

Communications Strategy Development



Creating a communications strategy is essential to achieving conservation outcomes

Introduction

The Climate Adaptation Fund believes that strategic communications help maximize and leverage the impact of an adaptation project. By more effectively engaging conservation practitioners, decision makers and other relevant stakeholders about the value of and methods for nature-based climate adaptation, practices can scale more effectively across a landscape. Strategic communications is commonly defined as “the purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfill its mission through a selection of tools” (Hallahan et al, 1997). This means thinking first at a high level about communication goals and objectives, context, and audience; which then informs more tactical and technical choices about how you will engage that audience. There are many approaches to strategic communications planning, but most focus on a set of five core components that comprehensively consider goals, context and audience:



Articulate communications goals that directly support the project’s overall objectives



Identify adaptation practitioners and decisionmakers who will be the target audience



Provide a clear message for each audience



Describe which communications tools will be used to reach target audiences



Document and measure communications activities

In this document, we briefly describe each of these core components and illustrate them using examples from real-world climate adaptation projects that have made strategic communications choices to effectively scale up adaptation practices in their respective region. Links to well-established strategic planning resources, including the Spitfire Strategies Smart Chart and Strategic Planning Wheel approaches, are available in the **Strategic Planning Resources** section at the end of this document.

Core Strategic Communications Planning Components



OBJECTIVES: Articulate communications goals that directly support the project’s overall objectives.

Communications efforts should be driven by clear communications goals that are explicitly linked to the project’s overarching adaptation objectives. These communications goals then help to guide the design of communications activities. It is therefore important to draw clear connections between each of your adaptation project objectives and the related communications goals.



AUDIENCE: Identify adaptation practitioners and decisionmakers who will be the target audiences of project communications.

This step involves a detailed study of individuals, organizations, or agencies that will be critical to achieving your adaptation project’s objectives and encouraging broader adoption of adaptation practices. To scale up climate adaptation practices to benefit wildlife and ecosystems, it is especially critical to be strategic about engaging conservation practitioners, regional leaders, and policymakers who may be early adopters, influence others, and create incentives to incorporate adaptation into broader regional conservation efforts. Strategic communication planning considers the following about target audiences:

- Why did you choose these individuals, organizations and/or agencies?
- Will you engage with them directly or connect with those who they trust?
- What are their key concerns?
- What key information do you need to keep in mind about your target audience such as when they are available, where they organize, and any cultural or historical considerations?
- Who are your key partners in achieving project communications and what sort of clout and resources do they bring to the table?
- What barriers may your target audience face?
- How will you plan the timing of your messaging and engagement around your target audience?



MESSAGE: Provide a clear message for each audience. Audiences need a refined “Call to Action” or take home message to bring into their work. Communications messages should be directly related to the project objectives and communications goals. Your messages will help inform the selection of communications tools and how they will be used. Strategic communication messages take into consideration the knowledge level and priorities of your target audience and how a new message will reinforce, counter or reframe them.



TOOLS: Describe which communications tools will be used to reach target audiences. The selection of communications tools should be driven by an understanding of the project’s communication goals, audience and messages. Effective communications tools should also reflect the practical realities of how your target audience seeks out and receives information. For example, not every communications solution needs to be high tech and online, especially for audiences that may have limited access to high speed internet (e.g., in rural areas) or less comfort with using the internet (e.g., for some older demographics). The “Strategic Communication Mediums Spectrum” link in the **Strategic Planning Resources** section of this document offers a range of communication tools that you might consider, after asking four key questions:

1. Which communication tools best fit your context and audience?
2. Why does this form of communications or engagement best suit the target audience?
3. When will this tool be used? How long will it be used?
4. Is the cost of a given communications tool proportional to its benefit?



DOCUMENT & MEASURE: Strategic communications include assessing activities and efforts to see if they are hitting the mark with the target audience. Strategic communications make goals and find metrics that are SMART (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic and Time-bound) to their project objectives. Setting goals to reach a metric (e.g., # of attendees, # of pilot projects, policy documents, etc.) helps drive communications. Milestone dates to review the metrics and report back on what worked well and what needs to change ensures that communications efforts are adapted as needed to stay on the path to reaching communication goals and project objectives. For each communications goal, SMART metrics determine if efforts are effective. A mixed methods approach (using both quantitative and qualitative metrics) can capture both the numbers but also the more nuanced aspects of your communication impact.

Taking Adaptation Viral: Case Studies of Strategic Communications

Given the complex nature of ecosystems, species, habitat and the people who shape them, no two adaptation projects and their communications strategy will be alike. However, examples of successful approaches that tailor communications to a unique context and specific target audiences can provide ideas and inspiration.

