Bristol Natural History Consortium’s Communicate 2014 conference took place at At-Bristol Science Centre in the UK on 4-5 November. Here, International Innovation presents highlights, interviews and key messages from the event, which focused on communication strategies in the context of conservation and climate change.
LAUNCHED IN 2003 and now in its 11th iteration, Bristol Natural History Consortium’s annual Communicate conference brings together more than 150 delegates for a two-day discussion of the most pressing issues facing those wishing to engage the public with the natural world. With support from the UK Economic and Social Research Council and National Environmental Research Council, the 2014 conference was the most diverse and discursive yet.

Key sessions

PROLOGUE: CHANGING STORIES IN A CHANGING WORLD

In this opening speech, Climate Outreach Information Network (COIN) founder and author of new book *Don’t Even Think About It: Why Our Brains Are Wired to Ignore Climate Change* George Marshall explored the psychological impact of narratives surrounding important environmental issues. The question of how people are able to disregard pressing conservation messages is at the heart of communication in this field, and the experienced climate change activist offered examples of people and organisations who are using stories to influence the dialogue. Climate change, he opined, has long been the ‘elephant in the room’ – but perhaps the most interesting and valuable question here is why this obstacle towards progress has not received more attention and more original storytelling to support it.

Marshall’s experience interviewing members of the Texas Tea Party and right-wing evangelical preachers in the US provided a particularly telling insight into the advantageous elements that communicators with a more liberal agenda may miss out on: stories of forgiveness and enmity. The narrative of climate change as a myth propagated by malignant parties for personal gain is so compelling and relatable, Marshall argues, that many people are prepared to engage with it regardless of evidence to the contrary; it reflects a kind of clear and urgent characterisation that opposing rhetoric seems to lack. If the truth is to be heard, it must first be packaged into a storyline that the human mind can readily accept.

MYTHBUSTING

In his own segment, conference host Ed Gillespie turned his attention to the process of dispelling some of the most popular misconceptions surrounding environmental communication. As co-Founder of Futerra Sustainability Communications, one of the only communications consultancies in the world to focus specifically on sustainable development and corporate social responsibility, Gillespie is an expert on this topic. His presentation tested delegates on their knowledge of current trends in the field and explored in minute detail how the stubbornly held beliefs of audiences can make them unresponsive to ideas, and ultimately cause them to be unresponsive to even the most effective communication.

REACTIVE COMMUNITIES

Reactive Communities was perhaps one of the most diverse sessions offered as part of Communicate 2014, and brought together three speakers from seemingly disparate professions: Tony Whitehead, Public Affairs Officer at the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), Stephanie Driver, Head of Press for the Labour Party in the South West, and Miranda Bishop (interviewed on p65), founder of new consultancy Talking Social Media. The common theme that united these professional communicators was the question of how messages can best be disseminated in a fast and influential way. With her background in social media, Bishop was quick to emphasise the importance of controlling the dialogue. Climate change, he opined, has long been the ‘elephant in the room’ – but perhaps the most interesting and valuable question here is why this obstacle towards progress has not received more attention and more original storytelling to support it.

Although birds and Labour politicians probably do not have much in common, the concerns when protecting their public image, Whitehead and Driver revealed, are very similar. In particular, both speakers highlighted the discretion necessary to distinguish between stories that they do and do not want to be associated with; in some cases, Driver argued, the Labour party simply does not want to put its name on a story. Other incidents of interest to the press are more agreeable, or too big to ignore – and when talking to journalists, Whitehead pointed out, one need not assume that they know everything. Often the press will contact an organisation’s media officer with little information on a story – and the skilful communicator must know just what to give away.

OUR STORIES

The first day of the conference ended with the Our Stories section, a regular feature of Communicate that aims to provide a short, sharp blast of environmental communication inspiration by giving the stage to eight short presentations. Speakers from organisations as diverse as the Environment Agency, Bristol Zoological Society, Wildscreen and the Durrell Conservation Trust gave their own take on a variety of environmental issues and new trends in communication, each no longer than 10 minutes. Environmental campaigner and television presenter Natalie Fee chaired this effervescent session, which threw researchers, conservationists and campaigners alike into the spotlight.

