

## RELATIONSHIPS – THE BUILDING BLOCK TO SUCCESSFUL COMMUNICATION.

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### ABSTRACT

This paper outlines the process used in the development of a Communication Strategy for the Murray-Darling Basin *Initiative*. The Initiative is the partnership between governments and the community aimed at achieving sustainable use of the Murray-Darling Basin's water, land and other environmental resources. The strategy, which highlights relationship building as the foundation to successful communication, was developed during 1999 over a ten month period and used a wide range of consultation and participation techniques. These included focus groups, response sheets, and structured interviews to allow stakeholder groups to identify their communication perceptions, concerns and needs with regards the *Initiative*. Specific issues and needs were related to information transfer and exchange, communication networks, and involvement in natural resource issues.

The Communication Strategy was developed with close involvement of the *Initiative* partners, and sought to directly reflect stakeholder issues and needs. Features of the Communication Strategy include the involvement of partners in the communication process and its focus on relationships. The Strategy also includes an emphasis on 'best-practice' principles for natural resource communication, including an emphasis on communication networks, exchange of information and involvement of people in natural resource management.

A companion Communication Strategy Guide was developed to assist the formal *Initiative* partners, catchment groups and others to help implement the Communication Strategy by developing their own complementary strategies and action plans.

### INTRODUCTION

The Murray-Darling Basin *Initiative* is the largest integrated catchment management program in the world, covering an area of over one million square kilometres. The *Initiative* was established by the Murray-Darling Basin Agreement, which was initially signed by the Governments of the Commonwealth, New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia in 1987. With the revision of the Agreement in 1992, Queensland became a signatory, with the Australian Capital Territory being included in 1998 through a memorandum of understanding. The *Initiative* is coordinated by the Murray-Darling Basin Commission (MDBC) and supported by the Office of the MDBC located in Canberra.

Effective communication is essential if the MDBC is to succeed in achieving its purpose "*to promote and co-ordinate effective planning and management of equitable, efficient and sustainable use of water, land and other environmental resources for the Murray-Darling Basin*".

In particular, MDBC communication needs to:

- build and maintain **relationships** within and between regions;
- facilitate best-practice **policy making** that is consistent with the principles of integrated catchment management;
- ensure **on-ground action** that reflects best practice management objectives;
- facilitate the exchange or transfer of **new knowledge** that has been generated by the *Initiative* partners;

- develop new alliances or **partnerships** that produce and promote cost-effective communication products;
- be aligned to the wider **strategic priorities** of the MDBC;
- be **integrated** across the range of MDBC Strategic Investigations and Education projects related to the riverine environment, irrigated regions, dryland regions, and the human dimension;
- help remove impediments to change within the Murray-Darling Basin and build the **communities' capacity** to participate effectively in catchment management; and
- reflect on-going **feedback and evaluation** on its own effectiveness in meeting the needs of stakeholders.

In early 1999 the Commission Office commenced the development of a communication strategy for the Commission, under the direction of a high-level project board comprising two Commissioners and two members of the Murray-Darling Basin Community Advisory Committee.

## **DEVELOPMENT OF THE COMMUNICATION STRATEGY**

The specific objectives for the development of the strategy were:

1. To identify the current concerns, perceptions and information needs of stakeholders with regards the *MDB Initiative* (Phase One);
2. To use the information collated and analysed in Phase One to develop a draft Communication Strategy for the *Initiative* (Phase Two); and
3. To further consult with stakeholders about the draft Communication Strategy, and finalise its contents (Phase Three).

Underlying all these objectives was a further objective to achieve as much ownership and support for the final Communication Strategy as possible.

A wide range of stakeholders involved in natural resource management were consulted during Phase 1, grouped as follows:

- (a) Basin resource users (Catchment and Landcare groups, land managers);
- (b) Basin resource managers and regulators (State and Federal government natural resource management agencies, policy setters and planners, local government);
- (c) Basin resource advisors and funders (Resource Development Corporations and funding agencies, agribusiness and extension providers);
- (d) Broader Australian community (including educational providers);
- (e) 'Internal' MDBC stakeholders (Chief Executive, Project Manager, Project Board, Project Support, Community Advisory Committee, Ministerial Council etc); and
- (f) Communication professionals working in the natural resource management area.

Groups (a) to (d) became the four main partner categories for the final communication strategy.

