



National Parks Association of New South Wales

An online conservation communication network

The National Parks Association of New South Wales (NPANSW) has over 4000 members, many of whom are active lobbyists on conservation matters. Its website, www.npansw.org.au, supports an increasing reliance on email and email-related discussion groups.

Using the web to build bridges between stakeholders

NPANSW, established in 1957, is a nonprofit community organisation seeking to protect and conserve the complete range and diversity of species, natural habitats, features and landscapes of NSW.

Its website, established in 1997 and enhanced in 2002, provides online access to a bimonthly journal, media releases on NPA campaigns, news about past and upcoming activities and events, the members and visitors scrapbook and the online forum. Members can elect to receive by email copies of media releases, newsletters, and information updates.

Work on the site commenced in the mid-1990s, using the relatively limited software generally available then, along with the volunteered expertise of a small number of NPANSW members. The initial aim was to publish information about the organisation and how it achieved its objectives.

Members were encouraged to supply text and photographs for inclusion. The structure, style and content of the website developed incrementally in response to participant interests and enthusiasms.

By the early 2000s, recognising the increasing power of websites and email for communication, lobbying and public information campaigns, the executive agreed to redesign the website to reflect the NPANSW's structure and objectives.

A website committee of some eight volunteer members, representing the range of interests within the organisation, oversees development and monitors website activity. It also oversees consistency with the NPANSW council's strategic vision and member feedback.

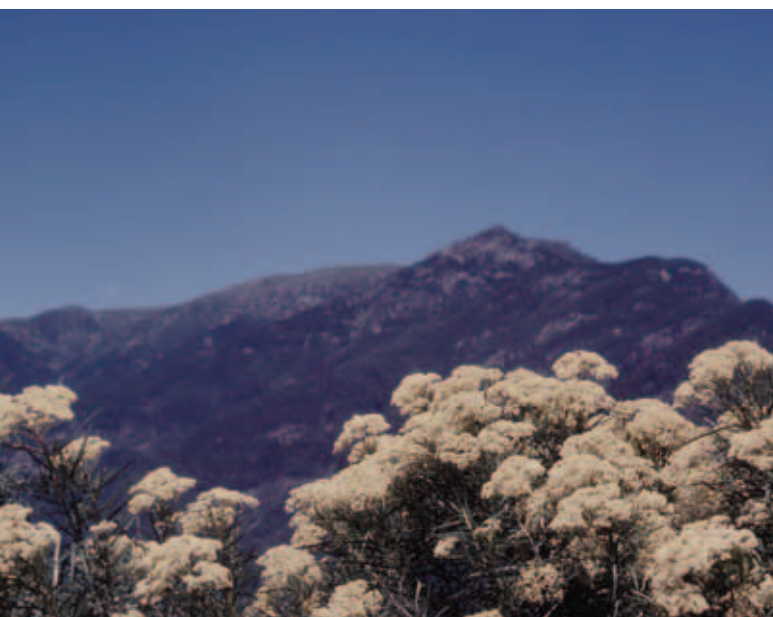
Tentative steps have been taken towards setting up online discussion forums to add more structure to the existing email discussions. Some consideration has also been given to future e-commerce activity.



Benefits

NPANSW's use of ICT has essentially supported the more traditional face-to-face, written or telephone methods—areas where NPANSW has had considerable success for decades—for building links between individuals and groups. Bonding around an issue, for relatively homogenous groups such as the Woodlands or Marine program groups, has been boosted recently by email communication.

Building bridges across more heterogeneous groups of stakeholders has also been common. For example, ski lodge and tour operators and environmentalists in the Kosciuszko area have found common ground through bridging communications.



Lobbying campaigns that use email to target politicians, members of relevant government departments and public sector organisations on conservation issues have played an important role in linking stakeholders appropriately into the 'power and influence' hierarchy. The overall communication network has contributed to these achievements but the role of email has been significant.

While ICT has made an appreciable contribution to NPANSW operations and there are a number of opportunities for further development, the organisation is concerned with staying close to its membership and finding ways to continue to value human interactions.

A key principle in NPANSW's adoption of ICT has been to tailor its activity to its resources. By its nature as a voluntary organisation—dependent on the work of volunteers and the funds provided by members who choose to support activities they value—NPANSW has limited resources.

Barriers

The diversity in member demographics, their varied access to ICT and ability to use it effectively means that a degree of caution is required to maintain a match between functionality and members' expectations.

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A number of the NPANSW's most active decision makers, for example, are founding members who have become skilled in email communication but have as yet had little involvement or apparent interest in the online forum. For others, the immediacy of online forums is routine, while some prefer the bimonthly journal for communicating with other stakeholders

Finding the right balance between these various approaches for the subsets of the membership continues to present interesting challenges. One response is to make the journal, website, email and online forums complement each other. Space in the journal is limited, so a short feature on a fascinating bushwalk might refer to a longer item on the website. Initial reactions to such complementary communications seem positive.

Publishing a member's contact details in a journal with a circulation over 4000 may be seen as less of an intrusion on privacy than publishing such details on a website or in an email list. There is the potential for abuse of such information through spam and unscrupulous marketing practices. Like other organisations, NPANSW must address questions of what is appropriate in material with various levels of availability. While amusing reports or photographs of friends sharing a high-spirited activity may be appropriate in a limited circulation newsletter with only a few days' currency, making such material universally accessible on a website offers a much greater potential for embarrassment.

As electronic communications increasingly replace face-to-face meetings, the human interactions through which trust develops tend to receive less attention. Online communications can lack the personal elements that maintain bonds across groups. The NPANSW's structure



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has a central executive and branches, and the traditional way to avoid a disparity between the perspectives and priorities of its various sections has been to have Sydney-based staff and volunteers share bushwalking experiences with key members of the more distant branches. Attention needs to be given to forms of personal interaction that can maintain relationships.



Key Lessons

- A key principle in NPANSW's adoption of ICT has been to tailor its activity to its resources. This has created a sustainable and acceptable use of ICT by and for the members.
- The development of the website in small steps means the site reflects the changing needs of the organisation and its members.
- ICT has complemented NPANSW's more traditional approaches to bonding, bridging and linking within and across various community groups who have an interest in conservation issues. ICT has enhanced its capacity for focusing attention on issues of concern and for stimulating public awareness and effective lobbying.

References

National Parks Association of New South Wales www.npansw.org.au

COMMUNITY CONNECTIVITY

More information

In these case studies, communities, nonprofit organisations and groups share their experiences and lessons they have learnt using ICT: enhancing capability and service delivery; supporting and building communities, networks and connections; and overcoming barriers and challenges.

Australia's Strategic Framework for the Information Economy 2004–2006 emphasises the need to ensure that all Australians can participate in the benefits of the information economy.

Key strategies in 2004–06 will be to strengthen collaboration and capabilities in nonprofit organisations, facilitate the creative use of ICT for building stronger communities and social cohesion, and develop networks, capabilities and tools to enable participation by people who are facing economic, geographic or social barriers.

For more information visit the DCITA website www.dcita.gov.au or email community.connectivity@dcita.gov.au.

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