

SSC and the Media

**A guide to successful media relations for IUCN Species
Programme staff and Species Survival Commission members**



SPECIES SURVIVAL COMMISSION

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Introduction

As the profile of IUCN and SSC becomes more prominent, Species Programme staff and SSC members face a growing level of contact with the media, whether for information requests, or requests for interviews on a particular issue. Some staff and members have been working with the media for many years and feel comfortable doing so, others feel apprehensive about talking to journalists. This document aims to help any member of the SSC network navigate the media, and feel effective when speaking to its representatives.

To date, SSC's media contact has been largely reactive, providing information on request. Yet with the network expanding rapidly and its increased level of activity, there is great potential to be more proactive in approaching the media with story ideas. This can help spread SSC's important messages to the wider world, including policy makers, our key target audience, and help raise funds. The nature of SSC's work is ideally suited to feature stories for which there is a growing market.

SSC is involved in a series of high profile events such as the Conferences of the Parties to CITES and the Convention on Biological Diversity, and the IUCN World Conservation Congress. It is important that the network understands the profile that SSC/IUCN has at these events and the key messages we should all be promoting.

Aside from these events, Species Programme staff should be ready at any time, to deal with media enquiries. IUCN's Director General has stressed that IUCN must raise its public profile. Everyone in SSC needs to be aware of elements in their jobs that could become news stories if called to a journalist's attention.

Although we are active in advocating the use of the best science in conservation decision-making, IUCN/SSC is not a campaigning organisation. Promoting a particular position on a given conservation issue can undermine our credibility as the provider of objective scientific advice. It can also cause problems with IUCN's member organisations which represent the entire spectrum of views. That is not to say SSC cannot have an impact with the media. We are being approached by an increasing number of media outlets searching for expert information. SSC's expertise can be applied to running stories or can add the scientific or technical "meat" to an issue. SSC should strive to become the definitive source of scientific/factual information on the status and conservation needs of biodiversity that is used by the environmental media, and ultimately recognised by wider audiences.

Understanding the media

There are two types of media - print and electronic. Print covers newspapers, and magazines, in which articles may be categorised as news, feature, or editorial/opinion. Electronic media covers radio, news agencies, television and the Internet. Competition is fierce and many newspapers have created Internet editions in an effort to maintain a competitive edge with the immediacy and visual impact of television. Media outlets may be local, regional, national, or international. Although there are many different types of journalists and journalism, all share a basic need - to identify stories with a news value and air/print them as quickly as possible. Television, radio and the Internet have replaced newspapers as leaders of the global news agenda.

The media industry is undergoing a major transformation with rapid advances in technology. The volume of stories and the speed with which they are produced is increasing. "Multi-skilling" has led to a decline in the number of reporters and sub-editors in a newsroom. Reporters often write their stories as well as subedit (layout) their pages. The number of specialist writers is also declining and the average reporter covers several, often wide-ranging stories in one day. Attendance at press conferences is also declining as most journalists can obtain the information they need quickly by email or the Internet, and by conducting telephone interviews. These factors should be taken into account when planning a media event.

The media should not be mistaken for SSC's ultimate audience; it is the conduit to reach target audiences. Interaction with the media should be used to "sell" SSC's messages, such as promotion of the best science in conservation decision-making, and the extinction crisis being adopted as a shared global responsibility.

Establishing media relationships

Positive media coverage is a prized commodity and can only be gained by building working relationships with journalists, proving ourselves to be reliable and available. Although it is largely the role of IUCN communications staff to generate key contacts for the Union, everyone in SSC can play an important part in cultivating relationships with journalists, alerting them to potential story ideas where possible. With the dispersed nature of the network this can help ensure an even geographical balance to coverage of SSC's work.

