

# CHAPTER 9

## SUCCESSFUL COMMUNICATION FOR SHELLFISH REEF RESTORATION PROJECTS

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### WHY COMMUNICATE?

**Effective communication with a variety of stakeholders is essential for the success of shellfish reef restoration projects. It is most often a permitting and funding requirement and, when done well, helps people feel connected to and excited about the project.**

In contrast, if communication and engagement are not done early and well, this can lead to misunderstanding and mistrust, causing problems and delays. Effective communication needs to be budgeted for and incorporated directly into the project planning. This section of the report describes the key elements of an effective communication strategy for a shellfish reef restoration project.

### COMMUNICATION PLANNING

Planning for successful communication can seem daunting, but a good strategy makes the most out of limited resources and will likely lead to greater project support and funding (Olsen 2009). It can also provide clarity about a project's mission and goals. Often these elements are not clearly defined until a group is faced with building a website or preparing a supporting document for the project. So where do we start?

**Build the team** - identify the people involved in your project who can assist with communication activities. This could include communication professionals from associated permitting or research institutes. Consider appointing a communications manager to oversee this aspect of the project, and recruiting paid professionals if the budget allows.

**Define the audience** - write down the most important people for the success of the project in order of importance and make sure these people are prioritised in your communication strategy. Make sure this includes funders, the team, project champions, local stakeholders and potential beneficiaries. Further guidance about how to define the project's audience can be found on the Reef Resilience Network website (<http://reefresilience.org/communication>).

**Work out the key messages** - start with the vision for the project. What problems is the project trying to overcome, and what benefits are envisaged? Keep it positive, non-political and based on evidence. Do not forget to mention partners and funders, and do not overstate what can be achieved through the project. Discuss benefits to local people and the economy rather than just ecological benefits as many people care more about the former.

**Work out the best methods to communicate with the project's target audience** - the best communication methods will be a compromise between the communication methods that are used by your audience, what your team is comfortable using and what is possible considering the project's time and financial budget.

**Keep track of the strategy** - write down objectives and track the project's success. Objectives should be S.M.A.R.T. (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, and Time-bound).

**Review the strategy** - projects change so make the time to review the strategy and reflect on what has and has not worked well. Make a calendar entry to ensure the strategy is reviewed and renewed at least once per year. Tools such as Google Analytics can be useful to determine what has been the most effective, for example by allowing tracking of posts that lead to visits to the project's website. Also ask the audience directly what they find the most effective. Cull communication methods that are not helping reach the goals and objectives, or be prepared to modify the content being provided to the audiences to increase communication effectiveness.

✓ **PRO-TIP:** Make the effort to engage with potential opponents and be willing to make some modifications to get them on board. One of the most exciting things about shellfish reef restoration projects is that they bring together a diverse group of stakeholders, who may be adversarial in other situations.



**Figure 9.1:** A shellfish restoration information tent at a harbour regatta day in New Zealand, with a yacht skipper coming by to talk over shellfish reef restoration activities in the nearby harbour. Photo: Andrew Jeffs.

## DO THE BASICS

It is tempting to focus on social media or news stories but as most projects rely on the buy-in of just a few people, face to face meetings, phone calls, public forums and visiting local stakeholders, these will often be more useful than thousands of followers on Twitter (Figure 9.1).

Ensure traditional owners and local industry are included early in communication planning as they are key partners and audiences for most projects (McLeod *et al.* 2018). Building websites is no longer a daunting process with many companies offering easy to use templates that can provide a home for the project where anyone can find out the basic details.

Keeping websites up to date, however, can stop being fun after a burst of initial enthusiasm, so consider linking social media accounts to the project's website to keep some new content popping up.

Email and eNewsletters are still a powerful way to communicate with an audience and effort put into building comprehensive distribution lists will be well worth it.

Consider partnering with a research institution and include scientific publications in the project's communication strategy so that lessons learned through the project can be recorded and shared with the scientific community.

Spend some time to generate frequently asked questions and answers about the project. These will provide a great resource for future media coverage and spending time generating these will help the project team get on the front foot with risks and objections. This is an opportunity to address perceived project risks and reduce concerns by providing context and evidence.

