9. TALKING TO THE MEDIA

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This manual has been designed to supplement your **Talking to the Media** training session. It is designed to expand on the themes discussed in the session and **provide practical examples** of how communicating with the media can aid in **raising the profile of your Natura 2000** site and of the wider Natura 2000 network.



Why should you talk to the media?

Learning how to engage with the media is not just a useful skill for an organisation and its members to develop but a vital one. If you are not telling the media about what your organisation stands for, what its values are and what it is doing, then other people or agencies will do it for you – and not always to your advantage.

Examples

In the training session we referred to a number of recent news items relating to Natura 2000 sites facing challenging circumstances:

- *Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP) approving a 'memorandum of understanding' for a 50 million Euro hotels complex in the Karadere area, on the Black Sea coast. The area falls within the Natura 2000 network.* **Story web link**
- *Precious metals development company, Mawson Resources Ltd, drilling 600 to 1,200 metres in the Hirvimaa glacial area, in Finland, just outside a Natura 2000 area*. **Story web link**
- *Committee Against Bird Slaughter (CABS) informing police of illegal finch trapping inside the Il-Majjistral Nature and History Park, near Manikata, Gozo – a Special Area of Conservation (SPA) of international importance within the Natura 2000 network of sites.* **Story web link**

The managers of these sites face different issues but, in all cases, their ability to talk to and use the media to get their message across to the public is important. Other agencies, particularly commercial ones, will use the media to convince the wider world that their point of view on an issue is the correct one. It is for the Natura 2000 site manager (and the network) to make sure a reasoned alternative argument – in the above examples, against development or exploitation, and for environmental protection – is also heard.

Remember!

You cannot compete with the advertising and marketing budgets of large corporations but (if approached correctly) gaining greater media coverage for your side of the argument can be done **for FREE.**

Media coverage for your Natura 2000 site can also be an aid to:

- **recruiting volunteers** to help with work
- creating a **sense of ownership** and pride in local residents about the site
- **encouraging sustainable business** interests to go into partnership with the site.

How this works in practice / *Case Study 1*

Let us imagine that a Natura 2000 site manager wants to encourage more walkers to visit their site. There is a rich history in and around where the site now stands and the manager has the idea of working with local History Societies and 'battle re-enactment' groups, to map trails to take people through areas of historical interest (former battlefields, etc), complete with information notice boards along the walks.

Our Natura 2000 site manager and these history enthusiasts need volunteer help to map the trails, and also want to publicise it so walkers will visit when they are complete.

The manager informs the local media of the story and over one day:

- s/he is interviewed on the local radio station's Morning Show (audience **25,000** listeners)
- spends two hours walking a TV news crew around the site, where s/he and a member of the 'battle re-enactment' group describe its (evening news audience of **100,000** viewers).
- talks to a journalist from the local daily newspaper for half-an-hour and emails them some relevant photos of the site to use with the article (newspaper readership of **60,000**).

For a morning's work the manager has 'told' a potential audience of **185,000 people** about the project, that it needs volunteers and when visitors can expect to come and use the site's new history trails. This is not including other media (weekly newspapers, magazines, bloggers and social media users) who may also take up the story, spreading the message further.

Why people don't talk to the media

We've seen that the media can be a useful tool to enable you to achieve your objectives as a Natura 2000 site manager but there are a number of reasons people give for not engaging with journalists and news organisations.

'I don't know anybody in the media I can talk to'.

As a Natura 2000 manager you will spend a lot of time travelling around the area where your site is. You will know:

- the newspapers people read
- the radio stations they listen to
- the local TV news stations
- if there are local interest websites, listing 'What's On' and upcoming events.

→ **Make a list of these media** outlets and find their phone numbers and email addresses. Nearly all news organisations today have their own website, where you will find a contact number or email address for a 'News Desk' or 'News Editor', or a number to 'Call us with your story'**. When contacting them, make a point of finding out the name of the journalist/editor you speak to for future reference.**

'If I do speak to someone, they won't be interested in what I've got to say'.

