



Environmental Change Network
Communication strategy 2008-2013

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Version history

30 April 2007	V1	First draft released (presented to Steering Committee)
1 April 2008	V2	Updated from first draft to include specific requirements of Defra and questionnaire returns from the 2007 Steering Committee meeting. Added Executive Summary.
29 April 2008	V3	Incorporates suggestions made by CCU staff
6 May 2008	V4	Incorporates additional revisions suggested by Don Monteith

Executive Summary

1. For the Environmental Change Network to deliver its objectives it must have a clear communication strategy which recognises the needs of a range of stakeholders. This strategy must achieve the following objectives:
 - to encourage and increase data use;
 - to inform policy and conservation agency audiences about ECN's findings;
 - to encourage research partnerships;
 - to raise public awareness of our work and the issues we address;
 - to garner support for the network.
2. This communication strategy sets out a series of actions for the five year period from 2008-2013. These actions are intended to improve the way in which ECN communicates. Some are already being undertaken, others are new proposals.
3. The strategy is based on an assessment of existing communication and our current audiences. It also includes specific needs identified by the Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA).
4. The strategy recognises that ECN has three priority audience groups:
 - the academic research sector (including key contacts in other relevant networks and initiatives);
 - government, policy-makers, and other relevant decision-makers, including those in the conservation agency sector;
 - our existing sponsors.
5. Other target audiences are also recognised, such as schools, but the strategy focuses most attention on the three priority groups listed above. Given limited resources, we need to ensure that most communication effort is directed towards these target audiences.
6. Thirty-six specific actions are suggested for the five year period. They are grouped into generic actions, designed to increase general awareness of ECN, and targeted actions relating to the five objectives of the strategy. Where necessary, specific actions are identified that are relevant to the priority audiences.
7. It is important to be able to measure the effectiveness of our communication. Therefore, for each objective, success measures are identified.

Environmental Change Network: Communication strategy

1. Introduction: The purpose of this strategy

A long-term monitoring programme like the Environmental Change Network (ECN) requires substantive funding and a high level of support from a range of partners and people in order to continue operating. The stakeholders in the network rightly expect to see a return on their investment. In other words, ECN must deliver its objectives. To do so we need to grow and maintain a range of key audiences, such as users of our data, existing and potential partners, funders and supporters, and the general public, including the next generation of scientists and decision-makers. There is, therefore, a continual need to promote ECN to a wide range of people and share with them the fruits of the monitoring effort (the data and the key findings) and we have to build and maintain a community of people that value the network.

This strategy sets out a five year plan (2008-2013) for communicating ECN to a range of stakeholders. The overall purpose of this communication is to promote an awareness of ECN and what it has to offer. The strategy explains why we need to promote ECN and how we might achieve this. It also discusses the need to build the ECN brand. It should be noted that a range of communication activities is already being undertaken, but this strategy also identifies a series of new initiatives. As far as is possible, the requirements of the organisations that make up the multi-agency consortium of ECN are taken into consideration.

2. ECN's mission and objectives

ECN's current mission is:

“To develop and maintain a multi-agency network and early-warning system to detect, present, interpret and predict long-term ecosystem change and help society mitigate and adapt to global change.”

To progress its mission, the long-term goals of ECN are to:

- Maintain the ECN network and database to deliver quality-assured data to a wide range of stakeholders.
- Develop database and analytical tools and procedures to provide early indicators of change from expected norms.
- Assess fitness for purpose of ECN protocols and network in relation to priority research and policy needs.
- Provide research and assessment that underpins the development and assessment of UK policy related to environmental change, particularly in relation to climate change, biodiversity, water quality and sustainable development.

3. Related documents

It is advisable to read this strategy together with the document entitled *Audiences and communication approaches* (Sier, 2008). This is an assessment of our current audience types and the effectiveness of current methods of communication employed by ECN and of other options.

The *ECN Research and Development Strategy 2008-2013* (ECN, 2008) sets out a framework for co-ordinating future R&D activities across the ECN partnership. This communication strategy is consistent with the aims of the R&D strategy.

