

Special Feature: Lessons Learned in Specialist Group Communications



Promoting collaboration between SSC Specialist Groups

A key topic of discussion at the SSC staff meeting in April this year was how to improve the effectiveness of the SSC structure to deliver conservation impact. It was widely agreed that greater communication and collaboration between Specialist Groups would increase SSC's impact as well as benefit individual groups.

The need for interdisciplinary approaches to conservation problems and increasing competition for funds means there is a trend towards increased collaboration in the environmental field. A growing number of Specialist Group are forming partnerships, and some have collaborated successfully for many years, but there is plenty of scope for more strategic partnerships.

Taxonomic groups such as the marine and invertebrate Specialist Groups are often in contact with each other and, coordinated by the Species Programme, worked together to develop joint priorities during workshops in 2002. Initiatives coordinated by the Species Programme can greatly promote the interchange of information and expertise across groups, for example, the Global Mammal Assessment which will involve all SSC mammal groups. Implementation of the Convention on Biological Diversity's Global Strategy for Plant Conservation is forming a unifying focus for SSC's 30 plant Specialist Groups which were central to development of the strategy.

International meetings and conferences such as the International Theriological Congress that focus on particular species are extremely useful for Specialist Group members working in that area to meet each other and exchange experiences. However, funding for attending such meetings is often limited.

There is potential for greater collaboration between groups in the development of Action Plans. The Canid Specialist Group worked closely with the Wolf Specialist Group on development of the forthcoming Canid Action Plan. To counter the widely perceived "animal-plant divide" that exists, there could be greater focus on integrating flora conservation issues into fauna action plans, and *vice versa*. Greater links could also be forged between plant Specialist Groups and those working on pollinator and disperser species.

For those groups wishing to form alliances with others, the SSC website provides a list of all Specialist Groups and their contact details (www.iucn.org/themes/ssc/sgs/sgs.htm). The SSC Directory, distributed with the last issue of *Species* is also useful for helping SSC members to get in touch with each other, for example, those working in the same country. Species Programme staff also try to play a "match-making" role in putting groups in touch with each other when they identify areas of overlap, or common projects that would benefit from collaboration.

Newsletters such as *Species*, Specialist Group bulletins and the monthly SSC E-Bulletin are useful for spreading news of collaboration, both ongoing and needed, but with the increasing information overload, greater targeting of information is needed to those most able to act on it.

Yet there is no substitute for face-to-face contact to find out what others are doing and to identify areas of potential collaboration. When attending major conservation meetings, Species Programme staff try to involve as many SSC members, particularly Specialist Group chairs, as possible. For instance, at the Vth IUCN World Parks Congress, a SSC members' reception was held to allow members to get together and make new contacts. An SSC meeting is also being held as part of the Asia Regional Conservation Forum in Colombo, Sri Lanka (www.rcfasia.org) as part of the Commission's drive to integrate regionally as well as taxonomically.

Events such as the World Conservation Congress, held every four years are critical for SSC networking. The 3rd WCC takes place in November 2004 in Bangkok and will, as usual, include a Commission-wide meeting. As outlined in issue 39 of *Species*, Team Species are keen to receive input from as many members as possible on what they would like from the meeting, to make it as useful as possible. Please send suggestions to ssc-chair-office@iucn.org

Promoting cross-group communication is one of the aims of the "Lessons Learned" section in *Species*. Here you can see great examples of communications within, between and beyond Groups.

Anna Knee, SSC Communications Officer

Communication within Groups: the Wonders of Technology

Effective communication among Specialist Group members is an essential element of the development process for consensus Specialist Group products such as Conservation Status Surveys and Action Plans. In 2001, the North American Bison Specialist Group Chair identified the need for a status assessment of bison in North America to form the foundation of an Action Plan. Our guiding principle was that the status assessment process should involve ongoing input from all Group members. We used an email and web-based framework for collaboration among members towards status survey development.

A fundamental challenge was the development of functional communication methods that enabled efficient and equal access by all members to information relevant to the project and its progress. The communication methods had to surmount the complications created by the geographical disparity of the members, as well as

incorporate straightforward mechanisms for inclusion and orientation of additional members in the future.