Econnect Communication, a Brisbane based company specialising in environmental communication was contracted to assist the development of the communication strategy. The following principles were used throughout the project:

1. Understanding the **needs of stakeholders** is central to the development of an effective communication strategy, and this is best achieved through the process of active listening;
2. Ownership of this Communication Strategy is best achieved by providing prompt and regular **feedback** and opportunities for stakeholders to make input at all stages of Strategy development; and
3. All stakeholders' input received during Strategy development is treated as being of **equal value and worth**, regardless of the source of that information, and where information is provided confidentially this will be respected.

### **Methodology used to develop the strategy**

The methodology used illustrates the emphasis that the Murray-Darling Basin Commission has placed on effective participation and relationship building. The use of three phases with continual opportunity for feedback and review has proved to be successful in obtaining ownership and subsequent endorsement by the *Initiative* partners.

### **Phase One: Identification of stakeholder needs**

The six stakeholder groups were consulted through a process of focus groups, response sheets, personal interviews, questionnaires and a desktop review of existing publications or information. This consultation

took place over a three-month period from late April to late July 1999. The full methodology for Phase One is described in the Phase One report (Econnect August 1999a).

**(i) Focus groups**

Econnect conducted focus groups for a maximum of an hour and a half with up to 15 participants who had a related interest, experience or expertise in Basin resource issues. A moderator facilitated the process, with a recorder who simultaneously sorted, grouped and summarised data throughout each session. This allowed participants to receive a summary copy of issues and opportunities identified during the conversation soon after the focus group had finished. Participants were then able to provide feedback while the issues discussed were still fresh. The contribution of the participants to the focus group discussion was recorded, but participants remained unnamed to encourage frank and open discussion on a range of issues.

Focus groups involving 215 people were run in 11 locations including State/Territory capital cities adjacent to or inside the Basin - Brisbane, Canberra, Sydney, Adelaide, and Melbourne - where many representatives of target audiences are based. Regional locations in the Basin were chosen to represent areas of information exchange for the MDBC - Toowoomba, Tamworth, Dubbo, Wagga Wagga, Berri and Bendigo. The Commission chose these locations so that a range of Basin target audiences could be consulted.

**(ii) Response sheets**

For those who could not attend a focus group due to location or timing, but who still wanted to contribute to the process, a response sheet was provided along with focus group invitations. This response sheet was also available at Econnect's web site address. A total of 61 response sheets were received.

**(iii) Interviews**

Twenty eight structured interviews were undertaken with key stakeholders involved in decision-making to explore a set of questions similar to those used for the focus groups in the moderator's guide. The people interviewed (in person or over the phone) were identified by the Commission Office. After each interview, a summary of the interview was prepared and sent to the interviewee for clarification and comment.

These in depth interviews explored particular points of view, provided opportunities to further explore specific issues identified in the focus groups and assisted in the development of the key messages relating to the *Initiative*. They provided not only data but also opportunities for crosschecking the focus group findings.

**(iv) Consultation with communication professionals**

Twenty two communication professionals involved in natural resource management (excluding those directly involved in extension activities who were consulted through the focus groups/response sheets) were consulted through the following mechanisms:

- (a) e-mail survey through the Australian Science Communicators and Cooperative Research Centres' communication networks;
- (b) personal interviews with leading communicators; and
- (c) participation through regular meetings of communicators involved in natural resource communication (NDSP Communication Coordinators; Environmental Sector Cooperative Research Centre communicators; CSIRO Land and Water communicators; State department communicators).

The purpose of this consultation was to establish current best practice in communication about natural resources and look for potential future synergies and partnerships in the implementation of the MDBC communication plan. The best practice elements identified are shown in Table 1.