Effective internal communications is key to the ultimate visibility of SSC and essential for successful media contact. Keep up-to-date with what SSC and IUCN are doing, via the website and other channels. If you know of a potentially good news item or indeed a potential problem, alert your colleagues, members, regional and country offices as appropriate. Also if you are successful in having a story or interview printed, share it with the network. Media clippings that recognise SSC's work are a great morale booster, as well as a useful resource to include in donor packages and information kits.

One of the quickest and most effective ways for SSC/IUCN to have its news disseminated internationally is through news agencies, such as Agence France-Press, Associated Press or Reuters. These organisations provide an instant and continuously updated news service that is used by world media as well as governments, United Nations agencies, non-government organisations, and industry.

When sending a press release to the head office of a major news agency, SSC should also send it to the agency bureau in the country or region to which the story relates. Tailoring news releases to a country or region and translating them to the relevant language can significantly enhance the chances of pick-up. The Geneva bureau of Agence France-Presse receives between 30 and 40 press releases every day and is invited to at least two press conferences each day. This illustrates the competition existing among information providers, and the need to focus on sending interesting and well packaged news. Press releases should preferably be sent both by e-mail and fax. IUCN/SSC should supply a list of its experts and global communications staff to key media outlets.

The period during which an environment story is most likely to be taken up by a media outlet is July/August (in the northern hemisphere) as those two months are usually quiet on the news front. SSC/IUCN can react to big stories with quotes, figures, and background information that provide 'sidebars' to articles.

Specialist Group Chairs, Programme Officers, and Group members may want to get to know their local media by calling and introducing themselves, describing the sort of work they do and what potential stories they have. Biographies of key experts and fact sheets on your work are useful as an introduction, then keep in regular contact. You may want to invite the media to spend a day with you, particularly if there is an interesting field project that may make a good feature article. Making a reporter's job as easy as possible and understanding the needs of your local media such as what deadlines they have and what sort of story they like to cover is more likely to result in accurate coverage.

SSC is receiving a growing number of requests to participate in television documentaries. These should be referred to IUCN's communications division and considered on a case-by-case basis.

The five Fs of media relations

Good relations with the media mean good relations with journalists. Below are the points to remember in your dealing with journalists:

1. Fast

Respect journalists' deadlines. Return calls as pledged. An unreturned call is an incalculable 'faux pas'.

2. Factual

Be factual. But make the facts interesting. Journalists appreciate facts stated with some literary flourish.

3. Frank

Be candid. Never mislead journalists. Be as open as possible and respond to their questions.

4. Fair

Be fair to journalists if you expect them to be fair to you. Favouring one news outlet consistently will lose you the confidence of others.

5. Friendly

Like everyone else, journalists appreciate courtesy. Remember their names. Read what they write. Know their interests. Thank them when they cover your issues.

Further tips

- Contact with the media should be handled promptly and professionally. Ideally, all enquiries should be channelled through the Species Programme Communications Officer or IUCN's Media Relations Officer, but with the growing volume of enquiries, this is not always possible.
- Before dealing with the media you should know your work and core messages, and how to present them in an interesting way. Understand your strengths and weaknesses and stick to what you know. Don't over-promise scientific expertise. If you are not in a position to help, point the media to a colleague, partner organisation, or IUCN member.
- Remember that everybody working for SSC/IUCN as staff or as a volunteer contributes to the image of the organisation. This applies not just to our media image but to our everyday work and contact with the public and other organisations.
- When initiating or responding to a media call, be organised before you make the call. Have background materials such as previous news releases and factsheets in front of you.
- Keep messages simple: mass media is designed for the masses - remember who your audience is. Introduce your message first then back it up with facts and examples.

- Information supplied to the media should be consistent and of high quality to maintain the good reputation of SSC. Do not confuse communications/press relations with public relations for donors. Material should be newsworthy, and written simply and clearly.
- Press releases are more effective than press conferences, as you can reach an extensive list of media outlets world-wide.
- When offering stories, use your best spokespeople. Enthusiasm and charisma are critical keys to success.
- Most environmental reporting focuses on the “doom and gloom” aspects. Although SSC’s main focus is drawing attention to, and halting the extinction crisis, there are opportunities to highlight conservation successes and outline solutions to problems.

