

Communications

CHAPTER THREE:



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Communications as a Core Value & Function of the IWJV

With an increasingly diverse and growing partnership that has a stake in our actions, it is imperative that IWJV communications connect, inform, and support an intricate spectrum of people to catalyze strategic habitat conservation. The task is daunting: identify audiences, craft resonating messages, and implement tools and tactics to efficiently reach intended audiences across a vast region. Communications must also integrate continuous technological advances and compete for people's attention.

The IWJV can approach communications differently than any of our partners due to the unique nature of our organization. We are not bound to public engagement structures to which federal and state agencies must adhere. Nor do we need to produce communications to raise funding from a membership base like non-governmental organizations. Our flexibility to explore different avenues of engagement with strategic creativity and innovation are invaluable. This unique position empowers us to implement a communications model incorporating multimedia storytelling about partnership-driven conservation efforts and the people who make them happen.



Communications Philosophy

Our communications advance the understanding of conservation programs, science, and tools as well as make connections so our partners can more effectively implement on-the-ground work.



Communications Objectives

With this philosophy in mind, our communications objectives are to:

1. Increase awareness about important wildlife habitat, especially in the face of climate change;
2. Engage a diversity of partners in strategic conservation with a shared vision to restore and manage habitat;
3. Connect our audiences to IWJV- and partner-produced science by appealing to values and strategically translating technical information;
4. Showcase proven models, outcomes, and other conservation-oriented innovations—especially those using partner funding resources—that benefit birds, other wildlife, and local economies; and
5. Communicate the importance of community-led conservation of wetland, sagebrush, and forest ecosystems across the West.





In-house Tools & Tactics

Strategic Communications Plans

The communications products described below require detailed and dynamic strategic plans.

Complex, Long-term Project Planning: Some of our projects require communications plans because they involve numerous partners to develop and translate complex bodies of science and result in multiple outreach products. These include web pages, fact sheets, infographics, feature articles, videos, and media engagement. Projects can take months or even years to complete. Long-term project plans document background information, identify purpose/outcome/objectives, develop messages and timelines for production, strategize distribution, include FAQs, and more.

Proposals Requiring Funding Beyond Staff Time: Some large projects require budgets that allocate funding to contractors or outside businesses beyond staff salaried time. When federal funding is used, this can trigger the need to fly a competitive Request for Proposals to work with contractors beyond \$10,000. The proposal system also invites funding partners to review the planning activities of a product and approve it for implementation. Films are one example of projects that need proposals.

Distribution Plans: These plans identify the platforms both the IWJV's and partners' and people we intend to seek out for content distribution, as well as the timeline for publication on each respective platform. These are identified based on the audiences we hope to reach, the action requested, and the nature of the content.

Digital Products & Platforms

Digital tools and platforms allow the IWJV to be efficient and effective with its messaging. Additionally, partnership engagement is bolstered by digital tools that facilitate two-way communication. Direct interaction from our audiences, including anecdotal data on how communications have facilitated valuable conservation connections, is incredibly valuable.

Websites: The IWJV's websites are the hub for our digital presence. They act as the "storefront" of our organization, inviting potential partners in to learn more about us or existing partners to find the content they seek. Our other communications tools point back to our website to house public-facing products. The IWJV's newsletters, videos, and social media accounts drive website visitation.

eNewsletter: The IWJV's monthly eNewsletters allow us to send information directly to our partners' inboxes. All other forms of communication require the viewer to take action and come to us for information. With an audience of over 5,000 subscribers and high open rates for our industry (25–35 percent on average), our eNewsletters allow us to effectively share three to six pieces of our highest-quality, original communications content with a broad audience each month.

Social Media: The IWJV uses Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and LinkedIn to share content engagingly and collaboratively. Our social media platforms allow us to broadcast our activities and support our partners in distributing content. This is a key way we connect with new demographics. In that social media is constantly changing, with platforms that frequently grow and decline, a large amount of staff research goes into understanding how best to use these tools. We regularly analyze the value of our time and impact on social media.



Communications Events

Some of the IWJV's most powerful tools are communications-led and -focused events. These gatherings bring a select group to a location (in-person or virtual) where they directly engage with IWJV partners and staff. This allows for the impactful delivery of our conservation messaging. The following communications tools are increasingly in-demand services.

