

A Study into Voluntarism in the Species Survival Commission

Introduction

With the rapid expansion of the SSC network, and with the important role Specialist Groups play in a number of areas, there has been a growing sense of loss of support to the network and over-burdening of volunteers. The responsibilities placed on a number of network members, particularly Specialist Group Chairs, continues to grow. There was a concern this was an unsustainable situation. In March of 2001, the SSC Executive Committee recognized the dangers in the SSC system and commissioned a study on voluntarism in the SSC.

An Executive task force, lead by Holly Dublin and consisting of Luigi Boitani, Marshall Murphree, Ulie Seal and David Brackett, was established to guide the investigation. Mark Stanley Price, former Chair of the Re-introduction Specialist Group, was brought in as the principal investigator.

A series of questionnaires was developed with an emphasis on who SSC members are, what they do for SSC, what they know about SSC and how they feel about it. Sampling was designed to continue until no significant or novel information was being collected and this stage was reached with information from 68 Chairs, 41 members, 12 SSC staff and nine SSC associates.

The final report of this study was delivered to the SSC Executive Committee for their meeting in October 2001. The report of the study covers the responses received to each of the questionnaires distributed, the comments of those interviewed and the conclusions and recommendations of the principal investigator.

Summary of the Voluntarism Study results

The study emphasised the organisation of SSC as a virtual network in the business of generating knowledge. This knowledge forms the intellectual capital of the organisation. The effective collection and transfer of that knowledge depends on the SSC social capital - the networks and norms of behaviour for moving information.

Generally, SSC is not a typical volunteer organisation in that the demands placed on the volunteers are variable, unpredictable and generally rely on their own professional expertise. Whereas a typical volunteer network has consistent meetings of the same people, reinforcing the necessary social capital, the organisation of the SSC results in very little personal contact.

This leads, as the results demonstrate, to a critical role for Specialist Group Chairs as network leaders. SSC Chairs in general are a distinctive group of

people who play more roles for the SSC, spend more time on SSC and are generally more informed about SSC. They are the linchpins of the network.

As such, Chairs demonstrated an active interest in being more involved in high level decision making - and new Chairs want the opportunity to learn from existing Chairs.

Major Findings:

- Differences between Chairs and members are very striking and combine to give a very consistent picture of each class. Chairs, in general, give 10 hours per week to SSC, while members give less than three hours.
- Both groups feel their enabling environments are inadequate: Chairs feel strongly about lack of resources, while members regret not being enabled by SSC to undertake conservation actions, and feel they do not know enough of what is expected of them.
- Specialist Group Chairs gave detailed information about the operations of their groups. The extent to which members are known personally by Chairs is very high, but many Chairs assess high proportions of their memberships as passive. Over 60% of Chairs bear some group costs personally, and the Secretariat has helped only 21% of Chairs with fundraising.
- The level of knowledge of SSC is particularly poor among members, complementing their point that they do not know what is expected of them. Individuals who are both a Chair and member of further Specialist Group(s) appear most knowledgeable.
- In general, and especially for Chairs, recognition of their efforts on behalf of the SSC network was found wanting.
- Network effectiveness is greatly promoted by personal knowledge between individuals; the impact of single meetings between Chairs and SSC leadership or Secretariat staff persisted for over a decade.
- Chairs are demotivated most by lack of resources and the professional cost to them of being Chair while many members are not demotivated at all for they give to SSC all the time that they are asked to: this complements exactly their lesser proactivity for SSC.

The study also showed a vast under-used network of SSC members who have a strong desire to contribute more. It is up to the SSC to identify and motivate this untapped resource.

The SSC Executive Committee responds

The SSC Executive Committee quickly recognised the large and complex issues that the Voluntarism Study brought into focus. A full day workshop examining the study, and investigating possible actions, was incorporated into the October 2001 Executive Committee meeting in order to begin to respond to the issues raised.

The aim of the SSC Workshop was to look for a series of actions to move forward in a pragmatic near-term sense as well as examine what the study suggests for the longer term strategic positioning of the network within the "conservation landscape".

Under the facilitation of Tim Sullivan, the SSC Executive Committee reviewed the results of the study including summarising some of the priority issues and recommendations. The Committee addressed these major issues and formed recommendations for both short term and long term action.