<b>Partner category</b>	<b>Description (examples of members of this category)</b>	<b>Desired relationship with the MDB <i>Initiative</i></b>
<b>Basin resource managers and users</b>	<p>This includes those who directly manage or use the resources in the Basin:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Industry associations or bodies, that may be subject to (a) regulation, (b) modifications to access to, or (c) subject to a charge for resource use</li> <li>• Special user groups (same reasons above), e.g. Landcare and Catchment Management groups</li> <li>• State, Local and Commonwealth government agencies who directly manage resources</li> <li>• Individuals who manage land, water or other natural resources</li> <li>• Communities (including Aboriginal and urban communities inside and outside the Basin) who use the Basin's resources such as water</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Empathy for the needs of individuals/organisation in the context of the sustainability of the Basin</li> <li>• Mutual understanding and trust based on knowledge and the opportunity for dialogue</li> <li>• Understanding and respect for peoples' perspectives and cultural backgrounds</li> <li>• Support for decisions on better natural resources management, based on a partnership approach</li> </ul>
<b>Basin resource use regulators or policy makers</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Resource-specific Local, State, or Commonwealth government agencies and staff with responsibilities for (a) regulating , or (b) developing strategies/policies, or (c) developing legislation</li> <li>• Inter-agency, or issues-based statutory committees whose findings or deliberations impact on the quality of the resources or peoples' use of the resource</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strategic alliances for sharing information and creating a dialogue across regional and State boundaries</li> <li>• Understanding of a common purpose in the context of sustainability of the Basin</li> <li>• Clarity of networks within and between government agencies</li> </ul>
<b>Basin resource use advisors and funders</b>	<p>This includes both government and private providers of advice or funds for research or on-ground action such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Research organisations (e.g. CSIRO, Universities, Cooperative Research Centres)</li> <li>• Research and Development funding organisations</li> <li>• Extension personnel, including facilitators for Landcare and Catchment Management groups</li> <li>• Private consultants</li> <li>• Business, including agribusiness, banks, etc</li> <li>• Government funding bodies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Confidence in and understanding of government decision-making processes and decisions made</li> <li>• Support for connecting with the networks that can facilitate change and on-ground actions</li> <li>• Understanding of the integration of natural resource issues on a local, regional and Basin basis</li> <li>• Confidence to invest in natural resources management as part of the <i>Initiative</i></li> </ul>

<b>Partner category</b>	<b>Description (examples of members of this category)</b>	<b>Desired relationship with the MDB Initiative</b>
<b>Broader Australian Community</b>	<p>This includes those with an interest in the both the Basin and national resources through either their general interest in sustainability issues and/or through their use of the Basin (e.g. for tourism) or of products from it (e.g. in terms of food, fibre). They will generally include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• National conservation, or natural resource-based interest groups, or other public advocacy groups who have an interest in (a) the sustainable quality of the resource, (b) equity of access for different public users of the resource, or (c) protection of ecological or habitat values</li> <li>• Educators, e.g. in tertiary education, curriculum development, teacher training, professional development of resource managers/industry professionals, etc.</li> <li>• The broader community, including media</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understanding of decision-making processes that are addressing the needs and concerns of partners</li> <li>• Valued understanding and involvement in the Murray-Darling Basin Initiative</li> <li>• Support for a sense of belonging and ownership that leads to a “sense of duty” with regards the Basin, where everyone see themselves as being “part of the problem <b>and</b> the solution”</li> </ul>

**Table 2. Outline of desired relationships with Initiative partner categories**

**(v) Desktop research**

Econnect’s desktop research looked at the MDBC’s past and current communication activities and media (see Econnect 1999b). The review also examined other communication strategies and relevant recent reviews and evaluation documents. This part of Phase One was extended in Phases Two and Three to produce a bibliography of relevant communication research.

**Phase Two: Communication Strategy development**

**(i) Workshop with the MDBC Communication and Initiative Operating Environment (C&IOE) Issues Working Group**

After consultation from Phase One was completed the data was analysed to identify key issues and needs of stakeholders. Issues and needs were predominantly related to the transfer and exchange of information, networks for effective communication, and how to improve involvement in natural resource issues. The rigorously coded data was analysed using qualitative analysis based on ‘grounded theory’ which is useful for identifying core issues of relevance from largely unstructured data. The use of a software package to analyse large quantities of unstructured qualitative data was unique in the identification of key issues. This method has since been used for analysis for another major MDBC project where the needs of a specific audience on a particular topic are required.

A workshop was then held with the MDBC’s newly formed C&IOE Issues Working Group. The aim of this workshop was to use the consultation data to produce a draft outline for a Communication Strategy. The workshop utilised discussion group processes with immediate feedback to determine a vision for the Strategy, overall outcomes and objectives and key messages. The workshop also included some preliminary discussion of strategies, tactics and evaluation for the Communication Strategy.

**(ii) Draft Communication Strategy**

The results of Phase One consultation and the C&IOE Issues Working Group workshop were used to develop a first draft Communication Strategy. This draft Strategy was circulated to Issues Working Group

members for further comment before going to the Project Board overseeing the project for endorsement in [add month] 1999.