Journalist Workshops: The IWJV is practicing an effective model to reach mainstream audiences with our messaging via mass media journalism through our workshops for journalists. These multi-day field tours connect mass communications professionals to the places and people we want to highlight. Without these events, journalists would have difficulty connecting to these information sources. See an example of a journalist workshop we held in the Bear River Watershed and the stories it generated [here](#).

Networking with Other Communications Professionals: The IWJV recognizes that we often communicate within a silo of like-minded conservationists. We believe that collaborating and connecting with communications professionals from other organizations helps build awareness and support for our messaging outside of this silo. We do this most frequently by coordinating with communications staff at other relevant organizations to create and distribute collaborative content. Furthermore, our [Storyteller's Circle](#) helps connect conservation communications professionals in bi-monthly, craft-focused workshops and associated events.

Virtual and In-person Trainings: A vital component of the IWJV's conservation implementation is communicating specialized knowledge and information across organizations. We therefore prioritize supporting educational workshops both online and in-person to maximize the strengths of both learning environments. One example is the [2023 virtual low-tech restoration workshop](#)—which will remain free online for public access—followed by the facilitation of and [storytelling about an](#) in-the-field work day later that year.





Evaluation

Evaluation allows us to determine whether communication intentions are met and will enable us to adapt future communications for greater effectiveness. We develop evaluation metrics in concert with the tactics and tools we use. Throughout the history of the IWJV's communication program, it has been a challenge to evaluate our content's conservation impact. As we evolve and our communications become increasingly sophisticated, we will seek new ways to quantitatively and qualitatively calculate our impact. This includes studying the best practices in the industry while staying up-to-date with the IWJV's conservation goals. Our current tools for evaluation include:

Digital Tools Evaluation Report: This report tracks evaluation metrics resulting from the delivery of digital communications tools. Each report focuses on the previous fiscal year and on trends over earlier years, and analyzes the results of targeted campaigns and releases. We also conduct analyses to answer key questions and improve our digital communications efforts (e.g., determining the characteristics of our most-viewed eNewsletter articles in past years).

Google and Other Built-in Analytics: We track unique visits to web interfaces to understand engagement with content and tools on our websites. The numbers tracked by Google Analytics help inform how we understand a piece of content's success (or "reach") and can help us identify ways to improve our distribution methods and engagement. Metrics such as time on a page and bounce rate help us understand user behavior.

Anecdotal, Qualitative Documentation: Although direct feedback from our audience is sporadic, it is the most helpful tool in judging our content's true impact. Hearing how our partners share and use our communications products—as well as how the products help them achieve their conservation goals—is valuable information for future communications planning and design. We document relevant anecdotal feedback as part of our year-end communications report by recording information staff receives and commentary our partners deliver and forward. This also illustrates how new partnerships can be established through communications.



Partner Engagement

Communication is key to functional, robust partnerships and thus is the heart of our work at the IWJV. Partnerships require nurturing to engage great people who represent multiple entities with diverse values and beliefs and are committed to working together toward a common conservation purpose for birds, other wildlife, and communities in the West.

Each member of our IWJV staff engages in daily partner communication activities, whether calling a long-time colleague about a large project, delivering carefully honed messages during Hill visits, or emailing a potential partner to introduce them to the IWJV for the first time. Interpersonal communication is perhaps the most potent form of outreach and engagement. IWJV ideas and messaging are best spread when individual staff members build relationships and connect with individuals and organizations. As it covers a large geography, the IWJV also depends on a digital presence, supported by in-person engagement, to stay connected with and inform our partnership. Through this presence, we:

Foster Co-produced Communications: Our partners have limited time and capacity for collaboration. Successful co-production in the past has involved, in some cases, the IWJV taking the lead on developing a product and consulting with partners at critical milestones and for final review. Partners are more willing to share content co-produced with the IWJV through their own communications channels if they advise its development and review the final product. This results in strengthened relationships, a greater reach to new and/or different (potentially larger) audiences, and successful team building on shared priorities.

Grow Our Reach: Partnerships blossom and sunset naturally. We must continually grow and adapt the reach of our content and meet new people and organizations to help us continue to engage partners.

