

Tackling false narratives: environment & conservation in the age of dis- and mis-information

9 October 2024: Royal George Hotel, Perth



Event focus and introduction:

We live in an age where information of various qualities swirls around us constantly. As eNGOs we can challenge or ignore dis- and mis-information. What is the best approach? Is there a way for eNGOs to lead the narrative and avoid being sucked into negative, energy sapping discussions that lead nowhere and distract from key issues?

We looked at and discussed ways of tackling dis- and mis-information. We learnt from LINK members and keynote speakers about successful and unsuccessful approaches. We examined when and how to respond and how to ensure we retain the narrative to breathe hope into communications and inspire positive action. We were aiming to:

1. Gain confidence in tackling mis- and dis-information: when to and when not to
2. Be inspired to occupy the narrative around positive messaging so that mis-information is unable to gain traction
3. Understand audiences in Scotland and take the discussion to where they are and inspire action there.

How can we best be the voice for nature into today's fractured and bad tempered public conversations?

Main session

Congress kicked off with an introduction from Deborah, as LINK's CEO to outline the task ahead and to provide some definitions and some context.

Mis-information	Dis-information
false or inaccurate information, especially that which is deliberately intended to deceive. wrong information	false information which is intended to mislead, false information spread in order to deceive people

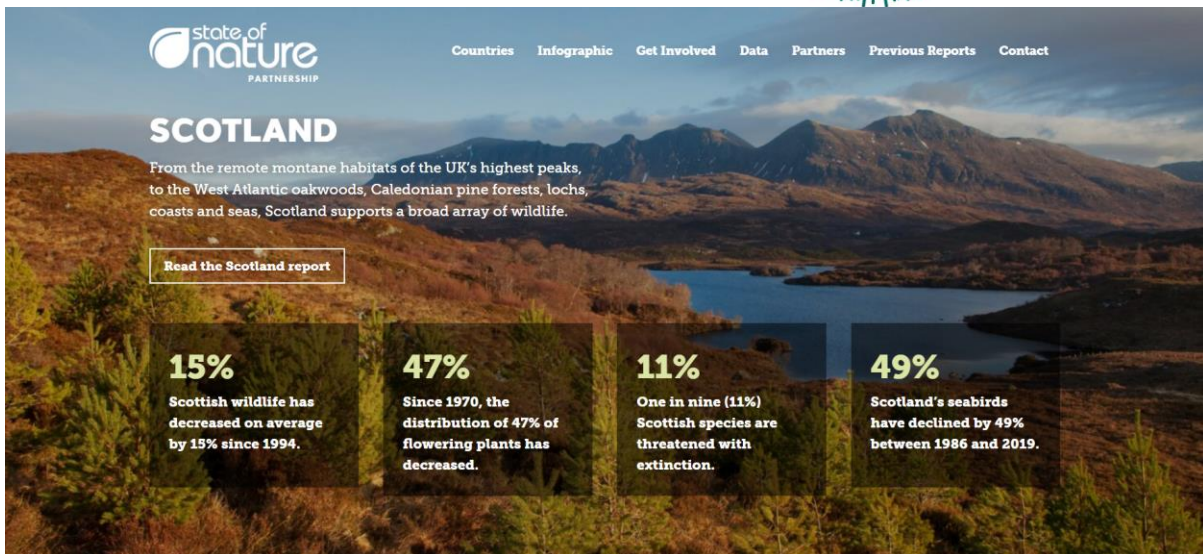
The most recent example of our need to decide when to reply and when to ignore has come with the National Park consultation in Galloway with vested interests pitched against local communities and our two LINK APRS reports, on the [social and economic benefits of National Parks](#) and the [farming benefits of National Parks](#), caught in the middle. How do we occupy the space and give a voice to nature and the environment while providing hope for local communities and future generations and at the same time, maintain our own resilience and mental health in the face of untruths and sometimes vicious social media?

[Recent polling](#) work LINK commissioned from the Diffley Partnership has helped us understand where people are generally on the environment: they are concerned, some more than others:

Tackling false narratives: environment & conservation in the age of dis- and mis-information



9 October 2024: Royal George Hotel, Perth



"I would say it's not been widely publicised, if that's the case. I'm sure that's the case in lots of local areas, but they're not really saying how there's this problem. You know, there's a crisis. What's causing the crisis and where it's happening specifically in your actual area?"

But there is also a dose of cynicism around statistics:

"I'm mildly cynical of this because anytime anybody uses percentages, it's normally shock and awe. Grab your attention and statistics can be made to prove almost any point. I don't disagree with them. I think there probably has or there is a lot of truth behind it. But the numbers themselves I take with a slight pinch of salt"

LINK has our new [Theory of Change](#) to help us decide where to put our resources and energy between now and 2030 and in it we can see how using our strong voice to put issues onto the agendas requires impactful comms, but also being a safe space for conversation. This is the topic of our Congress in 2024.

When and how do we use our strong voice to inspire positive, inclusive action?

