

## When things go wrong? – Communication and learning gaps between managers and their environmental advisors; a cartoon collaboration

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### Abstract

This paper explores the format of a cartoon strip to examine individual roles and social identity of participants involved in the management of protected land. Its collaborative production involved an advisor reporting interaction experiences and an artist's visualisations made in response. This dialogue iteratively generated a picture story about both the preparation and implementation of a *Site Management Plan* for a protected area and the different dialogues between individuals and their impressions of each other. The storyline is fictionalised through visualisation to be both generalised and highly specific. It illustrates some types of communication failure by contrasting speech and thought bubbles which in turn reflect one author's personal experience of providing (regulatory) advice over thirty years in the UK. However, the story has also borrowed elements of Alpine experience and the pictorial characterisation has been generated by the other author from a perspective as a visual artist. The authors offer this methodology as a consultation tool.

### Introduction

It is generally accepted that the effectiveness of policies protecting conservation sites is greatly influenced by local knowledge and perceptions (Dimitrakopoulos 2010). However, it is less clear whether the discourses on issues first raised by Wynn (1992) and the examples of detailed overviews of participation by both community and individual participation raised by Apostolopoulou et al. (2012) have fully recognised the dynamic of the perceptions of individual scientific actors with each other as well as with and among land managers.

If there are *misunderstood misunderstandings* (Wynne 1992) which are explicable by individual interactions, then there is a need to for nature conservation practitioners to be able to present best practice advice in an accessible form. We were impressed how, (in a different field of knowledge), this has been achieved by Carson et al. (2016) using the medium of a photo story. His paper sets out how to give advice to neurology practitioners and his blend of text and photo-story gives a unique clarity to his advice.

Our challenge was to find an equally engaging way to combine text and image.

We agreed on a cartoon format to open our thinking via fictionalization and development of the narrative about advice on implementing site management plans. We felt that text and thought bubbles together with visualisations of significant figures and objects within each cartoon frame would allow the reader to concentrate on individual emotional responses as well as dialogue.

We offer our paper both as *a case in point* to represent and generalize from the experience of one land-advisor practitioner on the process of preparing site management advice and also as a visualization tool for use in workshops that explore these issues.

### Method

Our exploration of our theme is based on more than thirty years of one practitioner's experience in offering nature conservation advice and seeking appropriate management agreements. We wished to condense this experience into a storyline of a consultation that highlights issues that might go wrong and present these in a memorable way. We chose to have a restricted cast of actors, both because in our experience this is typically the case and because we feel it is important to recognize that human interactions and decision making is undertaken by people often acting in self-identified roles. Indeed, characterization of *our actors* by the artist author is a vital part of our method.

Our starting point was identification of the key elements of our story line. Essentially this comprises:

1. advisor gets instructions on a task;
2. advisor visits farmer of protected site;
3. site occupiers are incensed as a result;
4. advisor realises that his message should be about dialogue and information exchange;
5. advisor seeks advice from experienced practitioner;
6. advisor has further site visit and listens as well as communicates;
7. relationship established.

The next stage was to generate and refine the dialogue whilst creating visual characterizations for people, plants and animals. We also tested the dialogue on a small focus group of rural activists. Both authors discussed results and iteratively explored draft text and whether we had identified an appropriate number of frames. This revealed that the process of preparation for the visit should be broken down into three different elements:

- a. instructions, possibly from a senior figure with generic targets to meet;

From memories to future:  
multi-disciplinary approaches to  
governing fragile mountain  
environments.

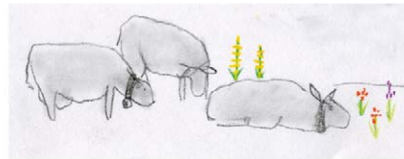


An interdisciplinary exploration of  
communication between land  
managers and their advisors.

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Frame 1

### Characters in the Cartoon



Frame 2



**The Conservation Advisor consults his manager  
about preparing a Site Management Plan**

Frame 3



**The Conservation Advisor seeks advice from an expert**

Frame 4



**The Conservation Advisor writes a Site Management Plan**

Frame 5



**The Conservation Advisor meets with the farmer**

Frame 6

- b. research, by advisor to gain expert knowledge relevant to identifying management needs;
- c. preparation of a *Site Management Plan* prior to visiting the farmer.

The further site visit was also identified as requiring two frames so as to capture change from instructions to dialogue.

The next stage comprised further iteration. Each frame and the sequence of frames were examined in terms of key message, key participants and key ele-

ments in each frame. This enabled a first draft of the pictorial representation, which in turn allowed a further reassessment of dialogues and thought bubbles and adjustments to scale and colour. Finally, the cartoon frames were produced as hand drawn preliminary sketches.





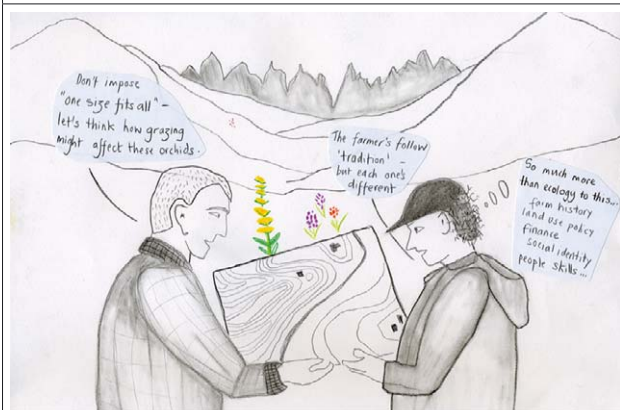
The Protected Area farmers hold a Meeting

Frame 7



The Conservation Advisor wakes up from a bad dream

Frame 8



The Conservation Advisor visits the site with an enlightened colleague

Frame 9



The Conservation Advisor meets at the farm to visit the site

Frame 10



The Conservation Advisor meets on site with the farmers

Frame 11



An agreement is reached in the farm kitchen

Frame 12

## Results and discussion

The Results comprise the cartoon frames 1 to 12.

