

How to convey a complex message to a wide audience: avoiding the ocean divide between science and public understanding?

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Complexity of coastal conservation, communication for commitment to and co-management of our 'commons': how to convey such conundrums?

Scientists are known to be weak at communicating their findings beyond their peers. The causes are multiple: communication to a wide audience is not felt as a primary assignment (and rarely appreciated in academia), the messages are increasingly complex and cannot be reduced easily to simple statements, and scientists avoid absolute answers to pressing questions from society when they are not entirely confident that such answers are correct. Yet, society has a right to call upon scientists. The scientific process is borne mostly by public funding and society, the latter of which so righteously expect justification and feedback on the utilisation and output of funds. Inversely, scientists, whether covering fundamental or applied fields, cannot shy away from communicating their findings to the public, for instance on environmental challenges to name but one. Coastal conservation is complex, because it combines ecological borderlines and transition zones, with local and global processes (through ocean connectivity and the spatial scale of coastal problems) and intense human pressure. Coastal systems further confront private interests and 'commons', as the property and interests of all, and hence also the responsibility of all. Often pressure and conflicts are strongest towards the narrow coastal fringe.

In the framework of the VLIR–UOS funded project 'Green Dyke' in Sri Lanka (2008–2014), we developed a Coastal Resources Awareness Centre, which essentially is a fixed and a mobile version of a targeted exhibition and associated communication activities to a wide and complex audience. Drawing on this experience the authors present their approach in Sri Lanka, which can serve as a source of inspiration elsewhere, also in Kenya. Indeed, such communication will be targeting more than one audience, *e.g.* school children in organised visits (not coming 'voluntarily'), adults with limited education, adults with somewhat deeper interest, occasional visitors, specific target adult groups (coastal managers, nature conservationists,...). This defines (i) media used, (ii) language used, (iii) level used, however all in one 'physical' or virtual item (exhibition, website,...). The geographic and cultural context will put additional demands on each of these as well as on the recognisability of the message and examples used.