

JV Communications Assessment

A report on the communications landscape across the shared PPJV-NGPJV states of Montana, North Dakota, and South Dakota.

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BACKGROUND

The PPJV and NGPJV are engaging in an effort to reach a broader constituent base by elevating compelling, positive stories that highlight the multiple benefits conservation provides for working farms and ranches, rural livelihoods, food and water security, wildlife habitat, biodiversity, and recreational opportunities. This began in August 2022 with separate Management Board discussions about the prevalence of conservation misinformation and the need for a network of conservation advocates. The PPJV Coordinator made additional funding available for the communications program to consider this challenge. As the PPJV Communications Specialist provides part-time support to the NGPJV, both JVs are collaborating on this effort.

To identify the specific charge, a working group was convened from January to April of 2023. The seven working group members represented both Management Boards and committed to attending three virtual meetings to have high-level discussions about the intent of this work. The result of these meetings was a skeleton strategy (Table 1), which was reviewed and approved by the working group as well as the Communications Committees for both JVs.

Table 1: Pertinent elements from the skeleton strategy.

Problem Statement	Misinformation about conservation continues to be perpetuated in the PPJV and NGPJV geographies. New communication strategies are needed to elevate positive stories across a broader constituent base and encourage continued interest in healthy landscapes for communities and wildlife.
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Desired Future Condition	<i>Short term:</i> Maintain a steady stream of compelling, positive stories highlighting the multiple benefits conservation provides for working farms and ranches, rural livelihoods, food and water security, wildlife habitat, biodiversity, and recreational opportunities.
	<i>Long term:</i> Build a network of engaged conservation advocates who are unified around a collective, positive message and willing to act in support of our natural resources, driving a slow shift in culture where people understand the issues and are not influenced by misinformation.
JV Role	SUPPORT communication both within and across JV boundaries by elevating important messaging, funding partner initiatives, leveraging current efforts, and formalizing relationships with new groups.
	Help COORDINATE a steady stream of landowner-driven content across different partner groups and provide a collection point to evaluate the volume of stories being shared.
	As needed, DEVELOP novel content to fill gaps in the storytelling landscape.
Geographic Focus	Start with the shared PPJV-NGPJV states of Montana, North Dakota, and South Dakota. Opportunity to expand to additional JV states in the future.

The action item identified in the skeleton strategy was to conduct a situational assessment to assess the “storytelling landscape” and develop an understanding of the communications that are already happening, where the gaps are, and how the JVs can offer support to our partners. This included an observational assessment of “visible” communications (e.g., newsletters, social media, etc.) as well as direct conversations with partner communications staff to introduce this effort, discuss ongoing work, and identify needs and opportunities. The assessment occurred throughout summer of 2023; intended outcomes were a report of the communications landscape and strengthened relationships with partner communications staff. Findings will be used to develop a strategic communications strategy that implements the ‘JV Role’ as defined above and moves the JVs towards the desired future condition statements.

FINDINGS

Observational Assessment

A total of 57 organizations, programs, and partnerships were tracked via their websites, social media pages, e-newsletters, and other digital channels. A database was built to catalog stories that highlight the broader suite of benefits afforded by conservation (i.e., not just wildlife and

habitat, but benefits for working farms and ranches, rural livelihoods, food and water security, and recreational opportunities). Stories that connected the dots with broad benefits but framed the narrative in terms of loss did not meet the primary criterion set forth in this assessment (positive storytelling) and were not included in the analysis.

Overall, there was less content about broad benefits than initially anticipated; this finding was validated by several partners during the interview process. A total of 40 stories were recorded as examples of positive storytelling being shared by partners across the landscape. Several of these are part of an ongoing series that can be expected to produce regular installments in the future (e.g., Our Amazing Grasslands, USFWS Stewards of the Land). With these stories in hand, the question is how to best share them to elevate the messaging to broader audiences.

Interviews with Partner Communications Staff

A total of 20 partner organizations participated in the communication assessment discussions. A standard list of 10 questions (Appendix) were used to guide the discussions and collect a consistent set of information about communications efforts, gaps, and opportunities.

Audiences

Primary audiences were as varied as the mission and goals of each organization, although there was consistent overlap with audiences such as landowners and hunters. Despite this variety, two themes emerged in the challenges that respondents experienced reaching out to their primary audience. The first revolved around targeting and audience segmentation. Even with a primary audience identified, it can be challenging to get as specific as needed to successfully reach them, and within an audience there are many sub-audiences that change how and what to communicate. For example, 'landowners' as an audience is a very broad group that will differ based on location, previous experience with conservation programs, and many other factors. Greater specificity in audience segmentation will lead to more targeted messages but can require a time-consuming level of planning and research.

