



Involving Stakeholders along the Baltic Green Belt of Latvia

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Abstract

An essential part of nature protection is involving stakeholders by communicating the need and the benefits from conserving nature. This is very often not easy to handle, the communication with important stakeholders can be disrupted and communication with these stakeholders might malfunction. In these cases a neutral mediator can influence the process and atmosphere of communication in a way that most disruptions and barriers can be overcome.

The Slītere National Park is taken as an example for the processes of communication in nature protection and the impact of a neutral stakeholder in a complicated communication regime. This paper analyses the process of communication, which circumstances influenced this process, the history of the area and its stakeholders. As a result, general guidelines for strategic communication with stakeholders in nature protection are given.

1 Introduction

An important part of nature conservation is to reduce the pressure of mankind on nature, for example by reducing the negative effects of stakeholders (organisations or key persons with an interest in the usage of land in a nature protection site), economic development and people's lifestyle. This means, nature protection depends on involving stakeholders; forming alliances and agreements with those who might harm nature with their actions, although it is not their aim – for example in tourism. Although it is not the aim of tourism developers to harm nature, the communication between developers and nature protectors is often negatively affected because the regulations for protecting nature are felt as obstacles. This process may be influenced by the history of the area, the introduction of nature protection, the personal background of the people and/or the organisation and aims of important stakeholders in the area. If the process of communication eroded over many years, the reestablishment of the connections is almost impossible for the stakeholders, because the personal history of each individual is too connected with dislike of others.

In these cases a neutral mediator, who is in contact with all stakeholders, can be useful to re-establish the communication regime between the stakeholders. In this paper, the process of stakeholder involvement with a neutral mediator is exemplified by the Slītere National Park in Latvia. We will give an overview of the park's history (which is important to know in order to understand the circumstances), the important stakeholders and the main activities of the neutral mediator. From this knowledge and expert-interviews with important stakeholders in the territory, we developed general guidelines for communication with stakeholders in nature protection.

2 Description of the area

The Slītere National Park (SNP) is located in the north-west of Latvia, on the edge of Riga Bay and Baltic Sea. The Park encompasses an area of 26,590 hectares, including about 10,000 hectares of marine habitat. The roots of the park were established as Slītere Nature Reserve in the year 1923. In the year 2000 the national park was established. The whole park is a Natura2000 territory as well.

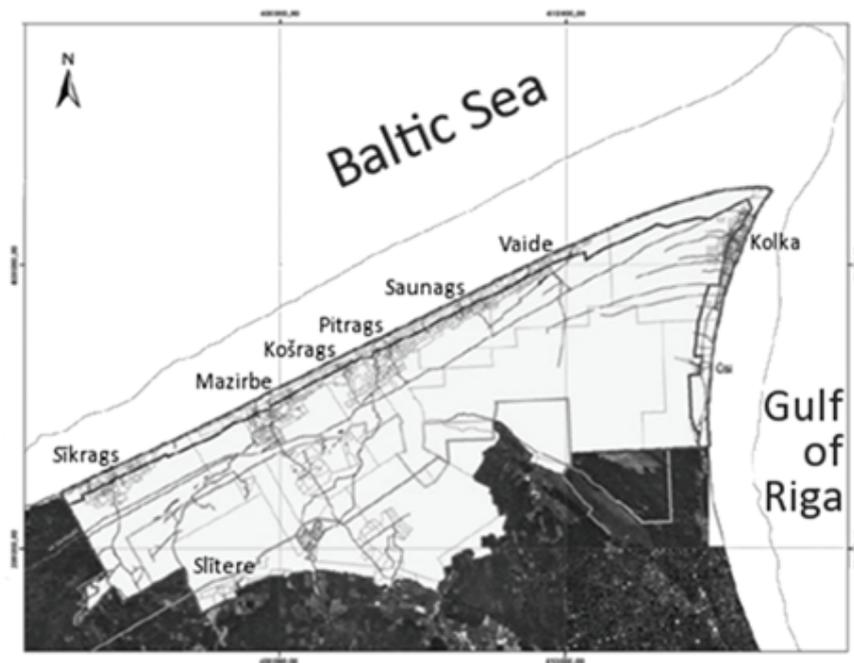


Figure 1: Slītere National Park management plan (www.slitere.lv, adapted).

