

# Evaluation of STEP Communication & Project management

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## 1. Introduction

In this document, the Communication and Project management of the STEP-project will be evaluated. The STEP project consists of three intrinsic parts, the communication and the project management. The intrinsic parts deal with sustainable public facilities (Activity 1), visitors' management (Activity 2) and with encouraging corporate sustainability (Activity 3). These 3 Activities were evaluated separately as well and together with this evaluation they form the overall evaluation of the STEP-project. The purpose of the separate evaluations is to provide better insight into the execution of specific actions, the results and the evaluation thereof.

STEP is an Interreg 2 Seas project and stands for Sustainable Tourism in Estuary Parks. The project concerns the encouragement and facilitation of sustainable tourism in wet nature conservation areas. Four partners work together in the project: Parkschap Nationaal Park De Biesbosch(NL), Waterwegen en Zeekanaal NV (BE), Agentschap voor Natuur en Bos (BE) and The Broads Authority (UK). The first is the Lead Partner, referred to as the LP; the second is also referred to as PP3, the third as PP4 and the last as PP5.

PP2 is missing as this partner merged with the original LP into the Parkschap over the course of the project. This new organisation has taken over and carried out all of the original partners' activities. The activities are being carried out in three areas: De Biesbosch in the Netherlands, De Polders van Kruibeke in Flanders and The Broads in England. PP3 and PP4 are therefore working together closely in the Flemish area.

Preparations for the STEP-project started in the autumn 2008 – spring 2009 period. The application was submitted in June 2009 and approved at

the end of November 2009. In effect, the STEP-project really started in January 2010.

Originally, the project would be completed by the end of 2012, but it was extended by six months until the end June 2013. A request for changes for this extension was submitted and approved around the end of 2011/beginning of 2012. This request also contained a number of smaller and larger changes in relation to the original project plan.

This evaluation subsequently deals with the original objectives, actions and results of Communication and Project Management (Chapter 2) and with the realised results (Chapter 3). Chapter 4 contains an evaluation of the results, objectives and cross-border cooperation. A separate paragraph in Chapter 4 consists of the evaluation by stakeholders. The evaluation is concluded by a number of conclusions and recommendations (Chapter 5).

This evaluation was written by the STEP-project's external project supervisor. The basic information for this was supplied by the partners. They filled in a comprehensive questionnaire on the objectives, intended results, actual results, etc. to the best of their knowledge. These questionnaires were then discussed, supplemented and improved with all project partners individually. The results were initially evaluated by the author. The evaluation by stakeholders was used as well. Interviews were held for this with entrepreneurs, municipal representatives and organisations involved in all three areas. In total, 18 interviews were held: 6 in The Broads, 5 in De Biesbosch and 7 in De Polders van Kruibeke; see appendix, list of names. Finally, the evaluation was discussed with all partners jointly.

## 2. Original description of the Communication and Project management

### 2.1 General

In the original application, the communication with respect to the STEP-project was described in a broad outline only. In the first six months an extensive communication plan was drawn up describing detailed actions, target groups and intended results (see following paragraphs). In the application, the communication was divided over 4 parts:

1. Internal communication at organisational level: this communication takes place during meetings between the various groups (Steering Group, Coordination Group and Communication Working Group) to discuss the project's progress, to decide on joint actions, budgeting, interim reports, etc. In addition to meetings, this of course also takes place by means of e-mails and the interactive website.

2. Internal communication at intrinsic level: this communication is aimed mainly at joint exchange and development of knowledge around the 3 central themes and the preparation and execution of all local actions and investments. Partners do this by means of working visits, workshops, peer reviews, excursions and joint studies.

3. External communication about the STEP-project: this form of communication, also referred to as dissemination, is mainly aimed at the outside world. Giving publicity to all actions and results of the STEP-project by means of an up-to-date website, newsletters, folders, conferences, press releases, etc.

4. External communication on a local level: the communication by individual partners about the local STEP-actions aimed at residents, companies and news media. Besides an informative significance these actions also have a function in involving residents and companies in the local actions. Partners make use of their own communication tools and channels, such as a website, press releases, events, etc.

This division shows that the first part largely corresponds with the project management. All actions by the project management have a significant internal communication value. These actions have therefore been described within this part, but also because the application has been organised as such. It is also the reason why the project management will be evaluated together with the communication.

The project management in the application is described briefly and effectively:

'The LP will appoint a bilingual project coordinator, who forms the Project Management Committee (PMC) together with the financial and communications manager. This Committee is responsible for the overall project coordination, the execution of joint actions and meetings and for drawing up semi-annual reports.

Governing them is the International Coordination Group (ICG), which consists of all partners' project managers. The ICG decides on the proposals put forward by the PMC, it maintains the overall project budget and if necessary, submits proposed changes to the International Steering Group (ISG). The ICG-members also provide all information for drawing up

the semi-annual reports and they ensure the execution of local actions and investments.

The ISG is ultimately responsible for the project at the objective and finance level. It makes decisions regarding any budgetary and other drastic changes and ensures the feedback of the progress and results at an administrative level.

In addition, there is a separate Communications Working Group (CWG) that organises all joint communication actions and comprises of all partners' communications officers.

The external communication at a local level has already been largely described in the evaluations on all actions within the 3 Activities. This was opted for because this communication component is closely linked to and often even part of those actions. That is why this component of the communication will only be discussed within this evaluation if it is necessary to get a full picture.