Every day newspapers have to fill many blank pages, radio and TV news stations hours of air time, even websites and social media pages have to be regularly updated to remain fresh and interesting. Media organisations try and do all this with as few staff as possible, which means their journalists are very busy people.

Anyone calling up to offer them an interesting story – complete with lively speakers and the potential for good photos/filming opportunities – is making their life easier and should be listened to.

It may be that, on the day you contact the media organisation, they are genuinely too busy to cover your story or feel it's just not for them.

DON'T give up after one setback.

Keep going back to them whenever you've got a new story about your site – the next one might be just right for a front page or top news item.

'The media is only interested in bad news'.

Wrong. The media is interested in interesting news – whether it's good or bad.

Media organisations work in a very competitive environment, constantly trying to keep their own readers/listeners/viewers and steal a share of their rivals. They do this by covering stories which will appeal to their existing audience and new ones. So, if a journalist is doing their job properly, they will judge a story's worth on how interesting it is – not whether it will show the organisation or people involved in a good or bad light.

For example, here are two hypothetical news headlines about a Natura 2000 site:

- Nature site to receive 500,000 Euro investment. Jobs to be created.
- Government report criticises nature site's management. Future uncertain.

Both would be considered valid stories by the media – because they are of interest to its readers/listeners/viewers.

****NOTE The key here as a Natura 2000 site manager is to make sure you build a good relationship with local media and supply them with a steady flow of stories about the positive work your site is doing.**

'All journalists have a hidden agenda. If I tell them about my site's project they'll twist my words for their own purposes'.

Yes, journalists can be lazy, incompetent and cause you trouble – but what profession doesn't include at least a few people like that?

Most of the journalists you'll meet will be hardworking and professional. In most cases they are just looking to help you tell them an interesting story, so they can tell their audience.

BUT you must accept that the journalist will want to present the facts you give them their own way, to make the story as interesting as it can be.

I wouldn't know what to say to a journalist.

This is the main reason people avoid engaging with the media – it can seem scary. But as a Natura 2000 manager you have a secret weapon – you.

How this works in practice / *Case Study 2*

A Natura 2000 site manager invites a TV news crew to their site, to cover a story about a serious science research project looking at the courtship rituals of a rare and endangered bird.

In the course of an interview, one of the scientists tells the reporter that the research has so far shown that – unusually – in this species the male birds are subservient to the females, and that the females actually 'date' a number of males before making their choice.

When it is broadcast the TV news item about the site's project gets all the facts right but makes it into a humorous piece, mainly talking about the female birds 'ruling the roost' over the poor males. While the Natura 200 site manager would have wanted a more serious approach, the media outlet chose this way of presenting the news item because it thought it would be more interesting for its viewers.

BUT – It is still a positive news item which raises awareness of the Natura 2000 site.

NOTE – There's a difference between a media organisation deciding to present a news item a different way and simply getting facts wrong, accidentally or deliberately.

IF a story about your Natura 2000 site is mis-represented and factually inaccurate, you should always address this with the media organisation involved.

News stories – whether written or recorded – are used as source materials by other journalists, for official reports and by politicians, so it is important they are challenged if inaccurate.

You can always speak to the journalist who contacted you or, if they are not helpful, their Editor, and explain clearly what was inaccurate, before asking for a correction or an apology.

Accuracy is very important to media organisations. Audiences will cease to trust them – and perhaps cease to read/listen/watch their news items – if they feel they are routinely not being told the truth. Journalists who regularly get their facts wrong do not last long in media organisations.

9.1 MEDIA SKILLS

Media skills you already have

You may not know it but you've already got the most important skills and knowledge you'll need to speak to the media:

• **Expertise** – Journalists are not (in the main) environmentalists, flora and fauna specialists, or scientists. Their skills lie in helping people who are those things to tell an interesting story. You will always know more about your site and the news connected with it than the journalist does, which means you can get over the message you feel is important.

