

PARTNERS IN FLIGHT EDUCATION, OUTREACH, AND COMMUNICATIONS NEEDS ASSESSMENT

ASHLEY A. DAYER¹, MELISSA PITKIN², AND SUSAN BONFIELD³

¹*Klamath Bird Observatory, Ashland, Oregon, USA;*

²*PRBO Conservation Science, Petaluma, California, USA; and*

³*Environment for the Americas, Boulder, Colorado, USA*

INTRODUCTION

Although the success of conservation relies upon human action, until recently limited emphasis has been placed on education, outreach, and communication as a means of achieving bird conservation. Bird educators working on the ground have long recognized this opportunity; today the conservation community is increasingly recognizing the same opportunity. As the number of educators and communicators dedicated to conservation grows, opportunities for partnerships with the ecological community are growing. Uniting the two groups will result in an enhanced ability to influence the knowledge, attitudes, skills, awareness, and behaviors needed to conserve birds and their habitats among targeted audiences. The Partners in Flight Education, Outreach, and Communication Needs Assessment builds upon historic efforts to improve bird conservation through education by summarizing the current opportunities as defined by participants in the 4th International Partners in Flight (PIF) Conference.

A key document from the 4th International PIF McAllen meeting, "Guidelines for Discussion Sessions and Needs Assessment" reflects PIF's growing effort to prioritize education, outreach, and communications as strategies for achieving bird conservation:

[Education, Outreach, and Communications]...are essential to achieving conservation success and have not received adequate attention to date. As you will see, the McAllen Steering Committee and Program Committee have integrated bird conservation education at an unprecedented level in this conference.

The needs assessment will provide specific information for the new Bird Education Alliance for Conservation [which serves as the Education and Communications Working Groups for Partners in Flight as of May 2008].

HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF NEEDS FOR EDUCATION, OUTREACH, AND COMMUNICATIONS

Only a few previous sources have summarized the needs for Education, Outreach, and Communications (EOC) efforts in achieving bird conservation. These past summaries have been general in their definition of EOC needs, placing less emphasis on these disciplines than on research and monitoring activities.

The Partners in Flight North American Landbird Conservation Plan (Rich et al. 2004) focuses on the needs for research and monitoring, but does not contain a parallel section for EOC. EOC priorities are defined broadly in the "Landbird Conservation Goals for the Next Decade" section of the plan—specifically under Goal 2—which refers to creating a network of conservation partners to implement landbird conservation needs at multiple scales. Two audiences, the general public and bird watchers, are identified. For the general public, needs statements promote large-scale actions including incorporating birds into school curricula and supporting International Migratory Bird Day and other public awareness-building activities. For bird watchers the emphasis is on engaging birders in monitoring and research through volunteerism as well as influencing public policy and funding resources. Despite the lack of detail regarding EOC needs, many of the threats to birds discussed within the plan's body clearly

⁴Present address: Cornell University, Ithaca, New York, USA. E-mail: dayer@post.harvard.edu

necessitate education, outreach, and communication as a strategy to address these conservation concerns (Pitkin and Duberstein 2009).

Increased attention to education, outreach, and communications was emphasized in the Partners in Flight Strategic Plan (unpubl.) under the headings of "Education" and "Communications". The focus under education is again general, including utilizing educational organizations to craft tools; drawing on tools and programs to secure support and involvement from audiences; taking advantage of public interest in birds by building public outreach and education aspects into PIF; and continuing to support International Migratory Bird Day. The communications list is longer with 16, as compared to four, items. Those include actions that are focused on promoting PIF to other conservation partners, such as professional meeting attendees, Joint Ventures, ornithological societies, and other bird conservation initiatives. The needs also focus on increasing the visibility, or awareness, of bird conservation amongst government and the conservation and bird watcher communities. Finally, several needs are associated with "inreach" within the PIF community, including general information exchange and workshops.