We began with email as the primary mechanism for information distribution. Email is convenient, immediate, and generally universal in its use, which makes it a logical method for quick information dissemination. However, email can be impersonal and it is our nature to avoid messages because of the lack of direct contact (unlike a telephone conversation, which requires immediate response). So we relied on the phone when matters requiring a quick response arose. In addition to regular correspondence, regular progress reports that summarized the status of the project, announced new members, and outlined upcoming project activities were distributed electronically.

A second step was to develop a Group website (www.notitia.com/bison) which included a publicly-accessible section describing the Group, bison conservation, and the project, and a password-accessed Member Forum for members and collaborators. The Member Forum featured access to individuals' contact information, archived correspondence, progress reports, and documents requiring member comment.

Reviews of draft material took place via the Member Forum. Members could review draft sections of the survey and provide feedback. A feedback form allowed the reviewer to select the draft (e.g., Draft 1—Genetics) from a drop-down list, enter comments, and then press 'Submit.' The feedback was sent directly to the Group Officer's email address with the selection from the drop-down list as the subject line. I then revised the draft documents based on the feedback. I also posted the feedback to allow all collaborators to view each others' comments. After incorporating comments from members, revised versions were posted for further comment, thus creating an iterative review process.

In addition to the review function, the Bison Specialist Group website provides an electronic presence for the Group, helps with the distribution of files and images that are too large for email, and helped orient new collaborators with the status of the project. With a fully operational website, email was no longer needed for sending general information. Instead it was used to advise members of new postings. Of course, individual arrangements were made for any collaborators who could not regularly access email or the website.

The collaboration process was designed to increase the effectiveness of the Group as a conservation planning unit, and to increase the accuracy and comprehensiveness of the status survey. This process has resulted in a document that reflects the collective consciousness of the group. With the new website, the process can continue to assist with Action Plan development and other group consultation exercises.

The Conservation Status Survey for Bison in North America is currently being formatted for final review by the Bison Specialist Group members prior to publication.

Delaney Burton, Officer, Bison Specialist Group (North America)

Communication between Groups: Obvious Added Value

The Conservation Breeding Specialist Group prides itself on integration of social science and attention to social processes in our biologically-based species conservation work. Sound science is at our core, but the philosophy upon which all of our processes are designed revolves around the themes of stakeholder participation, consensus decision-making and active listening to promote common understanding. In other words, communication is what we do. After 20 years of practice, we have not mastered it completely, but we are getting rather good at it within the workshop setting.

In addition, we have a long history of collaboration with other Specialist Groups. Since 1989, our Group has conducted 179 Conservation Assessment and Management Plan (CAMP) and Population and Habitat Viability Assessment (PHVA) workshops in 48 countries. These workshops have involved 92 collaborations with 42 different Specialist Groups, including 17 collaborations with the Primate Specialist Group alone. Many more workshops included Specialist Group members as active participants, even if their Specialist Group was not formally a partner in the workshop planning. While we are certainly proud of this record, it does not, by any means, indicate success. We have at times failed at communication within our own SSC network. There are plenty of excuses for this. Our staff of just a few program officers is pushed to their limit in conducting and participating in an average of 45 workshops each year. Some of the workshops were for taxonomic groups for which there is (or was at the time) no Specialist Group. But the reality is that sometimes we did not include others in our workshops because we just didn't think to. We kept our heads down, plowing ahead with the work at hand, and unless the need was glaring it just did not enter our minds to make the connection. This changed when we began interacting more with SSC staff and, through them, linking with other Specialist Group Chairs, program officers, and members. Our awareness was raised, and the added value to our process and resulting conservation action was obvious.

The social capital earned through personal contact is priceless



Guidelines for the Reintroduction of Galliformes — a team effort

Through our extensive experience, we have learned two very important lessons related to the causes of poor communication and the key to improving it. First, lack of communication is generally due to benign negligence rather than malice or a deliberate attempt to be exclusive. Yet it is easy for people to jump to the opposite conclusion. Secondly, developing personal relationships is the best way to ensure improved communication. Even today, in the age of video-conferencing and Internet meeting technology, there is no substitute for face-to-face interaction. The social capital that is earned through personal contact is priceless. An e-mail, a phone message, a request, and even a mistake, is treated differently when it comes from someone you know personally.

We recognize that it is difficult to maintain adequate personal contacts in a network as large and diverse as is SSC, but this is a goal toward which we must constantly work.

When it comes to communication we should all try to abide by two of the ground rules we set forth at the start of every workshop: assume good intent, and encourage full participation.

