



Cover photo of « Dialogue for nature », symbolising the programme's spirit © imageDJ/megapix

Swedish EPA

The Swedish Environmental Protection Agency is the national agency for environmental protection and nature conservation as well as outdoor recreation and hunting issues. Its key tasks are to present proposals for environmental policy and legislation to the Swedish Government and ensure that environmental policy decisions are implemented. For more information, visit www.swedishepa.se.

"I think that this kind of training is a prerequisite to handle the future, when we must combine environmental goals, people and environmental laws in our exercise of authority."

Karl Ingvarson, County Administrative Board of Södermanland, after having participated in a "Dialogue for nature" course

Dialogue for Nature Conservation

Dialogue and local participation

The importance of nature conservation is today commonly accepted, but the implementation of conservation policy is sometimes less straightforward as it involves many different stakeholders with diverse interests and backgrounds. Dialogue and local participation are therefore prerequisites for successful biodiversity conservation and the sustainable use of nature.

To meet this challenge, an exemplary environmental communication initiative was created in Sweden in 2008. **Dialogue for nature conservation** is a 'skills development programme' for dialogue, participation and conflict management for government employees involved in the field of nature conservation and wildlife management.

Conflict management and prevention

Sweden has many national parks and nature reserves. It has for example listed some 4,000 Natura 2000 sites (see box on page 2), covering around 15 per cent of the country's surface area. The preservation of these vast natural areas presents much potential for conflict – especially "when landowners, hunters and other local people have their own ideas about how to use what they consider to be their land and their business, and government officials do not know how to deal with these feelings or do not have enough time for it", according to Cecilia Persson from the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency (EPA, see the adjacent box).

The EPA has therefore implemented a competence building programme on behalf of the Swedish government to improve the dialogue and relations between authorities and stakeholders such as landowners, farmers, hunters, NGOs, neighbours and others.

The creation of the programme was thus not only precautionary – as nature preservation becomes more and more important and might therefore offer enormous potential for conflicts in the future – but was launched to meet an already existing need. This became evident during a recent conflict management course for officers who work with large predators in the Swedish EPA and County Administrative Boards where they learned how to deal with existing conflicts. At the end of the course a participant asked: *"This is good, but what can we do to not land in a conflict, how can we make a good start in these relations?"*



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Natura 2000

With the double objective of preserving biodiversity and developing its territories, the European Union launched an ambitious network of sites of high conservation interest in 1992, called Natura 2000. Its aim is to prevent the destruction of natural habitats and to protect animals and plants from extinction. The sites are identified for inclusion in the network under the provisions of the Birds Directive and the Habitats Directive. Today, the 25,000 Natura 2000 sites cover about 20% of European land. For more information, visit www.natura.org.



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This newsflash is issued by the EECN which is DG Environment's support structure for European Environmental Communication Networks.

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Having good communication skills and therefore avoiding conflicts when interacting with the different stakeholders involved in nature conservation is a decisive factor when implementing the Convention on Biological Diversity (see box at the bottom). Most of the government officers who work in nature conservation have an educational background in environment or natural science however, and training in communication is in many cases not part of their studies. The challenge during the design of the course contents was therefore also a linguistic issue: as natural scientists are often not used to the vocabulary of social science, attention was paid not to overload the courses with too many communication terms *"in order to get acceptance and still not lose the message"*, explains Suzanne Kolare from the Swedish EPA.

Tailor-made courses

To assure the high quality of the courses, lecturers from the Environmental Communication Unit of the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences (Department of Urban and Rural Development) have been charged with the development of the educational programme and also run the courses. Several courses have been created that are tailored to the specific needs and experiences of the different audiences: a basic course for officials, a course for nature conservation directors, advanced courses in specific areas (e.g. large carnivore issues, management and site protection) as well as advanced courses in communication (cooperation and learning as well as conflict management). The courses generally consist of teaching sessions (including lectures and exercises such as role-playing, case studies and reflective discussions) as well as self-study, for which they receive feedback and supervision.

New communication patterns

Dialogue for nature conservation attracted a lot of participants in its first 18 months, and many more employees than expected took part in the programme. This significant success shows that the need for such a skills programme was well developed. Lotten Westberg, one of the scientists who run the programme, explains that: *"Course members state that they have received ideas, tips, tools and methods to help them deal with contradictive interests and conflicts, arrange meetings and create more inclusive ways of working with stakeholders. They say that they feel less afraid of trying to work more inclusively, and have greater faith in their ability to fulfil their new roles as facilitators of public processes. Participants also note the value of meeting and engaging with other administrators faced with the same challenges. The courses seem to have given them motivation and skills to start new ways of working and to reflect upon how they communicate."*

After this first 2008-09 session, evaluations conducted by an external consultant will now determine the impact of the programme on nature conservation and will assess further needs for basic and targeted courses in the future.

For more information on the programme, please have a look at the website of [Dialogue for Nature Conservation](http://www.dialoguefornatureconservation.org).

Rio Declaration on Environment and Development (1992) Convention on Biological Diversity

At the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro (the 'Earth Summit'), world leaders agreed on a strategy for sustainable development and produced a short document, the **Rio Declaration on Environment and Development**. One of the key agreements adopted in Rio was the **Convention on Biological Diversity**.

This pact sets out commitments for maintaining the rich diversity of life on Earth. The Convention establishes three main goals: the conservation of biological diversity, the sustainable use of its components and the fair and equitable sharing of the benefits from the use of genetic resources.