BIRD EDUCATION ALLIANCE FOR CONSERVATION

Since spring 2008, the Bird Education Alliance for Conservation (BEAC) has served in the capacity of the PIF Education and Communications Working Groups. BEAC created the most recent articulation of EOC needs in its Strategic Plan (2008), introducing the collaborative network whose mission is to promote bird conservation through education, engaging new audiences in conservation action, developing the tools necessary to improve bird conservation messages and education materials, and incorporating education as a strategy into conservation efforts and bird conservation initiatives. BEAC has identified six priority goals:

- growing the collaborative network of professional educators and communicators;
- partnering directly with the science community;
- harnessing the power of education for conservation needs;
- enhancing the availability of materials and tools tied to the bird conservation needs;
- developing the means to reach underserved audiences; and
- ensuring linkages with our international partners.

Each of the strategic goals is fleshed out with clearly defined objectives. The BEAC strategic

plan can be found online at: www.birdedalliance.org.

BEAC steering committee members worked closely with the 2008 International PIF planning committee to come up with the questions asked of session participants for this needs assessment. BEAC has also taken the role of ensuring the needs identified in this assessment are implemented. As you read through the summaries of the needs note that BEAC has already initiated projects to address key needs.

DEFINING THE NEEDS CATEGORY

For the purposes of the Needs Assessment, the category of Education, Outreach, and Communications (EOC) is defined broadly to include all the fields of education, interpretation, social marketing, training, and human dimensions. In the instructions given to session leaders, EOC was defined by the PIF steering committee as "more than just dumping information on the public. We also have specific audiences who we would like to take certain actions. Identify an issue, a target audience, a message, and what exactly you want them to do."

NEEDS DEFINED AT THE FOURTH INTERNATIONAL PARTNERS IN FLIGHT CONFERENCE

Initially, 192 needs were identified by session leaders as fitting under the heading of Education, Outreach, and Communications (EOC). We removed 52 items from our analysis that did not fit the definitions provided in the Guidelines for Discussion Sessions and Needs Assessment. We also added in our review 11 needs from Capacity Building, which fit the definition of this analysis. In total, 151 needs are presented here. As such, 33 % of all the needs identified in the 2008 PIF Needs Assessment are related to EOC, making it the area with the most stated needs.

The 151 EOC needs are arranged into six key themes as defined by the authors. Each need from the sessions was coded by one of the six themes using NVivo (QSR NVivo 2002) which allowed for quantitative summarization and further exploration for qualitative description of how the themes were expressed. The themes are listed here and discussed in more detail below:

1. Changing of knowledge, attitude, or behavior of an audience to address a conservation issue,
2. Creating and distributing products and programs,
3. Improving how we conduct education/outreach/communications,

4. Elevating the importance of education/outreach/communications for conservation,
5. Communicating within the conservation community, and
6. Communicating outside of the conservation community.

We discuss each of these six themes in detail below.

1. CHANGING OF KNOWLEDGE, ATTITUDE, OR BEHAVIOR OF AN AUDIENCE TO ADDRESS A CONSERVATION ISSUE

In the traditional sense, education, outreach, and communications aim to change knowledge, skills, attitudes, or behaviors of an individual or group of people. Thus, the social component of every conservation issue might necessitate EOC activities targeting specific groups of people. Messages that are appropriate for different audiences must be created to encourage and promote direct conservation outcomes. These messages must be delivered in a way that targeted audiences can relate to and that will motivate actions to conserve birds.

Sixty needs expressed the theme of targeting specific audiences, making it the most prevalent need. Audiences mentioned were broad and ranged greatly: for example, some included tourism providers, landowners, federal land managers, bird trappers, students, and specific sectors of industry (e.g., glass companies). Associated actions for each audience were similarly broad depending on the session topic. For example, actions included adopting specific bird friendly practices, and growing awareness of a given issue. In some cases the actions were tied to a specific outcome while others were left vague.

Ideally, each need would have had a clearly identified audience, message, and outcome, necessary facets of targeted EOC delivery. This highlights the need for educators or others versed in this type of targeted outreach delivery to work in concert with those in the conservation community to address conservation threats. At the same time, bird educators need to take direction from the conservation community to ensure that their programs are addressing the issues of greatest conservation need. BEAC emphasizes this two-part need with its strategic goal of “harnessing the power of education for conservation needs.” Uniting the two groups will ensure that needs are well thought out and addressing the greatest conservation need.