## TRADITIONAL NEWS AND MEDIA

Local newspapers and similar media can be really important for the project and local journalists can be key project champions, especially if the project includes a lot of local people and offers solutions to local problems. Journalists are generally really busy and often do not know a lot about the context of the project. Providing key messages, photos and video will increase the chance that they will tell your story without misconstruing it. Be cautious about overstating project objectives and expected outcomes. It is tempting to get enthusiastic when speaking with media and overblow the potential outcomes of a project (for example 'this project will clean up the bay'). Better to keep these realistic, but with a positive spin. When speaking with media, think about the key message before the interview, do not get political or off track, and avoid adding too much technical detail.

## VISUAL COMMUNICATION

Good visuals are extremely important for getting key messages across to your audience.

### Photos and video

Great photos and short videos are powerful ways to share news of the project. Budget for professional photography if possible. However, not every photo needs to be *National Geographic* standard, 'bad' photos are still useful, so take a lot of photos to show the project's progress and the people involved.

Make sure people look (and are) safe and professional in photos and consider using release forms (or use a phone App to record informed consent). Take photos from the same place over time as time-series photographs are a great way to show project progress. Develop an 'electronic media pack' – a folder stored online with photos and video for media and including information about appropriate use and credit.

✓ **PRO-TIP:** Use a phone to shoot, edit and share videos. These are always handy and most phones are capable of capturing high quality videos and photos.

✓ **PRO-TIP:** Action cameras such as GoPro cameras are ideal for shooting underwater visuals for shellfish restoration projects because they can shoot at a wide angle and therefore can be placed closer to the subject. This is especially useful in low underwater visibility conditions.

## Infographics and other visualisations

Non-scientists rarely understand traditional graphs and charts so if these are used, make sure they are simple and clear. A better solution is to use infographics that display the main points in a visual and entertaining way. See Figure 9.2 for an example of an effective infographic.

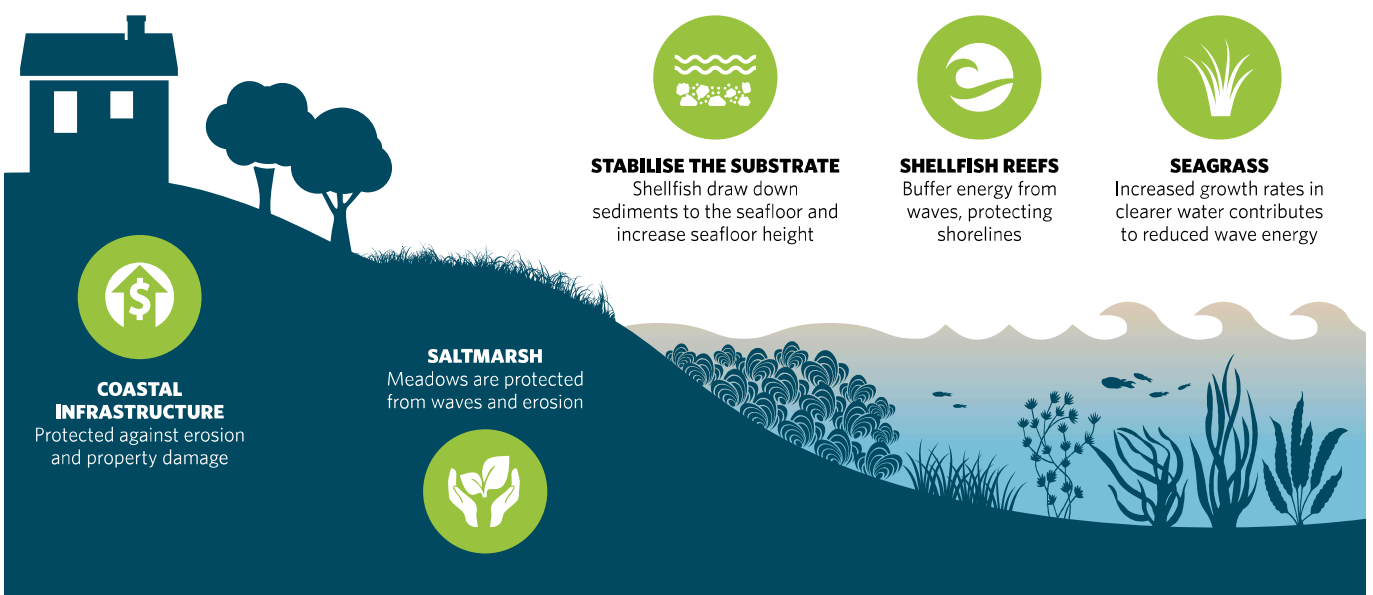
It is relatively easy to make free online infographics using the free online software such as Easel.ly (<https://www.easel.ly/>).