Note that this communication strategy, together with the two documents referred to above, are available on the ECN website.

4. Communication objectives

The primary purpose of communicating to our external stakeholders is to promote awareness of ECN and what it can offer. To achieve this, the following objectives have been identified:

- O-1: encourage and increase data use;
- O-2: inform policy and conservation agency audiences about ECN's findings;
- O-3: encourage research and monitoring partnerships;
- O-4: raise public awareness of our work and the issues we address;
- O-5: garner support for the network;

To achieve these objectives, we must communicate with a wide range of people (Section 5), and we must use methods appropriate to these different audiences. An assessment of the principle audiences for ECN together with current and potential communication approaches suitable for each is given in the accompanying *Audiences and communication approaches* (Sier, 2008).

Section 6 identifies a set of suggested generic actions that we will undertake. Sections 7-11 set out our strategy for achieving the five objectives set out above. To effectively promote ECN we must build a strong brand. Therefore, an essential part of the communication strategy is to develop the ECN brand as best we can, given limited resources. This is discussed in more detail in section 12. Note that the actions identified in this strategy are provided as suggestions only and this strategy does not commit ECN to deliver on each of these. An implementation plan – produced annually - will set out more specific and achievable actions, in line with the strategy, and available resources.

5. Audiences for communication

Audiences and communication approaches (Sier, 2008) identifies a range of existing and potential audiences for ECN. It considers them in terms of their relationship to ECN (e.g. data users, learners or supporters) and in terms of sector (e.g. academic, conservation, government). From this assessment it is clear that the main audiences for communication are:

- the academic research sector (specifically in the areas of geography, environmental sciences and biological sciences, but also socio-ecological and other interdisciplinary researchers). Also includes key contacts in relevant other networks and initiatives;
- the government and wider decision-making sector, including the statutory conservation agencies;
- our existing sponsors.

Whilst this strategy does not restrict itself solely to serving these audiences, it does recognise the need to direct most of our effort towards these groups, at least over the next years, especially given that resources of time and funding for communication activities are limited.

6. Generic actions

These suggested actions are deemed necessary to aid general awareness of ECN:

1. Undertake a review of the ECN website as a tool for promoting the network, and the improvements that could be made. This could include a survey of website users;
2. Ensure that all forms of promotion (posters, leaflets, presentations) employed by ECN direct people to the web site, by including the web address (URL);
3. Actively encourage relevant organisations (such as our sponsors, collaborating organisations and relevant networks) to create links from their web sites to the ECN web site;
4. Ensure ECN is included in relevant online directories, and that the information is up to date. This exercise should be carried out at least annually;
5. Ensure that relevant search keywords are used on the ECN home page to maximise the chances of a search engine finding the site and listing it near to the top of the search results.

7. Objective 1: Encouraging and increasing data use

Rationale

There are two main reasons why it is necessary for ECN to increase use of its data resources. Firstly, ECN is a UK research community resource and to derive full value from it we must encourage other researchers to analyse data sets relevant to their research. Secondly, there is enormous potential for ECN data to support scientific research, policy formulation and ecosystem management. For example, ECN data may be used to support experimental research, to develop or validate computer models or to form the evidence base for policies or conservation strategies.

Current status

The academic sector (higher education institutes) and research institutes form the primary ECN data user types, though all the audience groups identified in the assessment of audiences and communication approaches may be data users. The average number of data requests per year has risen since the start of ECN¹. However, it is felt that there is potential for much greater data use.

It must be remembered that increasing data licence requests has implications in terms of the servicing of these requests. If we are not able to manage a larger volume of requests the quality of the service will decline, which is not desirable.

The academic sector remains the primary audience within which to promote data use because they are the most likely to be able to utilise the data in a raw form. However, there is scope for increasing data use by other audience groups, particularly policymakers and the statutory conservation agencies.