Efforts underway by BEAC to create the Bird Conservation Toolkit (hereafter Toolkit) will provide great support in this area (Pitkin and Duberstein 2009). The Toolkit supports the

conservation of birds and bird habitat through strategic communications, education, and outreach efforts based on priorities identified in the Bird Conservation Plans. The Toolkit will enable those working in communications, education, and outreach to strategically identify, create, and implement regionally and locally relevant actions, materials, and activities that support the bird conservation initiatives.

This Toolkit will serve as a field-advancing resource to drive the work of EOC professionals nation-wide and serve as a foundation for collaboration amongst the conservation and education communities.

2. CREATING AND DISTRIBUTING PRODUCTS AND PROGRAMS

Products and programs are created and implemented by a variety of providers—some specific to bird education, some to conservation education, and some to bird conservation. Provider organizations are varied and include zoos, bird observatories, nature centers, Audubon chapters, and school to name a few. A variety of products and programs exist addressing an array of issues and messages. Some of these products and programs are promoted and/or distributed widely (e.g., International Migratory Bird Day [www.bird-day.org], Flying Wild [www.flyingwild.org], Bird Sleuth [<http://www.birds.cornell.edu/BirdSleuth>]). Others are unique to a single organization but with the potential to be utilized—directly or as a model—by other organizations. Sharing of products and programs increases capacity of providers, moving their expenditure of resources from product and program development to implementation. When quality products or programs are shared or expanded they have further value in the consistent messaging ultimately yielding greater impact.

This theme was the second most prevalent (expressed 34 times in sessions). The theme reflected calls for sharing resources, cataloguing resources, and distributing to providers the existing resources of various types. In some cases this theme overlaps with the previous theme as an education program or outcome needed for a given audience and purpose. If it was phrased in a way that emphasized the implementation of the product or program rather than educational messaging and outcome, we included it here. In other articulated needs under this theme, session participants were calling for a quality program or product to be used more widely such as landowner bird conservation guides or RARE campaigns (<http://rareconservation.org/>).

To address this need we must establish an effective clearinghouse for bird conservation education products and programs. It must be marketed so educators and communicators populate it and use it as a resource for acquiring products. BEAC focuses one of its strategic goals on addressing the availability of bird conservation education products and programs, linking them to the Toolkit as the resource or product relates to a given conservation need. Several potential sites exist that have been recently developed or are in development; Environment for the Americas (www.birdday.org); the Conservation Education Portal (www.outdoorresource.org/); and the North American Association for Environmental Education state resource directories (www.naaee.org/programs-and-initiatives/resource-review/ee-directory).

However, while an array of products and programs exists, it is necessary for bird education materials to be evaluated to ensure their quality. Standards for quality products and programs, such as the North American Association for Environmental Education *Guidelines for Excellence* (<http://naaee.org/npeee/materials.php>), should be followed. These characteristics of quality must be considered when designing the clearinghouse and sharing resources. It should be noted that in some cases promoting the product or program may not be the most effective approach but rather it is necessary to consider whether the hoped-for outcome will be achieved in a given location or situation with the implementation of a product or program.

3. IMPROVING HOW WE CONDUCT EDUCATION/ OUTREACH/COMMUNICATIONS

Just as with ecology-based conservation efforts, if we are to effectively conduct conservation education and communications we must follow best practices that include phases of planning, implementation, and evaluation. The North American Association for Environmental Education's *Guidelines for Excellence* provides best practices for all three phases. Program evaluation is especially critical as it provides findings to guide all phases of program planning, implementation, and feedback loops for ongoing improvement. A literature review has revealed a lack of peer-reviewed bird education evaluation studies or research on educational outcomes (Busch and Dayer 2008) suggesting that bird education and outreach programs as a whole have not been evaluated. Encouraging more evaluation is critical to improving our ability to effect conservation through education, outreach and communication.

