

A Communications and Community Outreach Strategy for Vashlovani Protected Area

**An Initiative of the Georgian Carnivore Conservation
Project**

Consultant:

Peter Seccombe

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Foreword

Communication and community outreach strategy for Vashlovani Protected Areas was written by Peter Seccombe, consultant from the UK, in 2010. The strategy had a three year work plan and detailed action plan for March 2011-March-2012. After one year of its implementation, Georgia Carnivore Conservation Project management team decided to update the strategy (based on one year experience) and write an action plan for April 2012 to April 2013.

For this purpose, Nino Markozashvili, the Assistant Project Coordinator and Tamar Brortsvadze, NACRES PR person, went to Dedoplistskaro and delivered two day workshops with local staff to review the communication strategy and write one year work plan.

The workshop in Dedoplistskaro was organized on April 5, 6. During the first day Nino and Tamar went through the communication strategy with workshop participants. They mainly used the Power Point Presentation and the flipcharts. Next day they wrote a detailed one year work plan.

Only few changes have been made to the strategy and action plan. The structure and the content are mainly similar to the original version.

Workshop participants: Merab Piroshmanashvili- the Director of VPA, Vazha Cherkezishvili-Head of the Law Enforcement Department of V PA, Zaza Bostashvili – Natural Resource Specialist of VPA, Khatuna Kokuashvili – Visitor Specialist, Amiran Kodiashvili – Member of Friends of Vashlovani Protected Areas.

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1: Introduction

Communication is a vital tool to increasing support for the management and conservation of Vashlovani Protected Area. It helps local communities, decision makers and other stakeholders to understand the reasons for management actions and enables the managing administration to understand the uses of the area by the community and their aspirations for it in the future. This Communications Strategy identifies a programme of communications actions for Vashlovani that will be critical for the implementation of the management plan.

The preparation of this plan followed a defined process which included participation by protected area staff. The key components of the plan are:

- **Identifying the audiences** – who are the key audiences that the authority should be working with to contribute significantly to the long term management of the area?
- **Identifying the key messages to convey to the audiences** – what are we wanting to say to the audiences in order to maximise the benefits of the communication? The messages should be chosen carefully to be relevant to each audience.
- **Identifying the most appropriate media for conveying the messages** – is it a simple leaflet or are there better and more relevant mechanisms for getting the message across?
- **Providing a programme of activities over a defined time period** – the programme should integrate closely with other outputs of the developing management plan.

The process also identified the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of communications activities in Vashlovani PAs. A table showing a SWOT analysis for the PA is shown in Appendix 1.

By using this process the Communications Strategy will help the Vashlovani Protected Area to anticipate and enhance publicity opportunities, develop a common vision about key issues, and fully integrate communications activities with the management of the area.

2: Description of Vashlovani

Vashlovani Protected Area lies in the south-eastern part of Georgia in the Dedoplistskaro administrative district. It comprises three protection categories – Vashlovani National Park, Vashlovani Reserve, and three Nature monuments. Located near the Azerbaijan border it is an ecologically unique area of Georgia – a semi-arid landscape located between the rivers of the Lori and Alazani with varied habitats including forest, riparian forest, scrub and desert. The PA has many endemic and rare plant species and a high diversity of birds and other animals.

There is no permanent residing population in the PA, though there are 38 farms in the complex using the pastures during the autumn and winter. Over 100 Tush are employed on these farms and manage 20,000 - 40,000 sheep. A further 34 farms, and about 25,000 to 30,000 sheep are located next to the National Park (within a 2km boundary). Since the 17th century Tushetians have migrated annually in the autumn from Tusheti in the mountains to the surrounding lowlands, including Vashlovani, to graze their flocks over winter, returning to the mountains in spring. However, recent historic events in the region (specifically, the collapse of the Soviet Empire) have restricted their movements and there is now an unprecedented clustering of livestock owners overwintering their flocks in Vashlovani.

As in Tusheti PA there is a heavy reliance on sheep products as a source of income and a low capacity for diversification amongst the seasonal community. Increasing flock sizes and poor husbandry skills contribute to degradation in the quality of the pastures and an increase in predation of livestock. HCC is a significant issue amongst the pastoralists and there is a general negative perception towards carnivores, particularly wolves, within the community as a whole. There is a strong interdependence between the management of the Protected Area as a diverse ecosystem and the maintenance of livelihoods by local communities. Establishing and developing good communications between the PA administration and the community, both permanent and seasonal, is therefore crucial in supporting this interrelationship.