## GETTING SOCIAL - HOW TO USE SOCIAL MEDIA

The advantages of social media include that it is an interactive process rather than one-way communication through traditional media. This also allows more control of messages because they are not being interpreted and modified by a journalist. Social media is usually free to use and relatively easy to run. Social and traditional media are converging, and journalists will often trawl through social media to get stories. There is a wide-range of platforms (Box 9.1) and you will not have time to use them all, so choose one or two that you and your audience are comfortable with.

In general, keep it short, make it visual, do not get political, check the spelling, and give all posts a final read over before they go live. Spend time to understand how each platform works. Be nice to others, and take a balanced and reasonable approach when dealing with others' points of view.

Choosing the right social media platform will depend on the needs of the project's audiences, and the capacity, comfort level and time commitment of those managing the project. Do not try to do everything, choose what works for the team and commit to achievable goals (like one post a week) rather than building up an audience and then running out of steam. Consider developing a one-page social media plan for the project, defining platforms, and who is responsible for posting.



**Figure 9.2:** Infographic of the coastal protection, water quality and other habitat benefits of shellfish reef restoration.

## BOX 9.1: SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

Below are some of the more commonly used platforms for shellfish reef restoration projects. These platforms are likely to change, come into or go out of fashion and may not even exist in the future, but represent our best advice in 2019.



**Facebook** - this is still the most used social media platform with 2.5 billion active users in 2018. Facebook groups can be a good way to keep in touch with project participants and these can be 'closed' so only people specifically added can see the content. Facebook has powerful video and photo compression so your project's audience uses the minimum amount of data. The downsides of Facebook include that a post will generally only be shown to a small proportion of a potential audience unless you pay the Facebook company.



**WeChat** and **Weibo** - both are the most dominant social media platforms used in China, with 1 billion active users on WeChat and 300 million users on Weibo. Both platforms allow convenient posting and sharing of images, videos, short messages or blog-type of articles. Posts and articles can be in foreign languages such as English, depending on the targeted audience. In WeChat, an official account needs to be created, and only people with subscription to that account gets automatic notification for new posts; whereas on Weibo posts can be promoted by using #tags.



**YouTube** - often forgotten as a platform, but very powerful and a great way to house and share videos. When media agencies create videos about the project, ask for a copy and permission to upload these to the project's YouTube channel. YouTube detects the bandwidth of a device and chooses an appropriate playback quality and provides the easiest way to embed the videos on websites.



**Instagram** - focussed on images and can be good for reaching a younger audience. One challenge with shellfish reef restoration is that people often do not have a picture of them in their mind, so providing compelling imagery through Instagram can help people care.



**Twitter** - tends to be more important for researchers, journalists and politicians. Journalists love Twitter and get many of their stories from it.



**LinkedIn** - could be suitable for some projects, as it is often used by consultants, engineers, and government workers.



**ResearchGate** - is a social networking site for scientists and researchers to share papers, ask and answer questions, and find collaborators. The questions and answers section can often generate specific answers to detailed questions. Great for sharing scientific outputs and project descriptions.

## LEARN MORE

Check out the communication content in the Reef Resilience Network toolkit - there is a communication planning section that is for marine resource managers and conservation practitioners with little to no communications training (see <http://reefresilience.org/communication>).

## REFERENCES

McLeod, I.M., Gillies, C., Creighton, C. and Schmider, J. (2018). Seven pearls of wisdom: advice from Traditional Owners to improve engagement of local Indigenous people in shellfish ecosystem restoration. *Ecological Management and Restoration* **19**, 98-101.

Olsen, R. (2009). *Don't Be Such A Scientist: Talking Substance in an Age of Style*. Island Press, Washington, USA.