Communicating results

Monitoring is undertaken to inform a group of people about the condition of and trends in resource condition in a particular area. Communicating the results to this audience is obviously an important part of your monitoring effort. Your group may wish to communicate to:

- influence some kind of change

- inform people about what they're doing, and/or

- attract new members and supporters.

There are a range of tools that can be used to communicate effectively to different audiences. Your monitoring plan should describe how you will communicate your results and identify which tools would be most appropriate to get your message across to your target audience.

In addition to this introductory text, this section includes the following:

- Guidelines for Preparing a Communication Plan

- Media Release Tips

- Media Release Example

- Briefing Paper Example.

Guidelines for preparing a communication plan

Effective communication is a crucial tool for monitoring programs, especially where the monitoring program is not managed by the same people who manage the resource being monitored. Developing a communication plan is part of fulfilling the monitoring plan i.e. communication is as much part of the project management cycle as measuring the resource.

A clear idea about who needs the information that themonitoring project produces and how it is best to communicate with this audience can also help to shape the monitoring. Planning for communication forces us to think about the eventual use of the results, the timelines of our audience (the audience may have key decision points that communication needs to inform in a timely manner) and producing tailored and user-friendly information products. Preparing a communication plan can also help us to reflect on the objectives of the monitoring project and how well these objectives can be met.

These guidelines aim to provide a simple explanation of the components of a communication plan for a monitoring program and a template for preparing your own plan. The main components of a communication plan are the:

- communication objectives – what and why are you communicating

- target audience – who do you want to communication to

- communication tools – what method of communication is most appropriate for your target audience

- timing and frequency – when and how often to communicate

- responsibilities – who is going to communicate

- communication quality – key concepts for excellent communication.

Communication objectives

Use the following examples to clarify the communication objectives of your project i.e.whether the objectives is to :

- strengthen the relationship between the monitoring project and its supporters and users of the monitoring data or results

- provide stakeholders with information about the activities and outcomes of the monitoring project

- make contact with decision makers, make them aware of the monitoring project and work with them to make evidence-based decisions about management of natural resources

- assure quality at all stages of the monitoring project by remaining mindful that others will have access to information about and from the project

- actively develop and support the continuous improvement of the monitoring program and management of natural resources by shared understanding through appropriate communication

- engage members and potential members who have skills and interests in promotion and communication of the monitoring program and its results

- develop links with local and regional communication products and media in order to use them as a tool to reach the target audiences, including the general public.

Target audience

Many different groups and individuals are potentially interested in the activities and results of monitoring natural resources. However, people are busy and increasingly overloaded with information from many difference sources. For a message to break through the information clutter, messages should be based on the

needs of the target audience and not on the priorities of the sender of the message. For this reason, the messages that are communicated and the means of communication should differ according to the specific audience(s) the project wants to inform or influence. For communication to be effective the audience must be selected and directly targeted with the appropriate message and means of distribution.

The main types of audience for natural resource monitoring are the:

- NRM Board and sub-regional NRM Groups

- researchers

- government agencies

- local government

- Local Action Plan/Landcare or other community NRM groups

- NRM Project Officers

- land managers

- project or community group

- general community

Determine which of these audiences it is important to target. It may be that different audiences will want different information or that the same information needs to be communicated differently to different target audiences.

Communication tools

Your monitoring plan should describe how you will communicate your results and identify which tools would be most appropriate to get your message across to the target audience(s). The main methods of communicating about monitoring programs and their results are listed below:

- project or data report

- conference, forum or information session

- scientific journal article

- regional or local newsletter

- field or demonstration days

- pamphlet or brochure

- project newsletter

- Project meetings

- local newspaper

- word-of-mouth

- State/National newspaper

- local/State radio

- TV

- magazine

- social media pages (e.g. Facebook)

- your own web-page

- blog.

Some of these methods may be in either paper form, electronic form or both. Sometimes the same information can be available for mail-out or put on a website. This is largely a choice about the extent of distribution and the currency of the information. It is possible to archive information on a website for access into the future, whereas, newsletters and information sheets are easily forgotten, lost, superseded or destroyed.

