum, or university and going out to talk to the right people might prove to be a very beneficial and cost effective tool.

## 5. Communication seen as information
In conservation communication we often tend to supply our audience with as many facts as possible. Apparently we think, "the more information we provide, the easier people will be convinced". We do not realize that our audience does not demand our expert information, and that it is often too scientific and not appealing. So quite often our audience decides that the information is not relevant to them. Therefore, before giving information, we should realize that "*what we say is not necessarily heard, what is heard is not necessarily understood, what is understood is not necessarily acted upon, and what is acted upon once is not necessarily repeated*". By realizing this, we might find ways for effective communication.