Taking Adaptation to the Airwaves: Playa Lakes Joint Venture

Project Title: *Playa Restoration on U.S. Forest Service National Grasslands: A Climate Adaptation Demonstration Project in the Western Great Plains*

Location: *Comanche, Kiowa and Rita Blanca U.S. Forest Service National Grasslands in southwest Colorado, northeast New Mexico, and the panhandles of Oklahoma and Texas*

Ecosystem: *Grasslands & Shrublands, Playas*

Intro

Playas are the dominant wetland type in the western Great Plains. They are both centers of biodiversity and the primary recharge mechanism for the Ogallala Aquifer, the water source for most of the region's agricultural production. In a drying climate, fewer playas will be wet, making playa restoration an important adaptation response to climate change for migratory birds. Playa Lakes Joint Venture restored the hydrological function of a network of playas across four states (Colorado, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas).

Strategic Communications Planning Steps Taken:

- **Communications Goal Defined:** Scale up the project's playa restoration work to restore up to 20,000 acres of playas in the Great Plains region by getting more private landowners to invest in playa conservation on their land.
- **Target Audience Identified:** Private landowners who are active farmers and ranchers with degraded or filled playas on their land were the target audience.
- **Message Strategy Outlined:** Playa Lakes Joint Venture created a working group of staff members who regularly interact with farmers and ranchers to craft a message that will speak to their target audience and engage them effectively. Their message included information about financial incentives from a Federal program that supports playa restoration to assist with the loss of income from acres that will be taken out of production for the restoration and the long-term productivity value added to land by the ecological functions provided by restored playas.
- **Communication Tool Selected:** Radio is known to be a common source of information for the target audience. Playa Lakes Joint Venture created radio spots for their country radio show with varying lengths, with different messages and guests.

Communication Product

<http://pljv.org/playa-country-radio/>

Building Watershed Resilience Through Video : Huron River Watershed Council

Project Title: *Preparing a Great Lakes River System for a Changing Climate*

Location: *Ann Arbor, Michigan*

Ecosystem: *Riparian, Inland Streams & Rivers*

Intro

The Huron River in Michigan is home to native species assemblages that help maintain a functioning ecosystem. Many of these species have tolerances that will help them persist as climate changes if actions are taken now to buffer against the impacts of climate change and maximize the health of the system. The Huron River Watershed Council will implement strategies to improve flow management at dams, reduce fishing pressure, restore instream habitat, and protected riparian vegetation that will create conditions to allow species to adapt to more extreme storms, increasing temperatures, and more frequent drought.

Strategic Communications Planning Steps Taken:

- **Communications Goal Defined:** Increase the awareness of city officials, local citizens and dam operators about the climate change threats and policy decisions that impact the watershed and the management and restoration actions that can be taken to protect the watershed today.
- **Target Audience Identified:** City officials and local citizens.
- **Message Strategy Outlined:** Make the case that action needs to be taken today to help the watershed face the adverse conditions brought on by climate change and educate viewers about what actions can be taken. Demonstrate that Huron River Watershed Council is a forward thinking, strategic organization that is working today to address climate change problems of the future. Huron River Watershed Council works with a wide variety of non-traditional partners to achieve their project goals. This led them to incorporate an overarching theme around the value that working together across restoration, management and policy efforts adds to the work that needs to be done.
- **Communication Tool Selected:** Since the target audience is large and their message broad, Huron River Watershed Council chose a communication tool that could be quickly consumed and easily shared on social media to reach more people.

Communications Products:

[1 Minute Video](#)

[6 Minute Video](#)

Web Stories for Meadow Restoration: American Rivers

Project Title: *Headwater Meadow Restoration in the West: Adapting to Climate Change*

Location: *East and West slopes of the Sierra Nevada Range in California and Nevada*

Ecosystem: *Grasslands, Inland Wetlands/Springs/Playas/Vernal Pools*

Intro

The majority of California and western Nevada's fresh water comes from the Sierra Nevada, falling in winter as snow that slowly melts in spring, delivering enormous amounts of clean water to both people and wildlife. Temperature increases due to climate change, are reducing the depth of this snowpack and accelerating snowmelt. In response, American Rivers restored headwater meadows to manage runoff and prolong streamflows during California's annual summer drought. Hydrology data was collected throughout their project to support the Sierra Meadows Partnership. The Sierra Meadows Partnership is comprised of 20 partner organizations and agencies with a goal of restoring 30,000 acres in the next ten years.

Strategic Communications Planning Steps Taken:

- **Communications Goal Defined:** Expand and accelerate meadow restoration efforts in the Sierra Nevada.