### **Phase Three: Confirmation of Communication Strategy**

#### **(i) Consultation about draft Communication Strategy**

The Communication Strategy endorsed by the Project Board in Phase Two was circulated to each individual who was consulted in Phase One, MDBC internal stakeholders and the C&IOE Issues Working Group members for wider partner consultation. A questionnaire was included with the draft Strategy to help guide the responses. Forty nine questionnaire and/or written responses were received and were collated and analysed for key themes and issues.

#### **(ii) Re-draft of Communication Strategy**

Based on this consultation, the Communication Strategy was revised in the form of a Guide. A second meeting of the C&IOE Issues Working Group in early October 1999, reviewed the re-draft and recommended that two documents should be produced: an *Initiative* Communication Strategy, and a companion Communication Strategy Guide. Both documents were to be concise, self-explanatory and user-friendly.

#### **(iii) Finalisation of Communication Strategy**

The final draft of the Communication Strategy and Communication Strategy Guide were submitted to the Project Board in October 1999 for endorsement. Following minor changes, both documents were then submitted to a Commission meeting in November 1999 where Commissioners approved the Strategy and Guide.

## **INITIATIVE COMMUNICATION STRATEGY**

### **Role of the strategy**

The Strategy (MDBC 2000) provides a framework for developing communication strategies and action plans for Commission projects and activities which can be used by all partners of the *Initiative* for their projects and activities. It will help promote the use of current communication best practice, the development of stronger relationships between *Initiative* partners and help focus communication action for information exchange, communication networks and involvement in natural resources management in the Basin.

### **Vision and goal for communication**

The following vision and goal was developed to underpin the strategy.

**Vision for communication in the Basin:** Partners in the Basin have the capacity to and are participating effectively together in the Murray-Darling Basin *Initiative*.

**Goal for communication:** To communicate the nature and extent of the natural resource problems facing the Basin and effective action strategies to ensure Basin sustainability and generate political and community support.

### **Partners in communication and desired relationships**

Four partner categories (target audiences) are identified in the Strategy for guiding natural resources communication in the Basin. These may need to be further sub-divided, defined, described and prioritised at a more specific level for individual organisations, projects and activities. In many cases, organisations or groups may be members of all four categories according to their roles in the Basin.