The national park includes the up to 50m high ancient coastline of the Baltic Ice Lake with natural broad-leaved forests, as well as *kangari* and *vigas* complexes (several miles long dune ridges – *kangari*, alternating with dune valleys – *vigas*), sea coast with sandy beaches and dunes, dry meadows, dry pine forests and the seaside type of raised bogs, merging with *vigas* and *kangari*. The area's population is about 1,100, of which 950 live in Kolka. The population density (at 9.4 people per square kilometre) is rather low. The main nationalities in the area are Latvians (91.6%) and Livonians (1.8%). The population of this region traditionally lives in small fishing villages along the sea (see figure 1): Sīkrags, Mazirbe, Košrags, Pitrags, Saunags, Vaide, Kolka. One main income source for locals is the fish industry: Two fish factories and 15 fishermen are located in the area. Further, there is one wood working enterprise, nine tourist houses, five shops and one petrol station in Kolka parish. Dundaga is the largest city within a radius of 25km, inhabited by about 1,700. The national park is administrated by the Nature Conservation Agency Kurzeme Regional Administration, located in the village Slītere.

3 History of the Area

From Nature Reserve to National Park

The roots of the Slītere National Park were established in the year 1923 by the foundation of the Slītere Nature Reserve (SNR). It was a 1,100 ha large territory at Slītere Blue Hills. The Slītere Nature Reserve is the second oldest protected nature territory in Latvia. The area has been expanded several times: During 1950s it had a size of about 8,000 ha and in the 1980s it slowly grew to 16,500 ha. In the year 2000 these-protected lands and further marine areas received the status of a national park.

The goal for creating the Slītere Nature Reserve was consistent with the concept of nature reserves (*zapovedņik*) of that time; as territories without any economic activity. The reserve's task was to ensure undisturbed on-going of natural processes. Visiting of SNR and other nature reserves was restricted to and local inhabitants.

The time of Soviet-Occupation

As of 1940 Latvia was occupied by the Soviet Union. The nature reserves territory and the surrounding area were strategically important for state security for the following reasons:

- The eastern coast of the Baltic Sea was external frontier of Soviet Union
- The way through Irbe strait was the only way to access the Gulf of Riga and to reach Riga, so it was constantly controlled.

Only local inhabitants were allowed to reside at the border zone (via a stamp in the passport) and their guests had to receive permission from the Ministry of the Interior. State border guards enforced the regulations of movement and supervised the beach. Sunbathing and swimming was allowed only during specific hours at small parts of the beach, close to the largest villages.

During Soviet occupation, when no private property existed, old dunes and depressions (*kangari* and *vigas*) around Slītere, covered with coniferous forest and hard to manage but biologically highly valuable, were, together with the Bažu bog, attached to the Slītere Nature Reserve.

In 1979 an administration with staff was founded for Slītere Nature Reserve, not only supervising and managing the territory, but also performing scientific research, monitoring natural processes and educating society. In 1980s Slītere Nature Reserve was supervised by five foresters.

Similar to Slītere National Park nowadays, the Slītere Nature Reserve was divided into land use zones with different protection levels: strict protection zone, regulated regime zone and buffer zone. Each of them had different rules for visiting and the usage of nature's bounties. All soil and wood resources were owned by the state, so society had no interest in buying land, building houses or cutting down forest. The main activity was to collect berries and mushrooms within forests and swamps of the reserve. These natural resources were an important source of food and income, as mushrooms and berries were preserved for winter, and some were sold as well.

People remember how they were wronged because of bilberry, cowberry and especially cranberry gathering restrictions. Berries were only allowed to be gathered at special conditions. Only local people were allowed to gather them without any devices that might damage berry bushes. If these conditions were ignored, foresters fined the trespasser and sometimes even took away gathered berries. Berries and mushrooms grow in all forests of Dundaga parish, and gathering outside the territory of Slītere Nature Reserve was allowed, but those were not everyone's favoured gathering grounds.