## **2.2 Objectives and target groups**

The main objectives of the various forms of communication and dissemination are:

1. Internally at organisational level: ensuring the project's smooth progress so that everyone knows what is expected when of him/her, so that all parties involved are well aware of all actions and results and involving as many residents and companies as possible in the local actions

2. Internally at an intrinsic level: realising the best possible exchange of knowledge and experience and effectively pooling these for one's own local project components, the joint actions and for other interested parties that do not participate in the project directly, but may benefit considerably from the outcome and results of specific actions and investments.

3. Externally at STEP-level: informing all external parties in the best possible way of the progress of the project, the interim results and the end results and involving the maximum number of residents and visitors in the project. In addition, creating social support for the maintenance and development of estuarine nature conservation areas and sustainable tourism.

4. Externally on a local level: the same as 3, but then especially aimed at the local-regional level.

Two more objectives were added to the communication plan, viz.:

-promoting the three estuarine nature conservation areas with respect to potential tourists and visitors; and

-raising the awareness of the advantages of European cross-border cooperation.

The internal communication, both at an organisational level as well as an intrinsic one, aims primarily at the immediate participants and parties involved in the project, including nature organisations, recreational amenities boards, municipalities, water managers, provinces, businesses, promotion organisations and residents. Usually, they are beneficiaries at the project objective level, but sometimes are final beneficiaries as well.

The external communication also aims at similar organisations in the entire Two Seas Region and even beyond. This form of communication also aims at national governments, nature organisations, recreation organisations, political policy-making bodies and the media. In this regard, they are the beneficiaries at the project objective level. The real final beneficiaries are the potential visitors, residents, businesses and managers of the regions.

Several messages are also identified in the communication plan with regard to the external target groups. The following four have been identified at the STEP-project level:

- Sustainable tourism offers the unique possibility to enable visitors to discover nature conservation areas in an attractive manner without causing damage to nature and the landscape.
- Implementing sustainable tourism is not easy in practice. There are still many measures that need to be developed and tested. STEP offers us the possibility to do this and to demonstrate that sustainable tourism is feasible.
- In many places in the 2 Seas Area sustainable tourism is being worked on, but this mainly takes place locally and without cooperation. STEP shows that sustainable tourism can really grow through cross-border cooperation because much can be learned from each other.
- Europe facilitates cross-border cooperation in the development of sustainable tourism in estuarine nature conservation areas.

Various messages have also been identified at a local level, viz.:

- These local actions and investments were also made possible by the EU
- The benefit of international cooperation is that much can be learned from each other's knowledge and expertise.
- Go and have a look in the other STEP-regions.

## 2.3 Actions

The following actions have been identified in the application within the 4 communication parts.

1. At the internal – organisational level:
  - 3 steering group meetings
  - 8 coordination group meetings
  - 4 communication group meetings

2. At the internal – intrinsic level:
  - 3 peer review meetings, including workshops and excursions
  - 3 joint studies, 1 within each Activity
  - An international excursion
  - 3 evaluation studies on all3activities

3. At the external – STEP-project level:
  - A start-up conference
  - An Estuary Trip Competition
  - A joint database
  - Website and 7 digital newsletters
  - A folder (2,000 copies)
  - 50 press releases
  - A guideline (2,000 copies)
  - A final conference

4. At the external – local level:

Several actions under 3, in particular the website, newsletters, folder and press releases are also aimed at the local level. In addition, partners make use of their own websites, newsletters, Facebook, folders and presentations.

The following actions were added to the communication plan:

Ad 1.

- 8 progress and financial reports

Ad 3.

- Update of the folder
- 6 roll-ups with information about the project and the 3 regions

Ad 4.

- 2 Open Shipyard days in De Polders van Kruikeke (by PP3&PP4)
- Debate with the Design Academy (by LP)

## 2.4 Interim changes

Only a few interim changes were made in the communication and the project management. It concerns the following issues:

Ad 2.

- The three studies that had been planned initially were changed into a communication plan and actions regarding communicating on sustainability (Activity 1), a Park-app as a tool for visitors' management and a report on the future of visitors' centres (Activity 2) and an analysis on public-private cooperation (Activity 3)
- An extra international excursion

Ad 3.

- The joint database was changed into a communication plan containing actions the 3 regions are going to use to promote each other, also after the project.
- The update of the folder was cancelled.

The studies were changed slightly as there was no need for extensive studies on the EU Charter for Sustainable Tourism (Activity 1) and on visitors' management (Activity 2). The EU Charter was, however, extensively discussed in a workshop and subsequently also applied by The Broads and De Biesbosch (see evaluation Activity 1). Communicating about sustainability proved to be a more interesting issue and experiments with this were carried out by all 3 regions.

The joint study on visitors' management was developed further by the international excursions to various visitors' centres and by writing a report about this. In addition, a Park-app was created for all three regions to design the visit in another, more playful way.

As there was budget left from another joint action, viz. the Estuary Trip Competition, an extra excursion was organised to the Lake District on the Visitor Giving system there.

The joint database could not be implemented because of privacy legislation. That is why this action was replaced by an alternative with the same goal, i.e. promoting each other's regions. This is now being developed by means of extra webpages on the sites of the three regions, referral signs, advertisements and the exchange of journalists.

An extra update of the folder proved unnecessary.