The Interview

Pre-interview analysis

Building media relations and responding to enquiries is time consuming. It is not possible to respond comprehensively to all. Staff should feel they can be selective in which interviews they agree to. However, all dealings should be quick, professional and courteous. If you can't help, suggest a colleague or partner organisation that may be able to. We can all refer journalists to SSC or IUCN members, other commissions, Regional and Country Offices, or partner organisations, but remember to inform the person to whom you have referred a journalist, in advance.

You should never feel you have to talk to journalists immediately, unless they are simply seeking basic information. Be helpful and polite, ask them what they would like to know, and call them back when you have had a few minutes to collect your thoughts.

Before you agree to being interviewed by a journalist either for print or electronic media there are several questions to ask:

- For which media outlet is he or she working, or are they freelance?
- What is the focus and context of the interview?
- Who is the audience?
- Ask yourself if you are the appropriate expert to take part. If not, find the appropriate person and brief them. Don't leave the journalist hanging.
- Is the reporter familiar with the work of SSC or IUCN? If not, offer to send some information, annual report, recent news releases, etc.
- When will the interview take place and where?
- How long will it take?
- What is the format (taped, live, debate, call-in, in-studio, background)?
- Is anyone else being interviewed/on the panel, if so, who?
- If it is a telephone interview and you will only be available on a mobile phone, ask if this is acceptable. It is usually not for a radio interview.
- When will the interview be published/aired?
- Will you be photographed, or do you need to supply a photo?

It is useful to ask colleagues or the IUCN communications division if they know of the journalist or organisation in question. Keep a record of the interaction to share any tips with the network for future reference.

If you decide to decline an interview, explain why, and if possible, suggest another expert. If you agree to an interview, respect the reporter's deadline. Be available at the agreed time. Always take a contact number in case you have to cancel or supply extra information. Be prepared with notes, background information, examples and case studies to hand. Don't hesitate to ask colleagues' advice in the preparation of the interview. Develop your own objectives for the interview and generate your key messages - try to use examples to support each.

Offer to send the journalist background information. We all need to be able to describe SSC and IUCN succinctly to journalists otherwise they will come up with their own description which may be inaccurate. Check that the reporter has received and read any materials you have sent, before you start an interview. Have contact details of additional experts ready for other aspects of the story.

Make sure you have the capacity to deal with the level of interest that may result from the interview, particularly if your contact details are being added to the article.

Practice talking about the issue out-loud. In particular practice presenting your work as concisely as possible. You should be able to answer questions in 20-30 seconds.

Listen to effective speakers on television and on the radio, see how they handle difficult questions, and steer the interview back to their agenda.

Be aware that the type of reporter you may encounter can vary greatly. With the decline in the number of specialist writers, most will have little knowledge of your subject and often won't have had time to research. Others may have a "machine gun" style, firing question after question without giving you time to reply fully, or try to put words in your mouth. Feel free to stop them and ask what the main question or focus of the interview is. Yet there are still specialist writers who will have good knowledge and expect detail. Some may lull you into a false sense of security by asking a few easy questions before suddenly firing a difficult one to try to catch you out and say something negative about your work or SSC/IUCN. Despite general suspicions about journalists, remember they are human, and are usually only trying to find the best information and the most interesting news angle.

