

## **Communicating the Concept of Natura 2000 in Slovenia**

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### **The issue from a conservation perspective**

Slovenia has included 26 Special Protection Areas (SPA) and 260 Special Areas of Conservation (SAC) in the ecological network Natura 2000. These areas are home to 111 endangered species and cover 35% of Slovenia's territory, extending over 20,000 km<sup>2</sup>. Such natural capital demands an immense obligation to conserve it, and this is not possible without the active participation of relevant stakeholders at local and national levels. Like elsewhere in Europe and the world, biodiversity is threatened by modern lifestyles but, instead of taking specific conservation actions, this project aims to communicate the concept of Natura 2000 and generate greater public awareness about conservation and the work of the ecological network.

### **Previous approach (without CEPA)**

The nature conservation approach used previously by governmental organisations was based primarily on surveys, law enforcement and modest public awareness, meaning more or less “decide, announce, defend” (DAD) decisions. Communication with stakeholders and the wider public was generally perceived as something that came last. Such communication is destined to be inefficient because it is not oriented towards problem solving, seeking win-win situations, and motivating stakeholders to actively participate and “own” nature conservation ideas and actions. Many times this approach even caused new conflicts to arise due to unclear concepts, objectives, demands, or messages. Strategic communication has not been part of the system and it has been dominated by a passive sensibility that makes it strictly an individual choice whether or not to seek out and stimulate active stakeholder participation. Leaving stakeholders out of decision-making processes has often generated negative attitudes and behaviours towards nature conservation. In short, the nature conservation sector has lacked the awareness, knowledge, and skills required to recognise the role and importance of stakeholders, and this has greatly diminished the effectiveness of the sector as a whole.

### **The issue from a “people management” perspective**

The first changes appeared through the IUCN training programme, “Effective Biodiversity Communication”. Knowledge and skills were gradually strengthened during the next phases of the IUCN programme, “Nature Management in Partnership”. These training programmes focused on “learning by doing” and practicing communication methods and techniques through workshops and pilot projects. The overall results of this programme were upgraded to a model for systematically communicating Natura 2000 sites. This project, which focuses on two main tasks—defining and communicating sites - began in late 2002. The

Ministry of Environment, Spatial Planning and Energy recognised that it had to create a clear, shared vision on conservation and communication issues when introducing the concept of Natura 2000. The communication groups had to focus on stakeholder analysis and set out feasible communication strategies and tactics. These steps guided the understanding that common goals can be successfully planned and achieved if based on consensus within teams, organisations, and the sector as a whole. Internal communication was a basic precondition for successful external communication.

### **The new approach (with CEPA)**

The Ministry decided on a new approach to garnering acceptance for nature conservation concepts, which was informed by a “people management” perspective. The first step was to bring strategic partners together and organise workshops aimed at training and communication planning. In the last year, several conferences, six workshops, and plenty of individual consultations with communication groups on specific questions were organised. A strategic partnership with the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Food was established at the beginning of the project. At the local level, groups of nature conservationists, foresters, and agriculture advisors communicated with key stakeholders, first defining problems, analysing stakeholder interests and prioritising them, and then setting goals and strategies for individual sites. The main objectives were to inform key stakeholders about Natura 2000, get their feedback on it, and explore their interests and reasons for cooperating further. This stimulated the completion of the evaluation of the strategy and results.

### **The ‘tipping point’**

The first tipping point in the project was a key agent who has been involved in the process from the beginning of the IUCN training programme, “Effective Biodiversity Communication”. This person was the right one for the job in terms of being motivated and committed - becoming the focal point for the entire six year process and an “opinion leader” for others who adopted the process early on. The philosophy and results of the local pilot projects became part of a ‘big picture’, which gained currency and attention at the national and international level, as did the Natura 2000 project. The early adopters were a group of people who quickly understood the role and power of strategic communication and took an active role in becoming ambassadors for CEPA and worked effectively with stakeholders on the ground. The “people management” perspective became a reality.