### **The importance of relationships**

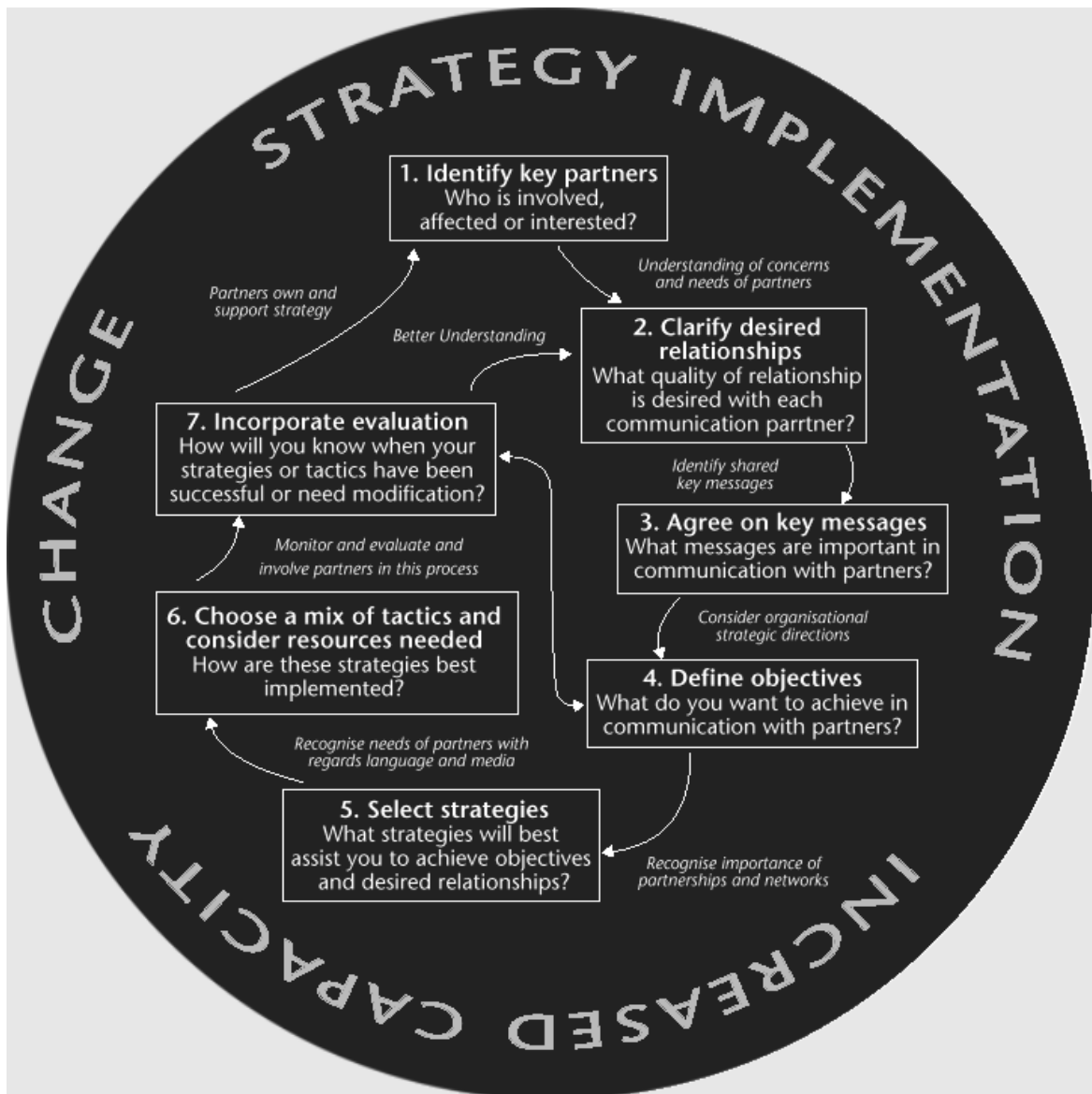
The Strategy follows the principle that before establishing communication outcomes and objectives, it is important to consider what sort of relationship is desired with a partner. A relationship can be defined as a particular kind of connection existing between people having dealings with one another. Clarification of desired relationships, that reflect the concerns and needs of partners, will produce more effective and realistic communication. These relationships will be further defined through experience. However, an understanding of what is desired from relationships at the beginning of the communication process will help direct that process.

There is a need for the *Initiative* to develop relationships of understanding across all partners that lead to trust and participation. The desired relationships articulated in the Strategy are shown in Table 2. These relationships are based on consultation, and should form the basis for all communication activities.

**INITIATIVE COMMUNICATION STRATEGY GUIDE**

To assist in the development of a Communication Strategy, a series of seven steps have been developed (see figure 1); the steps commence with identification of partner categories and establishment of the desired relationship.

The Communication Strategy Guide (MDBCb) outlines additional details for each step, and provides a range of strategies and tactics that can be used. The strategies and tactics reflect the suggestions made during the Phase One and Phase Two consultation. The Guide provides a framework for developing a communication strategy at a corporate, program or project level. In working through this Guide, the assistance of a communication professional, experienced in natural resource management issues may be beneficial.



**Figure 1.0: Key steps in the Murray-Darling Basin Initiative Communication Strategy**

What has been unique in the development of the strategy is the emphasis placed on relationships, the analysis of the qualitative data and the development of a guide to assist in the implementation of the strategy across six governments.

## **CONCLUSION**

The *Initiative* Communication Strategy has been adopted by the Murray-Darling Basin Commission to provide a framework for its communication activities. However, the Murray-Darling Basin *Initiative* includes the activities of a wide range of government departments and agencies, industries, catchment management bodies and other community groups. The Commission thus encourages wide use of the Communication Strategy Guide to help *Initiative* partners develop effective relationship-based communication strategies and actions that best suit their needs and those of their own partners.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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## **REFERENCES**

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Econnect 1999b. Desktop Research Report. Report to Office of Murray-Darling Basin Commission

MDBC<sup>a</sup> 2000. Murray-Darling Basin *Initiative* Communication Strategy 2000-2002. Murray-Darling Basin Commission. \*

MDBC<sup>b</sup> 2000. Murray-Darling Basin *Initiative* Communication Strategy Guide 2000-2002. Murray-Darling Basin Commission.\*

\*both documents are available free of charge through the MDBC web site or by contacting the MDBC office