The second theme revolved around perceptions of conservation and conservation groups. Respondents noted the distrust that some audiences have for conservation organizations, and communications targeting such audiences must be cautious with words that could turn people away, such as climate change. Additionally, organizations with roots in hunting sometimes face hurdles communicating with conservation-oriented, non-hunting audiences. In both examples,

there is a challenge in developing communications that don't alienate segments of the audience with preconceived notions of what we do and why we do it.

Regarding which groups we need to do a better job of reaching with conservation messages, there was noteworthy crossover between primary audiences and audience gaps (e.g., Organization A thinks we need to reach out to school-aged kids more, and Organization B specializes in outreach to that audience). While there are benefits to getting certain messages in front of a variety of audiences, each organization has goals to accomplish that often require focusing on a particular audience, and every organization doesn't need to communicate with every audience. There may be opportunities to work collaboratively to share knowledge about audience best practices and ensure that messages are broadly distributed, reaching a cross-section of the population that would be difficult for one organization working independently.

Activities

Activities utilized in communications efforts were even more widely varied than audiences, which is perhaps unsurprising given varied budgets and staff capacity. Communications activities that respondents were interested in trying had overlap with activities other organizations used often. Working with the media was frequently mentioned as a potential area for growth, but time and staffing are limiting factors. Some respondents noted media outreach as a strength or had knowledge of various PR tools, again indicating the potential for sharing information among the partnership. Field days were another activity that respondents would like to see more of. Offering an opportunity for people to see how conservation happens on the landscape or talk with a biologist at a wildlife viewing event are ways to engage those who may not typically be involved in conservation.

Emerging technology on the horizon holds some promise for opening new doors in conservation communications. Nest cams and drone technology offer ways of showing the world from a different perspective. Geofencing has potential applications in targeted communications for people visiting a specific place. Better listening tools can uncover themes and trends in online chatter. And at the top of the list is the rise of artificial intelligence. While programs like ChatGPT dominate the narrative, AI has other potential uses such as pattern recognition amongst a membership group (e.g., who is ready to volunteer or become a next level donor).

Storytelling

The frequency of efforts to develop communication materials that link conservation to benefits beyond wildlife and habitat were fairly evenly distributed between 'not often', 'somewhat', and

'often'. This reinforced the findings of the observational assessment that these kinds of stories aren't being told frequently, and when they are they're usually from the same organizations that have the capacity to do so. Of those who don't develop these kinds of stories often, the reasoning included lack of capacity, lack of evidence to support such claims, or a need to focus on their organization's mission. Those who do develop these stories acknowledged that they are largely being shared with their existing followers, who are already conservation oriented.

Evaluation

With many communications efforts happening in a digital space, there's a detailed suite of analytical tools available to track metrics. While these provide valuable insights on communications outputs (e.g., e-mail opens, clickthroughs), they don't shed much light on outcomes; that is, are audiences doing anything with the information they are receiving, and how successfully are conservation groups moving the needle? Outcome evaluation is undeniably important but is also very challenging as it often crosses into social science.

Beyond output analytics, evaluation metrics utilized by respondents largely focused on measures such as program sign-ups, donations, requests for more information, and survey responses. Anecdotal evidence is also a valuable tool but can be more difficult to obtain as it sometimes has multiple channels to go through to reach communications staff. Most respondents noted that they don't have the capacity to collect and analyze outcome metrics.

Barriers and Missed Opportunities

The most common barrier to increasing the scope and effectiveness of communications was staff and financial resources. While this not a unique challenge in the conservation industry, it prevents communications staff from being proactive in their approach and making efforts to reach new audiences. As one respondent said, "everyone has so much to do that we don't have time to come up with new ideas, and allowing yourself to push the boundaries of your own box is challenging."

Many respondents noted that there is an opportunity to improve how communications staff work with each other. While conservation organizations are aligning and partnering more than ever, this effort isn't necessarily translating to the communications level and communications staff are missing opportunities to coordinate on messaging and creatives. This collaborative space can be a challenging one to work in, but carrying a collective message has a lot of value and potential impact. Having access to a broader communications network is an opportunity to showcase the benefits of conservation at a larger scale, help partners build relationships with new audiences,

and create a unified presence to carry messages about important topics like the value of grasslands or the Great American Outdoors Act.

How Can Partners Support Your Work

Thoughts on the best way partners can elevate ongoing communications work fell neatly into two categories: cross-posting and connecting. Sharing communications pieces through partner channels is an opportunity to increase reach and get messages in front of new audiences. This can also add relevancy to messages that may have initially been ignored because the audience distrusts or dislikes the original messenger. Some organizations may be more or less able to cross-post depending on the message and how it aligns with their mission. Further, cross-posting requires effort to find stories worth sharing, which is a challenge for communications professionals who are already pressed for time.