• **Passion** – When you listen to someone who is committed to and enthusiastic about what they are doing you can get carried along too, even if you know very little about their field. That's you. Don't be afraid to show your (controlled) passion for what you're doing in an interview, to engage the media audience it's aimed at. If you're looking for them to take action (volunteer or visit your event, perhaps) you will need to enthuse them.

• **Experience** – You've probably had to describe what you do to someone who knows nothing about the Natura 2000 network, many times. You keep the explanation simple, tell them all the most exciting bits first, and try not to throw a lot of jargon and organisation names at them. This is exactly what you need to do when talking to media outlets and the audiences reading/listening/watching them.

Now what we need to do is add the skills and knowledge to help you use that Expertise, Passion and Experience to gain good media coverage for your Natura 2000 site and the wider network.

Media skills we need to work on

• Knowledge of the media and how it works

In the training session, everybody was asked to help list as many different types of media as they could think of.

<u>We can divide types of media up in terms of the way they transmit news:</u>

- **Printing it** – newspapers, magazines, newsletters.
- **Broadcasting it** – TV and radio.
- **Posting it online** – websites and blogs.
- **Using social media** – Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn and many others.
- Sometimes news is not put out by a news organisation but just one individual. **Citizen journalists**, with access to a computer and smart phone, have become a big generator of news now.

<u>Or, media can be listed in terms of the areas they cover:</u>

- Local and regional
- National
- International

<u>Or, the kinds of story they cover:</u>

- General media – news and current events aimed at a broad audience with no specialised knowledge.
- Specialist media – subject specific and aimed mainly at a smaller audience with that special interest. *(e.g. a monthly magazine for environmental/conservation professionals.*

If you have a good news story about your Natura 2000 site, think about how you can use as many different news channels as possible – newspapers, radio stations, websites – and talk to both the local outlets (general media) as well as environmental/conservation press (specialist media).

You worked hard to identify your news story, so you want it to go as far as possible for all your efforts. If it is a strong news story, it will 'travel' quite far anyway. Different parts of the media watch and listen to each other all the time, and will often pick up on a news story they like.

How this works in practice / *Case Study 3*

A story's 'journey' through the media could go something like this:

Specialist & Print – Monthly conservation magazine runs serious article on research at a Natura 2000 site, looking at a rare male insect's courtship rituals.

Online & International – Story goes on magazine's website.

Social media – Web link to the story is picked up by Twitter users. A Twitter user remarks on the male insect's 'cute' habit of giving a 'wrapped' gift of grubs to the female its pursuing. A short video with the tag line 'world's most romantic insect' begins to rapidly trend on Twitter.

National & Broadcast – TV news station follows Twitter and picks up on the story. It contacts Natura 2000 site manager, asking to come and do a feature item on it for that evening's news.

9.2 NEWS SENSE AND NON SENSE

What is a story?

News should be 'new'

- **Fresh** – something not known before, just announced.
- **Immediate or very recent.**
- **Surprising or unusual** – a unique or rare occurrence. 'Man bites dog' is unusual, so it makes for a better news story than 'dog bites man, which is commonplace.
- **Relevant** – People pay more attention or are driven to action if there's a chance something will affect them. If you want news about your Natura 2000 site to get someone's attention, explain how it affects them or their environment.
- **Available** – The media needs your help to cover a story. Reporters need to know about it in good time, get to interview the right people and have access to photograph/film or record.

What isn't a story?

- **Repetition** – Asking a news organisation to re-run a story they did on your Natura 2000 site project six months ago, without offering them a new twist or 'news line' about it. They won't do this just because you need the publicity.
- **Out of date** – If you've got a fantastic event that's just happened a journalist will need to be told quickly. Telling them a month later, once the photos have come back, is no good.
- **Irrelevance** – As we said before, newspapers and broadcasters have to run stories that are relevant and interesting to their audience, or their audience will stop reading/ watching/ listening.

A visit from EU officials may be exciting for those on the Natura 2000 site itself but the media won't be interested, unless you can tell them why it's relevant to them and their audiences.

