

The strategy guide: a SIN for conserving Europe's biological and landscape diversity

Delbaere, B.

European Centre for Nature Conservation, PO Box 1352, 5004 BJ
Tilburg, the Netherlands, delbaere@ecnc.nl

Abstract

The European Centre for Nature Conservation (ECNC) is a Network organization that aims at conserving nature and especially biodiversity in Europe. It is an organization that links both policy and science and that strives to integrate nature conservation considerations into other sectors. In doing so it provides various information services and uses Internet communication and information technology.

In recent years, ECNC has gained experiences with developing and managing a Special Interest Network (SIN) on ecological networks (LYNX), a topic that is being covered in one of the programmes of the organization. This paper describes the lessons learned from this 2-year experiment and highlights issues that a network organization is faced with while operating as a network.

Based on the experiences gained, ECNC is developing, in co-operation with the Council of Europe and UNEP, a communication and information network for the Pan-European Biological and Landscape Diversity Strategy. This Strategy provides the policy framework for the conservation of nature and landscapes in Europe for the coming 20 years, and is concentrating on various priority Action Themes. The organizational structure of the Strategy requires sound communication and information exchange between the parties involved in implementing this Pan-European Strategy. It also provides an ideal basis for a distributed approach using Internet communication and information facilities. This clearly reflects a structure that is comparable to a SIN. This networked information system will provide an answer to the communication and information need of the stakeholders in the Strategy process, taking into account the lessons learned from developing LYNX. Also, the information system does not stand by itself. The Strategy Guide will complement existing initiatives relevant to Europe, in particular the Clearing-House Mechanism for the Convention on Biological Diversity

and the Environment Information and Observation NETWORK of the European Environment Agency.

Keywords: Special Interest Network, Pan-European Biological and Landscape Diversity Strategy, Clearing-House Mechanism

I Introduction

It is some three years ago, in October 1995, that the European environment ministers gathered in Sofia, Bulgaria, to discuss their joint European environmental policy. At this Pan-European conference, flagged “Environment for Europe”, they endorsed the Pan-European Biological and Landscape Diversity Strategy, a long title for a long-lasting policy framework. This Strategy sets out an innovative and proactive framework towards the protection of Europe’s biological and landscape diversity (Council of Europe et al. 1996). Drafted for the Council of Europe by the European Centre for Nature Conservation (ECNC) together with various other international organizations, it forms a Pan-European response to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), the global nature conservation policy adopted in Rio by the United Nations in 1992 (UNEP 1992).

The Pan-European Strategy covers a time-span of 20 years; it started in 1995, and is structured into four 5-year Action Plans. The first Action Plan (1996–2000) concentrates on 11 priority areas requiring immediate action, the so-called Action Themes. One of the Action Themes (number

3) specifically addresses raising awareness with policy makers and public involvement in the conservation of Europe’s nature and biodiversity. This includes the issues of communication and information, both relating to furthering nature conservation or promoting the Strategy itself. This is where the Strategy Guide comes in, as will be demonstrated further on.

As it is necessary for implementing an international policy framework such as the Pan-European Biological and Landscape Diversity Strategy, an organizational structure has been set up in an early phase. Three organizational bodies were created initially for the overall implementation and follow-up of the actions undertaken as part of the Strategy: the Strategy Council (54 states), the Executive Bureau (13 geographical regions), and the Joint Secretariat for the Strategy.

As the Strategy itself has a hierarchical and sequential structure (Strategy composed of four Action Plans of which the first one is composed of 11 Action Themes) also the organizational structure is hierarchical in nature. In addition to the above-mentioned bodies each Action Theme is co-ordinated by one or a few international organizations. Within the Action Themes working

groups might be created and numerous projects are undertaken by a variety of organizations and institutes. The implementation of the Strategy hence involves an international, interdisciplinary network of people and institutes, between whom various types of information are or should be communicated in multiple ways. This also is where the Strategy Guide comes in, since it serves information dissemination and it provides communication tools.

The year of endorsement of the Pan-European Biological and Landscape Diversity Strategy is also the year the exponential growth of the Internet and more specifically the World Wide Web started (see for example Zakon 1998). With the advent of the World Wide Web an enormous amount of information could be made available to an audience bigger than ever before in a way that was increasingly becoming accessible to the entire world. Exponentially the Internet conquered the world in all levels of society, and can be expected to also be used increasingly by policy makers. Hence gradually the idea ripened to use this tool to its full potential in the implementation process of the Pan-European Strategy concerned. The Strategy Guide turns this idea into (virtual) reality.