Seek Continued Learning: To expand and strengthen our knowledge and connections, the IWJV Communications Team will use our annual Individual Development Plans to identify people and subject areas where we can grow our skills, seek continuing education, and build partner relationships. Other types of learning, such as workshops, conferences, and online courses, are also encouraged.





Scanning the Horizon

As we look to the future, the following topics are areas of work that the Communications Team will be invested in throughout the life of this implementation plan and beyond. This forward-thinking section includes information collected through scoping exercises with staff and partners.

Expanding Mindfully

The IWJV's communications program brings entities together around shared values. We are commonly referred to as the "connective tissue" among federal and state agencies, non-governmental organizations, private companies, and members of the agricultural industry. However, barriers exist to broadening our audience and achieving awareness of our existence and mission. In our scoping efforts, IWJV staff asked many partners about their perception of our identity as an internally facing partnership organization and how to balance this with external requests for wider-reaching communications. Our conflicting identities directly influence general recognition of our work and our ability to engage with many audiences. The IWJV needs to be humble and supportive from behind while letting partners be the face of the work and to be cautious with controversial topics to avoid damaging our reputations. At the same time, partners have asked us to reach new audiences via new outlets and to grow beyond our existing networks.

Greater awareness and reach may not directly equate to better conservation outcomes. There are risks that come with mass recognition. In a recent synthesis of cognitive research regarding the effectiveness of conservation communications messaging¹, researcher Anne Toomey presents that while wider reach is often seen as an optimal goal when it comes to audience and impact, entrenched social ideas and values often lead to the rejection of new information unless it's presented in ways that are strategic and targeted.

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¹ Toomey 2023



With this in mind, simply working toward a larger and broader audience reach is not always an ideal tactic. The IWJV, our partners, and our common conservation priorities may be best served by being strategic with our communications outreach and delivery. The following actions will help us grow our reach in a strategic and targeted manner:

Nurture Existing Partnerships at All Levels: We often take for granted that agencies (both state and federal) and partners at nongovernmental organizations know who the IWJV is as an organization and how we work. This is not always the case, especially among partners working in middle management or in the field; these partners are also among our most valuable relationships in their abilities to both implement conservation and generate conservation communications. They are therefore an especially important audience for IWJV communications. To achieve increased recognition of our work and to advance our mission, we will:

- Continue to dedicate ourselves to reaching our existing audiences and partners, especially at different organizational levels, acknowledging that this may be more important than expanding recognition of our work among new audiences.
- Develop new mission awareness materials, such as “Who is the IWJV?”-style communications geared to both existing and new partners.
- Strengthen relationships with communications staff at partner organizations and with other entities by collaborating on projects and coordinating on content that serves common goals.

Strategically Seek New Partnerships: The IWJV fosters a network of partners that, together, facilitate on-the-ground work that couldn’t otherwise happen. This concept is one we should consistently lean into with our communications and partnership efforts. It will strategically help us seek new partnerships to improve our access to new audiences and support our conservation mission. To achieve this, we will:

- Emphasize strategy over random action when establishing new communications partnerships. We can be more efficient with our time and resources by identifying specific goals for engaging an audience or seeking content placement in new outlets.
- Identify impactful communication partnership opportunities where conservation priorities align and there is mutual benefit.





Communications to Galvanize Action

Today, people experience an incredible amount of information overload. Attention results in engagement and influence in all forms; therefore, attention is a prized commodity. The IWJV uses our communications to seek the same outcomes as other information sources and constantly looks for new ways to be competitive.

Toomey's² findings also show that while it is often thought that increased access to high-quality information and increased scientific literacy will directly influence individual attitudes and behavior, this is not the case, based on how humans cognitively process novel information. Rather, people naturally seek to integrate new information into worldviews that are influenced by personal values and the needs and norms of social networks.

Because one of the core functions of IWJV communications is to transform science into action, we must consider how we can do so by appealing to the emotions and values of our various audiences. We work closely with the IWJV Science to Implementation Team to identify science-based gaps within our partnerships and determine how communications can help fill them through the following actions:

Tell Stories About People and Experiences:

IWJV's quantitative analytics constantly point to the fact that communications products perform extremely well when they focus on people, either our own staff or individual partners. Stories with central characters and emotional resonance may stick with readers well beyond the closing of a web browser. To achieve this, we will:

- Produce articles, social media posts, and films that explore an individual's motivations and experiences in conservation. This includes first-person narratives that connect audiences to specific characters.
- Create communications that incorporate the motivations of central figures. We recognize these stories resonate well with audiences for cognitive reasons. The issues of resource management with which the IWJV works often have emotional significance within the communities we serve, so identifying the heart of our communications stories can guide production.
- When it comes to defining how the IWJV partnership operates, we will seek opportunities to connect our audiences with the faces of the IWJV partnership, whether it's a capacity position, a management board member, or IWJV staff.

