

**Caribbean Strategic Communications Learning Exchange
August 11 - 14, 2015
Miami, Florida**



Managers and practitioners from Florida, Puerto Rico, the US Virgin Islands, Bahamas, Belize, and St. Lucia participate in the Caribbean Strategic Communications Learning Exchange. Photo © TNC.

This learning exchange and report were supported by The Nature Conservancy under cooperative agreement award #NA13NOS4820145 from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA) Coral Reef Conservation Program, U.S. Department of Commerce. The statements, findings, conclusions, and recommendations are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of NOAA, the NOAA Coral Reef Conservation Program, or the U.S. Department of Commerce.

Executive Summary

With the support of NOAA's Coral Reef Conservation Program, a four-day learning exchange was held August 11-14, 2015 to help marine conservation professionals approach their outreach and communications work strategically. Eleven participants from Florida, Puerto Rico, and the USVI were selected for participation based on recommendations from jurisdictional USCRTF points of contacts. They learned key components of strategic communications, and applied these concepts to create their own communications plan. Learning exchange facilitators worked with participants prior to the event to identify a marine communication project to develop during the learning exchange. During the workshop, facilitators provided one-on-one feedback on participant's plans as they evolved and to the final plan. Based on participants' needs and interests, training was also provided on the topics of social marketing, interviewing, and media relations, including social media, with opportunity for practical application of learned skills.

Background

The Reef Resilience Network works to strengthen and enhance training and capacity building opportunities for coral reef managers to address the impacts of climate change and local stressors to coral reefs. To do so, Reef Resilience staff organizes multiple learning exchanges each year to provide intensive in-person trainings for coral reef managers to address their site-specific needs. These exchanges are designed to teach managers new skills and provide them with opportunities to apply these skills. They are also designed to create an environment of exchange where participants can share resources and lessons learned, provide each other with feedback, and expand their network of coral reef managers, practitioners, and experts.

Objectives

The aim of the learning exchange was to introduce participants to the strategic communications planning process and guide them in creating their own communications plan for a coral reef conservation related project in their regions. In addition to this objective, we aimed to improve the communication skills of this cohort so they would be better prepared to talk about their project during an interview or pitch their project as an opinion editorial. The third objective was to connect practitioners working in the Caribbean so that they could share challenges and lessons learned.

Participants

Eleven marine conservation professionals participated in the Strategic Communications Learning Exchange. Organizations that participated included:

- Puerto Rico Department of Natural and Environmental Resources
- U.S. Virgin Islands Department of Planning and Natural Resources
- University of the Virgin Islands
- Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission
- Florida Department of Environmental Protection
- National Park Service
- Saint Lucia National Trust
- Belize Audubon Society
- Bahamas National Trust

Facilitators

To provide the one-on-one coaching necessary for this type of faced paced learning and real world application, Reef Resilience staff aimed to have two facilitators (coaches) per participant.

Learning exchange facilitators included:

- Kristen Maize, Strategic Communications Manager, The Nature Conservancy Hawai'i
- Petra MacGowan, Reef Resilience Program Manager, The Nature Conservancy
- Cherie Wagner, Reef Resilience Program Coordinator, The Nature Conservancy
- Evelyn Wight, Senior Communications Manager, The Nature Conservancy Hawai'i
- Rocio Johnson, Marketing Manager Urban Strategies, The Nature Conservancy

Guest speaker: Alexander Britell, Chief Editor, Caribbean Journal

Agenda Overview

Reef Resilience Program staff invited practitioners who were able to apply strategic communications to their work and share these skills with others in their region. Participant support – leading up to and during the learning exchange – was provided by the Reef Resilience Program Manager, Strategic Communications Manager, and Program Coordinator.

Pre-Learning Exchange

Once participants were selected, they completed an online survey to assess their communications skill level and areas of interest. This survey was also used to help participants identify three project ideas to focus on during the learning exchange. Following the survey, Reef Resilience staff worked one-on-one with participants to help them think critically about their projects and identify one project goal to create a strategic communications plan for.

Day 1

The learning exchange kicked off with a group dinner, introductions, and an overview of the agenda, goals, and expectations – both participants and facilitators – for the next three days.