## 2.4 Expected results

The following tangible results were expected from the communication and the project management beforehand:

Ad 1. At an internal – organisational level:

- 15 reports of all meetings
- Good organisation, good progress of the project and satisfaction with all project partners and other parties immediately involved
- Clear progress reports and satisfaction with the JTS

Ad 2. At an internal – intrinsic level:

- 2 reports on the 2 local workshops about local actions and investments, incl. recommendations, exchange of knowledge, etc. and 1 report of the workshop about the EU Charter for Sustainable Tourism
- Various communication actions on sustainability measures in the three regions
- 1 report on the future of the visitors' centres
- 1 Park-app to explore the three regions
- 1 report about the possibilities for public-private cooperation in the three regions
- 2 reports about the two international excursions
- 3 evaluation reports about the three Activities

Ad 3/4. Externally – at the STEP level and the local level:

- 100 participants in and report about the start-up conference
- 250 participants in the Estuary Trip Competition, 6 winners and 6 visits to the three regions as well as the publicity thereof
- 10,000 unique visitors to the constantly updated website
- 7 digital newsletters which are sent to 200 readers
- 2,000 folders, fully distributed
- 50 press releases (15 per region and 5 general ones)
- 6 roll-ups containing information about the project and the 3 regions which are regularly used for exhibitions
- 2,000 Guidelines to be distributed during the final conference, and sent to all parties involved directly and indirectly in the project in all 3 regions
- 150 participants in the final conference and a report on it
- 6 communication actions to promote each other's regions
- 10 publications in professional journals
- 10 radio reports
- 2 TV-broadcasts
- 1 report debate with the Design Academy (by the LP)
- 2 Open Shipyard Days in De Polders van Kruikeke (by PP3 and PP4)
- websites, newsletters, presentations and folders of the partners

### 3. Realised actions and results

#### 3.1 Project Management and internal communication

The project management has been implemented as planned by the establishment of an International Steering Group (ISG), the International Coordination Group (ICG) and a Communication Working Group. Immediately following the start of the project all these groups' positions were filled. They also met regularly in accordance with the planning (3, 8, and 4 times respectively) (see table below).

Date	Town	Meeting – Group(s)
9 February 2010	Dordrecht (Biesbosch)	ICG-meeting
10 May 2010	Kruikebe	ISG-meeting
10 May 2010	Kruikebe	CWG-meeting
23 June 2010	Norwich (Broads)	ICG-meeting
23 June 2010	Norwich (Broads)	CWG-meeting
25 November 2010	Dordrecht (Biesbosch)	ISG-ICG-combined meeting
17 March 2011	Kruikebe	ICG-meeting
7 November 2011	Norwich (Broads)	ISG-ICG-combined meeting
13 February 2012	Werkendam (Biesbosch)	ISG-ICG-combined meeting
21 June 2012	Kruikebe	ISG-ICG-combined meeting
22 November 2012	Dordrecht (Biesbosch)	ISG-ICG-combined meeting
19 February 2013	Norwich (Broads)	ICG-meeting
16 April 2013	Kruikebe	ICG-meeting
7 June 2013	Dordrecht (Broads)	ISG-ICG-combined meeting

In total: 1 steering group (ISG)-meeting, 11 coordination group (ICG)-meetings (6 of which were combined with the ISG) and 2 communication working group (CWG)-meetings, all this in accordance with the planning. All meetings were always prepared well by means of agendas and the

required appendices. Reports were drawn up of all meetings, including appendices (14 in total; 15 had been planned).

Please note that more meetings were held on a smaller scale, e.g. to prepare the start-up conference in Kruikebe in March 2010, a special meeting of the financial managers in Kruikebe on 10 May 2010, a meeting on 1 March 11to prepare the meeting in Kruikebe on 17 March 2011, a visit to The Broads by the chairman of the steering group on 6 November 2011 and a few meetings for the park app.

The Project Management Committee, consisting of the project manager, the communications manager and the financial manager, functioned at the level of the LP. The PMC met approximately 4 times a year to discuss the progress, problems and other issues. The joint meetings were also prepared by this group. Especially these joint meetings were also attended by the external project coordinator. He primarily looked after the start-up and monitoring of all cross-border actions.

#### *Progress and Financial reports:*

Seven progress and financial reports were submitted completely and in a timely fashion. In general there were few requests for further explanation and recommendations. The JTS was (most) satisfied with these reports.

#### *Major modifications:*

Two requests for modification were submitted during the project period. The first one was in November 2010 and the second one in February 2012. The first one concerned the merger of the original Lead Partner (Natuur-en Recreatieschap De Hollandse Biesbosch) and PP2 (Stichting Beheer Nationaal Park De Biesbosch) into the current LP (Parkschap

Nationaal Park De Biesbosch). In addition, various smaller budget modifications were implemented then.

The second major modification regarded a large number of smaller and some larger modifications at the level of actions, investments and project duration. These modifications are described in detail in the evaluations of the 3 Activities. Both major modifications were approved.

#### *Midterm review and action plans:*

In the autumn of 2011, a midterm review was carried out. All actions and investments were examined extensively by the PMC with respect to implementation, feasibility within the project period, expenditure, budget lines, etc. A detailed report was written about this. On the basis of this report the second major modification was developed and all project partners had to draw up a detailed action plan at the level of subactions for the last 18 months of the project. These action plans were subsequently monitored and updated every four months. This has definitely contributed to a timely implementation of most actions and investments and therefore to a good project result.

