



Lawachara National Park
[Sirajul Hossain]

Communication Tools and Strategies

Mehrin A. Mahbub

The primary challenge of Nishorgo was to alter the way Protected Areas (PAs) were managed and governed at pilot sites. A communications program complemented these field experiments, and an initial communication strategy was developed by the project team in 2003. The purpose of this chapter is to review the main initiatives undertaken in the communications program and to identify lessons learned in the process.

Starting Assumptions and Subsequent Adaptation

Communication Strategy Development

The 2003 Nishorgo communications strategy identified and described priority stakeholder groups that would be targeted. Principal targets included government policy decision makers, journalists and media, youth – including university students, local stakeholders at pilot sites, environmentalists, and private sector leaders. The resources available to the Nishorgo team were not sufficient to conduct mass communication campaigns; besides, this more targeted approach was more acceptable to the Forest Department (FD) because of its hesitancy to draw attention to itself in mass communication activities.

The communication strategy focused on developing a unique identity for the Nishorgo Program. To provide a fresh “look” distinct from the Forest Department’s existing image, a new name and logo were established. The challenge was to use the “new identity” to communicate the Department’s willingness to make change.

The Nishorgo communication strategy elaborated a platform for reaching out to different stakeholders. The strategy identified possible target audiences and listed communication tools for reaching each of them. However, the communication strategy was very comprehensive and perhaps a little too ambitious for a five-year project. National level awareness generation calls for a broader resource pool.

The communications unit of Nishorgo consisted of a communications coordinator and a graphics designer, along with one communication officer in each of the northern and southern regions. Communications activities were initially expected to be modest but they gradually came to take on a larger role to address the need for consensus-building at local and national levels.

The Naming of Nishorgo and the Program-Project Distinction

The initial contractual name for what is now known as the Nishorgo Support Project (NSP) was the “Co-management of Tropical Forest Resources in Bangladesh Project.” Knowing that the project itself would be gone after only five years, the project team decided instead

to build brand awareness and recognition of what would be a permanent FD program. This meant an image associated exclusively with the management of forest Protected Areas, wildlife conservation, and the benefits of conservation to the local poor and the nation at large that would be distinct and yet complementary to normal Forest Department operations. The Department's public reputation in 2003 was marked by allegations of staff improprieties and occasional collusion with political figures. The image was generally not a positive one, especially amongst the urban youth and private sector. It was felt that a fresh image associated with community participation and nature conservation – and especially with participation of the poor – would be an important modification of the traditional FD image.

The FD, USAID, and the project team agreed that the main beneficiary of the project would be the younger generation for whom natural resources need to be preserved. The first step in this process was to create a name and an image for the new program. To do so, a national naming competition was held among school and college children up to 18 years. Nearly 300 students from around the country submitted proposed names along with drawings, descriptions, or explanations as to why that name would be appropriate for a national forest conservation program. The naming process itself stirred considerable interest within the Department and transmitted a clear view of how our younger generation hopes to see Protected Areas conserved.

With the “Nishorgo” name (which means “serene (or idyllic) nature”) established, a suitable logo was developed to present an image that was consistent with the Forest Department's wildlife conservation mandate and participation, with a more modern “look” than the FD logo. The new logo used green and red – the colors of the national flag. Red was also intended to connote the Red List of Threatened Species put out by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). In addition to the name and logo, the project came up with a slogan. The slogan – originally in Bangla – can be translated as “Saving nature for future generations.” This slogan later helped the team to forge partnerships with youth organizations.

Under the new branding arrangement, the permanent PA and FD conservation program was called the Nishorgo program and, in keeping with this, the five-year project supporting establishment of this program, became known as the Nishorgo Support Project (NSP).