At the same time student educational excursions were organised to the area. During Soviet times student excursions along places of natural and cultural heritage were very popular, as they were integral part of the school program. Slītere NR researchers developed educational routes and led lessons in forests. An independent educational exposition about nature was set up in Slītere Manor House for many years.

Independence, land reform and territorial spatial planning

In the 1990s, after foundation of the independent state of Latvia, the border zone restrictions for visitors and locals ceased. From independence on, the beach was fully accessible and permission for entering the “zone” was not needed anymore.

However, Slītere Nature Reserve continued fulfilling its goal; to ensure conditions for natural processes according to the territorial land use zones. In the 1990s the first nature trails with covering were built and brochures for tourists about Slītere Nature Reserve were published. This was the start of public relations and environmental education of the general public.

Together with the independence of Latvia a land reform was started. Its aim was, and still is as follows: “The objective of the land reform is to reorganize the legal, social and economic relationships of land property and the use of land in the countryside during a gradual privatization in order to promote the renewal of the traditional rural lifestyle of Latvia, to ensure the economic use and protection of natural and other resources, preservation and raising of soil fertility, increase of qualitative agricultural product production” (Law On Land Reform in the Rural Areas of the Republic of Latvia, Section 1).

This law, dated November 21, 1990, provided special regulations for protected nature territories to avoid destruction of natural values. Slītere Nature Reserve had the right to not privatize the land (Section 12 of the law), however the administration decided to use the paragraph of the law about land exchange which states, that if a land owner’s previous property is located in the nature reserve or a regulated regime zone it can be replaced with identical land area within the buffer zone. As the buffer zone was at the seacoast, in the fishing villages and around them, most parcels of private land returned were in the zone between the sea and Ventspils-Kolka motorway. The Slītere forest remained property of the state and there was no obstacle to ensuring nature protection measures.

Together with the law on land reform, the state undertook a territory planning process. The Kolka parish was in favour for this plan, although 95 per cent of its territory was under administration of the Slītere Nature Reserve. A relevant part of the plan was to determine the borders of Livonian fishing villages according to the Protection Zone Law (regulating sea coast dune protection within village borders) where beneficial conditions for construction and forest management existed.

Kolka parish’s plan for the village borders was to draw a line from Mazirbe till Kolka, creating a 30km long zone between the sea and the motorway, including protected dune forests where no houses are built. Such editing of the plan was not accepted by the Ministry of Environment. This conflict, although indirectly, affected the relationship between Kolka parish and Slītere NR administration.

Without this territory plan it was hard to receive permission for construction in these villages, displeasing the landowners who were willing to build. These land owners blamed the Slītere National Park administration for this situation.

The spatial planning process was just finished in the year 2010.

European Union and financial crisis

The entrance of Latvia to the European Union on the first of May 2004, (together with Estonia, Lithuania, Poland and six other eastern European countries) led to the designation of the Slītere National Park as a Natura2000 territory. The severe pressure from the Latvian society and economy, mainly the timber-industry, was a major problem for nature protection in woodlands during the financial crisis which started in 2008. The nature protection system itself is disputed in Latvia, but the government has to “maintain [...] at favourable conservation status, natural habitats and species of wild fauna and flora of Community interest” (Council Directive 92/43/EEC of 21 May 1992, on the conservation of natural habitats and of wild fauna and flora) due to the European agreements.

4 Results

The stakeholders – a short introduction

Kurzeme Regional Administration (former SNP administration)

During the Baltic Green Belt Project the SNP administration changed its name several times. The institution has changed subordination in the Environmental Ministry structure also. And as a result of the changes, the Slitere National Park is one of protected nature territories that are managed by the new Nature Conservation Agency (NCA). The NCA Kurzeme Regional Administration (KRA), the successor of the SNP Administration, is one of four regional administrations of the NCA in Latvia. Main functions of the NCA KRA are the management of all protected areas in the western part of Latvia; carrying out the cooperation with local authorities, tourism entrepreneurs, non-governmental organizations and education institutions to promote nature conservation, and to educate and inform the society about nature conservation.