Suggested actions

6. Develop a secure system for direct web-based delivery of raw data, so that both the staff effort involved in servicing data requests and the length of time between receiving a request and providing the data are reduced;
7. Continue to use targeted letter/email campaigns to staff in relevant institutions – particularly in the academic sector, at least once every two years;
8. Aim to increase the number of academic, policy and conservation agency contacts on the ECN mailing list, and increase the proportion of people for whom we have a working email address.

Targeting the academic sector:

9. Where possible, hold meetings with representatives from relevant academic institutions at which we promote the ECN data and site-based research resources available to them;
10. Identify – on an annual basis - a series of essential meetings/conferences known to be attended by staff of relevant academic institutions and at which ECN should be represented and promoted. Endeavour to promote ECN at these events;
11. Investigate the use of an e-newsletter targeted at the academic sector.

Increasing data use amongst policymakers:

12. Work with Defra and the devolved administrations to identify their requirements. Review and, if necessary, improve the way in which ECN data are presented to, and accessed by, these users.

Increasing data use amongst the conservation agencies:

13. Work with the statutory conservation agencies to identify their requirements. Review and, if necessary, improve the way in which ECN data are presented to, and accessed by, these users.

Measures of success

- An increase in the number publications (reports and papers) that use or refer to ECN datasets;
- An increase in the number of data requests made per year, particularly those which lead to a paper or other output;
- An increase in the number of academics, policymakers and conservation agency staff on the mailing list and receiving regular communication from the CCU.

¹ From 5 in 1995 to a peak of 67 in 2002. The mean figure for the past 6 years (2002-7) is 59 requests

8. Objective 2: Informing policy and conservation agency audiences about ECN's findings

Rationale

The Environmental Change Network is recognised as a unique source of policy-relevant data and knowledge. The statutory conservation agencies acknowledge the need for reliable long-term data that can assist them in developing effective conservation strategies. There is an increasing need, however, to ensure that the findings - the messages - from ECN are presented in ways that are readily understandable to these sectors.

Current status

ECN produces an annual data digest, now quite easily generated direct from the database. However, its value to policy or conservation users is probably limited. ECN has developed an indicator of climate change for Defra. We do not, however, routinely produce targeted material for the policy or conservation sectors.

Suggested actions

14. Identify the key environmental issues to which ECN can contribute and produce a series of reports (in a range of forms) on the trends and 'stories', targeted at policy and conservation agency audiences. The first of these reports, on climate change impacts, is in preparation;
15. Investigate the use of e-newsletters targeted at the policy and conservation agency sectors;
16. Produce and maintain a set of PowerPoint slides and accompanying notes that can be used by policymakers and conservation agency staff to inform their key audiences (e.g. Ministers);
17. Identify the key publications (such as in-house magazines, websites, etc.) to which it would make sense to submit articles, and submit occasional articles to these;
18. Maintain and publish trend data for key freshwater, climate change and biodiversity indicators;
19. Work with policy and conservation agency contacts to record references made to ECN in policy reports, ministerial briefs and other material.

Measures of success

- An increase in the frequency with which ECN is referred to in published material produced by these target audiences;
- Positive feedback from these target audiences that clearly demonstrate the value and effectiveness of any new approaches we adopt to inform them about ECN;
- An increase in the number of policymakers or conservation agency staff signing up to ECN contact lists;
- An increasing number of reports, summaries, etc. that are accessed (downloaded) by these target audiences.

9. Objective 3: Encouraging research partnerships

Rationale

ECN relies on support not only from its sponsoring organisations, who help fund and manage data collection at sites, but also from a range of research partners, formal or otherwise. NERC aims to deliver and promote the UK's National Capability for long-term monitoring, requiring that the benefits of that capability be widely recognised among the research community. ECN has a research and development strategy (see 'Related documents'), but this objective is included in this communication strategy because (a) there is a need to 'advertise' our products and services and (b) it is valuable to be able to demonstrate strong research partnerships when promoting the network. The R&D strategy sets out more details of the strategy for developing research partnerships.

This objective is linked, to some extent, with the first two, in that the development of research partnerships involving ECN can both increase data use and help increase support for the network. However, it is treated here as a discrete objective because (a) the target audience is more specific and (b) there is a greater emphasis on promoting very specific components (e.g. sites, individuals or data products) of ECN.

