

# ISSUE SHEET 9




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## COMMUNICATION AND AWARENESS- RAISING ABOUT NATURE CONSERVATION

For some 12 years, the Nature Conservation Programme (NCP) has worked to support relevant national and local authorities and stakeholders in managing the natural resources of the Bregalnica river basin on a sustainable basis, conserving their unique biodiversity for future generations. From the outset, good communication with all concerned was recognised as a crucial factor; the programme could only achieve its aims through public acceptance and a degree of behaviour change towards nature-friendly practices. It was therefore important to understand the perspective of the different stakeholders and to tailor messages and awareness-raising activities accordingly. This Issue Sheet provides an overview of the approaches used, and results obtained through the NCP.

*“The old rule in science is that if something is not published, it doesn't exist. The new rule in nature conservation is that if something wasn't communicated, it didn't happen. Actively communicating the core goals and values of the NCP was one of the keys to the success of the whole programme, although, it was a challenging task to balance the needs of different stakeholders. It was of the highest priority to educate and inform the public about our dependence on protected and rural areas as well as to support a resilient, independent and sustainable local community.” Kiril Arsovski, biologist, external advisor in communicating nature related topics.*

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## KEY LESSONS LEARNED

- For complex programmes such as the NCP, the early development of a communication strategy with a clear action plan, tools and indicators offers a powerful means to support team members in achieving raised stakeholder knowledge and awareness.
- Targeted communication to different stakeholder groups plays an important role in supporting nature conservation initiatives. For example, younger people are best reached through social media; engaging social media influencers proved a helpful tool.
- The strong local presence of the programme, including a local project office, fostered acceptance among different local stakeholders.
- Creating opportunities for local actors to implement sustainable natural resource management activities proved a good way to increase public knowledge, awareness and behaviour change.
- Specific campaigns, such as the proclamation of protected areas, and Natura 2000, are also a good means of increasing public knowledge.
- Regular monitoring of campaign results using public awareness surveys is key for the successful targeting of different target groups using different communication tools shape forestry in the respective countries.

## INNOVATIVE COMMUNICATION TOOLS DEVELOPED BY NCP



Using the communication strategy as a general guideline, a variety of communication tools were developed over the three phases of NCP. They were adjusted to the specific needs of different target groups and fine-tuned according to the results of the public awareness surveys and feedback from partners and stakeholders. Aspects taken into consideration included the age of the target group, their interests, and their location (for example, some more remote areas of the Bregalnica region have poor internet connection).

**Social media** ([Facebook page](#), [Instagram profile](#), [YouTube](#)). The NCP Facebook page is highly appreciated, with more than 65,000 followers, and a monthly reach of about 130,000, with continuous interaction. Analysis shows that the top followers are women aged 35-54 and men aged 35-44. Meanwhile, the Instagram profile is used more heavily by younger women and men aged up to 35.



An **e-newsletter** was used as a tool for the periodic dissemination of information about programme activities, containing promotional, informative and storytelling articles. In total, 28 editions of the e-newsletter were prepared and distributed to more than 650 subscribers, mainly institutions on national, regional and local level, members of CSOs, media and other stakeholders.

Printed and electronic **conventional media**, TV and radio interviews were used to communicate to a broader public, with thematic TV debates being held to draw attention to specific programme activities. Across the entire duration of the NCP, more than 1,000 relevant articles were published in different media.

The NCP **website** [www.bregalnica-ncp.mk](http://www.bregalnica-ncp.mk) provides a unique documentation base at which all relevant data on biodiversity and nature protection for the Bregalnica basin can be found in one place, in two languages: Macedonian and English. It is designed to be a free-source platform for the future retrieval of all NCP data, results, and documents.

A range of educational and promotional **videos** targeted to different audiences were prepared under the programme; one full length film (see later) was also funded in part through the NCP.

**Promotional materials** such as educational magnets, leaflets, and banners were prepared and distributed to the general public, especially around important events.

Local **events** were organized to celebrate important dates such as International Biodiversity Day, Natura 2000 Day, International Bee Day, World Water Day, and International Landscape Day.



**InstaTours** of the Bregalnica region featuring social media influencers were organised, as an innovative tool for promotion of NCP's results and sustainability concept.

**Specific campaigns** were organised to ensure public understanding and promote acceptance of actions such as the proclamation of protected area or Natura 2000 sites.

**Small projects:** As detailed in Issue Sheet 4, the NCP provided small grants to local bodies for projects linked to environmental awareness and nature conservation. Communicating about these activities was a specific requirement of each grant. Activities included working with school children and organising events and outdoor activities for farmers, teachers, and CSO members - inviting the conventional media as well as ensuring promotion through social media.