The project team aimed to establish the name and image of the Nishorgo program as a conservation program within the Forest Department that would last after the project ended. It is as yet too early to know whether the Nishorgo program as such will remain an accepted element of the Forest Department, but it would be fair to say that many people continue to associate Nishorgo with a time-bound project, and not with a permanent program, as originally envisaged. It is, however, increasingly recognized that Nishorgo activities within the FD connote PA management and participation.

The Forest Department and Communication

It was assumed in the early years of the project that the FD would be active in developing and institutionalizing the Nishorgo image and also in furthering its ideas in the public domain, particularly through print and television media. However, it became quite clear that the

Department itself, including its communications officers, had limited freedom in advancing their ideas through mass media. Forest Department staff must get permission from the Ministry of Environment and Forests for all press releases or communication with the press. This need for approval on all communication actions constrained the ability of the Department to develop an improved public image.

The Annual Tree Fair (Brickho Mela)

Each year, for more than 20 years, the Forest Department has organized a national Tree Fair in Dhaka, with the Prime Minister usually attending as chief guest. The Tree Fairs have successfully disseminated information about trees and encouraged the public to plant trees – and have also enhanced the image of this service of the Forest Department.

When Nishorgo began, the Department asked it to play a part in the Tree Fair. For three years, the preparation of booths, brochures, and the organization of personnel for public outreach absorbed Nishorgo’s communications resources during the months of May and June. With hindsight, the impact of those efforts was less than expected. This is because the people who visited the Nishorgo booth at the fair were not a priority communications stakeholder group – those who visit the Fair are generally the urban middle class looking to buy seedlings, saplings or flowers to plant in their homes or apartments. This shows how targeting communications effort through traditional FD activities or priorities can miss the key stakeholders for a new conservation-based program such as Nishorgo.

Site-level Communications and Outreach

Local level communication was a fundamental component of the overall strategy. In retrospect, northern and southern sites differed in the level of communication success. In the immediate buffer areas and vicinity of the PAs, stated awareness of the Nishorgo activities was high among adults (over 60%, according to surveys), with those surveyed stating they were aware that Nishorgo was associated with forest conservation. However, the awareness level did not necessary dictate action. To address this gap, a range of communication activities was organized. These included Nishorgo Clubs, school outreach events, community cultural events (theater, music, folklore), and work with local and regional journalists.

Traditional media, such as folk songs and stage drama, proved to be powerful in rural settings. In the northern region, RDRS, a Bangladeshi NGO, successfully developed local performer groups in each of the PA sites. Hundreds of people gather to watch the theaters and folk song shows, known as “jatra.”

Existing RDRS theater teams from northwest Bangladesh were mobilized to train groups of local resource persons, who in turn imparted theater training to selected villagers residing in PA landscapes. Thousands of local villagers attended the theater events organized under the Project. Many songs describing forests, biodiversity, natural landscape, and wildlife were developed and performed in the dramas that were organized at strategic locations in and around the pilot PAs. These mass gatherings generated considerable community awareness about conservation.

At southern sites, a relatively greater emphasis was put on preparation of news articles for local newspapers; theater had to be abandoned as it became apparent that an evolving religious fundamentalism made these approaches less welcome. “*Pot gaan*”, another local combination of song and message, was to have been used in the Chunati area but was abandoned when it became clear that it would not be well received by some religious leaders.



Theatrical events and troupes provide an important means of conveying messages. Here, a group trained by Nishorgo partner RDRS delivers a show on conservation near Satchari National Park. [Nishorgo Support Project]

Both the northern and southern site communication officers forged strong relationships with the local media resulting in regular publication of news about Nishorgo programs and activities in local newspapers. Moreover, much of Nishorgo coverage in the national dailies originated from local initiatives that brought PA stories to the attention of local correspondents (journalists).

competitions – also publicized the Nishorgo Program. NSP strived to involve the local Forest Department officers in these communication activities from the planning stage, but actual FD participation varied greatly between PAs depending on the interest of individuals.