The results of all these actions in the field of internal communication and project management are:

- As an independent body, the Steering Group functioned to a limited extent only. Especially on the Flemish and English side administrators attended only occasionally.
- The Coordination Group functioned very well: participants of all partners always attended, the group often met, proposals, meetings and joint actions were always prepared and where required, decisions were taken; there was also much contact between the members by telephone and e-mail outside the meetings to discuss and prepare matters, to share knowledge, etc.
- As an independent body, the Communication Group mainly functioned in the first year; after that matters were discussed increasingly by e-

mail and telephone and its duties were partly taken over by the Coordination Group.

- The PMC mainly met to prepare and discuss meetings and the documents for those meetings. In addition, there was much contact between the PMC-members themselves to discuss issues and carry out actions, such as progress reports, proposals for new joint actions, etc.
- The entire project management resulted in the implementation of nearly all joint actions and even some extra actions.
- All project partners are satisfied with the project management and the project's progress.

Conclusion: the actions have been fully implemented in accordance with the intention in the application and the intended results have been realised.

### **3.2 Internal communication at the intrinsic level**

Including the modifications this part of the internal communication consisted of 4 parts:

- 3 meetings (1 in every region) to look at the planned actions and investments (excursion), to discuss them (workshop) and to consider them for a possible recommendation (peer review)
- 3 joint actions, 1 within each Activity: a workshop and actions about communication on sustainability (Activity 1), a Park-app as a tool for visitors' management and a report about the future of visitors' centres (Activity 2) and a consideration on public-private cooperation and making businesses more sustainable (Activity 3)
- 2 international excursions
- 3 evaluation studies on all three activities

The first part was dealt with in three meetings:

In The Broads on 24 June 2010, in De Polders van Kruikeke on 16 and 17 September 2010 and in De Biesbosch on 26 November 2010. The first two

really focused on the local actions and investments. In The Broads for instance on improvements to visitors' centres, developing public-private cooperation and the Green Mark for businesses. In Kruikebe the peer review and workshop especially focused on visitors' management, recreational infrastructures and the use and necessity of visitors' centres. In De Biesbosch the workshop dealt with the EU Charter for Sustainable Tourism. Extensive reports were drawn up of all meetings, which can be found on the website. The first two show that this resulted in much useful knowledge and many recommendations for the two regions. This is also the case for the last one in De Biesbosch, but there it concerned the matter of what a Charter application should look like.

The joint actions within the three Activities have yielded the following results:

- Within Activity 1:
  - \* a study into what European parks are doing with the Charter for Sustainable Tourism with regard to communication on sustainability (2011)
  - \* a workshop on Communication about Sustainability in De Biesbosch on 14 February 2012
  - \* communication actions on sustainability:
    - In De Biesbosch: 3 nominations for the EDEN award with the corresponding publicity and info via the Biesbosch Ranger app
    - In De Polders van Kruikebe: activities with schools and youth movements, a training course for guides and info via Polder Ranger app
    - In The Broads: information via the Broads Ranger app
- Within Activity 2: products relating to visitors' management:
  - A brochure/guideline regarding the future of visitors' centres;
  - a Park-app for the three regions: this is an on and off-line tool to discover and experience a nature conservation area in a playful manner; this is a game for smartphones that allows for

information about the region to be added interactively by the parties.

- Within Activity 3: a study and report containing recommendations on public-private cooperation in the three regions.

Within the third part, two 3-day international excursions were carried out. The first in the Netherlands and Belgium, i.e. from 15 to 17 June 2011. Here the focus lay on visitors' centres and sustainable small-scale accommodations. During this excursion, eight regions/locations were visited by day and visitors' management and visitors' centres were discussed in detail in the evening.

The second excursion was to the Lake District in England (12-14 September 2012) and was fully focused on the Visitor Giving principle. During the excursions, four projects and five entrepreneurs were visited to listen to and discuss the approach and results of this system, i.e. asking visitors for a voluntary contribution for the management of nature and recreational facilities.

About 25 people took part in both excursions, including project managers of all partners, those indirectly involved in the STEP-project and entrepreneurs. A detailed report was drawn up on both excursions and made available on the website.

The fourth part is related to the evaluations of the Activities. These three evaluations, and even a fourth (this) one on communication, were carried out in the autumn of 2012 and the spring of 2013 (see introduction). The preliminary versions are mainly for internal use and for writing the guideline. The final versions will be available on the website by the end of August 2013.

Conclusions: Parts 1, 3 and 4 have been carried out in accordance with the application. An extra excursion was even organised for part 3. The results

of these 3 parts are also in line with the description in the application. The second part was carried out completely differently than planned. The results are rather unclear, with the exception of the Park-app.