- **Lack of access** – It's not unusual for a big project or event to keep people so busy they only think of getting publicity for it right at the end, when those most involved may no longer be available. Plan ahead. If journalists are told everyone's "too busy" to speak to them, they will quickly lose interest and move onto someone else's news item.

9.3 DIFFERENT MEDIA AND THEIR NEEDS

So far we've talked about all media needing:

- something interesting to report on
- someone to interview who has in-depth knowledge about the story and is willing to be quoted/recorded/filmed
- images, video footage or photos to illustrate the story (this even applies to radio stations, most of which now have their own website).

But a newspaper reporter will approach a story differently to a radio presenter, who will in turn have different needs to a TV journalist or an online 'special interest' blogger.

Let's take a brief look at how these different media operate.

Print



Newspaper and magazine journalists will come to you to do an interview but it's not unusual for them to do a lot of their interviews over the phone. This is not (usually) because of laziness but is due to the time pressures of working to a deadline. On a daily paper they might have only an hour to 'file' a story.

Freelance journalists (who work for themselves, finding stories to sell to media outlets) often take their own photographs. A newspaper reporter might interview you over the phone and send a photographer out to get the photos afterwards.

If you can shoot your own photos or film footage for a story, and offer it free to media, this is often appreciated and might mean your story gets better coverage.

Radio



Radio like their listeners to feel the immediacy of the story. They will often ask an interviewee to come into the studio or will send a presenter out into the field, so they can interact directly with the person speaking.

They can, however, also interview over the phone.

A Natura 2000 site is always going to have background noise but this is fine. Some background noise adds to the atmosphere for the listener.

This sounds obvious but remember the radio audience can't see you. If you are doing an activity you might have to describe your surroundings and your actions – but the presenter should talk you through this.

Television



Even more obviously, television news is all about pictures.

If a TV news crew is coming to your Natura 2000 site to see you about a project or activity, you will need to be available to take them to the location and demonstrate the activity.

If the news item is being pre-recorded it might mean many 'takes' before the journalist/cameraman is satisfied.

Be warned – This can take a long time. It is not unusual for it to take two or three hours to film a story that lasts only a minute onscreen, on that evening's TV news.

Digital/Social Media



This sector of the media is growing more rapidly than any other.

There are far too many different types of digital/social media to address in-depth here – with new ones coming online all the time – but here are two general rules for organisations using it to put out its news:

Invest the time – Many organisations set-up websites and social media channels with enthusiasm and the best of intentions, then lose interest after six months or just run out of things to say.

A weekly online column might sound like a great idea – until you're desperately trying to think of a fresh topic on week 15.

Be realistic on how much you can regularly do online. A website news section or Twitter account that's been inactive for months reflects poorly on an organisation.

Prepare to be criticised – Putting news online means your organisation can be criticised (often unfairly) by anyone with a laptop or mobile phone. It's important for organisations to monitor their social media channels, to respond to queries and also to answer criticisms. This is particularly important where those criticisms contain the wrong information.

For example – "The EU just takes land off farmers to create new Natura 2000 sites and doesn't compensate them."

Unchallenged, these become accepted 'truths' that other media may also use.

Five key points to remember when talking to the media

- **You're the expert**
  Knowing more about the subject than the journalist puts you at an advantage.

- **Show your enthusiasm**
  It will engage the reader/listener/viewer.

- **Keep answers short and simple**
  The audience or readership you're talking to may know nothing about the subject. Using unexplained acronyms and professional jargon will lose their interest.

- **Correct poor questioning**
  Don't be afraid to politely correct a journalist/presenter, who gets their facts wrong. You can use your answer to correct them.
  Example: Journalist – "How do you think local people will feel about paying the costs of the new project on this Natura 2000 site?"
  You – "Actually 100% of the costs will be covered by the European Union, local people won't pay anything, but they'll benefit from the project because…"

- **Assume nothing is 'off the record'**
  unless you have a good and long established relationship with the journalist.