2 Implementing the strategy

After three years, progress has been made in the implementation of the Strategy, although to a lesser extent than was hoped for. The organiza-

tional structure has been in place since 1996, each Action Theme has at least one lead organization coordinating its activities, the Strategy bodies meet regularly, and information is exchanged. However, as it became clear during a workshop in October 1997 (Expert meeting to structure information & communication for the Pan-European Biological and Landscape Diversity Strategy, Scheveningen, the Netherlands) an important condition for success when working in a decentralized framework is proper information flow to keep the process alive, efficient and co-ordinated (IUCN/CEC 1997). Several of the recommendations resulting from this workshop, that was organized by IUCN – the World Conservation Union together with ECNC on behalf of the Dutch Ministry for Agriculture, Nature Management and Fisheries, concerned the use of the Internet, notably E-mail (including distribution lists and discussion groups) and a dedicated Web site for the Strategy. Although it was recognized that not all parties involved in the implementation of the Strategy have access to the Internet or use it regularly, it was agreed that a Web site on the Strategy would support the promotion of it as well as the implementation of it.

As is mentioned above, numerous parties are involved in implementing the Strategy and its components. The further down in the hierarchical structure of the Strategy, the more concrete this implementation gets by way of the actual carrying out of projects that form part of Action Themes. In the process of implemen-

tation the results of the projects (ongoing, completed or planned) are reported to the co-ordinator of the respective Action Theme. This co-ordinator in turn assembles the results and reports to the Executive Bureau and the Strategy Council through progress reports that also cover general Action Theme progress. The information gathered through these progress reports and through other media, such as conferences or President overviews, is compiled by the Strategy Council and is forwarded to the triennial Pan-European ministerial conferences "Environment for Europe", as foreseen by the Strategy itself (Action Theme 0: setting up the Strategy process). This all illustrates the need for good communication tools and information dissemination services for good co-ordination and co-operation.

At the meeting of the Executive Bureau of the Strategy in November 1997, ECNC proposed to start the development of an information and communication system that would support the implementation of the Strategy. The proposal was welcomed informally by both the Council of Europe and UNEP and the proposal was successively elaborated to become the development of the Strategy Guide.

3 The strategy guide

3.1 Objectives

The subtitle to the Strategy Guide summarizes its objectives: an information, communication and monitor-

ing tool in support of the implementation of the Pan-European Biological and Landscape Diversity Strategy. Of this description, the major objective is to support the implementation of the Strategy. This implies that the primary target group is those involved in the implementation process, notably the Strategy Council, the Executive Bureau, the Joint Secretariat, the Action Theme co-ordinators, and the institutes or people carrying out actual projects.

Breaking down the major objective results in the following objectives:

- to provide information – operational, strategic and referral – about the Strategy and its implementation;
- to provide communication tools for those involved in the Strategy process;
- to monitor progress in implementing the Strategy and its components.

3.2 The concept

The method used for developing the Strategy Guide is based on a number of factors:

- the experience of ECNC with setting up and managing a Web site (Delbaere et al. 1996) and other Internet services, and the development and maintenance of a Special Interest Network.
- the natural networked structure of the Pan-European Strategy requiring a distributed approach
- the relationship with similar clearing-house approaches such as the

one for the Convention on Biological Diversity and EIONET.

As the Pan-European Strategy itself is a policy framework, the Strategy Guide provides a framework for exchanging information and providing communication tools. It is constructed in such a way that a central node forms the gateway to information that is residing on remote sites. Most information that concerns the overall Strategy and its implementation is stored centrally, whereas the information on individual Action Themes is provided and maintained by remote information holders, the Action Theme leaders or persons designated by them. This distributed approach (combination of retrieval and referral function) is one of the main characteristics of a Special Interest Network (SIN), of which the original definition by Green (1994) has been fine-tuned by Langaas (1998) to be formulated as follows:

A Special Interest Network (SIN) is a group of people and/or institutions who collaborate to provide comprehensive information about a particular subject by means of various information activities on the Internet.