### 3.3 External communication at STEP-level

All actions planned as part of the external communication at the overarching STEP-level have been carried out. The table below shows the planned and realised results:

Action	Intended result	Actual result
Start-up conference	100 participants	70 participants
Estuary Trip Competition	250 participants	383 participants
Website	10,000 visitors	7.771 visitors 4.935 unique
Digital newsletters	6 newsletters; 200 readers	6 newsletters 535 readers
Folder	2,000	2,000
Press releases	50	Ca50
Publications in professional journals	10	30
Articles in newspapers	-	8 in national newspapers 31 in regional and local newspapers
Radio reports	10	15
TV-broadcasts	2	7
Guideline	2,000	2.000
Closing conference	150 participants	92 participants
Roll-ups with information on the project and the 3 regions	6 and regular expositions	6 used about 20 times

Communication actions to promote each other's regions (action instead of joint database)	-	-Visit by journalists to STEP regions - Signposts - Water bottle - Advertisement - Com. Kit - Roll-up - Park app - Geocache - Web pages
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This overview shows that most results were realised. With regard to some action the results slightly below expectation, e.g. the number of visits to the website, with others clearly beyond expectation, e.g. the number of articles in newspapers, and the number of TV-broadcasts. On balance the result is good.

### 3.4 External communication at a local level

On the one hand the communication on a local level made use of actions referred to under 3.3 and on the other hand of local channels, such as websites, presentations, events and folders. These local communication actions usually related to concrete actions within STEP. That is why the actions were extensively identified within the evaluations of the three Activities. Only the most important and/or striking ones are listed briefly below.

Activities	Communication actions and execution
General	Special STEP-pages on the websites of all partners
	Regular attention for the STEP-actions in local newsletters: PP3 3x a year; PP4 in Spoorzoeker (8,000 readers)
	Presentations on STEP-actions for local stakeholders; by

	all partners
	2 Open Shipyard days in De Polders van Kruibeke (PP3 and PP4): 350-400 visitors a year
	European Open days in May, 2 x by LP and 1x by PP3: ca 3000 + 100 visitors
	Scheldt happening by PP3: 50 visitors
	Facebook page by PP3; 800 friends
Activity 1	Brochure on subaction 2 by PP4
	General project brochure by PP3; 2,500 copies distributed
	Press releases on obtaining European Charter by LP and PP5
	House style proposals at the Design Fair in Milan by PP3
	Much publicity on ecolodge (LP)
Activity 2	Exhibition, lecture and debate on designs by the Design Academy by the LP: 50 visitors
	Inspirational booklet on sustainable visitors' centres by LP
	Programme folder on guides training course by PP3
Activity 3	Press conference and signing of host contracts by LP
	Press conference and signing of participation in Beleef en Geef De Biesbosch Fonds by LP

This overview also shows that the partners communicated intensively at a local level in accordance with the actions identified in the application. In this regard too, the results are beyond expectations.

### 3.5 Cross-border cooperation

The cross-border cooperation has been very intensive in parts 1, 2 and 3 of the communication. However, not so in the fourth part, as it concerned external communication at the local level.

In the first part, internal communication in the organisational field, the meetings were prepared in turns by the partner where this meeting was held. Please note that this usually happened in conjunction with the LP and other partners were involved as well.

In principle, the same applies to the meetings, actions, excursions and evaluations in part 2, i.e. internal communication at the intrinsic level. The specific added value of workshops and studies has already been described in the evaluations of the Activities. Exceptional was the added value of cross-border cooperation during the international excursions and during development of the Park-app. During the first excursion a new image emerged during the visits of various visitors' centres and the discussions in the evening about the value and use of these centres in the future. As a result of the second excursion all partners became convinced that the visitor giving system can, if necessary, be used in their own regions in an altered form. The Broads and De Biesbosch have even begun working on this; this cannot be done in De Polders van Kruibeke until the constructions has been finished and a suitable organisational structure has been realised. The Park-app is a product of complete cooperation, exceptional in its kind and because of the joint approach and design probably applicable in all nature conservation areas in Europe. The meetings on public-private cooperation have also led to new and useful insights for all partners (see evaluation of Activity 3).

In the third part the cooperation has led to exceptional results, such as much publicity in newspapers, professional journals, on radio and TV; a nice competition with many participants, pleasant trips and much publicity; a beautiful guideline and a renewed approach to promote each other's regions also after the end of the STEP-project. Without cross-border cooperation these results would not have been feasible.

More generally speaking all communication actions combined have resulted in:

- A substantial increase in the cooperation with stakeholders, i.e. entrepreneurs, municipalities, and organisations in all 3 working regions;
- A more positive image of the regions, the partners and EU-projects;
- More insight into differences and similarities in the procedures in other countries and what from that To use in one's own organisation and/or working area.

## 4. Evaluation

### 4.1 Results

The table below shows a summary overview of the planned results and the realised results at the end of the project (July 2013).

<b>The tangible results of the Communication and Project management:</b>	<b>Responsible partners</b>	<b>Realisation: Yes Partly</b>
Subaction 1. Internal communication - A working project organisation with a PMC, ISG, ICG and CWG - 3 steering group, 8 coordination group and 4 communication group meetings, including reports - Progress and financial reports, major modifications and midterm review	All partners, esp. Biesbosch (LP) All partners  All partners, esp. Biesbosch (LP)	Yes Yes  Yes
Subaction 2. Internal communication on content level - 3 workshops ed. local actions - 3 joint actions / studies - 2 international excursions - 3 evaluations Activities	All partners All partners All partners All partners	Yes Yes Yes Yes
Sub action 3. External communication on STEP-level - Website (10,000) + 7 newsletters - Folder (2,000) - Start- and final conference (100 resp. 150 participants) - Estuary Trip competition (250 part) - Joint promotion – Park Pals (alternative database)	All partners All partners All partners All partners All partners	Yes Yes Yes Yes Partly

- Guideline (2,000) - 50 press releases - 10 publications - 10 radio reports - 2 television programs	All partners All partners All partners All partners All partners	Yes Yes Yes Yes Yes
Sub action 4: External communication on local level: - local websites - local presentations - press releases - other actions	All partners All partners All partners All partners	Yes Yes Yes Yes

The overview shows that almost all intended results as identified in the application have been realised, not just in qualitative terms but in most cases also quantitatively. With that, the whole package of communication actions can be evaluated as highly successful. With the Park Pals concept, the three regions will continue promoting each other also after the end of the STEP project.