Thirty-one needs related to improving how education, outreach, and communications programs are conducted. These needs can be summarized into five categories: employing best practices, training education providers, conducting evaluations, building capacity of educators to evaluate programs, and taking a strategic approach to setting priorities. In some cases they specified linking with national organizations known for success in quality education advancement, such as the North American Association for Environmental Education or the Children and Nature Network. Many of these needs came out of sessions that were education, outreach, or communications focused and full of professionals in the field who are aware of such needs, including a workshop on education evaluation, a session on conservation education, or a session on science education through bird banding.

Best practices in the fields of environmental education and environmental communications exist as models that can be adopted by those working towards bird conservation. This may be accomplished by:

- Encouraging bird education providers and organizations to accept North American Association for Environmental Education *Guidelines for Excellence* for their education programming and undergo the review process of their programs to ensure the quality of bird education;
- Providing trainings on these guidelines as well as on specific aspects of best practices such as evaluation must be conducted;
- Promoting Environmental Education certification for bird EOC staff;

In order for the bird conservation education field to benefit from training and opportunities to learn how to implement best practices and evaluations, there must be ample institutional support and financial resources allocated toward these needs. In some cases we make the erroneous assumption that these skills and knowledge are not as difficult to pick up and can be self-taught while we emphasize allocating resources to geographical information system trainings or statistical analyses trainings. Yet, in fact, these skills and best practices require training and educational support to be effectively employed.

4. ELEVATING THE IMPORTANCE OF EDUCATION/ OUTREACH/COMMUNICATIONS FOR CONSERVATION

While biological studies and conservation implementation has flourished and advanced,

bird conservation education has lagged, receiving fewer resources, staff, and funding opportunities. In some cases resources allocated go to bird education, rather than bird *conservation* education. Educators are skilled in following such principles for effective communication and education; yet, in many cases there is not collaboration with the science community who understand the greatest conservation needs. The education, outreach, and communications community could be instrumental in addressing these needs, moving the outcomes of their education efforts beyond bird appreciation to bird conservation action. In some cases, institutional barriers have stood in the way, and in many other cases resources have been limited.

Nine needs mentioned the necessity of including education in various conservation approaches, increasing collaboration between science and education, or improving the availability of resources to bird conservation education.

As growing attention is placed on the need to integrate EOC into conservation, BEAC is prepared to serve as a collaborative network to facilitate this collaboration between the science community and bird educators. The Bird Education Network, developed by the Council for Environmental Education 2007, has also created two significant mechanisms for galvanizing bird educators—a bird education listserv with over 500 participants and a bi-annual national gathering of bird educators with 100-150 participants at the 2007 and 2009 gatherings. These mechanisms can be used to facilitate communication with the bird education community. To ensure communication with the bird education community is tied to the conservation community, representatives from EOC must actively engage in bird conservation meetings, such as PIF and the North American Bird Conservation Initiative. These initiatives offer such a vehicle through their Education and Communications working groups and committees. Yet, these professionals must also engage in meetings of the PIF Implementation Committee for collaboration to occur. Funding for those in education, outreach, and communications to attend these meetings and play a significant role in the conservation projects of these collaborative networks continues to be problematic and proved to be a barrier in the past to the active engagement of the EOC community in these efforts.

5. COMMUNICATING WITHIN OUR CONSERVATION COMMUNITY

Education, outreach, and communications professionals are often called upon to aid in communicating within our community. Some refer to

this internal communication as “inreach.” Before we can be fully effective in external communications, our conservation community must be on the same page, and thus, internal communications is crucial. As PIF approaches its twentieth anniversary, much has been accomplished in internal communications within the bird conservation community in North America. Hundreds of individuals and organizations are involved in listservs and meetings at state, national, and international levels. In many cases those in education, outreach, and communications are not as aware of PIF and bird conservation issues as are the biologists. Further, conservation professionals outside of bird conservation can continue to be brought into the network.