A series of **Issue Sheets** (including this one) were prepared on selected topics as part of programme finalisation. Targeted to policy makers and potential donors, they summarise some of the key lessons learned and provide practical recommendations for similar initiatives.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA AND SPECIAL INSTA TOURS FOR PROMOTING THE REGION AND PROGRAMME RESULTS



Social media is an important tool in today's world for engaging and communicating with multiple audiences, especially young people. The innovative approach of using social media in combination with tailor-made tours for Instagram users represented a proactive way of promoting the Bregalnica region overall as well as specific NCP activities. Five InstaTours were organised through the programme, engaging a total of 18 enthusiastic Instagram users.



In telling stories about nature conservation and sustainable natural resource management, participants shared photos, video clips and personal impressions on their Instagram and Facebook profiles. They averaged over 400 postings on each tour, attracting more than 450,000 views. An added value was that some participants also published articles in electronic media.

*“Numerous successful projects have been implemented in the framework of the Nature Conservation Programme in North Macedonia over the past years. I had the honour and opportunity to be invited as part of the Insta tours to get to know the Eastern part of our wonderful country, and I am infinitely grateful for that unique experience.*

*In the past 5–6 years, we have explored countless natural and cultural treasures, travelled quite a lot of kilometres, tried the most delicious meals authentic to the Bregalnica region, and met many hard-working locals who proudly continue the tradition and preserve the cultural and natural heritage through the responsible and sustainable use of resources.*

*The opportunity to be part of the team that was selected to explore the eastern part of our country was the perfect way to get to know the development projects of the Bregalnica region and to convey them through social networks.*

*After the last tour, at the final stage of the project, I can say that I am very satisfied and happy with the results we achieved. Personally, I will say for myself that I enriched my research experience and filled my eyes and soul with beauty. For everyone else, I hope that through what we shared, we inspired more and more people to visit and explore the beautiful Bregalnica region. The number of messages and countless questions after each tour speak for themselves” Stefanija Vidovski, member of Instagram team, October 2023.*

## SPECIFIC CAMPAIGNS

Several specific campaigns were conducted in addition to regular awareness-raising.

**Proclamation of Protected Areas:** In partnership with East Planning Region, NCP conducted a specific campaign in 2016 to raise public awareness about the need for nature conservation using the slogan #It’s about people!. The aim was to facilitate acceptance amongst various stakeholders of the need to designate parts of the region as Protected Areas (see Issue Sheet 3 for more information). Once the process of proclamation of Osogovo Mountains and Maleshevo as Protected Areas was underway in 2020 and 2021 respectively, two separate specific campaigns were also conducted.

As a specific communication tool, testimonials from local individuals were used to highlight the benefits of protected area status for all land uses both within and around the areas concerned.



*“For 10 years together with my family we have been welcoming and saying goodbye to satisfied domestic and foreign tourists coming to our house “Ethno Lesnovo”. If we succeeded without a Protected Area, then I believe that within a Protected Area, the potentials for development of rural tourism will be even better.” Vesna Petrova, owner of “Ethno Lesnovo”, 2019.*

**Natura 2000:** Although Natura 2000 status can only be provisional until North Macedonia joins the European Union, it is nevertheless important to identify such areas of international biodiversity importance and inform the public accordingly. Accordingly, a specific campaign was implemented over 2019-2021, targeting both the general public and specific interest groups in the Bregalnica region, using TV, printed materials and organising special events.



## INTERNATIONAL PROMOTION AND SHARING OF NCP EXPERIENCE

Whilst the main focus of NCP communication activities was at regional and national level, important achievements and experiences were also shared internationally at conferences and congresses. These included the international conference Green development, infrastructure and technology (GREDIT), two European and one World Ecosystem Service Partnership conferences, 7th Pan-European stakeholder consultation for the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) and many others. At the first International Mountain Innovation fair organised by UNEP in 2023 in Bollzano, the NCP concept for sustainable tourism in and around protected areas was selected as one of the eight finalists among more than 80 applicants. The NCP project team also participated in the 6th International Ecologist Congress, at which a special session was dedicated to the Bregalnica region.

**Film Honeyland:** Public awareness about this important documentary film was raised through specific promotional activities, including special events, TV shows and the design of an educational package that was distributed to all schools in Bregalnica region.