Commandments of good media interviews

- Know your key messages. These should be short, clear and to the point. Repeat them often. Use the interview as an opportunity to publicise important work/issues.
- In a telephone interview keep a note card in front of you in case you need a prompt, but try not to sound too rehearsed.
- Try to ensure that IUCN/SSC is accurately represented and described, identify yourself as a Species Programme/SSC representative. If you are referring to the Red List, use the full title IUCN Red List of Threatened Species, Wildlife Trade Programme rather than Trade Programme.
- Tell the truth, be honest and sincere.
- Anticipate the questions, particularly the difficult ones, and practice your answers. Always include your message.
- Use plain language - avoid jargon and acronyms.
- Keep your ultimate audience in mind. Address the journalist but remember that through him or her you are addressing public opinion. Try to see your work and issues from the perspective of the reader or viewer.
- Speak in complete sentences. This is particularly important for television or radio interviews as you will probably be edited.
- Repeat SSC's and IUCN's name in full several times rather than "the Commission," "SSC," or "the Union" as the full name may be edited out.
- Be animated and enthusiastic, the reporter is far more likely to be sympathetic to your cause.
- Look your interviewer in the eye.
- If being interviewed at home or in the office, make sure there is no background noise.
- Remember you are the one in control.
- Use phrases such as "but the real issue is" or "what is important to realise" to steer the conversation where you want it to go.
- If you don't know the answer to a question, say so, and "bridge" to something you do know.
- Remember the role of SSC and IUCN, do not get drawn into commenting on issues we do not cover.
- Know when to stop. If you feel you are going beyond your agenda make moves to wrap up by saying something like "I hope this has been helpful, if we've covered what you needed...", or ask "is there anything more you need from me?"

- Don't repeat negative questions or phrases, as this sounds as though you are reinforcing them. Likewise, in television interviews avoid nodding as the interviewer asks a question or makes a statement, it looks like you're agreeing.
- Respond rationally to emotional questions. Don't lose your cool or get defensive.
- Never say "no comment".
- Remember you are "always on the record". Don't say anything that you don't want reported.
- Do not give personal opinions, you are always representing the position of SSC or IUCN.
- Don't attempt to speak for another person or organisation.
- Never speculate.
- Use examples, personal experiences, and anecdotes to add interest or to illustrate a point.
- Keep practicing your interview skills. Even the best spokespeople refresh their skills regularly.

Tips for television interviews

Talk show

Look at the presenter.
Keep your arms loose; don't clasp your hands.

Satellite

Sit perched.
Look into the camera (not at the video monitor).
If sitting on a panel, look at the other people speaking.
Keep hands loose, not folded in your lap.

Stand-up interview

Look at the reporter.
Keep your hands and arms loose.

Sitting in an interview

Sit as though you are perched, don't lie against the back of your chair.

What to wear

Wear bright colours - no stripes or patterns
Never wear black or white. White shirts are said to be intimidating on men with ties.
Red works well unless in a crisis!
Avoid busy ties.
Avoid prominent or noisy jewellery.

Interviews over the telephone for radio

Make sure there is no background noise, and that you won't be interrupted.
Stand up as this adds power to your voice.
Keep a glass of water next to you.

After the Interview

- Recap on the conversation, at least the main points, ask if there are any points the reporter wishes to clarify.
- Do not ask to see a copy of an article before it is printed, this can cause offence and can be seen as an attempt to exert editorial influence.
- Ask to be sent a copy of the article when it is printed or find out when the interview is being aired.
- Ask if the reporter needs to contact additional experts.
- Offer a follow-up phone number or email address at which the reporter can reach you.
- Keep notes on the reporter/publication including pros and cons to share with colleagues.
- Thank the reporter for his or her interest.
- Evaluate your performance. Are there areas you could improve on?
- Prepare to handle further interest that may be generated by the article or broadcast.

If you are happy with the resulting article or report, call or email the journalist to acknowledge the good work. Discuss future opportunities and story ideas.

Correcting errors

After an interview, if intuition tells you the reporter did not quite understand an issue or answer fully, call back and offer to clarify a point. The reporter will usually appreciate the effort.

After all your best efforts, if a factually inaccurate story appears, take action immediately. Start by calling the reporter direct, explain the inaccuracies and offer to fax or email the correct information, fully sourced. He or she may offer to print a retraction or to correct the information in a following story. Don't be hostile, it may have been an innocent mistake, or one made by a sub editor, not the writer.