One speaker, Jennifer Garrett, actually took the stage twice as part of two separate presentations. In her first appearance, she spoke as campaign manager for Bristol Zoological Gardens, explaining some of the most exciting and impactful campaigns that the visitor attraction has run in recent years and posing the question of whether zoo visitors can save the natural world. After having opened the session in this way, she then returned in the final presentation alongside her colleague Maddy Bartlett to champion a second, emerging success story: that of the Bristol Nature Network. Garrett and Bartlett are the Chairs of this local organisation, which is aimed at engaging young people with nature and encouraging action.
**Interviews**

**Social media 101**

*International Innovation* caught up with social media aficionado Miranda Bishop, founder of Talking Social Media, to discuss what she considers to be best practice for scientists hoping to make the most of this loquacious platform.

To start, what does the professional use of social media involve, and how can it be valuable to researchers and academics?

Using social media effectively is just a case of emulating your real life; all the busy stuff that you’re already doing – your research, your dissemination, your collaborations – these are the things that make you credible, and you should be sharing them as widely as you can. For example, when I tweet saying that I’m coming to a conference like this, it’s because I want my audience to know that I’m speaking at an event that’s well-received, and the subtext is that I speak for a living and that I’m well-equipped to train others. Showing people what I do every day is going to keep me credible in their eyes, because my activities are valuable.

Scientists tend to be very busy people – are there any time-saving measures you can recommend to make social media maintenance more manageable?

There are loads of great scheduling tools that allow you to preprogram your social media updates – applications like Hootsuite and TweetDeck can be very useful, and in particular I recommend using Buffer. This free tool is really very easy for anyone to get to grips with, and lets you manage your social media offering at times that suit you; it’s what I start all my training clients with. There is also a lot to be said for living in the moment, on the other hand, and being reactive and flexible will often help you improve your use of social media.

Many academics have already engaged with social media, but struggle to develop their methods of using it beyond the basic. What barriers separate this kind of user from communicating effectively?

I think that where academics, like a lot of people, fall down is in feeling like they’re wasting their time on social media. The reality is that there is an opportunity here to make small investments in time, and reap big rewards in visibility. There’s also the problem of keeping the lines of communication open – with something like Twitter, for example, users rightly feel that inactivity is not good, and if they miss an update or two they abandon it. Again, it’s about timing; what I do is, after I’ve finished a meeting, I get in my car ready to go and I think: ‘I’m just going to send a really quick update about that meeting I just had’. It’s a tiny investment of time, but it keeps your account active – and there are many ways to do this.

What one piece of advice would you give to putative social media users who are hesitant to take the first steps?

I would say that your social media account is your own. I think sometimes it can be a confidence issue, people are scared of social media, they worry that they can’t turn it off when they want to and wonder why everyone is interested in what they’re doing anyway. People are scared of a cross between public and private life, but the fact is that your social media account is your own; it’s fully under your control, and that’s the beauty of it. Don’t be afraid to experiment – sometimes the best way to get started is to share as much as you can, and just see what your audience responds to.

**Moving in the right direction**

Conferences like Communicate can undoubtedly be valuable for scientists – but are the right people being reached? PhD student Lydia Bach, who travelled from the University of Belfast to attend, shares her views on this issue.

How important is outreach and engagement to researchers, in your opinion?

It’s huge; in many cases it’s a big tick-box in your funding application. The problem is that for many people – especially some more senior, established academics – it’s nothing more than a box to tick. They don’t stand behind it as a practice, or see the value in pursuing it.

Has this had a big impact on the way you pursue your PhD?