## THE FILM DOCUMENTARY HONEYLAND

This film captures the story of the last woman bee-hunter in Europe, whose livelihood depends on collecting honey from wild bees. Conscious of the delicate ecological balance between taking enough honey for herself and leaving enough for the bees, she finds her way of life threatened by a nomadic family that arrives and disregards all ecological principles. The Honeyland story unfolded whilst filming other NCP activities. Recognising the importance of what was taking place, NCP supported the preparation and production of the documentary, as well as the organisation of promotional events.

Honeyland won more than 40 prizes around the world and was nominated for an Oscar in two categories, spreading a universal message about the fair and sustainable use of natural resources.

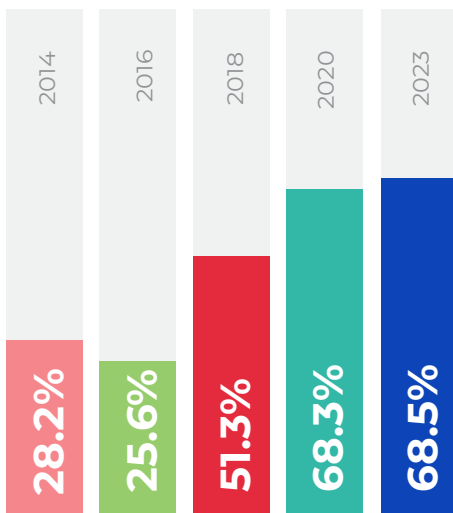


*“Produced with the support of NCP, the documentary Honeyland sends very powerful messages about the equitable, sustainable use of natural resources and achieved huge success. It won many awards and recognitions at film festivals around the world including two Oscar nominations. For me personally, and for the entire project team, the most significant award is the “impact for change” from the Sundance Festival. This award confirms and justifies the commitment of the entire team together with the authors of the documentary to raise public awareness and encourage changes in behaviors and excessive use of natural resources that follows the modern way of life, especially in developed countries, but also in countries in transition such as ours. I am glad that the main messages of Honeyland have spread all over the world and I am especially glad that the values and messages of the film are part of the educational process of the young people of our country.”* Marjana Shushlevska, Team Leader, NCP.

# MONITORING AND EVALUATION OF COMMUNICATION EFFECTIVENESS

Public surveys were conducted on a biannual basis to obtain quantitative measurements on the impact of communication activities and specific programme interventions on the awareness of the general public and key stakeholders regarding nature conservation. The surveys covered a representative sample of about 600 respondents from the Bregalnica region, proportionally stratified by sex, age, ethnicity, place of residence (urban/rural), and education. The results show that there was a clear increase in public awareness about the value of nature and its sustainable use over the period of NCP operations. Awareness stood at about 30% in 2012, at the beginning of NCP phase 1; by the end of the exit phase in late 2023, it had reached 68.5%. Nearly all respondents were of the opinion that nature conservation is linked to improved living conditions – that is, it is important for human health and a high quality of life.

## Awareness of the importance of nature protection



Awareness for nature protection %

The success rate can be attributed to:

- applied adaptive management of awareness raising campaigns and programme activities based on the results of surveys/ reports
- the use of communication tools tailored to the needs and perception of the local population and key stakeholders, including the specific social media promotional concept, the organisation of Insta tours, and production of thematic and promotional videos, and
- the establishment of the Educational Centre for Nature Conservation in the village of Negrevo as a unique facility for education and public awareness raising in the country (see Issue Sheet 8).





## PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS

- Ensure that a communication strategy is developed right at the beginning of programme implementation, identifying key stakeholder groups and the most effective communication tool to reach them. Plan appropriate messages at key times and use feedback from this process to stay focussed on programme goals.
- Ensure an adequate budget for communication and designate responsibility for communication to a team member. If possible within the budget, engage a professional agency for social media management.
- Develop innovative communication tools to reach young people, seeking their active involvement in disseminating messages to their peers.
- Adapt communication tools as appropriate to reach specific key stakeholders and local communities who have limited access to the internet and related media.

This Issue Sheet was produced by Jasminka Pashaliska Andonovska, NCP's Local Activity Coordinator, Cvetan Nikolovski, NCP's Programme Advisor and Marjana Shushlevska, NCP's Team Leader, all from Farmahem. It entailed consultation with many NCP stakeholders, including but not limited to those quoted. Jane Carter, Senior Adviser, Natural Resource Governance at Helvetas, provided editorial support. For further information, please contact [farmahem@farmahem.mk](mailto:farmahem@farmahem.mk).

The Nature Conservation Programme, NCP in North Macedonia is a project of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, SDC. Implemented in phase 1 by Helvetas in partnership with Farmahem and then in phases 2 and 3 by Farmahem with backstopping support from Helvetas, the total project lifespan is effectively 12 years (2012 – 2023).