If the journalist is rude or discounts your concerns, go to the next level, at the station or publication, with all your facts at hand. Refer the case to the head of communications at IUCN, via the Species Programme Communications Officer.

How to identify a news story

One of the communications problems of IUCN, like other international organisations, is that people in the field have difficulty, or are too busy to identify and promote projects or operations that could be developed into a news story. Any news story presented to the media should be able to address three basic questions that the reader or viewer inevitably asks "So what?" "Who cares" and "What's in it for me?" They will be more interested in a story that relates directly to them, or takes place in a region close to them.

A news story has several or all of the following components.

- **Proximity criteria** – A media representative will prefer to cover an event, which takes place in his region, rather than miles away for the basic reason that the audience is more interested in an event that takes place in his or her area, rather than a distant country.
- **Identification criteria** – Less than 2% of the total media coverage deals with environmental issues. This is mainly due to the difficulty in making readers identify with conservation. Environmental communicators therefore need to include a human angle in their stories.
- **The news criteria** – A newspaper deals with news. SSC must be quick in acting on stories as they happen.
- **The surprising criteria** – people remember only 7% of a news programme only two hours after it has been broadcast. Most of the time they remember what surprised them for one reason or another. Always try to include surprising facts or examples.
- **The story-telling criteria** – An environmental message is best explained through a story. For example, if a species is on the edge of extinction, illustrate the likely consequences, perhaps through loss of livelihood of local people.

Writing a news release

A news release should be simple and well written. It should have a strong news angle, be clear, concise, and short - approximately 300 words, one page, never more than two. Paragraphs should be kept short with one main theme or statement in each. A news release is not a donor report, policy paper, or position statement.

Language should be non-technical and acronyms (avoid over-use) should be spelt out in full in the first instance.

Include a human element/context and provide concrete examples. Figures can be useful but should be put in perspective by including phrases such as "which is equivalent to..."

Structure:

1st paragraph - introduce the news angle, the date and source.

2nd paragraph - develop the main idea

3rd paragraph - add a direct quote to back up the main idea

4th paragraph - include background and context

5th paragraph - add a second quote if needed

6th paragraph - develop the larger perspective, vision for the future, action needed.

Always include:

Contact person(s) for further information and make sure they are available to respond quickly to enquiries.

The standard description of SSC/IUCN at the end.

The website address of SSC and IUCN.

Press Kits

Press kits are useful at major events, meetings or launches that have potential for media interest. They should include:

- A briefing note or news release with contact name, telephone number, email address, website URL
- Factsheet on the issue, including examples or case studies
- Quotes or comments by experts
- Relevant press clippings
- Standard description of SSC and its objectives
- Other background information as appropriate such as the annual report

Press briefings

Press conferences should only be used for major newsworthy events. With the time and effort needed to prepare for one, and the fact that attendance is falling, alternative ways of communicating your messages should usually be found. Smaller, more focused press briefings may be a more effective way of promoting important messages. They can also be used to provide SSC/IUCN expert background to a running story.

Several days before the briefing

- Reserve a conference room with a large table.
- Call and personally invite 6-12 reporters, invite double the number you expect to attend. Send the invitation by fax and email.
- Confirm your spokesperson and experts (preferably two, maximum three).
- Develop press lines and main themes.
- Meet in advance to review the presentation. Prepare for speaking as thoroughly as you would prepare written material.
- Prepare written materials and background information.
- Call to remind journalists the day before.

Hours before

- Check that receptionists know your whereabouts during the briefing.
- Erect signs to the briefing room.

During your briefing

- Introduce reporters to your speakers and to each other.
- Keep to the time set for the briefing.
- Facilitate the briefing, make sure everyone has a chance to speak.
- Make an audiotape if possible.
- Keep a record of who attended and who declined.
- Follow up with reporters after the briefing.
- Be prepared to give one-to-one interviews after the briefing.