The goal is to ensure the ecological value of the Slitere National Park.

Local entrepreneurs (Tourism Infrastructure)

There are 13 tourism entrepreneurs (Table 1) that offer accommodations for tourists in and around the SNP. This kind of business is quite seasonal. Only one or maybe two of them are able to earn a living during the tourism season.

Table 1: Accommodation infrastructure in the area.

Village	Accommodation type(s)	beds/pieces
Sikrags	Country house	6/-
Lapmežciems	Country house	12
Mazirbe	Country house + Camp houses	18/20
Vīdale	Country house	8/-
Košrags	Guest house / camp houses + Country house	22/24
Vaide	Camp houses	12
Kolka	Country house / place for tents + hotel + hostel	41/-
Pitrags	Place for tents	-
Dūmele	Country house	10

The majority of accommodation facilities were established in the last few years. The tourism sector is a (slowly) growing economic factor in the region. In general, the aim of the entrepreneurs is, of course, to generate an income, but there are three different groups. The first group consists of local people, who have lived in the territory for several generations, working in a regular job but generating some extra income with tourism. The second group are people that have lived and worked in a large city before, who are now returning to their parents' home. These people may be pensioners, and accommodations for tourists are a way to earn some money and spend a spare time. The third group is people that have purchased land in the national park with the aim to develop a business.

Summerhouse owners

There is no hard data about how many estates are inhabited permanently. Some owners have declared their place of residence as Kolka parish, but they live and work in Riga, another city or abroad. For example, there are four permanent inhabitants in Sikrags, but during weekends and summers there are a hundred or more inhabitants.

It is hard to involve the owners of summerhouses, because they do not have any strong relationships to other stakeholders, and they simply prefer the quiet atmosphere of the territory.

Tourism information centre of Dundaga (Dundaga district municipality)

The Dundaga tourism information centre (TIC) started its work in the area in 2009. One permanent employee organizes the work and several tourism guides have seasonal jobs in the TIC. Dundaga TIC wants to promote a favourable ambiance for tourism in the whole Dundaga district. It provides services to stakeholders that work in the field of tourism, organizing seminars and meetings, and also funding to develop the touristic infrastructure and the tourism products of the area.

Cape Kolka Information and Visitors Centre (Ltd. Kolkasrags)

Cape Kolka Information and Visitors Centre is a business of Ltd. Kolkasrags. Ltd. Kolkasrags hires land (about 20 ha) between the Baltic Sea and Riga Gulf. They maintain parking places (paid service), keep information boards and sell souvenirs and snacks in Cape Kolka. They also organize some events for tourists. Kolka Cape is the most famous countryside destination of Dundaga district or even Northern Kurzeme. There are more than 50,000 visitors per year.

The aim of Ltd. Kolkasrags is to attract people to visit Kolka Cape.

Lauku Celotajs

Lauku Celotajs (engl "Country Tourism") is a Latvian tourism association with registered office in Riga established in 1993, which develops products and measures for sustainable development in Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania. Lauku Celotajs connects rural tourism entrepreneurs and had around 350 members in 2009. Its aims are to develop tourism products for rural areas, "quality control and labelling, provider training and consultations, promotion and marketing its products in brochures, maps and internet, lobbying for interests of members and project activities" (Baltic Green Belt Project 2009).

The organisation, with currently nine workers, started to work in the Slītere National Park during a LIFE Project in the year 2004. The organisation is now involved in the Baltic Green Belt-Project as a project Partner within a pilot project to "preserve natural territories that are of a high level of ecological value in the coastal zone that was part of the iron curtain" (Baltic Green Belt Project 2009).

The situation of communication before the involvement of stakeholders

The communication between the nature conservationists and other stakeholders was disrupted and influenced by the history and recent planning activities. Many local people compared the activities and rules of nature protection with the occupation of the soviet army, because restrictions were compared to be almost on the same level. Another huge problem was the unfinished process of spatial planning and the missing understanding of legal organisation in the territory.