3: Evaluation of Communication Issues

The current situation

The Vashlovani PA administration has been communicating with shepherds, the community and other organisations in the following ways:

- **Environmental education sessions at schools** – staff visit schools, give lectures on the PAs of Georgia and on Vashlovani and their tourist potential. They also discuss ecological disasters such as air pollution, deforestation and global warming.
- **Visiting shepherds** – every Saturday, rangers visit the houses of shepherds, giving them information and maps on the boundaries and regulations of the PA. They have a bulletin with news of the park and get each shepherd to sign, to agree to the regulations. There are 35 houses in the PA and a further 34 bordering. Rangers stop at each and also stop to talk to shepherds. Now shepherds are allowed to take dead wood and to allow their sheep to drink water in the park.
- **Consultation meeting** – Staff have held ad hoc meetings with hunters, fisher-people, informing them of their rights and responsibilities. They are now allowing sport fishing in the PA.
- **Establishing links with guest houses** – Staff have established links with guest houses in Tilova and other towns, leaving leaflets and other information. They have also left leaflets in Tbilisi hotels and embassies.

- **Website** – They have their own website as well as links on the Agency website and others.
- **Leaflets** – There is a leaflet for the PA, produced by the APA
- **Cleaning day in the park** – this event is planned for this summer to involve schools and children. Because the PA is quite remote it will be difficult getting students into the park and funding is currently not available to help with transport.

The administration is planning the following activities over the next year:

- **Interpretation / information boards** – prohibition and warning boards for park boundaries
- **Border markers** – marker boards are planned to the PA boundary.
- **Information boards** – posters for urban areas to attract people to the PA
- **Articles in newspapers / media** – there is a regular TV programme about the park and wildlife. They would like to do more and have more articles published in newspapers

Planning communication

Communication can be undertaken at a number of levels from providing simple information to the community, to supporting independent community initiatives. These levels can be expressed in the Ladder of Participation (developed by Sherry Arnstein in 1969). The Ladder presents a series of steps that an organisation can take for developing a relationship with people for different purposes. It is helpful for a protected area authority to understand where its communication activities ‘stand’ on this ladder and for what purposes. The key stages of the Ladder are:

<p>Community Control The community takes control of decisions and actions and seeks advice and support from other agencies.</p>
<p>Community Involvement People become involved in an activity and arrive at decisions jointly with the agency. They have a stake in action plans and a sense of ownership of projects or activities.</p>
<p>Community Participation People participate in an activity, such as path building, or a guided walk, provided by the agency. Although they are participating they have no sense of ownership of the activity.</p>
<p>Consultation People are consulted and their views are recorded. The agency may change its approach, but those consulted have no role in decision-making. Communication is two-way but the agency is still largely in control.</p>
<p>Information The agency provides information, through leaflets, exhibitions or questionnaires. People may feel more informed but they have no opportunity to influence the work of the agency.</p>
<p>Persuasion The agency tells the community what it wants to do, or what is going to happen. Communication between the agency and the community is</p>

entirely one-way.
<p>Agency control The National Park, or the organising agency, is in full control and carries out its work without any contact with the community.</p>

The ladder can be simplified as:

Supporting independent community initiatives

You help others do what they want - perhaps within a framework of grants, advice and support provided by the resource holder.

Acting together

Not only do different interests decide together what is best, but they form a partnership to carry it out.

Deciding together

You encourage others to provide some additional ideas and options, and join in deciding the best way forward.

Consultation

You offer a number of options and listen to the feedback you get.

Information

The least you can do is tell people what is planned.

Most public awareness work falls into the 'Information' category of the ladder which is satisfactory as a first step in developing a relationship with the community and visitors. Consultation becomes a valuable tool for testing ideas and plans and for exploring community reactions and aspirations. Deciding together and acting together are important stages for encouraging the community to participate more actively and to undertake their own activities and projects. Supporting independent initiatives is at an advanced stage for most authorities and may be particularly relevant for developing eco-tourism economic development projects, for example.

Many of the activities already undertaken by the Vashlovani PA administration fall into the 'information' and 'consultation' levels. 'Information' and 'consultation' are important in their own right, and also as pre-cursors to more advanced activities of community and visitor participation, which would be important long term aims for the administration in its successful management of the Vashlovani area.

The media chosen for conveying messages to specific audiences is crucial to attracting their attention and interest. Leaflets are the most commonly used medium but are not always the most effective in conveying a message. Other forms of communication, including public meetings, the use of press and media and fun activities, will also be used to help build a positive relationship between the Vashlovani administration and users of the area.