Also other aspects of a SIN are reflected in the Strategy Guide, notably the four functions that are being served by the system: publication, library, on-line services and communication. These functions are also provided by a clearing-house, in which they are more loosely applied. As this is also the case for the Strategy Guide it might as well be referred

to as a clearing-house. In this respect its organizational structure is comparable and compatible with systems such as the Clearing-House Mechanism for the Convention on Biological Diversity and EIONET for the European Environment Agency. It differs from these systems in its content (the Pan-European Biological and Landscape Diversity Strategy) and its primary target group (those implementing the Strategy).

The central Web site for the Strategy Guide aims to have the information on the Action Themes provided by the respective Action Theme co-ordinators (cf. co-ordinating centres in a SIN; national focal points in EIONET; national clearing houses for CBD-CHM). In order to do so and to have the information provided in a transparent way, standardization, training and capacity building is being proposed and agreed to present to the Action Theme co-ordinators. Standardization of the Web document layout and structure as well as on the content can be achieved through proper agreements in the form of memorandi of co-operation or terms of reference. Also quality control should be guaranteed through these types of agreements.

Not only will a distributed approach be adopted through a thematic division (the Action Theme co-ordinators) but also by way of geographical co-operators being national government and organizations. The Strategy Guide will cover Pan-European including the individual countries who will play a major role in information provision and in the entire implementation process. Also this type of co-operation involves

matters such as quality control, standardization and potentials for uploading or posting documents.

The aspects mentioned above are not applied from scratch, they result from experiences gained by ECNC with developing and maintaining a SIN on ecological networks, called LYNX (Delbaere 1996). The development of this SIN has been inspired by a talk by David Green during a workshop at the European Forest Institute in 1995 (Saarenmaa & Kempf 1996) and on the expertise that was available within ECNC on the topic of ecological networks in general and the development of the Pan-European Ecological Network in particular. The SIN was initiated in spring 1996 and followed the SIN rationale very tightly; it provides the four SIN functions in a recognizable way and it is structured of co-ordinating centres and a co-ordinating node. The lessons learned from this experience will be discussed in paragraph 4.

3.3 The content

The Strategy Guide provides three types of information:

- Operational information: this is mainly supporting the implementation of the Strategy (primary target group, see 3.1) and comprises information such as meeting documents, calendar of events, a progress monitor and a contacts database;
- Standard retrieval information: although also useful for the primary target group this type of information is mainly interesting

for secondary target groups, i.e. those that do not know the Pan-European Strategy (well enough) and that want to learn more about it. It contains information such as a general description of the policy framework, the full text of the Strategy and related initiatives;

- Referral information: being a distributed information network it is inherent that much of the information will consist of mere hyperlinks to other Internet information sources. These will in the first place contain the separate Action Themes (semi-internal information) and in the second place hyperlinks to Web sites of organizations involved in the Strategy or to related initiatives on the Web.

The content of the Strategy Guide can also be classified according to the SIN functions mentioned before:

1. Publication: many formal documents that form part of the Strategy process (e.g. meeting agendas and minutes) will become readily accessible through the Internet;
2. On-line library: this Virtual Library will in a first phase be the least developed component of the Strategy Guide. It will basically consist of a document containing links to related initiatives;
3. On-line services: in a first instance these services will comprise an on-line contacts database, a progress monitor and a 'help desk' (which overlaps with the communication function);
4. Communication: in addition to the one-way communication pro-

vided by the Web site some interactive communication tools have been built in:

- comment form: a standard Web form through which users can send additional information or ask specific questions;
- E-mail distribution lists: centrally maintained lists used for broadcasting information on the Strategy to a wide audience;
- E-mail discussion group: a forum for discussion provided by a list server;
- On-line contacts database (see also on-line services);
- Traditional tools: the Strategy Guide is not restricted to the Internet, it also uses traditional tools such as a newsletter (Strategy Bulletin, published by the Council of Europe) and standard mailing.

The progress monitor requires some extra attention since it relies on one of the most important characteristics of the Internet: the easy updating of information. The Strategy Guide will be used as a monitoring tool to indicate in how far the Strategy is implemented, what the differences in progress of implementation are between the various Action Themes, and how this progress is being qualified by various bodies. Criteria for monitoring this progress might include deadlines that have been met for projects, resources allocated by governments and other financiers, meetings that have been held and a validation of their outcome, a quality stamp for work plans that have

been developed or concrete nature conservation successes through the Strategy. The monitor will be a visual representation of the score given to the various criteria to be developed and can be updated daily if required.