Crisis communications

It is impossible to predict what crises may occur in the SSC. Examples may be a fire at headquarters, that seriously impedes the working of SSC, or criticism of SSC's scientific credibility which escalates in the media.

We should never assume that a crisis brings chaos. Many organisations have weathered a crisis to emerge stronger more efficient and respected for honesty and professionalism. Prepare for the worst, stay calm and in control, and be proactive afterwards.

SSC should be alert to situations that could constitute a crisis. What assumptions would the press, or the conservation community hold? What message do we most urgently need to convey? What concrete actions are we taking to contain the crisis and prevent a recurrence?

The ABC of crisis communication

The As

Anticipation

- Anticipate the likely questions; have answers ready.
- Identify gaps in information; know where you are most vulnerable.
- Know the history with media organizations or reporters.

Agenda

- Talking points of key messages that you want to make during an interview.
- Don't just react to media questions, communicate your message.
- Stay on your message; repeat it often.

Accessibility

- Decide who the spokesperson will be.
- Respond to reporters as quickly as possible.

The Bs

Brevity

- Comments should be concise, informative and relative to the subject of enquiry.

Bluster

- Don't damage your credibility with insincerity or arrogance.
- Do not gloss over or minimize problems.
- If you don't know the answer to a question, say so, then do your best to find the answer quickly.
- Avoid "no comment" when at all possible.

Bad News

- Get out the bad news yourself - do it quickly, and get it behind you. This earns you points for candour and credibility with the media and public.
- Stalling with information prolongs a crisis and creates an information gap. The public will fill gaps with speculation or, worse, misleading or incorrect information.
- Frame the bad news in your own context; this allows explanation from your perspective.

The Cs

Consistency

- Consistency of your message is always important, but critical in a crisis.
- Accurate and up-to-date information builds credibility.
- Don't add to problems by having to go back and correct information.

- Keep information centralized; brief your spokesperson thoroughly.

Control

- Assemble a core crisis team immediately.
- Make it clear to the media and public that you are in control.

Concern

- Be concerned with your reputation, and for those affected by the crisis.
- Concern must come across with the media.
- Do not take responsibility for a crisis.

Crisis Tips:

- Form an internal task force, decide who will be the spokesperson(s)
- Make sure everyone knows what to do, have clearly defined roles
- Keep your target audience in focus
- Have clearly developed messages
- Communicate the situation to internal staff ASAP and maintain internal communication
- Provide a quick analysis of the situation and its impact
- Be truthful and honest
- Prepare background documents in advance
- Develop a standard reply that avoids saying “no comment” when fielding an enquiry
- Don’t rush to make judgements, or accusations
- Log media enquiries and coverage
- Use your website to post information and updates
- Avoid sensationalist media activity. If approached for an interview, clarify what it is about - if it’s sensationalist and you know there is no hope of getting your message across, turn it down. Be wary of live calling as you have little control.
- Have background information ready: a statement, background to the organisation, factsheet, phone list etc.

A final word

Most of what has been said in this manual is common sense. Feeling at ease with working with the media only comes with practice. We should all view interactions with the media as an opportunity to publicise the vast range of fascinating and important work being carried out by the SSC network, rather than as a hindrance. Please contact the SSC Communications Officer, Anna Knee or Andrew McMullin, or IUCN's Media Relations Officer, Carolin Wahnbaeck with any news or story ideas that can be pitched to the media. They are always looking out for news for SSC's various communications channels, the website, *Species*, E-Bulletin etc.

Please also contact them if you need advice in dealing with the media, or need help preparing a news release for example. Notify them in advance of any event you are organising or issue in which you are involved that may generate media interest. Staff at IUCN headquarters often receive enquiries about the activities of Specialist Groups and with more than 100 Groups it is impossible to keep track of what they are all doing!

When speaking to the media when travelling or at conferences, it is courteous to notify the relevant IUCN regional or country office as they often receive enquiries after the event. Finally if you happen to see articles, or television programmes that mention SSC or IUCN please pass on the information.

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