This points to the second category of connecting to each other through a broader network of conservation communications professionals. Almost every respondent indicated a need for greater connection and coordination in the communications world. The benefits of such an effort could include collaborative digital campaigns, co-producing communications creatives, sharing resources (e.g., training opportunities, raw materials like photographs or drone footage), developing a “story bank” for key audiences, or simply being appraised of what’s going on across the landscape. Several respondents also brought up the possibility of meeting in person or organizing a communications conference for networking and training.

- “Communications people feed off of energy and ideas – we need to reconnect, build relationships, and see what’s happening as a collective.”
- “Communications among partners is important. We’re all in this together and if we fail, we all fail – there can be a Caribou coffee across from a Starbucks, that’s okay.”
- “I would love to have a communications network in the state, we don’t have anything like that for our communicators.”
- “We have different missions, but we can learn from each other. More voices will resonate with more people if we work together to get the message out.”
- “You can have different horses attached to the same hitch as long as they’re all pulling in the same direction. We need to work together as partners to get information out there.”
- “Having these kinds of conversations is important. It’s valuable to build relationships across organizations and jurisdictions – the industry needs that effort.”

NEXT STEPS – *Support, Coordinate, Develop*

In seeking to fill the outlined role of supporting, coordinating, and developing communications projects, the Joint Ventures should play an active role in facilitating communications networks in Montana, North Dakota, and South Dakota. Given that partnerships are the entire modus operandi of the JV model, this approach is a good fit and would help both JVs fill a communications niche in the landscape. With different operating environments and challenges in each state, the strategy for forming and maintaining such a network would need to be adapted and adjusted accordingly. This would require the Joint Ventures to work closely with local partners to define the purpose and structure for the proposed network, which then needs to be championed and supported by those local partners instead of having the JV out front. As North Dakota already has a network in place – the Meadowlark Initiative’s Conservation Marketing Group – there is an opportunity to learn from their efforts to assist in the development of networks in Montana and South Dakota.

The JVs will also reevaluate and adapt our approach to storytelling to better elevate ongoing partner communications work and more nimbly respond to untold stories. Ideally, having communications networks to tap into will better enable the JVs to be aware of and amplify compelling stories of local conservation. This would prioritize the storytelling efforts of our partners so that the JVs are actively focusing on sharing partner-developed content and getting more eyes on stories that already exist. Closer contact with our partners will also help identify important stories that are not being told, creating an opportunity for the JVs to assist in developing novel content to fill gaps in the storytelling landscape. These are very important roles that the Joint Ventures can play, and, if successfully realized, will facilitate the conversations that lead to greater unity around collective, positive conservation messages.

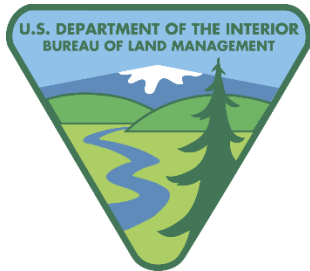
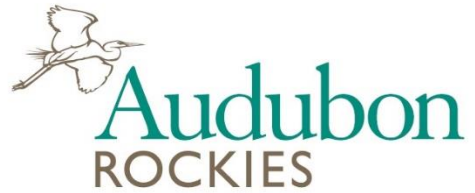
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Thank you to our partners who participated in this assessment!



MEADOWLARK INITIATIVE



Natural Resources Conservation Service

Appendix: Discussion Questions for Partner Interviews

Purpose: The PPJV and NGPJV are engaging in an effort to reach a broader constituent base by elevating compelling, positive stories that highlight the multiple benefits conservation provides for working farms and ranches, rural livelihoods, food and water security, wildlife habitat, biodiversity, and recreational opportunities. As a first step, we are collecting information about what's currently happening across the communications landscape in Montana and the Dakotas, where the gaps are, and how the JVs can offer support to our partners.

1. Who are the primary audience(s) of your communications and what challenges have you faced in trying to communicate with those audiences?
2. In your opinion, what audiences do we need to do a better job of reaching out to with messages about conservation?
3. What activities have been most/least effective in communicating with your priority audiences?
4. Are there any activities that you think would be effective, but you haven't had the opportunity to try? Any emerging technologies that you're excited about?
5. How often do you develop stories that highlight the benefits of conservation beyond wildlife and habitat? (e.g., livelihoods, communities, recreation, etc.)
6. What methods do you use to measure progress towards communications outcomes?
7. What are the most significant barriers for your organization to overcome to increase the scope and effectiveness of communications?
8. Have any of your communications efforts led to information being used in an unintended way?
9. What do you think are some of the biggest missed communication opportunities in this landscape, and why? (not necessarily specific to your organization, but at a larger scale)
10. What's the best way partners can help support and elevate your work?