Major issues arising from the voluntarism study were grouped into the following categories:

- Structure and organisation
- Resources and Capacity
- Recognition
- Communications

Structure and Organisation

The Voluntarism Study pointed to the need to give serious thought to the fundamental structure of the network, especially in relation to the changing conservation landscape. Thus, SSC should examine its role in the biodiversity information constellation and be sure of its core business. Further, the current network structure can lead to feelings of exclusion and elitism. There is a need for the membership, particularly Specialist Group Chairs, to be more involved in the decision making of the SSC. These needs are the most challenging to face and will require a longer-term evolution of the SSC network.

For the shorter term, areas which can be given more attention include developing a regional strategy for SSC actions which can be delivered through the SSC Regional Vice Chairs and linked to IUCN Regional and Country Offices, finding a way of financing an "all Chairs" meeting, making information on the SSC membership more available, and encouraging Specialist Group workplanning in the context of the SSC Strategic Plan.

Resources and Capacity Building

Attention given to resources was further classified into three separate and linked areas, intellectual resources, social resources and financial resources. The

Committee identified the need to improve intellectual resources through training and mentoring and improve social resources through more opportunities for personal contact and discussion. Fundraising for Specialist Group support and activities was also identified as an early need.

In all three areas, there was a common need for specialised training on both using SSC tools such as the Red List or Species Information Service, and developing needed skills such as management, communication and fundraising.

Recognition and Motivation

The Committee recognised the distinctions between the SSC and other volunteer organisations. These distinctions should be celebrated with a move to regard the network as expert conservation collaborators representing the world's best professional, technical expertise, rather than simply volunteers.

A number of immediate actions are needed to begin the evolution of a culture of recognition within the SSC. An award system, expanding on the Peter Scott Award and including more personal contact should be developed as well as a means to identify achievers and future leaders within the membership. Specialist Group Chairs and members will be encouraged to identify active members for recognition and profiling in the SSC communication tools.

Communications

The Executive Committee recognised the lack of knowledge on the SSC within the membership. This pointed to a need to look more closely at the messages the SSC is sending internally and the vehicles for those messages. The rise of electronic communications opens new opportunities for communication but it is clear that not all members have access to the latest electronic means of communication.

Species, the SSC newsletter, continues to be the most widely distributed SSC communications vehicle. There is a need to maintain the focus of this product for the motivation of SSC members. By celebrating dynamic members, strong achievements, local (regional) initiatives and lessons learned, the newsletter can inspire SSC members.

Cross-cutting issues

There is a need to give more serious attention to network management. This may involve a serious investment in a professional network developer and manager, while recognising effective network management is the responsibility of all elements of the SSC structure. SSC should learn from contemporary thinking and methods on network development and strive to take effective advantage of its social capital.

Recommendations and Conclusions

In the short term, the Executive Committee commits to:

- Putting a serious emphasis on fundraising to host an "all Chairs" meeting prior to the next World Conservation Congress
- Develop a regional strategy for SSC activities, to be delivered through the SSC Regional Vice Chairs
- Developing a network training strategy
- Developing a recognition system, soliciting the input from Specialist Group Chairs
- Continuing to improve on Species as a tool for motivating the network
- Continuing to probe into the strengths and weaknesses of SSC network design, taking lessons from other virtual networks

The Executive Committee recognises that a number of long-term actions will be required to fully tackle some of the issues brought to light. It is committed to the continued strategic evolution of the Species Survival Commission to best meet the needs of the SSC members and the objectives laid out in the SSC Strategic Plan. As part of this commitment, the Executive agreed an analysis of the conservation landscape or context within which the SSC operates was important, as well as an analysis of the SSC strengths. Both of these should be mapped against the SSC Strategic Plan.

The SSC Executive Committee acknowledges the role of the Task Force in guiding the Voluntarism Study and, in particular, the strong leadership of Task Force Chair, Holly Dublin.

The SSC Executive Committee formally accepted the report provided by Mark Stanley Price and the voluntarism task force. This document represents a synthesis of that report, and the results of the Executive Committee's deliberations.