Current status

ECN currently has seven formally identified research partner organisations that operate one or more sites. ECN also works quite closely with several others, particularly in the university sector.

Nevertheless, there is potential to develop partnerships with a range of other organisations. Existing partnerships include, for instance, joint supervision of Ph.D. students, joint authorship of papers and enabling research activities at some ECN sites.

Suggested actions

20. Wherever possible, list our formal research partners in appropriate media, such as the website, leaflets and newsletter. Maintain an online list of other research partnerships (organisations and individuals. We will provide accurate information about these research partners and (wherever possible) include links to partner websites on the ECN website;
21. Produce a leaflet and/or web page explaining the potential benefits to an organisation or individual researcher of developing a research partnership with ECN. This should include, for example, establishing research at ECN sites and promoting the use of ECN data by post-graduate students;
22. Review and, where necessary, update the information provided on the website concerning ECN sites, clearly indicating those sites which are suited for use by other researchers, and highlighting some of the successful research conducted at those sites;
23. Work with NERC to promote ECN as a key component of the UK's National Capability for long-term ecosystem monitoring;
24. Promote the use of individual ECN sites as long-term interdisciplinary research sites in collaboration with site sponsors and local higher education institutes.

Measures of success

- Maintenance of, or an increase in, the number of research activities using ECN sites;
- Maintenance of, or an increase in, the number of papers jointly authored by a person directly connected to ECN (an 'ECN author') and a non-ECN author;
- An increase in the number of masters and Ph.D. students using ECN sites for research.

10. Objective 4: Raising public awareness

Rationale

Like all publicly-funded programmes, we have a responsibility to ensure the public have the opportunity to find out about ECN, about what we do and what we are finding. However, ECN's commitment to communicating with the public is borne out of more than mere sense of duty: we have a genuine desire to talk with non-specialists about our work. Although the public are not currently among our priority audiences, science in general requires public support. We also have a role to play in raising awareness amongst the public about key issues such as climate change. Finally, we can help enrich the educational experience of young people, developing not only their understanding of environmental science, but also encouraging some young people into scientific careers.

Current status

Many ECN partner organisations undertake some form of public engagement. These may include talking to local groups, guided walks, open days – often featuring ECN – and hands-on events for children. However, there is no coordination of these events across the ECN network, and no funding to facilitate specific ECN activities. There is also no systematic recording of these activities.

A set of tutorials aimed at school students (GCSE level) were developed. They cover climate change and weather, and draw upon ECN datasets. These are in need of revision.

Some staff in the ECN Network Coordination Unit are engaged in a climate change awareness project, Climate Change Explorer. Phases I and II of this project received funding from the Arts Council, England. Phase II also had substantial funding from Defra under its Climate Challenge Fund. This project has brought scientists, artists, schools, youth groups and a film-making company together to enable young people (including hard to reach young people) to explore the issue of climate change. Although operating in the north of England, the artistic and educational outputs (primarily web and DVD-based digital works) have a national relevance. There is limited funding to enable the project outputs to be toured. A project is on-going to engage more schools in follow-up activities.

Suggested actions

25. Identify the most promising opportunities for public engagement, such as major events;

26. Develop flyers and posters specifically aimed at the public (adults and children). These could take the form of templates, with some basic information about ECN, but allowing sites to insert specific information. These could be used during any activities run by the ECN sponsors;
27. Where appropriate, produce specific material and/or organise events presenting ECN 'stories' to the public. These could take the form of press releases, leaflets, posters, school events, etc.;
28. Build on contacts already made with the broadcast media, and attempt to establish new media contacts, with the aim of featuring ECN work in at least one broadcast film, newspaper or magazine article;
29. As part of a general review of the way in which the ECN website is used to promote ECN (see section 5), consider improvements to better serve the general public;
30. Revise the current ECN education web pages;
31. Build on existing partnerships with educational users and develop new partnerships as appropriate;
32. Continue to play an active role in the current phase of the Climate Change Explorer project, and work to ensure that the outputs from the project are used in the best way possible, not only to raise awareness of climate change, but also of ECN;
33. Record public engagement activities undertaken by ECN sponsors which promote ECN.