The Slītere National Park administration was blamed by many people for preventing the development of the area. Although it was not their task to finish the spatial planning, the parish of Kolka and the ministry of environment were the competitors, the administration was perceived as guilty of the blockade. Subsequently, the atmosphere was poisoned and in many cases, when permission for the construction of any structure was complicated and long, the park administration was blamed.

The assertion of the administration, that it was not their fault, was not accepted by the recipients. Due to this development over several years, the communication of nature protection as an institution with the stakeholders was almost disabled.

The process of involving stakeholders

The recent cooperation of Lauku Celotajs in the Slītere area started around the March 2009 (within the LIFE-Project LIFE07 ENV/LV/000981) when they met with local people and entrepreneurs they already were in contact with through their tourism board. They gathered stories and information about the national park area's history and step by step – concentrating individually on key persons – they involved about 30 local people from different stakeholders (e.g. from the Nature Protection Agency, tourism entrepreneurs, etc.) of the area. These personal recollections were gathered for publishing the

“Slītere National Park Tourism Guide”, which was published in the Latvian language in 2010 and soon afterwards also in English. The interviewed people were allowed to influence the finished text modules and also the layout.

When they had involved these people individually, they organized events and seminars in small groups in a “friendly atmosphere” – with local food and no pressure, trying to connect these individuals with each other. The dialogue during these seminars enabled the participants to understand the perspective and activities of the other stakeholders.

In these meetings, when Lauku Celotajs already developed five tourism products for the local people as a package (hiking, cycling, boating, skiing and animal watching), the idea for traveller days was born. The goal of which was to show these products and the beautiful landscape, home to the stakeholders, to a larger number of tourists. It is not sure whose idea it was, some say it was Lauku Celotajs, but Lauku Celotajs said it was the idea of local people.

The first Slītere “Traveller’s Days” were organized by Lauku Celotajs, the Dundaga municipality, the Kolka visitor centre, the Kurzeme regional administration (NCA) and local tourism entrepreneurs (including self-employed tourism guides). For the first “Traveller’s Day” (one day in July 2010) about 1000 “contacts” were achieved – the General Director of Nature Protection and the Minister of Environment held speeches. With the second “Traveller’s Days” (two days in June 2011) about 2000 “contacts” were accomplished. The number of contacts is not equal to the number of people visiting this area, because the visitors participated in different activities and thus most of them were counted more than twice.

Table 2: Historical overview for the Slītere National Park territory.

Year	Event
1923	Slītere Nature Reserve has a size of 1,100 ha
1950	Slītere Nature Reserve is expanded to 8,000 ha
1979	Slītere Nature Reserve administration is established
1990s	Independence, land reform, Kolka parish villages borders conflict starts
2000	Slītere National Park is established
2004	SNP becomes a Natura2000 territory
2009	Dundaga district, Kolka parish villages borders conflict ends; Lauku Celotajs starts their activities in SNP, first local people NGO appears
2010	SNP Management plan is finished, first Slītere Traveller Day (organized by Lauku Celotajs) involved municipality, SNP administration, local stakeholders
2011	Second Slītere Traveller Day, organized by Dundaga municipality, SNP administration and local stakeholders

5 Discussion

The communication activities of Lauku Celotajs in the Slītere National Park area were planned well and began with individual and personal contacts to tear down potential barriers. When this first (or second) contact was established, they organized events with different groups of local stakeholders, connecting them with each other. Lauku Celotajs’ role then was to act as a mediator between the groups by giving these people the possibility to work together on one project. While working on this project, the stakeholders got into contact with each other in a productive way – emotional barriers were set aside, because reaching the shared aim (contributing to sustainability of the region, creating a better economic perspective for the people) is a benefit for all groups. The stakeholders got to know each other and the communication between them had fewer disruptions in further contacts.

Lauku Celotajs’ communication activities were divided into many small steps; each step was built up on another, following a particular aim.