Six needs expressed a call for internal communications. Several specified a website or mechanism for sharing a type of information (e.g., climate change) or successful models. One specifically referred to increasing the distribution of an existing internal communications tool, the bilingual quarterly newsletter “La Tangara,” for PIF MesoAmerica.

While internal communications have increased greatly through listservs and newsletters, we have the particular opportunity to take advantage of web advancements. Individual PIF working groups and committees are beginning to explore shared workspace technology such as Google groups and Wikis. These interactive technologies will allow for better sharing of information and tools and resources. The BEAC Toolkit project is researching how these technologies might be used for the sharing of education, outreach, and communications products and programs. Additionally, these opportunities are being considered for tracking the implementation of this Needs Assessment.

6. COMMUNICATING OUTSIDE OF OUR CONSERVATION COMMUNITY TO GROW IT

A communications need in any network or movement is sharing the approach and goals with those on the outside to foster partnerships. PIF, as a voluntary network for advancing bird conservation, has enjoyed great success through recruiting a diverse set of organizations and individuals to be involved. As we continue to face challenges in bird conservation, we will need to continue to involve non-traditional partners in our bird conservation efforts.

Ten needs related to ways in which the community might grow. In several cases the ecotourism and tourism community was mentioned. Additionally, agricultural producers, watershed councils, Natural Resource Conservation Service,

and landowners were mentioned. In addition a couple needs broadly called for nontraditional partners or inter-regional partnerships.

A communications plan for PIF and the bird conservation initiatives broadly could address such needs for communication and provide direction. Additionally, a mechanism for the conservation community to engage with and advise the ecotourism community might be necessary. As birding grows nationally and internationally, this certainly will be an area for potential collaboration and also potentially impact to birds.

NEXT STEPS

There is great opportunity to use education, outreach, and communications to advance the field of bird conservation. As we have advanced our knowledge in ecology and conservation needs, we are far more advanced in understanding what conservation outcomes must occur. Simultaneously, bird education programs are growing, creating a powerful cadre of providers capable of reaching a variety of audiences. As the McAllen Needs Assessment highlights, there is potential for EOC to have a great impact on conserving birds and their ecosystems. Yet, with such an array of needs, we must prioritize and be strategic in our efforts.

International guidance and coordination will be needed, such as by the Bird Education Alliance for Conservation (serving as the PIF Education and Communications Working Groups and on the North American Bird Conservation Initiative Communications Committee and State of the Birds Communications Team). Further, means to communicate and encourage collaboration amongst bird educators, has been developed by the Bird Education Network (BEN) through their listserv and bi-annual national gathering. These coordinating efforts will allow us to respond to the identified needs as a group and as individual organizations and providers. The time is right with the education community galvanizing and conservation community ready for such collaboration.

BIRD CONSERVATION TOOLKIT

Given the highest number of needs (60) addressed targeting specific audiences, the BEAC Toolkit project (Pitkin and Duberstein 2009) along with assessment of existing products should be a top priority. An analysis of all of the conservation threats in bird conservation plans has been accomplished. A structure for the Toolkit has been created. Now we must link all conservation issues with audiences,

messages, and outcomes. Then we can begin to populate it with quality existing products and programs. As we begin to evaluate the effectiveness of the products and programs in achieving goals we can inform our future efforts to ensure effectiveness.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND BEST PRACTICES

Professional development and implementation of best practices must be prioritized as well. As educators embrace the North American Association for Environmental Education Guidelines for Excellence and related best practices, our field will concurrently be advanced and improved. Training and capacity building related to program design and evaluation must be undertaken for practitioners to be able to continuously make their efforts more effective.

PIF COMMUNICATIONS PLAN

With internal and external communications needs ongoing, a communications plan for PIF is advisable. Through its design, the above needs could be incorporated as well as those identified in the PIF Strategic Plan (unpubl.) that have yet to be addressed. As with the Toolkit, a communications plan could guide the work of the collaborative network as well as those organizations and individuals who play a part. The Partners in Flight 20th Anniversary in 2010 is a key opportunity for external communications.