Practice Continued Innovation: Communication is one of the fastest-changing fields in conservation. The arena is highly competitive, and audiences expect regular revolutions in media and platforms. The IWJV is well-poised to adapt and explore new innovations in apps, social media, and multimedia storytelling tools. However, a critical eye toward efficiency and strategy is necessary, as many potential technological advancements in education and outreach will not serve our conservation mission or be effective in reaching our audience(s). With this in mind, we will:

- Strategically increase video production with a mix of contractor assistance, use of staff cameras, and high-quality phone video. Video production is one of our most time-intensive endeavors, so we will remain highly selective with video-based projects in order to maintain a diverse communications portfolio.
- Research and experiment with new outlets, tools, and tactics to stay relevant and up-to-date with cutting-edge technologies and trends.
- Seek select opportunities to partner with other organizations to reach different audiences through platforms and mediums not currently within the scope of the IWJV's communications program.

² [Toomey 2023](#)



Communicating the Relationship Between Wildlife & Agriculture

Water, sagebrush, and forests provide important natural resources that sustain much of our country's agricultural industries. In many instances, healthy habitat and wildlife populations cannot be separated from working agricultural lands. As referenced in the partnership chapter of this implementation plan, healthy landscapes rely on Indigenous Knowledge, western science, and local knowledge to ensure durable conservation. Communicating the relationships between agriculture and wildlife is a long-practiced role of the IWJV and one we will continue to refine, grow, and improve upon.

Strategically Elevate the Role Agriculture Plays in Conservation:

Much like our approach to science communications, the IWJV works to inform and influence people to reach the end goal of land conservation by appealing to their emotions and values. By approaching this topic with interpersonal stories, harnessing the power of social networks and communities, and reflecting on the many ways of knowing that exist in our society, we can effectively relate the wildlife values provided by agriculture. With this in mind, the IWJV's communications will:

- Target specific organizations and audiences with information about working lands, to increase the conservation literacy of entities that may not currently understand or appreciate the value of agriculture to wildlife and water resources.
- Seek new forums to be thought leaders in the sustainability of agricultural lands that provide important habitat benefits. Elevate these values in ways that our partners individually cannot do.
- Profile agricultural producers stewarding important landscapes/habitat in order to connect urban audiences to rural communities and people.
- Communicate science that demonstrates how and where agricultural lands and practices are important for maintaining wildlife habitat.



Fulfilling Intra-agency & Partner Agreements

The IWJV has the great fortune of hosting a team of three communications professionals, partially funded through intra-agency agreements. These agreements acknowledge that communications are a key activity to which funding will be dedicated. The majority of that funding covers communications staff time and may also be used for contractor services. The IWJV Communications Team works to amplify the following actions:

Deliver Communications Services to Partners: We will coordinate with partners to provide communications support for projects and efforts that align with the IWJV's priorities. The delivery of these services will support the tenets documented in the agreements, memorandums of understanding, and other nonfederal partnership agreements. This includes coordination on one-off products, complex communications campaigns, and amplification of partner communications. It requires an important step of partners connecting IWJV communications staff with the appropriate people within their agencies or organizations (whether it is sources for stories or other outreach staff) to facilitate this work.

Elevate Our Impact to Attract Funding and Partnerships: Increasing the visibility of IWJV and partner work will require dedicated communications attention to further on-the-ground conservation. IWJV communications staff will leverage the results and reach of our tools and tactics to support our organization's partner-building efforts. The intent is that this work will result in impactful conservation along with continued and new funding streams.

Looking Ahead

These activities led by the communications staff at the IWJV are meant to encourage and empower the IWJV network— staff, board members, and partners—to think about their role in advancing communications. “Communication” is an active verb with many meanings and approaches. As leadership comes from all levels of an organization, so too does communication.