- **Target Audience Identified:** The U.S. Forest Service was identified as the most effective target audience for achieving their goal. American Rivers determined that the key sources of information for this audience were agency publications and word of mouth from agency staff and respected leaders in the field.
- **Message Strategy Outlined:** Multiple agencies have released targets for meadow restoration over the last seven years, including the U.S. Forest Service, National Fish and Wildlife Foundation and California Resources Agency. American Rivers used these targets to reach the U.S. Forest Service and highlight the needs to overcome bottlenecks in restoration planning and design.
- **Communication Tool Selected:** American Rivers chose to develop web content strategically placed so it would be viewed by their target audience. A webpage about the project was designed for the Forest Service's Climate Change Resource Center website and an ArcGIS web story about the project that mapped all projects in the area that employed American Rivers' restoration methods was created by a U.S. Forest Service communications expert. Given their goal, target audience and the primary sources of information dissemination of the audience, American Rivers chose an advantageous partner to assist them in creating two strategically placed communication tools.

Communications Products:

[U.S. Forest Service Climate Change Resource Center webpage](#)

[ArcGIS webstory](#)

Getting Hands-on With Beaver Mimicry Structures: Wildlife Conservation Society

Project Title: *Natural water storage using beaver mimicry: Offsetting climate-driven declines in mountain snowpacks*

Location: *Headwaters of the Missouri River, Montana*

Ecosystem: *Riparian, Inland Streams & Rivers*

Intro

Rising temperatures, lower snowpacks, earlier spring melt and a multi-year drought in the Headwaters of the Missouri River are already putting stress on wildlife and water users. To help offset declines in amount and duration of water stored in mountain snowpacks, the Wildlife Conservation Society is working with private landowners, local conservation districts, and State and Federal agencies to showcase structures designed to mimic some of the beneficial functions of beaver activity. Using a relatively simple technique that weaves together willow branches, these semi-permeable "speed bumps" help to slow the flow of streams, recreate meanders, and boost the storage of water in soils beneath riparian areas. These changes in turn help riparian vegetation recover, further adding to the capacity of watersheds to function as 'sponges', capturing water when it is plentiful and releasing it during dry periods.

Strategic Communications Planning Steps Taken:

- **Communications Goals Defined:** Encourage broader adoption of beaver mimicry techniques by providing practical, hands-on learning opportunities for relevant decision makers and resource managers to see and better understand the benefits of beaver mimicry structures.
- **Target Audience Identified:** The Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, and Conservation Districts were identified as critical audiences because of their role in state water law (water rights), permitting riparian restorations, and interest in cost-effective solutions for natural water storage.
- **Message Strategy Outlined:** Beaver mimicry structures are not dams, they are non-permanent permeable structures that help 1) restore the 'sponge' function of healthy watersheds by passively recharging groundwater and restoring riparian and wetland habitat, and 2) are a relatively inexpensive watershed restoration tool that can be adapted to meet a broad range of goals.

- **Communication Tool Selected:** From previous experience with similar conservation initiatives, it was clear that decision makers and landowners would need to see a new technique demonstrated first hand to gain comfort and see how it provides benefits that they value. With this in mind, three on-site and hands-on work days where participants built beaver mimicry structures provided the foundation for many of the project's communications activities. These work days drew participation from the target audiences, as well as landowners from the region. Additional training presentations, multi-day workshops, a video, and infographic materials are helping to further spread the project's key messages.

Communication Products

- Flyer advertising beaver mimicry work day
- PowerPoint presentations from training workshops
- **Using Beaver Mimicry** infographic series
- New York Times Article "[Reversing Course on Beavers](#)"
- Short film: [Climate Change Adaptation Through Beaver Mimicry](#)

Closing

The WCS Climate Adaptation Fund supports projects that make strategic communications choices. Through this document and its project case studies we have illustrated aspects of strong project proposals and how they engender broader uptake of adaptation principles through strong communications and practitioner engagement.

Further information is available in the 2017 Applicant Guidance Document issued along with the 2017 Request for Proposals.

For questions, please contact Liz Tully at etully@wcs.org.

Strategic Planning Resources

1. **Spitfire Smartchart:** An Even More Effective Tool to Help Nonprofits Make Smart Communications Choices.
http://smartchart.org/content/smart_chart_3_0.pdf
2. **Strategic Communication Mediums Spectrum**
<https://strategicsocialmedia.wordpress.com/2009/05/25/getting-engaged-are-we-making-a-difference/communication-wheel/>
3. **Strategic Planning Wheel**
<https://deepblue.lib.umich.edu/bitstream/handle/2027.42/108580/CommunicationsPartII.pdf?sequence=1>
4. Hallahan, Kirk , Holtzhausen, Derina , van Ruler, Betteke , Verčič, Dejan and Sriramesh, Krishnamurthy(2007) 'Defining Strategic Communication', International Journal of Strategic Communication, 1: 1, 3 — 35