We heard from two keynote speakers: Councillor Heather Anderson, Convener Climate, Environment and Biodiversity, Dundee City, talked to us about *Taking People with you as we tackle the climate and nature crisis*. She looked at how we can understand when change happens using Kurt Lewin's Change Equation; understanding what kind of change we're dealing with, whether that's technical change or adaptive change and understanding resistance to change. She illustrated her talk with some examples of resistance to change, misinformation and disinformation and the importance of local authorities in making change happen. She gave us some examples of actions in Dundee City council where change has come about through using these levels of understanding to bring nature to life for people and to re-imagine Dundee as a green and sunny city and UNESCO city of design.

Jason Ormiston, Head of External Affairs, Naturescot talked about *It's a noisy world - how do we make our point heard?* He advised: get your strategy straight, know what matters, be clear on

Tackling false narratives: environment & conservation in the age of dis- and mis-information



9 October 2024: Royal George Hotel, Perth

messaging, make responding your default, use plain language, journalists are still important, and deploy storytelling techniques in both mainstream and social media.

The panel question and answer session discussed how to tackle culturally based misinformation, talking with vested interests and whether the levels of venom we're seeing are actually symptoms of a lack of local democracy.

Workshop sessions:

What do people really think: Dan Paris, Advocacy Manager, Scottish Environment LINK

Dan shared what we learnt at LINK from recent opinion polling and focus group work. Is there really a rural / urban divide in Scotland? How much do people worry about climate change and biodiversity loss? Do young people have very different concerns and levels of worry to older people in Scotland? Dan also took us on a journey looking at how we can understand what people really think and then how we can respond to that so they can engage and take action. The results of the survey are available [here](#).

Dealing with false and racist narratives: Danny Carden, Communications and Engagement Manager, Ramblers Scotland, shared experiences of false and racist narratives aimed online at his organisation & its representatives. He explored lessons learned and outlined the anti-racist strategies that Ramblers has used to protect its people and its work. Ramblers fight for access rights and aim to get everyone walking regardless of backgrounds. He shared their journey on becoming an anti-racist charity. If you hear racism, it's learning how to challenge it/call it out/change the narrative. Ramblers are making sure they are deliberately always challenging it. Danny pointed to a video by John Amaechi about never missing an opportunity to show where you stand even when you can't change everything. The workshop covered lessons learnt and tactics for managing challenging situations.

Mis information and journalism: how it's viewed and used: Ginny Sanderson, from RSPB Scotland, shared her experience and expertise as a journalist to illustrate how journalists verify a story, how they identify misinformation, and then how they can address it, the importance of fact checking and the reality of news reporting now. She looked at how eNGOS can respond to misinformation given that all eNGOS are news outlets themselves and noted that while it can be important to respond, it is also important to assess when to do so on case by case basis. Sometimes it's not worth it, and other times it's important to make a stand and present the positive case with hope and solutions. Ginny used some examples from her career as a journalist: [exploring our relationship with social media](#), conspiracy theories during the [Covid pandemic](#), Elon Musk's [attack on Humza Yousaf](#) or the royal family releasing [photoshopped images](#).

Final session and next steps

Our final session kicked off with a panel Q and A session with all our presenters and workshop leads. We acknowledged that we shared a positive vision but we had some challenging narratives to get across. We need to get the balance right with a focus on the bigger picture because the health of the natural environment is important to everyone. We know this vision is shared widely and we are using our [Scotland Loves Nature](#) campaign, for example, to amplify and share this vision.

We ended with conversations of hope: we need to counter the 'everything is getting worse' arguments, empower and amplify local voices, while delivering our role as national eNGOs, who are

Tackling false narratives: environment & conservation in the age of dis- and mis-information



9 October 2024: Royal George Hotel, Perth

trusted messengers, build our media ambassadors and the long term relationships and funding necessary to maintain momentum and stay the course.

In the evening we were joined by Honorary Fellow Claudia Beamish who reflected on the day and how disinformation has been used for a very long time to hold back change. She looked back at open cast mining through to the fracking debate. Having a clearly articulated vision of hope is crucial and she reminded us of the importance of repetition: our audiences don't get as bored of our messages as we do and we need to stick with the messages. She offered us some tips from her role as an MSP on what worked for her: using cultural references to bring issues to life, providing press release copy and briefings and a reminder that we are playing the long game and as such we need to act in solidarity. A network gives support and strength and LINK provides that in spades. Her conclusions were:

Don't be daunted

Know your enemy

Be optimistic in connecting with the public and politicians

Continue to offer valuable research and proposals

Keep being a counterweight to the trash that's out there

Be optimistic about our social media opportunities

Go on refining and focusing our campaigns for change, repeat our messages as trusted voices and always remember our collective strength.

With thanks to our presenters, Cllr Heather Anderson, and Jason Ormiston, our workshop leads, Dan Paris, Danny Carden and Ginny Sanderson, Charles Dundas as Chair, and Claudia Beamish our after dinner speaker. Thank you to the LINK staff team who organised it all, especially Donna Banks, Rachael Fairbairn and Leigh Abbott and our member reps for making it so productive and enjoyable.

Taken from notes from Deborah Long, Juliet Caldwell, Miriam Ross.

Deborah Long
December 2024.



Registered office: 5 Atholl Place, Perth, PH1 5NE. A Scottish Charity No. SC000296

Scottish Environment LINK is a Scottish Company Limited by Guarantee and without a share capital under Company no. SC250899

