



Reflections on recent experiences with the UK National Ecosystem Assessment

The brief in brief

It is often argued that there is a need to improve communication between science and policy on ecosystem services and biodiversity topics. However, why communication problems exist and exactly *how* to improve science-policy communication is not always clear. In the SPIRAL project, we explored factors constraining or facilitating communication in three case studies. Here we focus on communication in the development of the UK National Ecosystem Assessment (UK NEA). We reflect on some of the experiences and views of individuals connected with developing the first phase of the UK NEA. We also discuss implications of our research for informing future work on the NEA and related topics.

What we did

We conducted twenty-five semi-structured interviews¹, in the second half of 2011, with a range of individuals connected with the production of the 2011 UK NEA report: from the client group, co-chairs, the user group, chapter author groups, and the secretariat, plus a handful of individuals who were not directly connected with the UK NEA², but may well be expected to read or use it. In these interviews we explored understandings and experiences relating to the NEA, as well as discussing broader views and recommendations



¹ In qualitative research such as this the aim is not to use a representative sample, rather to capture the full range of views and experiences, so that the range of views, and experiences and patterns can be exhaustively explored and explained.

² The site <http://uknea.unep-wcmc.org/About/WhosInvolved/tabid/63/Default.aspx> explains the role of these different groups.

about science-policy interfaces. We used NVivo software to aid an inductive analysis of transcripts of these interviews.

Factors constraining communication in the UK NEA process

Across all interviewee groups there was some dissatisfaction with opportunities to communicate during the assessment process. In particular, there was dissatisfaction with the communication about the process across groups, and a desire for more connections (e.g. between the client group and chapter author groups). Authors even felt disconnected from those working on other chapters, although they often valued the chance to discuss issues within chapter teams.

In particular, some authors worried that the full range of social science views may not have been sufficiently integrated. It was felt that this could have affected the report, in particular the extent to which new ideas were advanced, and the structure of the chapters. It also meant there were lost networking opportunities, which are often useful for advancing thinking as well as building understanding across different groups.

Many of the above comments are linked to the fact that the whole UK NEA process took only 2 years. Limited resources in terms of time and money may also have limited opportunities for communication between and within groups.

Interviewees had different views on the 2011 UK NEA report as a communication tool. There was confusion over its basic purpose. Opinions included advancing thinking and scientific ideas, operationalizing ecosystem services concepts into policy, communicating new ideas from science to policy, and providing specific facts to help decision-making for particular problems. Some interviewees admitted to simply being confused! This affected how interviewees viewed the report. It is also a strong indication of imperfect communication processes during the assessment. Some argued that the NEA had created a compelling and easily understandable explanation of the state and value of the UK's natural environment and ecosystem services. However, many thought the size and dense content of the main report is quite daunting. Its

We had some contact with the authors....particularly on the response options and scenario chapters [Was the process useful in making connections between...people?] Not hugely! No. No.
Mr P, Client Group

inaccessibility was not aided by it being launched whilst several chapters appeared to still be in a draft format.

Factors facilitating communication in the NEA process

Where opportunities to discuss issues and topics did occur, they were highly welcomed by interviewees. One interviewee valued highly the intense discussions within his chapter group. The UK NEA also benefitted from a process in which the chapters were reviewed by non-academics. This cross-sector review process was deemed a particularly useful process for helping communication across different potential user groups. Although dealing with hundreds of responses could be a large burden of work for authors, it raised the UK NEA's profile with a wide range of potential users (e.g. interest groups), as well as allowing the groups within the NEA to better understand the scope of and evolving thinking in other chapters.

The way in which uncertainty was handled in the final report was mostly well supported by interviewees and seen to aid communication. Each chapter starts with a set of key findings and include an indication of the level of scientific certainty, and where possible a likelihood scale. This consistent labelling was highlighted by interviewees as being very useful, and indeed needed in such a complex and uncertain field.

Furthermore, the quantity of evidence compiled in the final report was considered to maximise potential practical uses for answering specific questions or purposes.

How communication may affect uses of the UK NEA

While it is too early to know if the UK NEA may be useful as a 'problem-solving tool', studying the process of developing the NEA can shed some light on other potential uses and outcomes. For example, there is evidence that conceptual learning occurred not only between producers and users (particularly through the review process) but also within author groups, who said they had enjoyed working in new groupings for "intense" thinking and analysis about new topics often beyond many authors' 'comfort zone'. Some interviewees suggested the UK NEA could also be of relevance to changing mindsets and introducing concepts to audiences who might traditionally not consider or strongly value environmental issues, such as non-environmental policy makers.

A White Paper was published by DEFRA just one week after the UK NEA report was launched. White Papers are documents produced by the UK Government setting out details of future policy. They allow the Government to receive feedback before it formally presents the policies as Bills. A member of the client group was personally aware of the NEA's content and conclusions well before its official publication, and so his department could ensure this was picked up and referred to in the White Paper. This suggests that the NEA may also have strategic uses, and supports the value of communication throughout the whole process for encouraging policy uses.

Reflections on the future

The production of the 2011 UK NEA report was an ambitious task that involved many different groups: managing such a process will always be challenging. However, there are perhaps lessons to be learned for future work for NEAs in the UK and in other countries or regions, and related topics. Interviewees' experiences suggest that

improving communication between various disciplinary and sectoral groups is a key challenge, but worth the effort.

The NEA2 should be an exercise of going through that pile [of chapters] and actually looking for consistencies, and linkages across the way.

Dr T, lead chapter author

Assessments such as the UK NEA should therefore not only focus on tangible outcomes and reports (with attention on tailoring them for defined audiences) but also support processes (devoting resources to bring together different groups and allowing space for views to evolve). In the case of the UK NEA, the ongoing work in its second phase includes communicating existing messages from the 2011 report in formats targeted to particular audiences. Results from this work suggest that future activities should not focus only on tangible products but also on events that promote ongoing dialogue and learning.

Looking for more information on science-policy interfaces?

For more SPIRAL results, including recommendation on communication building on this and other case studies, see companion SPIRAL briefs at <http://www.spiral-project.eu/content/documents>

This brief is a result of research and interactions within and around the SPIRAL project. This brief was written by Kerry Waylen (JHI) and Juliette Young (CEH).

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