LINKING EOC WITH SCIENCE

As evidenced by all of these needs within the historical context of past conservation plans and the PIF strategic plan giving minimal attention to education, outreach and communications, it is appropriate to involve EOC professionals in these planning processes from the onset in the future. The NABCI subcommittee that wrote *The U.S. State of the Birds* (North American Bird Conservation Initiative, U.S. Committee 2009) followed such a collaborative approach with a Science team and a Communications team working in tandem. The report and the expected outcome with the media and policymakers is a testament to the value of such close collaboration. As PIF undertakes its Trinational Vision design and writing, such communications involvement is advisable. In fact, it has already begun with an evaluation of the users of Rich et al. (2004) which was conducted by BEAC. Future PIF plans must incorporate EOC needs and involve the skills of these professionals in their design and messaging and in their communications and media planning.

PRIORITY FUNDING FOR EOC

In order for these EOC needs to be met, we must have funding mechanisms. Traditionally, resources for bird conservation education have lagged behind other fields in bird conservation such as biological planning, monitoring, and even research. This is evidenced by the lack of positions dedicated to education, outreach, or communications in federal and state agencies and in many bird conservation nonprofits. Further, many of the larger funding sources for bird conservation have not included bird education, outreach, and communications as one of their priorities or have only allowed it as a small component. In order for us to realize the potential for EOC these funding sources must include EOC as a priority.

CONCLUSION

Education, outreach and communications engagement and expertise have increasing importance for bird conservation. Thirty-three percent of all the needs identified at the 4th annual International Partners in Flight conference were focused on this area, making it the category with the highest concentration of needs. This document explains those needs, categorizes them, and suggests some priority areas for moving forward. Those dedicated to bird conservation, from both the scientific community and the EOC community can now partner together to address the needs outlined in this assessment and improve on-the-ground bird conservation.

LITERATURE CITED

- BEAC (BIRD EDUCATION ALLIANCE FOR CONSERVATION). 2008. Bird Education Alliance for Conservation Strategic Plan, version 1.0. (S. B. Bonfield, A. A. Dayer, J. N. Duberstein, S. C. Gilchrist, and M. J. Pitkin, lead authors). [Online.] <http://www.birdedalliance.org> (26 June 2009).
- BUSCH, A., AND A. A. DAYER. 2009. A process and tools for bird banding education success. Partners in Flight McAllen Proceedings, pp. 459-470. In T. D. Rich, C. Arizmendi, D. W. Demarest, and C. Thompson [eds.], *Tundra to Tropics: Connecting Birds, Habitats and People*. Proceedings of the 4th International Partners in Flight Conference, 13-16 February 2008. McAllen, TX. Partners in Flight.
- NORTH AMERICAN BIRD CONSERVATION INITIATIVE, U.S. COMMITTEE. 2009. *The State of the Birds, United States of America 2009*. U.S. Department of Interior. Washington, D.C.
- PITKIN, M. 2005. Mist netting with the public: A guide for communicating science to the public. MS Thesis, Southern Oregon University, Ashland, OR.
- PITKIN, M., AND J. DUBERSTEIN. 2009. A toolkit for bird educators: Using education and outreach to support bird conservation. Presentation for Bird Conservation through Education Conference, Jekyll Island, GA.
- QSR NVIVO. 2002. NVivo qualitative data analysis software, Version 2. QSR International Pty Ltd. Cambridge, MA.
- RICH, T. D., C. J. BEARDMORE, H. BERLANGA, P. J. BLANCHER, M. S. W. BRADSTREET, G. S. BUTCHER, D. W. DEMAREST, E. H. DUNN, W. C. HUNTER, E. E. INIGO-ELIAS, J. A. KENNEDY, A. M. MARTELL, A. O. PANJABI, D. N. PASHLEY, K. V. ROSENBERG, C. M. RUSTAY, J. S. WENDT, AND T. C. WILL. 2004. *Partners in Flight North American Landbird Conservation Plan*. Cornell Lab of Ornithology. Ithaca, NY.