Yes. At the moment, PhD courses everywhere seem to be one-sided and not truly interdisciplinary, certainly in the sciences. I’ve spoken to a number of people, and nowhere is that element of outreach and engagement being integrated into courses. When certain mentors have given me advice, they have told me that I must choose one: either take the academic route and concentrate on publishing, or go the outreach route, and invest in that kind of communication for impact. The truth is, I shouldn’t be spending additional time out of my PhD for public outreach; that should be integrated into my thesis.

You seem to have been very successful in engaging with audiences despite these difficulties – could other PhD students not do the same?

They can, but it’s not easy. Take this conference; if I want to attend, I either have to make an excuse or ensure that it can be neatly fitted into one of my tick-boxes. I’m happy to do it in my spare time, as a hobby – if I didn’t, it would never get onto my schedule. As for other students, most follow the example set by those at a senior level – so affecting change will not be easy.

You have travelled a long way to be here today; is Communicate everything you had expected?

I thought there would be more scientists – most of the delegates have a media background, so they already do this for a living. It’s been a really useful day so far, and this kind of event is certainly valuable for me, as well as other people at the same level as me or pursuing projects similar to mine. But there are not many senior academics here, thinking about how they can incorporate this stuff into early-career research. It’s a great event, and I’m really pleased to be here – but in a way, it’s preaching to the choir. If things are going to change, we need to engage the right people.
Tim Scoones
Executive Producer, BBC Natural History Unit
In an exclusive interview with International Innovation, environmental evangelist Tim Scoones talks candidly about his commitment to re-engaging society with nature, and describes the important role of digital communication in promoting environmental action.

How did you become involved in environmental science and what led to your current role at the BBC’s Natural History Unit?

I’ve been a naturalist since I can remember! I grew up in Dorset where nature was my friend, companion and inspiration, and as I grew older it became an intellectual fascination, intensifying along with my sense of worry about the planet and desire to become a conservationist. I involved myself in fieldwork and prior to university took a gap year, volunteering on two field-based science and conservation projects. I went on to study biology at university; at the time I thought this would lead me to work as a nature reserve warden or a research scientist in the field.

During my university years I took part in various expeditions, including a trip to Aldabra in the Indian Ocean, where I made a film that received the BBC Mick Burke Award for young, aspiring filmmakers. This was my first involvement in media, even though as a biologist and naturalist I was keen on photography, and as a student I ran a drama society.

During my university degree I took a year out in 1989 to work in Zimbabwe. This was a very critical time, with the ivory ban underway and sustainable utilisation kicking in. The exact point when I decided to go into the media was during dinner with Rowan Martin, Head of Research for National Parks in Zimbabwe. He said: “You should go into media – you’re articulate, a good communicator, a photographer, you tell stories well and you’ve already made a film…we need people like you!”

I finished my degree and returned to the BBC where I became a researcher on Horizon. I then secured a position with Oxford Scientific Films – a specialist natural history producer – where I stayed for 10 years and gained film-making skills. I was offered a job in the BBC’s Natural History Unit in 1997 and worked my way up the system from a producer to an executive producer. I worked solely for Springwatch for about six or seven years, and in the last few years have broadened my involvement.

Which channels are most effective for communicating environmental science?

From an environmental point of view, digital’s ability to empower large numbers of people to inform themselves and take action, as well as joining with others to be part of communities and campaigns is interesting. If you combine modern and traditional channels with the capacity for personal empowerment and community cohesion, an idea or opinion can travel fast. In terms of changing attitudes and behaviours, which is ultimately what conservation is about, the ability to do that now is much more powerful and democratic.

In what direction do you see digital communication moving in the next few years?

Longstanding media like television and films still play an important role. It’s human nature to want to gather around something and watch it together, as is storytelling. We used to gather around fires and we now gather around screens. I don’t believe we’ll end up being completely digital – the traditional channels will endure.

There are some things that will probably never change – like the power of a good story, the need for both emotional and intellectual engagement, and people’s desire to feel like they belong – they just need to be reapplied in these new spaces using new tools. Although digital provides a capacity for information sharing, I would argue on the other hand that the capacity for conservationists or science communicators to make the wrong choices about the platform or approach has also grown; the ability to make mistakes is significantly more interesting.