### 4.2 Objectives

The original objectives for the communication and the project management focused on four issues:

- ensuring that the project progresses as smoothly as possible , that everyone knows what is expected of him/her when, that all parties involved are kept up to date of all actions;
- realising the best possible exchange of knowledge and experience and effectively combining this for one's own local project parts, the joint actions and for other interested parties;
- informing all external parties as best as one can of the progress of the project, the interim results and end results and involving as many stakeholders as possible i.e. entrepreneurs, organisations, etc.
- informing residents and visitors of the project.

The first objective was realised beyond expectations. This is evident from the evaluation filled in by the partners themselves. They are all very pleased with the organisation and the internal communication within the project.

The second objective has been realised as well. Not only did partners exchange much knowledge and experience, but during intensive actions, such as the many workshops, international excursions and joint studies, new knowledge and insights emerged for one's own actions and investments, e.g. with regard to visitors' management, visitors' centres, visitor giving, sustainable facilities, etc. The results of the cross-border cooperation have been explained in detail in the evaluations of the three Activities.

Informing and involving external parties and stakeholders has also been more than successful. In all three regions the number of parties involved has turned out to be larger than expected. The evaluation among stakeholders also shows that they find that the project has been very successful in this regard as well. In The Broads this has resulted in a renewed convergence of entrepreneurs regarding tourism in and to The Broads. In De Polders van Kruikeke the project resulted in a changed attitude on the part of entrepreneurs and organisations in relation to the developments there and even to the creation of a Steering Group Tourism. In De Biesbosch a large group of entrepreneurs was involved directly in different ways, e.g. through hostship, Green Key, Beleef en Geef Fonds, in the Parkschap and provincial barriers were removed.

Properly informing residents and visitors has probably also been fairly successful. It remains difficult, however, to evaluate this as this was not examined. In this regard only the scope of publicity in the shape of newspaper articles, exposure on radio and TV can be examined. From this perspective, the project has been successful in relation to the objectives set in advance.

### 4.3 Evaluation by the partners

As discussed briefly in the previous paragraph, all partners have filled in an evaluation concerning the organisation and cooperation. The outcome of this will be explained in this paragraph. The following issues will be dealt with consecutively:

- a. organisation and internal communication
- b. cross-border cooperation
- c. external communication

#### a. Organisation and internal communication

Seven questions were submitted regarding this item. The first question related to the evaluation of the organisation of the STEP-project.

Comments were:

- Intensive, much work, but necessary
- Administrators of PP3, PP4 and PP5 often failed to make their appearance at steering group meetings
- Process and financial management was good and necessary
- Motivated and dedicated LP

The second question related to the internal communication, with answers such as:

- Good, smooth mutual contact
- Very good, LP kept everyone well informed at all times
- Good, but also capable of improvement with regard to speed (replying immediately to emails) and in the case of local actions seeking contact sooner to act on issues together

The third question: Which organisational problems did you encounter?

- Sometimes there was not enough time to prepare issues properly
- Within the organisation, the project is initiated by (too) few people
- Internal coordination with regard to procedures intern is difficult in relation to the time pressure of the STEP-project

- Within the organisation the agreements on the obligations from STEP were not always clear, which resulted in confusion
- Much extra work for the Finance Department which was not anticipated

The fourth question: Which communication problems did you experience?

- Communication managers usually remained in the back ground as a result of which communication actions were supervised in practice by the project managers; because of this it was not always clear who was point of contact
- Within Interreg one does things that are not always obvious within one's own project and organisation. Reason why there is not always support for it.

Question five: Did you experience any cultural differences; and if so, which ones?

- Because of the language barrier it sometimes takes longer to reach agreement.
- I did not; there was a shared interest and wish to get the job done
- The Dutch are direct, high-handed and action-oriented. The English polite, self-critical and less concrete. The Belgians are less decisive.

Question six: How do you evaluate the degree of mutual cooperation?

- Good, relaxed and intensive

Question seven: How do you evaluate your organisation's contribution to the project, organisationally and communicatively?

- As good as can be, a lot of manpower and time was invested in STEP (there could always be more of this and better, but not feasible due to a lack of time)
- Sincere and we did what could be expected from us. Successful in terms of publicity in the media.

- LP should have taken the lead and did so. Partners occasionally depended on the LP a little too much.
- Their contribution is substantial in relation to the project size.

The conclusion that could be drawn from this is that all partners are fairly pleased to very pleased with the organisation and the internal communication within the project. There have not been any major problems, and small ones were resolved. It proves to be necessary, however, for organisations to be better prepared internally for the participation in a cross-border project. It takes much more time than expected and it is not enough if only the project manager is given time for this. Others too, especially communication managers and financial managers and executives, should be involved more in the project and better from the start.