External project consultants were the next key drivers of change, first the foreign consultant and, later in the process, the local one. This was crucial since it brought to the process a “view from the outside” and relevant expertise. This meant a new approach to leading the training process, key strategic interventions in all phases and levels of the process, and an effective influence on management (projects and organisations), including top managers - one of the key stakeholder groups for success.

The most significant change in the whole process emerged when the top manager in the agency involved in the IUCN programme accepted CEPA as a management tool and the key driver for social change. Since it was “owned” by the top manager, CEPA was much higher on the agenda of the institution and it was possible to use it as an important tool in framing national projects - first, preparing a biodiversity strategy and finally the Natura 2000 project. Additionally, the communication success of the Natura 2000 project depended very much on mobilising the relevant key agent (ambassador) in the Ministry of Environment. This was the head of the ministerial PR service, who occupied a high (and relevant) position, had the “big picture” in mind, and regularly attended high level meetings. This person immediately recognised the benefits of taking a strategic approach to working with stakeholders, instead of using only PR, developing strategic partnerships and working relationships with forestry and agriculture, as well as the thinking before acting (through joint planning and team work). This key agent made it possible to elevate CEPA on the agenda again and give support to all of the people working on the ground.

The successful results that were achieved throughout the process of working on pilot projects, and later national projects, proved that the “stakeholder management” approach brings real changes in the attitudes and behaviour of people. A CEPA approach provided the impetus for a recurring positive feedback loop.

## **Results**

Through formal and informal communication and building trust and working relationships, several stakeholder groups became interested in participating in the project. Results really depended on the quality and level of internal communication, and the most important factor was the attitude and behaviour change among those strategic partners who worked together to build a foundation for future cooperation.

The strategic partners approached stakeholders following careful analysis and planned actions. After a year they had contacted half of the local communities and many other stakeholders, sharing the information and identifying opportunities. A year and half was too short a time to effect significant changes in stakeholder behaviour, but through these efforts we encountered less opposition to Natura 2000, which usually comes from lack of information and awareness. Additionally, in many cases they bolstered the desire of stakeholders to participate actively in the next stages. There was much evidence of increased satisfaction as the “government” came to talk to them.

## **Success factors**

- Working on targeted messages that were communicated in a simple and understandable way;
- Listening to stakeholders and coming to them right from the start;

- Team work, internal communication in teams and organisations, and managing expectations;
- Strategic communication with stakeholders.

### **Room for improvement**

Following the successfully executed events, an evaluation of the results and feedback from the stakeholders should form a blueprint for managing Natura 2000 sites and effectively organising stakeholder participation. The Ministry should work on a clear vision of next steps, not only in terms of procedures, but also communicating them. Momentum on communication needs to be sustained; the same problems and dilemmas arise again and again in the field of conservation management, making the role of local communication groups even more important.

### **Key CEPA interventions**

The very first step in the CEPA process was identifying key stakeholders and “opinion leaders”. Then the communication groups brought the stakeholders together, organising formal and informal meetings, broader presentations, workshops, participation in international events like Green Days, and so on. Through direct communication, the groups and stakeholders explored together their values about nature and joint solutions that would sustain them. Through improved internal and external communication, a foundation for further co-operation was created in many places.

The added value of CEPA for this project was at first stakeholder involvement. This resulted in much more effective outcomes and success because of the focus on exploring common interests, opportunities, win-win situations and consensus building. Through effective team work the strategic partnerships were established and strengthened, and a network of people working on the same issues was created, giving them the chance to upgrade what had been started already. Last but not least was the significant improvement in the relationship with stakeholders, followed by a much better reputation of individuals, institutions, and the nature conservation sector as a whole.

### **Conclusions: CEPA ‘principles of excellence’**

Nature conservation is people management. Communication is a tool that changes stakeholders’ attitudes towards sustainable development and, ultimately, their behaviour. Step-by-step changes can be realised through strategic communication interventions in the public arena, especially when they are combined with economic, financial, or other instruments. The main challenge for the Ministry is to continue improving the reputation and public awareness of nature conservation, and foster better outcomes using communication as a driving force.