Table 7 below provides recommendations about the most appropriate communication tools to inform different audiences. Choose the communication tools which will most effectively reach your target audience and develop your message to fit that tool.

Tips for timing and frequency of communications to improve effectiveness

The timing and frequency of communications depends on a number of factors related to the availability and form of the information, the need of target audience, the resources of the monitoring group and the time that different communication tools take to get information out to the audience. The most important thing is to optimise the opportunity of communication and not simply send out information because you have it. A few general tips to timing your communication are provided in Table 8.

Responsibilities

The responsibilities for each stage of preparing material for communication, and the stages leading up to communication (eg. analysis and interpretation) need to be allocated to people capable and prepared to undertake them. Determine the tasks to be undertaken, allocate the tasks and set deadlines to keep track of progress. The tasks required when using different tools will be different for different monitoring projects. However, the main tasks to be allocated will be:

- deciding when you want to communicate and what communication tools you will use – including checking things like newsletter deadlines, meeting times, publication policies, word or picture limits etc

- collating and synthesising interpreted information. This may include text, tables, graphs and

photographs.

- drafting the communication text to ensure a clear, concise message in the form appropriate to the communication tool(s) chosen

- nominating a contact person or contact point to answer questions

- responsibility for any revisions or proof checking

- disseminating the information – this might simply be a matter of loading it onto a website or may include printing, typing addresses and stuffing envelopes, or delivering copies to libraries etc.

Quality in communication

To ensure quality in communication, it may be helpful to consider the clarity, consistency, tone, appeal, credibility and openness in the way you have communicated your message.

Clarity
Communication from the project must clearly convey information to create an environment for the target audience to understand the message and to limit the chances of misunderstanding. Clarity is improved when as few technical or bureaucratic terms as possible are used. Eliminate information that the target audience does not need in order to understand the message or make necessary decisions. Be aware that the science and terminology of natural resource monitoring may be unfamiliar to many of the potential target audiences.

Consistency
Messages about the monitoring project should be consistent over time. The communication tools may be the only contact some target audiences have with the project and consistency of message, language and method will assist in engaging the audience. This does not mean that the content of the message cannot change but that each new communication builds on those already disseminated.

Tone and appeal
The messages may be straightforward, reassuring, challenging or even controversial, depending upon the desired response and the target audience. Being clear about the desired response before communications will help to set the tone and appeal of the message. Messages should always be truthful and delivered with appropriately authoritative voice.

Credibility
In all communications, the monitoring project must be believable and trustworthy and should be recognised for its scientific credibility.

Openness
The ongoing significance and success of the monitoring project may depend on support from stakeholders, response from decision makers and the ability of the project to respond to the needs of these audiences. It is important that communications demonstrate openness to ideas and enquiries from stakeholders and users of the monitoring data. This can be as simple as including contact details or information about upcoming activities in communications.

Media release tips

The media need you! Both print and broadcast media need to fill space or air-time and journalists will generally accept a story if you can sell it to them. Sending a written press release is your first step and the most effective way to ensure that your message is correct and packaged the way you like it. If your story is picked up, the journalist may follow up to check details or clarify the topic.

The following tips are to help you to prepare and check your written press release.

Purpose of media release
The key points include:

- attract interest and/or notify potential participants about the activities of the group

- highlight the findings from the monitoring

- give general background information about the monitoring program or the natural resource issue

- outline the organisation's point of view on an issue.

Table 7 Recommended communication tools

Target Audience/Organization	Project or data report	Conference or forum	Scientific journal article	Regional or local newsletter	Field or demonstration days	Pamphlet or brochure	Project newsletter	Project meetings	Local newspaper	Word-of-mouth	State /National newspaper	Local / State radio	TV	Magazine	Social media pages	Your own web-page	Blog
NRM Board	●																
Sub-regional NRM groups	●	●															
Researchers		●	●														
Government agencies	●																
Local government	●	●		●													
LAP/Landcare group	●			●	●												
NRM Project Officers	●			●	●	●			●	●							
Land managers					●	●			●	●							
Project/community group				●	●	●	●	●	●						●	●	●
General community									●	●	●	●	●	●		●	●