A substantial part of the local communication effort focused on youth (see separate section). Other local communication activities typical of Bangladesh – such as observing international days, rallies, and



Members of the Earth Club of North South University spotting the different bird species while hiking in Satchari National Park. [Muhammad Hussain]



Members of the Earth Club of North South University learning about Co-Management and sharing their views about forest conservation activities. [Muhammad Hussain]

National Level Events

The two most significant national level events undertaken were the launch of Nishorgo in early 2004 and a “Co-management Week” in 2006. The 2006 event was co-sponsored and organized with the MACH project and included local stakeholder events and visits as well as a

roundtable discussion with development partners and civil society leaders. It included invited international guests from Nepal, India, and Sri Lanka, all of whom are leading experts in the participatory management of protected areas. The Co-management Week events also brought together for the first time co-management participants from wetlands and forest PAs around the country.

Both of these events raised awareness among participants. At the same time, these events absorbed substantial time and effort of the project team. If any lessons can be drawn from such events it would be this: major events are only worth undertaking if follow-up media dissemination and policy influence processes can be supported. Without constant attention to the journalists and television media both during and after such events, the impact on awareness-raising is not significant. Moreover, in the case of the Co-management Week, the intended policy impact from bringing together forests and wetlands, including fisheries, to better understand the common potential for co-management was lost when it proved administratively impossible to bring senior officials from the respective ministries to a common platform.

Targeting Youth – The Scouts and Other Activities

Nishorgo's communications strategy included an explicit target of reaching out to youth, beginning with its youth-focused slogan. But how to reach out to the youth in a country of Bangladesh's population size? The project team singled out three youth focus groups.

In and around the PAs the team reached out to young people through the creation of Nishorgo Clubs and events for children (for example, art competitions and fairs) often conducted through schools. Local Nishorgo staff regularly held school programs, supported by youth-focused communication materials including stickers, games, bookmarks, masks, pencils, and other small items. Clubs provided an avenue for young people to become involved in the forest at all five PAs.

The Bangladesh Scouts were a second youth target. More than a million strong, the Scouts are organized in every district of the country. At the national level, their leadership includes some of the countries leading civil servants (Joint Secretary level and above), many of whom complete their day jobs at the Bangladesh Secretariat and then go directly to Scouts headquarters to volunteer their time. Unlike Boy Scouts in the United States, where membership levels are highest at elementary school age and then taper off steadily through high school, the majority of Scouts in Bangladesh are from the high school and university age groups. As nearly 20% of the Scouts are young women, the Scouts offered an excellent means to partner with a single organization and spread awareness of Nishorgo's conservation efforts while at the same time engaging youth in useful conservation activities.

Of the various activities conducted between Nishorgo and the Bangladesh Scouts, probably the most effective was the high profile "PA-to-PA Hike" designed to raise awareness of the existence of a PA network in the country. Led by one of the country's leading outdoor enthusiasts and ornithologists – Enam ul Haque – the first hike included a group of 60 Scouts and Rangers who spent 2 1/2 days hiking between three PAs in the northeast, followed by television and newsprint journalists. A similar hike was later conducted between Chunati Wildlife Sanctuary

and Teknaf Wildlife Sanctuary. These hikes were far more effective in capturing the interest and attention of both television and print media than were the other Nishorgo events. Subsequently, local scout groups arranged similar hikes in nearby PAs. The Nishorgo team also participated in numerous national jamborees (scout conventions) attended by thousands of Scouts. At these events, Nishorgo staff organized quiz programs, held seminars on making improved stoves, and showed nature-focused movies. The local youth mingled with the Scouts in many events – from PA-to-PA hikes to national Scout jamborees. All these activities helped to raise the level of recognition about NSP among the Scouts. This resulted in some potentially more lasting links between youth and PA management – for example, the Scouts from Moulavibazaar came forward to help with tourist management at Lawachara National Park.