Motivating scientists to devote time to outreach is paramount to increasing public engagement and promoting environmental action. How can this be more effectively achieved?

It’s all about impact – what’s the point in finding something out if no one knows about it? The first thing scientists can do is look at what’s already going on out there and join the right groups. The Springwatch television series is a good example – make Springwatch aware that you’ve done something around UK wildlife or conservation, get yourself featured and put your ideas out there.

There are many different forums available for hosting these types of ‘show and tell’ conversations. I also think institutions play a role as creating platforms or media opportunities is not solely the provision of media companies. It would benefit institutions to think about what they could build or support and the technical partners they could join to give scientists the easy tools to be able to make their work visible. We shouldn’t expect scientists, who are specialists by definition, to suddenly learn how to be digital experts. We should be saying ‘we’re going to make it easy for you, dear scientists, we’re going to help host you, cluster you together in meaningful groups and market you!’ It’s more about organisation, working together and using the tools that already exist, rather than trying to reinvent.

How would you rate the public’s current engagement with nature? In what areas do you think this could improve?

Nature and science communication are different things, and science communication can actually blur the distinction between one’s sense of aesthetics about nature or one’s passion for nature, or the role it plays.
in people’s lives. Science communicators often fear they are ‘dumbing down’ science, but they’re actually putting useful handles on things. *Springwatch*, for example, is quite a cheesy show – but the science is bang on, so we’re reaching a lot of people with accurate science. The UK is famous for being mildly obsessed with nature, but we must not forget that we have to connect with people’s hearts as well as their minds, and we need to deliver to people’s passions and needs.

There are several challenges in the developed world that are related to disconnection. There are numerous options now encouraging people to disconnect from nature. Children nowadays have fewer opportunities to connect because there’s less access and more fear. There are more fabulous opportunities, like the shows that I make or games and consoles, which they can engage with from a box in the corner of the room. On top of this is urbanisation – nature is less apparent to us, and in the cities it can be seen as dirty, verminous and uninteresting. Urban life is less stimulating and intellectually interesting for the pure, aesthetic human condition.

Does the natural history community promote environmental science to the wider audience and attempt to reconnect people with nature?

There is debate among our natural history community about whether we’re doing enough and the right thing. We try to inspire people on two levels: first, by stimulating basic awe and wonder – people may be seeing something through their screen without going outside, but they get to see a piece of Borneo, or some sort of animal that they never believed could exist, for example. There’s huge debate as to how useful that is, but no one has the answer. We know it must have some effect, because even really urban people seem to have an interest in and affinity with nature, and a sense of their place within it.

Second, it is important to inspire people to think, act and participate. That’s what we hope the Watch series’ (*Springwatch, Autumnwatch, Winterwatch*) do as effectively as possible. There’s discussion within our industry about why we’re not doing more of that and why the BBC isn’t making people do more things. However, the BBC is in a very unique position whereby it legally can’t campaign – that’s not its role. But how else could we get people to genuinely participate or, even better, change their behaviour so that they become more eco, or become active proponents or participants in conservation efforts? It’s a huge debate and there are no answers.

Could you share the greatest successes of your career to date?

My greatest achievement has to be the established and ongoing success of the Watch series’ that have embraced the digital age and used it to empower its audience. Even if they played no part in engagement, to have 26 hours a year of British wildlife on TV is what I call a headstone achievement. We are hopefully providing a space where the conservation sector can galvanise itself and we are experimenting with the new media world to do that more effectively.

I’ve also made some lovely films and series that have been seen all over the world. I’ve never made the huge landmarks like *Planet Earth*, but have supported them. Just being part of this unique, natural history community and supporting others has been a great accomplishment, and I’m very proud to continue to do so.

What is the greatest benefit of placing people at the heart of biodiversity policy?

A powerful, impactful and sustainable result. People inherently protect things that are important to them. It gives it immortality. It’s not just a good idea, it’s the only idea.