4: Aims for communication

The aims for enhancing communication in Vashlovani Protected Area include:

- Communicate how to manage protected areas effectively
- Change behaviour of visitors and the local community
- Inform different target groups, including local authorities and visitors, of the importance of the protected area
- Develop close relationships with law enforcement agencies

- Develop and maintain good relationships with people who have activities within the park, such as farmers
- Develop good relationship with the mass media – local, regional and national

5: Management priorities

The management priorities of the protected area include the following:

- Change the behaviour of the shepherds to achieve more responsible use of natural resources, such as grasslands and forests.
- Raise awareness of protected areas among the community, local government
- Encourage better use of marked trails
- Dissemination of new laws and regulations about the use of natural resources

6: Audiences for Vashlovani

The audiences for communication activities, and their characteristics, for each of the management priorities are identified as follows:

Management Aim	Audiences	Characteristics
1 Change the behaviour of the local community to achieve more responsible use of natural resources	Visitors - Georgian	Friendly, interested
	Local community	Some friendly, some negative
	Farmers	Some friendly, some negative
2 Raise awareness of protected areas among the community, local government	Communities	Some interested, some not
	Schools, other educational institutions	All friendly and supportive
	Local government	Interested, friendly
3 Encourage better use of marked trails	Visitors	Some friendly, some irritated
4. Dissemination of new information about using of natural resources	Users of the natural resources (sheherds/livestock owners, hunters)	Some friendly, Negative, irritated

7: Messages

The key messages for each management aim are identified as:

Management aim	Message
1 Change the behaviour of the local community to achieve more responsible use of natural resources	The habitat of our protected areas is sensitive. Uncontrolled use of resources may result in damage to our natural heritage Large carnivores are an important part of Vashlovani and we need to learn how to live alongside them
2 Raise awareness of protected areas among the community, local government	The main responsibility of protected areas is the protection of national cultural and natural heritage which include large carnivores
3 Encourage better use of marked trails	Please follow the tracks advised by the administration to avoid damage to habitats
4 Dissemination of new information about using of natural resources	Better access to information will help you in sustainable use of natural resources.

8: Media

Available media that could be utilised to deliver this strategy include:

Leaflets and brochures – relatively easy to produce, though can be costly and need distributing carefully to reach the desired audience. An interpretive map is useful for explaining features of a protected area or site.

Newsletter – Easy way to get up to date information and explanation about the PA to the community. Annual, biannual or quarterly.

Children's leaflet – inviting young people to prepare a leaflet about the PA using their own illustrations and photographs and their perspectives about the area.

Press release – simple, effective and low cost way to get information to the media. Use at least once a month.

Information sheet – low cost and effective way to provide information to a desired audience. Care is needed to distribute to the desired audience.

Community meetings – very useful way to discuss issues with the community and to get their involvement in decision-making about PA management. Can be used for regular updates about issues and PA management.

Meetings with organisations – Can provide an opportunity for regular exchange of information both ways. Very useful if combined with site visits to places in the PA and hospitality.

Photographic surveys and competitions – useful for engaging with the community, particularly young people. The photos can then be used in exhibitions and visitor centres as temporary displays.

Environmental education – A wide range of activities for young people including traditional arts and crafts; using natural materials; constructing nest boxes; writing stories, plays and music; outdoor study sessions; storytelling and roleplay.

Community education – Similar activities to children's but more adult-focused, including traditional arts and crafts, music and storytelling, poetry, painting and sculptures, and re-enacting traditional ceremonies.

Village maps – Inviting the community to prepare a two-dimensional or three-dimensional map of the village and identifying their important places, and areas that need improvement.

Working groups – establishing issues-based working groups of representatives of the community and organisations to find solutions to management challenges.

Training courses – offering local people training in better sheep grazing, diversifying livelihoods, sustainable tourism, guiding visitors, languages, species identification, habitat management.

Participating in exhibitions and fairs – run by other organisations including local government.

Website – including pages for specific issues of interest to the community and visitors.

Working with local businesses – regular meetings and training sessions with local businesses to explain the role the PA has in enhancing opportunities for sustaining livelihoods in the area.

Interpretation / information boards – prohibition and warning boards for park boundaries

Border markers – marker boards are planned to the PA boundary.