NOTE: *Remember that the NRM Board, stakeholders or others who host or distribute your communications may have policies, styles or templates that are useful for you or important to ensure communication consistency and limit liability. Ask project officers or NRM Board staff about requirements for communication tools they are responsible for.*

Table 8 Tips for timing and frequency of communications to improve effectiveness

Tip	Explanation
Find out when key decisions are made by stakeholder or supporters of the monitoring project	Providing information in a timely manner to decision makers can increase the chance that they use the information. Many decisions in NRM are made by committees or at meetings. Missing the meeting can mean waiting or missing out on funding or action. Collection of some information could be deliberately timed to be ready for a particular meeting or forum.
Not all information needs to be communicated immediately.	It can be a good idea to wait for the right opportunity to influence a decision rather than diluting your message by sending out information when the target audience is not ready. This could include collating information about change in the natural resource over a few years and presenting it at a key meeting rather than sending it out hoping someone is paying attention.
Provide interpreted results not just raw or analysed data	Use your home ground advantage and decide for yourselves what the results of monitoring mean by properly analysing and interpreting them before communicating them. If other stakeholders disagree with your interpretation they can discuss it after you have established your opinion. You also want to avoid the risk that unanalysed or insufficiently interpreted results are misinterpreted or misunderstood.
Plan for all the stages of your monitoring project, including the communication	Don't forget that each stage of a monitoring project takes time, including preparing communication products. Add some extra time into plans to give yourself a buffer if tasks don't go right at every stage. It is common to underestimate the time taken for things like analysis, writing, formatting, sign-off by authorised personnel and printing. Agreeing on deadlines for specific components can improve the efficiency of preparing for communications. You can work out the timelines by working backwards from the desired publication or communication date.
Use existing communication tools and products where they are appropriate and available	If there are already newsletters, websites or other communication tools you may be able to have your information included for distribution. Distribution can be expensive and it may be necessary to compromise on the amount you can include in an article in an existing newsletter or information product to ensure that you can cheaply and easily reach your target audience. Remember that groups who host or distribute your communications may have policies, styles or templates that are useful for you or important to ensure communication consistency and limit liability. Ask project officers or NRM Board staff about requirements for communication tools they are responsible for. Even if you are not using an existing communication product, you might be able to save some effort by copying what you like from existing products or talking to the people producing them.

Maximising the likelihood of seeing the media release published

Focus on no more than three messages that you want to convey, for example:

1. This monitoring is undertaken by the community.

2. A change has been detected.

3. Planning or management may be affected.

Stick to the facts and be precise. Don't offer your personal opinion, speculate, talk about anything you are unclear or uncertain about and don't let yourself talk too much.

Always be polite and calm in all dealings or interviews with the media. Refer reporters to the most relevant person to discuss any details.

Content

Evaluate the news value of the press release as this is what the media outlet will do. News value can be measured by:

- How many people may be affected or interested in the issue.

- The likelihood that a particular group of people might be affected by the report e.g. Irrigators.

- The likelihood that something will change as a consequence of the report e.g. management of the resource might change if monitoring showed an undesirable trend).

- The level of human or local interest in the story.

- How recent the information is and length of relevancy.

The opening paragraph should summarise the whole story i.e. who, what, when, where, why. It's important to keep it simple, to the point and factual.

Make sure the location of the story matches the distribution of the newspaper/media outlet. Be accurate with names, titles, dates and time and use active language with verbs and avoid adjectives.

Avoid technical language, jargon and clichés. Neither the journalist nor general public, are likely to be familiar with technical or bureaucratic language of natural resource management or monitoring. If possible, make a visual or sound illustration available e.g. photo or recording of a frog found at the monitoring site. The media especially like photos of children, animals and flowers.

Include simple figures or numbers with context and explanation. It is often easier to understand figures which refer to an amount of change rather than an absolute amount e.g. 10 % increase in salinity over 2 year).

A few other tips:

- assume no prior knowledge – i.e. only use acronyms or technical terms if they are explained

- include quotes – the media loves them. "Blah, blah, blah…," said …. (include full title the first time this person is mentioned)

- include a headline made from keywords from your release (no more than six words)

- keep the release to 1 page e.g. 200-400 words.