Measures of success

- An increase in the number of people reached through public engagement activities;
- An increase in the number of visits to public-orientated ECN web pages;
- An increase in the number of activities undertaken with schools;
- An increase in the number of requests made by schools for ECN to run education activities;
- Broadcast films, radio programmes, newspaper or magazine articles featuring ECN or drawing substantively on ECN findings.

11. Objective 5: Garnering support for the network

Rationale

Without support from a range of institutions, ECN cannot be maintained in the long-term. Therefore it is essential to ensure that ECN is known about and strongly supported by a range of organisations and key individuals. It is also in ECN's interests to foster support for long-term ecosystem monitoring and research (LTER) in general.

Current status

Support for ECN is currently quite strong and there is healthy interest in the need for a strong LTER network in Europe. This support has only been achieved, however, through the continued hard work of those representing ECN in a range of fora: it cannot be taken as a given.

Suggested actions

34. Be clear about and publish (a) the benefits to be accrued from maintaining ECN and (b) the unique strengths/characteristics of ECN. These will be communicated to all the existing sponsors via the Steering Group and other appropriate media (e.g. annual report to Defra). They will also be listed on the website and in other communication devices, such as a leaflet and poster;
35. Wherever possible, seek to engage new organisations as active members in the network (i.e. operating one or more sites). We will do this in the most appropriate manner in each case, but probably through a combination of written and face-to-face communication;
36. Work with LTER networks in other countries to promote the benefits of LTER. Specifically we will do this by taking a lead role in managing the websites for LTER-Europe and the International Long-Term Ecological Research Network (ILTER). We will also be active in relevant European and international arenas, for example, promoting integration of LTER activity and developing key resources and infrastructure.

Measures of success

- No loss of sponsorship/support for the network;
- New funders attracted to support ECN;
- Maintenance of, or an increase in, the number of ECN sites.

12. The ECN brand

Promotion of a concept, product or service is generally aided by having a strong identity ('brand') with which people can identify. This is clearly evidenced in the commercial world, where successful brands become household names, and branding is big business. Companies often spend large sums on developing strong brands, because they recognise the benefits that a strong brand can bring.

A brand may consist of a logo, a common font, common colour schemes and a strap line or slogan. These need to be carefully selected to convey the key qualities of the product or service that is being promoted. A key necessity is consistent approach: everyone in the organisation or project needs to adopt the brand identity and use it rigorously. This can be facilitated by the development of shared templates, letterheads and so on. The brand has to be used in all areas of an operation, from the website to presentations, letterheads to leaflets.

The ECN brand only consists of the logo (see front cover). This is the only common element that is employed by most, hopefully all, people in the network. The question is, is this enough? A strong brand is necessary to stand out in a competitive market place: ECN is the UK's only long-term, integrated monitoring and research network covering terrestrial and freshwater environments, so it has no direct competitors. However, even for ECN, it is useful for us to have a good brand identity. For instance, the devices employed (logo, etc.) may serve as a reminder for someone who perhaps has seen a poster about ECN at a conference and later looks up the ECN website: it is reassuring if he or she recognises the brand elements seen on the poster.

We may have more success in promoting ECN if we adopt other common elements of a brand, such as colour scheme and a consistent font. There are, though, some significant problems to this: it would require conveying these other elements to all concerned (who are spread across 23 organisations). It would mean altering a large amount of existing material. Furthermore, applying the brand would conflict with the needs of people to comply with the branding requirements of their own organisations.

In practice, the use of a common logo for ECN is probably the only device we can easily employ. We should, therefore, ensure that all concerned have ready access to a good quality version of the logo, and we should ensure that the logo is used consistently.

Suggested actions

37. Review the elements of the ECN brand to determine whether there is any need to change or strengthen the brand;
38. Ensure all people involved in ECN have access to a good version of the logo, and know how to use it correctly.