Day 2

The first training day began with an introduction to strategic communications and a detailed introduction to the strategic communications planning process. Our format for teaching this process was to introduce a planning step/topic in presentation format, and then work one-on-one with participants as they applied each step to their own project. The presentations and activities covered during Day 2 included:

- Setting Goals & Objectives
- Setting the Context for your Project
- Identifying Decision-Makers & Target Audiences
- Making your Messages Matter
- Making your Messages Come Alive

Day 3

During the second communications planning day, the last two steps of the planning process were introduced and applied:

- Messengers and Tactics for Communicating Messages
- Measurements and Reality Check



Participants practice communicating their messages through interviews. © TNC

Participants were then provided with individual work time to tie the planning activities/steps together into a cohesive project plan, and share a particularly challenging aspect of their

project for group feedback. Additional time was provided for participants to incorporate group feedback into their plans, which they then emailed to their coach for final review.



Participants receive guidance from facilitators focused on their specific projects. © TNC

Later in the day, media topics were presented, which included: New Media and the Power of Storytelling and a Social Media Case Study. Participants also got a unique opportunity to hear from and interact with the publisher of the Caribbean Journal, Alexander Britell.

Day 4

On Day 4, participants were introduced to media relations, opinion editorials (op-eds), and social marketing, received instruction and practiced communicating their messages by interviewing each other, brainstormed how to successfully develop an op-ed, and met one-on-one with facilitators to discuss their summary project plans.

The learning exchange closed with participants sharing an important “take away” and completing workshop evaluations.

Feedback from Participants

Participants’ evaluations of the learning exchange revealed that they all felt that skills learned during the workshop could be applied to their work. See the bullets below for additional comments from the participant evaluations:

- *I really enjoyed the real life examples. This goes for all sections of the LX, not just this one [Decision-Makers & Target Audiences]. A lot of these concepts are very abstract to me, but those examples make it more reliable/help clarify the concept.*

- *This activity [Setting the Context for your Project] allowed me to put myself in the shoes of the people I am trying to reach out to and see how their perceptions and day to day responsibilities affect my outreach.*
- *This activity was helpful in narrowing down the message/overall purpose*
- *I learned how to measure some of my activities that I previously thought were impossible to measure.*
- *After completing the summary I felt much more confident in acting on my strategies. While most people needed all of the time allotted, I finished early.*
- *I was able to make a stronger linkage with my main overarching goal and reasons why my target audience should care [Project Sharing & Feedback].*
- *I now feel like I am better equipped to manage our Facebook and Twitter pages.*
- *I have acquired knowledge of how to strategically plan any form of media I employ.*
- *Really amazing to be able to get feedback from professionals that are well versed in communications.*
- *Wonderful, enriching experience. Wish this could be offered to a larger group.*
- *Thank you so much to the trainers! You are all amazingly knowledgeable and great teachers. I'm happy I was able to participate.*
- *Loved that the trainers were so well prepared and carried out excellent delivery of information.*

Lessons Learned and Next Steps

Reef Resilience staff deemed the learning exchange successful, highlighting these contributing factors:

- The partnership approach for identifying participants worked well in identifying quality participants and strengthening partnerships with other networks and contacts in the region
- Exchange objectives were achieved and participant needs were met and exceeded
- There is a high potential for participants to apply skills learned to their specific project, which was the focus for the learning exchange
- Learning from experience at a previous exchange, we connected participants to the online Network Forum during the event to decrease barriers to usage post-exchange

Recommendations for future learning exchanges

Detailed debrief notes outlining specific suggested changes/adjustments were taken during the coaches meeting at the end of each day. Overall takeaways for future learning exchanges include:

- Spend time with participants up front: Time spent communicating with participants prior to the learning exchange was time well spent. Surveying participants to understand their communications skills/training and interests resulted in a training that met – and exceeded – participants' expectations. In order to help participants get the most out of the fast paced and relatively short training, we took the time to work with participants one-on-one to identify a project and goal (that would serve as the building block for their strategic communications planning process). This helped the participants feel confident enough to get started in the planning process rather than become overwhelmed in the beginning.

- Maintain the intentionally small ratio of one coach for two participants. This proved to be essential during the individual activities. While this meant additional resources (staff time and money to support cost of additional facilitators), the extra attention and interaction with experts resulted in engaged and happy participants and quality final communications plans.

Feedback from participants:

- *With complex projects, this activity [setting Goals & Objectives] was very challenging. Thanks for the extra time. I really appreciate having the individualized assistance coming up with these ideas.*
- *The group discussion amongst coach(es) individually at our tables was great!*

Next Steps

Reef Resilience staff will:

- Continue to manage and monitor the Caribbean Strategic Communications LX online discussion forum on the RR Network Forum
- Share related resources such as LX presentations and how-to guides with participants via the Network Forum
- Follow up with each participant to monitor and encourage progress towards the implementation of their project plans