#### **b. Cross-border cooperation, substantively**

The partners were asked two questions about this:

1. What has the cooperation within STEP yielded for their own organisation in terms of knowledge, content and execution?
2. How do you evaluate the substantive meetings, such as workshops, studies and excursions?

With regard to the first question, the following answers were given:

- A more intensive cooperation between PP4 and PP3.
- Informative because the Dutch and English partners are way ahead in the development of sustainable visitors' centres and reception facilities.
- Permanent cooperation with the other partners
- Inspiration and knowledge
- Everywhere in nature conservation areas it is difficult to realise facilities because of procedures
- Learned a lot from the Broads about the EU Charter and Green Marks

- Lines and decision-making are short and fast in the Netherlands; in the other countries they seem to be longer and slower.
- The relationships with the tourist sector have been transformed in a positive sense and the local organisation again realises the importance of remaining active in tourism and of maintaining the cooperation with the business community.
- Because of the participation by English entrepreneurs in STEP-meetings they have begun to realise that they are part of a larger European whole.
- Sometimes many studies and experiences are not yet immediately useful for the Flemish partners as the development of the area is still in a different phase; but this will be the case in the future, especially in the field of management and operation of the region.

With regard to question 2 the following answers were given:

- All peer reviews took place shortly after the start of STEP; because of that a lot of useful knowledge was the result.
- Instructive workshops at and working visits to the partners, good discussions and it is interesting to see how partners have made progress.
- The pace was often quite high: much was seen and heard in a few days.
- It took some time before the joint studies got under way. Finding the largest common denominator proved difficult and was impossible at times. Through perseverance, other, yet good results were achieved, e.g. the Park-app, and the public-private cooperation.
- The study within Activity 3 is most valuable for The Broads, not only in the short term, but also in the longer term.
- The excursions were extremely interesting and valuable. The visits to objects/regions have led to new ideas for one's own region. The speakers and discussions in the evening were exceedingly instructive, as was the time one had to discuss issues with partners in detail. The

participation of entrepreneurs and other stakeholders has also been fruitful; they have gone to work in their own region.

- Because of the multi-year term one really gets to know one's partners, aspirations and the problems of each region. Because of this one gets increasingly better at giving each other feedback and at learning from each other.

These answers too show that all partners were very pleased with the substantive part of the cross-border cooperation. Especially the intensity of it all resulted in mutual trust and the added value of the cross-border cooperation really coming into its own. Better consideration should really be given to joint studies beforehand, i.e. in the preparation phase. Finding a common denominator or problem proved to be harder than anticipated.

### **c. External communication**

Respondents were asked to evaluate the specific communication actions such as the website, the brochure, etc., the functioning of the Communication Working Group (CWG) and the learning points for the future, what should be done, what should not be done or done differently.

The evaluation of specific communication actions is:

- start-up conference: turnout was good; little publicity; good start of the cooperation; the right note was struck immediately, also towards stakeholders and superiors in one's own organisations; of major added value for the Flemish partners, including towards the Municipality of Kruikeke.
- website: much work goes into keeping it up to date; compliments from the JTS; excellent; easily accessible; logical structure; attractive lay-out; up-to-date; gives outsiders a good image of the results; the intranet did not come into its own.
- newsletters: also a good tool to communicate about STEP on a local, regional and international level; steady increase in the number of

subscribers; questions by readers; varied and good balance between stories from the three regions; twice a year is enough; NL and UK version gives added value.

- brochure: good; accessible, original; should also have been distributed in a Dutch version; could be simpler with more references to website; updating it might have been useful after all; was indispensable, especially in the first year to explain STEP to the environment.
- roll-ups: useful and attractive; real eye catchers that give a good first impression of STEP; were located too often in De Biesbosch and not enough in The Broads; it may be better to make a set for each region.
- estuary trip competition: nice way of involving private persons; good promotion of the regions and STEP; resulted in much positive publicity; noticeably few English participants; organising the prizes took too much effort and time; financial settlement was too cumbersome.
- joint press releases: only two were made; more would have been useless as each partner has his own way of approaching the press.
- mutual promotion (alternative database): laborious process to implement this action properly; successful in the end with all kinds of nice actions, e.g. students of journalism and bidon with park pals as a gadget at the final conference.
- guideline: beautiful book, very useful for colleagues in other nature area; good overview about what has been reached (esp. for politicians, stakeholders and local organisations)
- final conference: interesting speakers, good workshops, nice networking area.

On balance all specific communication actions worked out really well and everyone is most pleased with them. The most important recommendation for the future is: do everything bi-lingual. Furthermore, efforts should go towards simplifying various actions as they proved to be very time consuming.

Opinions regarding the functioning of the Communication Working Group are somewhat divided, however: some are satisfied, others less so. The cooperation on practical issues such as the website, brochure, newsletters etc. was pleasant and progressed smoothly. The criticism is not so much levelled at the communication manager, but not enough time was made for it structurally. Besides, there were quite a few changes in parties and duties were sometimes taken over by project managers, which resulted in a lack of clarity on responsibilities. The feeling is that opportunities may have been missed out on because of this, for there were plenty of ideas within the group.

The following issues were mentioned as learning points for the future:

- backing by a good external agency developing and implementing original communication is essential;
- keeping the duties of project managers and communication managers really separate;
- intranet did not work and may be shaped differently, e.g. by dropbox
- everything in two languages and roll-ups for all regions

The partners did not really experience any lack of communication actions, products or tools.