An example media release is provide on the next page.

Distribution

Weigh up whether the impact would be greater for the release to go out soon after the event (news is new and current) or whether it is best to manage timing for greatest impact. The effectiveness of a release can be enhanced by timing it with profiled events e.g. Watercare Week or World Environment Day.

Determine the target audience for your release and choose appropriate media. Check the media's deadlines and publishing/broadcast schedule (daily, weekly etc.). Include contact details and make sure that the contact person is available for at least 3 days after the release has been sent.

Follow up your release with a brief and to-the-point phone call. Ask if the journalist has received, and had time to read, your release. You can also offer to line up an interview or obtain a good quality photo.

Some of the information provided here has been sourced from the following references:

- Media release guidelines (University of Leeds) www.leeds.ac.uk/media/media_guide/what_news.htm (accessed 2007)

- http://vitw.org/pdfs/Writing_a_Media_Release.pdf (accessed 2007).

- Thanks for additional advice from Rita Reitano, CRC for Australian Weed Management

Media Release Example

Contact details
Borrow Creek Landcare Group
Contact person:…………..
Contact details:…………...

Healthy Water Flows in Borrow Creek

The quality of water flowing in Borrow Creek has improved according to the results of monitoring by local landholders and a group from the Borrow School.

Forty-five children from the Borrow school have been collecting water samples along the Borrow and Stony Creeks to measure changes in the quality of the water. The information collected has been combined with information collected by the Borrow Creek Catchment Group and shows that the salinity of the water in Borrow Creek has dropped by about 10 % over the past two years.

The monitoring program was started by the Landcare and School groups to help inform the public about potential threats to the unique ecosystems along the Borrow Creek. The chair of the Landcare group Mr John Smith said that the improvement in salinity was expected after such a wet season but that the amount of sediment in the water was on the increase.

"The water is very cloudy which makes it more difficult for plants and animals to live in it" said Mr Smith. "We haven't found as many frogs this year and there are ongoing weed problems along the creek".

The group undertakes monitoring on two days each year and welcomes people with an interest in the natural environment and Borrow Creek.

"The monitoring we do isn't very technical and training is provided" said Rebecca Jones, a project officer assisting the monitoring. "Lots of people like catching the frogs and fish and learning about how these animals live. The program has been very popular with the school" she said. The program is one way for people who want to make a difference to the conservation of the local environment to learn about wetlands and the threats to them.

"We are hoping to provide information to local government and the Natural Resources Management Board on how land management in the area is influencing the quality of water in the creek" said Ms Jones.

Example Board Paper

Continued Degradation of Borrow Creek

Purpose

Highlight evidence of degradation in the condition of water and biodiversity in Borrow Creek and recommend actions to reduce the degradation.

Background

Stock grazing and cropping are the dominant land uses in the Borrow Creek catchment. Changes in agronomic practice and land use rotations in recent years have seen an increase in the period of exposure of soil to erosion risk and potential for sediment movement to Borrow Creek. In 2004 the Borrow Creek Landcare Group began a program to monitor the quality of water in the creek and the condition of the vegetation in the creek and riparian strip. There are now four years of monitoring data on salinity (EC), pH, turbidity, nitrate & phosphate levels and flow in the Burra Creek.

Discussion

Four years of monitoring data in Borrow Creek demonstrate a decline in the quality of water and the condition of vegetation associated with increased sediment load and eutrophication from run-off from agricultural land. Attachment 1 shows the trend in turbidity and nutrient levels in Borrow Creek over the period 2004-2008. These changes are correlated with changes in agronomic practice over the past decade. There has been widespread removal of contour banks and increased periods of soil exposure with cultivation earlier in the year, and increased stocking rates in parts of the catchment. Run-off from agriculture land is contributing to the degradation of Borrow Creek and action is required to raise awareness of the issue and inform land managers of best practice land management techniques to reduce the impact of agriculture on the creek.

Recommendations

AGREES to develop and implement an education/awareness program to inform landholders of current best practices to limit erosion and the movement of sediment to Borrow Creek.

Attachment 1 – Borrow Creek condition monitoring results 2004-2008