Onnie Byers, Conservation Breeding Specialist Group

Communication between Groups: A Multitude of Examples

The Animal Health for the Environment and Development (AHEAD) Forum that took place at the Vth IUCN World Parks Congress is an example of effective collaborative between Specialist Groups. SSC's Veterinary Specialist Group and Sustainable Use Specialist Groups worked closely within a broader consortium of organizations including the Wildlife Conservation Society. AHEAD will serve as a forum for exchanging ideas from a range of fields to combat introduced diseases and the impacts they have on conservation as well as human livelihoods. See page 6.

The Vet Group also collaborated with the SSC Cetacean Specialist Group to conduct a site visit and prepare a report in response to widespread public interest in the live-capture and export of dolphins from the Solomon Islands. See the news story on page 4.

The SSC African Elephant and Re-introduction Specialist Groups worked together, with the Vet Group, to produce a series of guidelines on the translocation of African elephants for re-introduction, enhancement or management purposes. See the African Elephant Group report on page 14.

SSC's Re-introduction Specialist Group and the World Pheasant Association with SSC's five Galliformes Specialist Groups have teamed up to

develop Guidelines for the Reintroduction of Galliformes, based on the principles outlined in the 1995 *IUCN Guidelines for Reintroductions*. The guidelines were formed in response to the increasing interest in many parts of the world in reintroductions as a conservation tool for Galliformes (game birds).

With a growing trend in SSC towards regionally-based Specialist Groups, there is scope for collaboration between the more traditional taxonomic based groups and the new-comers. The Southern African Invertebrates Specialist Group will help the Mollusc Specialist Group identify mollusc conservation priorities in the southern African region. As one SSC member put it, with invertebrates lacking the profile they deserve, groups need to capitalize on the synergy of collaboration. By teaming up, they may have sufficient critical mass to achieve much more locally than by working individually. Check out the Southern African Invertebrates Group report on page 18.

Team Species

Communication beyond Groups: Conservation through Education

The Education Committee of the Orchid Specialist Group has been recently activated. We have been examining the ways and means that educational methods could be effectively applied to attain desired learning outcomes in orchid-rich countries around the world.

Essential steps towards the development of a successful conservation education program:

Step 1 - Identify the target audience

We recommend that you begin with programs addressing the specific needs of one defined audience. Possible audiences vary from place to place but once an audience has been identified, get to know the audience, their perceptions, misconceptions, hopes and fears, through dialogue, group discussion, or surveys.

Step 2 - Select a conservation message

This is perhaps the most critical step as a message must be clearly understood and appreciated if we are to change attitudes or behaviors. A message should be selected according to the needs of the specific audience.

There are innumerable conservation messages for orchids and one or more of the following example messages could be combined according to the selected audience. For example, if the audience is tourism operators, the message could be a combination of: "What are orchids and why should we conserve them?" combined with a second message, "Orchids and tourism create jobs."

- Orchids are an indicator of environmental health and therefore should be conserved.
- What are orchids and why should we conserve them?
- Orchids are a money-making resource that can be sustainably managed without endangering the wild populations.
- Orchids and tourism create jobs.
- Do not collect orchids from the wild.
- Do not purchase orchids collected from the wild.

Step 3 - How should you deliver the message?

Any or all of the following delivery mechanisms could be used depending upon the audience and available resources.

- websites—sophisticated sites could include feedback surveys, self-assessment quizzes
- printed matter - information sheets, press releases, magazines, books
- pictograms *
- posters for schools and displays
- advertisement through a major sponsor
- advertisement through other NGOs
- murals
- promotional messages on food cartons or containers
- face-to-face delivery - seminars, meetings with communities, business groups

* Education Committee member Greg Steenbeeke (Australia) had the good idea of developing information cards/folders with a conservation message similar in style to airline safety procedure cards (pictogram). This might be worth developing for specific audiences where literacy is a challenge or where a quick reference is needed to reinforce the message. Symbols used in pictograms must be unambiguous and easily recognizable by the audience. Pictogram symbols should be tested with the audience first to be certain that the message conveyed is easily understood.

Step 4 - Is your message heard and understood?

You should include methods to evaluate an educational program in terms of the impact on knowledge, skills, attitude or behavior. These can include surveys, feedback from other agencies or monitoring behavioral shifts.

The Education Committee welcomes your comments.

Marilyn H. S. Light, Chair, Education Committee, Orchid Specialist Group