The content of the Strategy Guide makes that it will serve the implementation of the Pan-European Strategy but also, because of the objectives of this Strategy, nature conservation in Europe in general. In doing so the Strategy Guide will act as a true clearing-house on nature conservation in Europe, covering activities to conserve ecosystems, species, landscapes, etc.

3.4 Non-Internet users

As the primary target group for whom the Strategy Guide is developed still can be expected to be largely non-Internet literate and as decision-makers need information that can be absorbed quickly without the need for special tools or expertise (WCMC 1998) the Internet will not be the sole information carrier. Although intentionally focussing on using the Internet facilities in addition to existing traditional information sources such as the Strategy Bulletin two approaches are developed to also target at those that are not familiar with using computers or the Internet in their daily work.

The first approach is rather straightforward and classical and is in place since the endorsement of the Strategy in 1995. It consists basically of all the printed material that has been produced in the process, such as a version of the Strategy with col-

our illustrations (Council of Europe et al. 1996), an explanatory brochure about the Strategy (McCloskey 1997), the Strategy Bulletin (Council of Europe 1997), numerous meeting documents and project reports.

The second approach is more proactive in that it stimulates the use of the Internet, preferably also by policy makers. It is an approach which would consist of training sessions, demonstrations on how to use the Strategy Guide, capacity building in those countries that have less developed Internet infrastructures, promotion of the system at conferences and other events, etc.

4 Lessons learned

From the ECNC experiences in developing and maintaining a Web site and a Special Interest Network some lessons are applied while setting up the Strategy Guide. All of these are related to the networked approach that is naturally adopted when developing an Internet information and communication system.

Admittedly, the Special Interest Network on ecological networks is currently not used to its full extent. The first year after its establishment showed a lively evolution: information was regularly updated and added to the Web site, people got subscribed to the E-mail distribution list, through which questions were answered occasionally and events were announced, the on-line expertise database grew steadily. However, co-operation with the co-ordinating centres in the network was not practised.

There were basically three reasons for this:

- the co-ordinating centres are all institutes with their own projects, with much educational work in the universities, and very little time to voluntarily be spent on initiatives like this, disregarding the enthusiasm with which it was welcomed;
- the co-ordinating node had a similar problem. Funding did not allow to put a full time staff member on the project and the activities as part of the SIN got snowed under with other work.
- the topic of the SIN was not linked to any formal process or initiative whatsoever. Although informally supporting the Action Theme 1 of the Pan-European Strategy there was no formal backing or linkage for the project. This made the input and updating of information a more or less ad hoc activity without a real driving force.

The lessons learned from the above mentioned problems are applied in the Strategy Guide as follows:

- the information and communication system is directly linked to a formal policy framework, the Pan-European Biological and Landscape Diversity Strategy, of which the implementation provides the driving force for keeping information updated;
- as has been discussed before, the Strategy has a hierarchical structure including Action Theme leaders who are invited to report to the Joint Secretariat of the Strategy, which provides a good

basis for a continuous information flow towards the Strategy Guide and back to the Action Theme leaders;

- the Joint Secretariat for the Strategy forms the support role as an official co-ordinating node, whose task it is to disseminate information about the Strategy and its implementation to those involved in the Strategy process and to the wider public. With the Strategy Guide being developed they have a strong additional tool to support this task.

5 Conclusion

The discussion presented in this paper introduces an Internet application in support of a European policy framework for 54 countries. The application concerned, called the Strategy Guide, builds on Internet experiences gained at the European Centre for Nature Conservation and on the hierarchical structure of the policy framework concerned, the Pan-European Biological and Landscape Diversity Strategy. As the system is yet to be presented at the ministerial conference "Environment for Europe" in Aarhus, Denmark, on 23 June 1998 it is too early to report here on the usefulness or usage so far. It is expected however that the Strategy Guide will form a useful addition to the traditional communication media that have been used so far. With the continuous increasing use and access to the Internet, also by policy makers, the Strategy Guide might become a very efficient tool

in making the Pan-European Strategy successful.

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