The Minister of Environment and Forests and the US Ambassador, along with senior FD staff members, at the February 2004 launch of the Nishorgo Program. [Asiatic MCL]

Probably the least effective of Nishorgo’s youth targeted activities were those focused on urban youth. The team assumed that an outreach program targeted at the best schools in the capital Dhaka would influence those young people to be active supporters of conservation and thereby raise the awareness of their parents. The team organized communication events including games, a movie, and prizes at each of eight leading schools in the Dhaka area. However, it was necessary to involve outside experts on forest to keep the fledgling Earth Clubs interested – otherwise, they ended up learning very little. In general, seminars and

in-house programs were not so effective. The program content or duration tended to result in participants losing interest. Limited resources for expensive field visits and the parents’ fears for their children’s safety on field visits to PAs meant that this program did not take off as planned.

Nevertheless, some visits organized for university students did succeed in informing a potentially influential section of society that there are PAs with interesting nature trails and rich biodiversity – even in Bangladesh. This practical experience usually improved their views about Bangladesh and is possibly the best thing that Nishorgo did at youth level to encourage visits to PAs.

Central Coordination Cell and Message Management

From its outset, Nishorgo tried to establish a central coordinating cell to guide communications activities. The program intended to include representatives of Ministry of Environment and Forests, environmental NGOs, and possibly the private sector. However, the Ministry was reluctant to take a leadership role in coordinating media-related activities, so coordination of communications messages was undertaken by project and FD staff. In essence, it was not possible to have all Nishorgo messages and communication coordinated from a single joint team, including sufficiently high-level government officials and the project staff.

Outreach through Print Media and Video

During its five years, more than 450 news articles were published about Nishorgo, along with several short television documentaries and features made by television stations themselves, and one documentary was financed by the project. The Nishorgo project achieved a high level of press coverage, but this required considerable efforts to facilitate visits and follow-up with journalists, otherwise coverage was low. For example, the Visitor Interpretation Center at Teknaf Wildlife Sanctuary was opened in July 2008. Although 15 print journalists and three TV stations attended the opening, only one TV station provided high profile coverage and not a single front or back-page news article appeared after the event. Although support had been provided throughout the field events, the necessary follow-up dialogue did not happen.

Lessons Learned

A number of general lessons have emerged from Nishorgo's communication program.

Lack of any single "champion" or small group of "champions" hampered the communications program. A national public program such as Nishorgo called for high level Government involvement in communications – which did not take place. Without champions and spokespersons for Nishorgo from within higher levels of government (above the level of the Forest Department), the impact was not commensurate with time and effort allocated to it. The idea of message management and strategic communications required for a national public program was somewhat alien to the public sector and required leadership from experienced private sector communicators. Future conservation campaigns would do well to include Bangladeshi marketing leaders and seek respected civil society or private sector expertise and champions in addition to leadership from the Government itself.

Target group identification for communication needs to be more refined and specific, both in group description and in expected behavioral changes. Nishorgo took a broad approach to mass communication. However, much of this effort resulted in messages reaching the already "converted" within the environmental community. The impact even for this community may be limited as these actors generally have their own agendas and may feel threatened by a competing "project." More effective communications activities should be tailored to the interests of well-defined stakeholder groups and the changes that are expected of them.

Communication efforts did not succeed in distinguishing in the minds of the public the national Nishorgo program separate from the Nishorgo Support Project. It was intended to create an "umbrella" program under which a wide range of potential partners could feel comfortable in collaborating with Forest Department. This aspect of communication will take longer and more effort to see a change in widespread understanding and perceptions of the Department, and will require greater ownership of communication by the Nishorgo program of the Department.

Conclusions

Nishorgo's communications program succeeded in establishing a name and image for a new national conservation program led and coordinated by the Forest Department. Awareness of this program is broad amongst environmentalists, the Bangladesh Scouts, young journalists, and civil servants. But the program is yet to become commonly recognized among the broader group of urban middle and upper class Bangladeshis and rural communities outside of Nishorgo pilot areas.