The partners evaluated the communication actions below as being the best:

- fold-away bird box (gift during start-up conference): eye-catcher
- the international excursion of June 2011: learned more from it than from all other project actions
- the STEP-logo: splendid representation of the project and the regions and really useful for other communication actions
- YouTube film for the promotion of the Estuary Trip Competition
- Website and newsletters: result in questions by outsiders
- Roll-ups: good background material to photos
- Workshop on sustainability in February 2012

#### **4.4 Evaluation by stakeholders**

The stakeholders were not specifically questioned on all communication actions, but more so on the concrete actions within the Activities. However, all stakeholders in all three regions ascertained that the communication regarding substantive issues and the external communication worked well.

In De Biesbosch they find that because of all communication entrepreneurs and other organisations have become much more involved in all kinds of projects, such as the host ship, Green Key, routes, entrances and Beleef en Geef Fonds, and that they have started to think about and/or have set to work on sustainable tourism. They also felt that the international excursions and visits to the partners' working regions were very useful. They have learnt much from them. The only point of criticism is that the communication could have started earlier and could have been more intensive.

The same opinion is heard in The Broads from their stakeholders. They too find that without the intensive communication in actions such as GTBS, branding, Green destination guide, Sustainable Tourism Strategy, Visitor Giving their involvement would not have been so immersive. The communication was essential in improving the cooperation. It has given The Broads Authority a credible position in the tourist area of activity and many entrepreneurs have started to work on sustainable tourism. Points of criticism that were mentioned are: the promotion on the European dimension of the project could have been better and entrepreneurs should have been involved more in excursions to the Netherlands and Belgium.

The communication in De Polders van Kruibeke also worked well in this region, especially towards residents, the municipality and other organisations. It really helped to involve all parties concerned in e.g. the reception and communication plan; house style, guides training course and much more support has been created for the plans with De Polders.

Here too there is criticism: one should have taken more people on the excursions to the Netherlands and England. That would have helped in highlighting the European dimension of the project.

## 5. Conclusions and recommendations:

The main conclusions from this evaluation on the communication and the project management are:

1. Apart from two, all communication actions have been implemented as originally planned. Only the joint studies within the three Activities and the joint database have been implemented somewhat differently. The reason for this was that, with respect to the former it was hard to determine the common denominator as the regions find themselves indifferent stages in terms of development of sustainable tourism and with respect to the latter that privacy legislation prevented exchange of documents. The alternative implementation of the actions did not harm the intended objectives.
2. Nearly all planned results were realised as well, sometimes even beyond expectation. Only the number of visitors to the website was lower (6,000) than planned (10,000). Nonetheless, this is still a good score. The results are also evaluated extremely well by the partners themselves and by the stakeholders.
3. The objective with regard to organisation, structure and procedure has been realised. A few points of criticism in this regard are that superiors and administrators, with the exception of the chairman of the steering group, could have shown more involvement and that the communication working group could have functioned better.
4. The same applies to the exchange of knowledge and the involvement of external parties. All partners find that they have learned more from the project than anticipated. And the involvement of external parties has also been more successful than expected and has yielded unexpected positive effects. The stakeholders concur with this last aspect.
5. Everyone is most pleased about the internal communication. Problems were hardly encountered, in spite of the fact that the workload and time pressure were very high. This was recognised insufficiently internally, both before and during the process.
6. The external communication was a balanced package of actions, which were implemented to everyone's satisfaction and yielded the desired results. Points to note in this regard are the amount of work and the fact that all expressions should be bi-lingual as this lowers the threshold for the stakeholders and the public.
7. It remains difficult to properly highlight the European dimension of the project. Media still prove to be mainly interested in the local aspect and the same applies initially to stakeholders. It turns out only much later, also for stakeholders themselves, that they have had too little regard for the European part and failed to make the most of the opportunities provided by this context.
8. In general the stakeholders are extremely satisfied with the communication. They find that because of this far more entrepreneurs and organisations have become involved in the regions and actions. It has also given a huge boost to the cooperation within the regions and to thinking about and acting towards sustainable tourism. In retrospect many would have liked to have joined the working visits and excursions. They partly blame themselves for this, but also the project partners who could have communicated the opportunities for this better.
9. One hardly ever experienced any cultural differences, apart from the normal language barrier of course. The Flemish and the Dutch were quite enthusiastic and direct and the Flemish and the Dutch found the English to be most gallant.

The most important recommendations are:

1. Organisations (partners) should prepare themselves better internally for the consequences of participating in such a European project. It takes a lot of time for project managers, but also communication and financial managers should be granted more time to properly follow up such a project. In addition, supervisors and administrators should make more time to follow the project closely. This will of course take time and money, but it yields results in terms of money, knowledge, insights, etc.
2. With regard to substance more thought should be given beforehand to joint studies. This is not as easy as it sounds and this also applies to joint actions such as excursions, conferences, a website, etc. Joint problems and subjects of study should be identified better in advance.
3. Involve stakeholders at the earliest possible stage of the project and take them along to other regions/partners. This will not only be instructive for them, but they will also be much more involved in the project and the local actions.
4. Although we tend to believe that English is no longer a barrier for everyone in the Netherlands and Flanders, this is still the case in practice. That is why we should still offer all communication expressions such as folders, websites, etc. in two languages for now.