Information boards – posters for urban areas to attract people to the PA

8: Action Plan

Issue: 1. Changing the habit of the community																	
Message: Change the behaviour of the local community to achieve more responsible use of natural resources																	
Activity	Audience	Sub-message	3 year Timetable (Quarter years)												Organiser	Funding	Output
			1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4			
1. Park Newsletter, about the activities of Vashlovani Protected Areas	Visitors Local residents, Farmers	Get more information about the management of Vashlovani Protected Areas and get involved in management process	x		x		x		x		x		x		Administration Friends of Vashlovani (writing content)	APA – Technical support Donor organization	Park Newsletter
2. Newspaper article about sustainable use of natural resources	Visitors, Local community Farmers	Come to express your ideas Information guarantees a sustainable use of natural resources	x		x		x		x		x		x		Administration Friends of Vashlovani (writing content)	Donor organization	Article
3. Flier with information and instructions	Visitors Local Community	Protect and care about the unique natural heritage	x		x		x		x		x		x		Administration Friends of Vashlovani (writing content)	APA Donor	Flier
4. Community meeting to raise the awareness about environment protection issues (picnic in Vashlovani Protected Areas)	Local Community	Protection of the cultural and natural heritage is important for future generation	x		x		x		x		x		x		Administration Friends of Vashlovani	APA (technical support) Donor	Meeting Report

Issue: 2. Raise awareness of protected areas among the community, local government																		
Message: Purpose of Protected Areas is to restore and protect national cultural and natural heritage including large carnivores																		
Activity	Audience	Sub-message	3 year Timetable (Quarter years)												Organiser	Funding	Output	
			1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4				
1. Park Information sheet about the biodiversity of Vashlovani Protected Areas	Local residents Schools Local authorities	To protect and restore national cultural and natural heritage is important for all of us.	x				x					x				Administration Friends of Vashlovani	Donor	Park Information sheet
2. Meeting with the government and business representatives to discuss problems due to PA protection, including waste management	Local Authorities Business representatives	We ask you to help us in protection of natural heritage		x				x					x			Administration Friends of Vashlovani	APA (technical) Donor	Meeting report
3. Page in newspaper	Local residents Schools Authority	Protected Areas of Vashlovani is our heritage which needs care and protection	x				x					x				Administration Friends of Vashlovani	Donor	Page in newspaper
4. Eco-educational activities at Education institutions	Children of pre school age School and University students	Protection and restoration of natural heritage, review of the Protected Areas	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	Administration Friends of Vashlovani	APA (technical) Donor	Report about the activity
5. Family Activities	Families	Let us introduce nature of our country to our children			X				X				X			Administration Friends of Vashlovani	Donor	Report of the Activity
6. Cleaning Activities	Local residents Schools	Let us protect the environment from pollution		X				X					X			Administration Friends of Vashlovani	APA (technical) Donor Fauna and Flora International	Report and pictures

7. Calendar with Vashlovani wildlife and landscape photos	Local Community					X						X					X			
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Issue: 3. Use of the field trails

Message: Please, follow the trails identified by the Park Administration

Activity	Audience	Sub-message	3 year Timetable (Quarter years)												Organiser	Funding	Output			
			1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4						
1. Brochure about the park tourist routes	Visitors	Please, use our tourist opportunities please, follow the instructions for your safety			x					x						x		Administration Friends of Vashlovani	Donor	Brochure
2.. Renovation of the field signs and managing the tourist trails including trail marking activity	Visitors Local community	Please follow the identified trails	x		x		x		x		x		x		Administration APA Friends of Vashlovani Protected Areas	Donor	Renovated field signs			
3. Flier about the safety rules	Visitors	Please, follow the instructions designed by the Park Administration for your safety			x					x						x		Administration Friends of Vashlovani	Donor	Flier

Issue: 4. Dissemination of new information about using of natural resources																	
Message: Better access to information guarantees the sustainable use of natural resources.																	
Activity	Audience	Sub-message	3 year Timetable (Quarter years)												Organiser	Funding	Output
			1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4			
1. Park information sheet about the use of natural resources	Farmers	updated information will help you in managing your business	x		x		x		x		x		x		Administration Friends of Vashlovani	Donor	Park Information sheet
2. Press Release overgrazing issues	Farmers	Overgrazing will threaten development of cheep breeding.			X				X				X		Administration Friends of Vashlovani	APA	Press Release

Appendix 1: SWOT Analysis

An analysis of the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats of communication activities at Vashlovani Protected Area.

<p><u>Strengths</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Appropriate infrastructure • Administration working as a whole unit • No local conflicts • Strong links with local enforcement • Human resources highly qualified and experienced • Good equipment 	<p><u>Weaknesses</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local community and local government have little information about the PA • Lack of communication means in field – no mobile coverage and no radios • Legal regulations are not refined • Lack of finance • Lack of human resources – not enough rangers and specialists
<p><u>Opportunities</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Behaviour of local people can be changed • Community and local/central government can be better informed • Better links with business and farming • Attract better funding 	<p><u>Threats</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Habitats being damaged by overgrazing • Decrease and cut in funding • Unable to renew technical equipment