This success of work was possible due to the fact that a very short time before Lauku Celotajs started its work in the Slītere National Park the conflict in spatial planning between the village of Kolka and the Ministry of Environment was resolved. This event had a huge influence in the atmosphere of communication between the stakeholders, because from this point on the rules for development of the area were simplified. Many local people and especially those willing to develop tourism felt released from heavy restriction, which was unintended by nature protection.

The combination of releasing pressure on those who were willing to develop and the mediating activities of Lauku Celotajs led to a regaining of trust between the stakeholders. The atmosphere of communication was highly improved – by a lucky combination of planning and external events.

Guidelines for communicating nature protection

Indicating a long lasting and successful regime of communication between stakeholders of a nature protection area is not very easy, especially in a short period of time as is common in projects funded by the European Union. The aims, positions and feelings of the stakeholders are connected with the history of the area and personal experiences; they developed over a long time and will not change rapidly.

However, it is possible to re-establish a certain process of communication between stakeholders that used not to speak with each other for several years. A neutral mediator from outside the territory can help to cease the conflicts.

The first task of the neutral stakeholder is to analyse the communication regime by identifying the stakeholders, their background and the binding connections. For Lauku Celotajs it was very helpful to have these connections to most stakeholders before they started their activities, so they knew the regime of communication already. Lauku Celotajs' aim then was to re-establish communication between the stakeholders in order to develop the area for sustainable tourism. Therefore they used collaborative projects (Travellers Days, Slītere National Park Guide) with a value for both the stakeholders and the main aim of Lauku Celotajs, which is developing tourism.

This case cannot be transported one for one to another area with a different history, a different society and different stakeholders. But it is possible to transport the way in which the communication was planned by Lauku Celotajs. The following guidelines were developed from campaigning literature (a project like the BGB is set on time – just like a campaign) and the extraction of interviews with eight organisations from the Slītere National Park in Latvia and the Pajuris Regional Park in Lithuania.

The communication process should contain different modules depending on each other. The most important modules are:

- Analysis of the communication environment
- Focusing the target group
- Describing the aim of communication
- Setting up the measures

By using these modules in a systemic way it is possible to focus efforts and to evaluate them, learning from mistakes but also from successes.

Environment Analysis

The environmental analysis is the first step in planning a communication strategy. The aim of this analysis is to identify the circumstances in the area clearly. It starts with an Identification process, where the following questions shall be answered (Buchner et al. 2005):

- What is the problem? Why is the situation as it is right now? What happened in this direction already? Which political, economic and social events will influence the atmosphere in the near future?
- Who are the stakeholders? Who is working for the own organization? Who might be an ally?

- Who is a competitor?
- What are the resources? Which resources does the own organization have?

The results of the identification phase shall then be analyzed in a “strengths and weaknesses” profile, for example in the SWOT-Matrix; this allows structuring the situation (Figure 2).

	internal		
positive	Strengths <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Good contact to...</i> 	SWOT	Weaknesses <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Lack of money</i>
	Opportunities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>UN-Year of biodiversity</i> 		Threats <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Financial crisis</i>
	external		
		negative	

Figure 2: Example of a matrix for the SWOT Analysis.

These facts can then be analyzed in order to identify “friends” and “enemies” and their possible reactions to the planned issue (Buchner et al. 2005). The environment analysis is the basis for every following step; therefore it is useful to put a lot of energy into this identification phase. The SWOT analysis is not obligatory but useful, to create a structure of the environment.

Target group (The Recipients)

Knowledge about the target group is important to place the information in such a way, that the recipients receive the message. Therefore it is important to understand who the target group is (Kuckartz 2002). The more information about the target group that can be gathered, the more precisely targeted can be the message, tearing down the barriers of communication.

The Aim

Very important for a communication-strategy is the aim. Again, there are several models for defining an aim; one of the simplest is the SMART-Model. In order to evaluate the success or failure of the communication, according to Buchner (Buchner et al. 2005) the aim has to be:

- **Specific** and focussed
- **Measurable**
- **Achievable** and realistic
- **Relevant** for the topic
- **Timed** (reasonable timeframe, until the aim shall be achieved)

Aims in nature protection may be generating confidence, alertness or sympathy of the general public (or other interest groups). The well-defined aim is connected to the parameters “Celerity”, “Low Costs”, “High Quality” and “High Acceptance”. These parameters are highly connected with each other and one cannot be pushed forward while leaving the others behind. A ranking of these priorities should be defined before working out the measures.