We do not discuss our conclusions in the context of the land management literature but to highlight discussion points concerning consultation processes generated by imaginative visualization and characterizations based on field experience. We are conscious

that the dominance of text based expert communication has the intention of placing images and text to maximum effect. We invite the reader to choose to view our cartoon separately or in conjunction with the commentary below. Our contention is that the process of constructing the cartoon is what gives it a depth of meaning that in itself constructs the discussion points of which ours are just a sample.

### Frames 1 & 2

These set the scene and describe our results as a draft visualization in which people, plants and animals have their own characters revealed in different settings and contexts.

Note also that the flowers appear in all but one frame. What are the advantages in creating a *mental image* of the characters in the cartoon? Can this help in understanding unspoken hierarchies and self-identification of the roles of the participants in the cartoon? Is it representative that the characters are predominantly male?

### Frames 3–5

Do farmers have the expectation that either the advisor he/she meets is instructed by a faceless bureaucrat and/or an impractical scientist? In fact, the advisor may be trying to resolve different roles at a national or higher directive level with a local situation. He/she may also be interpreting varying professional jargons.

Do current mechanisms for public engagement and consultation sufficiently recognize differentiation between different types of expertise mediated by personality related social dynamics?

### Frame 6

Each participant may well be making factually correct statements but simultaneously reinforcing their prejudices about how they each see each other.

Is sufficient weight given to the possibility that there is a mismatch in power hierarchies? Does the advisor represent the power of government plus its bureaucratic complications whilst the farmer represents the lone individual who relishes his (or her) independence and ability to take decisions on his/her own land?

The slide also shows the flowers in their natural habitat. What additional contexts and mental visualisations might this be bringing to the cartoon?

Their ecological context here is that the yellow flower represents Yellow Gentian whose level of browsing can indicate grazing pressure and the pink represents orchids within a habitat valued for nature conservation.

### Frame 7

Each of the statements on this slide could come from an individual case in point. They are direct quotes from (real) meetings.

### Frame 8

The storyline here represents the need for the advisor to recognise the need to do things differently. It highlights pressures may come from the need for results within a particular framework and the farmer's desire either to be left alone or to be given a quick decision on whether a particular management regime would be acceptable.

### Frame 9

This slide is deliberately identified in value-labelled terms. The *enlightened* colleague is identified as an individual who is ready to listen and address his/her colleague's concerns and to attempt reconciliation between the organisation and the farmer's concerns including the farmer's sense of identity. Note that the picture is located at a field meeting centred on the core of the conservation interest.

Nevertheless, the organisation to which the advisor and colleague are affiliated could consider that mutual resolution of issues can be taken too far. How might this affect the self-perceived role of advisors as scientists and/or practitioners?

### Frame 10

This slide is located at the farm so that the advisor can introduce his/her site perspective only after enquiring and learning about the whole farm situation. Note that it is here that the farmer's wife makes her first appearance in the cartoon. The role she has been allocated in this cartoon highlights a problem whereby sexist attitudes can both devalue understandings and individuals. The fact that in the cartoon she is not contributing to the *expert* conversation can and should be objected to as sexism. However, another way of interpreting her characterisation is that she is pragmatic and resourceful in integrating different kinds of knowledge and the next two frames show her likely involvement in participating in places and spheres where a consensual agreement is possible. Nevertheless, her depiction in a support role only, hopefully represents a problem that is becoming less common.

Clearly, across Europe and from farm to farm, different socio-economic conditions influence the structure of *family farms*. In UK hill-farms it is sometimes the case that one partner's farming enterprise is financially supported by the other's non-farm income. However, social self-identity as a farmer may be as important a consideration as farm income.

### Frame 11

This slide is located at the site of conservation interest and the meeting is going well because each side is engaging with the other's concerns. The door is open to an exchange of expertise and mutual recognition of specialist and local knowledge. (The advisor would do well to seek to include the farmer's wife in discussion. Her inclusion is likely to affect any agreement outcome).

The nature conservation context to the flower icons is now clearly a matter of practical management with agreement on a target height for the unpalatable yellow gentian that acts as a measure for an appropriate grazing pressure for the conservation management of the orchids.

## Frame 12

This slide recognises the importance of the farm-kitchen as the hub of farm business decisions and the essentially individual and personal nature of the relationship that ensures (or otherwise) an agreement being reached and a relationship developed. To be invited to share conservation expertise with another grouping is often a sign of respect but this is unlikely to emerge at a first meeting. However, there needs to be a professional / personal boundary that is maintained in any further relationship to avoid any conflict of interest.

The flower icon appears again in this slide demonstrating that nature is not only about ecology and conservation but often about artistic inspiration and public enjoyment.

## Conclusions

The cartoon and the learning points that emerge from the series of pictorial visualizations are an individual *case-in-point* where *the case* is the perspective of one author's professional experience as a nature conservation advisor mediated and interpreted by the artist author. These provide more than a pictorial visualization. The characters emerge such that the reader can construct mental images of attitudes and emotions. We contend that this sort of understanding is an essential component of providing successful advice. We offer this collaboration as a possible consultation tool. We suggest that sharing this case study in pictorial form in local contexts with real stakeholders may help find a way that helps mutual understanding (emotionally and intellectually) such that all participants see each other as part of a consultative process and not as enemies.

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