The Measures

The information compiled so far about aims, target groups and the communication-environment is the basis for the measures. The wheel of communication (Figure 3) is orientated on the Lasswell-Formula (Lasswell 1972) and helps to define, which activities shall be accomplished “how”, “when”, “where”, “by whom”, “to whom”, “by which channels”, “how often” and “with which aim”:

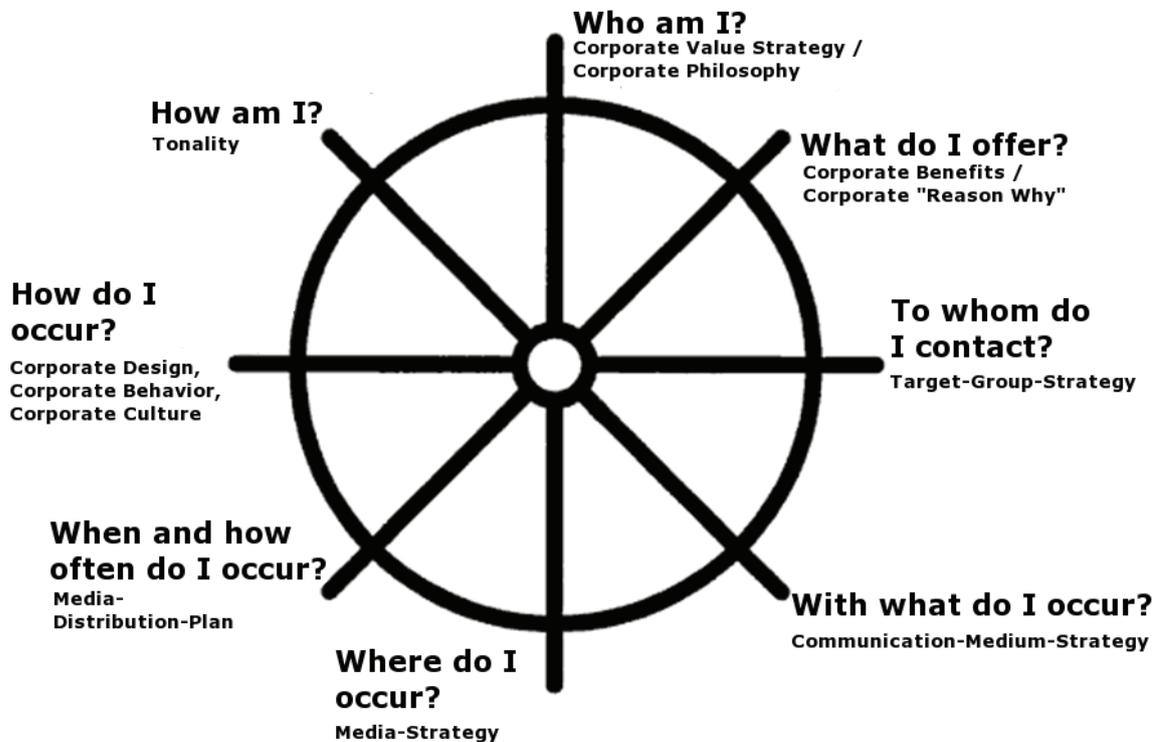


Figure 3: The Wheel of Communication (According to Linxweiler, Buchner 2005 - translated).

This information helps to transport the message in a way that fits to the organisation itself and the focussed aim. In many sectors the strategic communication with stakeholders is state of the art and has been practiced several years. This type of focussed communication has been developing in the sector of nature protection for several years (e.g. Feucht 2006), this paradigm shift in nature protection communication is necessary to compete with other sources of information. It might be useful to organize capacity building for the topic of strategic stakeholder communication in nature protection for governmental bodies and nongovernmental organisation.

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