

## Capturing our Coast – Communications and key messaging to engage and retain citizen scientists over a three-year project

Winton Debbie<sup>1</sup>, Adams Leoni<sup>2</sup>, Anderson Emily<sup>3</sup>, Burrows Michael<sup>4</sup>, Dickens Stephanie<sup>5</sup>, Dobson Nicola<sup>6</sup>, Grist Hannah<sup>4</sup>, Hull Sue<sup>6</sup>, Jenkins Stuart<sup>7</sup>, Kragh Gitte<sup>1</sup>, Mieszkowska Nova<sup>8</sup>, Millard Justine<sup>9</sup>, Morrall Zoe<sup>10</sup>, Richardson Leonie<sup>9</sup>, Sugden Heather<sup>5</sup>, Vye Siobhan<sup>7</sup>, Watson Gordon<sup>10</sup> and Delany Jane<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Engagement and Science, Earthwatch Institute (Europe), Mayfield House, 256 Banbury Road, Oxford, OX2 7DE, United Kingdom

E-mail: [dwinton@earthwatch.org.uk](mailto:dwinton@earthwatch.org.uk)

<sup>2</sup> Marine Biodiversity and Climate Change, Marine Biological Association, Citadel Hill, Plymouth, PL1 2PB, United Kingdom

<sup>3</sup> Communications and Fundraising, Earthwatch Institute (Europe), Mayfield House, 256 Banbury Road, Oxford, OX2 7DE, United Kingdom

<sup>4</sup> Scottish Association for Marine Science, Scottish Marine Institute, Oban, Argyll, PA37 1QA, United Kingdom

<sup>5</sup> Dove Marine Laboratory, School of Natural and Environmental Sciences, Newcastle University, Cullercoats, North Shields, NE30 4PZ, United Kingdom

<sup>6</sup> School of Environmental Sciences, University of Hull, Cottingham Road, Hull HU6 7RX, United Kingdom

<sup>7</sup> Ocean Sciences, Bangor University, Menai Bridge, Anglesey, LL59 5AB, United Kingdom

<sup>8</sup> Mieszkowska Laboratory, Marine Biological Association, Citadel Hill, Plymouth, PL1 2PB, United Kingdom

<sup>9</sup> Volunteer and Community Engagement, Marine Conservation Society, Overcross House, Ross Park, Ross-on-Wye, Herefordshire, HR9 7US, United Kingdom

<sup>10</sup> Institute of Marine Sciences, University of Portsmouth, Ferry Road, Portsmouth, PO4 9LY, United Kingdom

One of the biggest challenges of citizen science programmes once participants are recruited, is keeping them motivated to collect data and stay involved for the duration of the project. A strategic, innovative and integrated communications strategy that adapts as barriers and successes are identified, is vital in achieving this.

Capturing our Coast (CoCoast) is a three year UK-wide project furthering understanding of intertidal marine life around the coastline by working with citizen scientists to collect biological data. CoCoast has successfully created a skilled and passionate community, training 3,000 people in intertidal survey techniques and engaging hundreds more through simple activities open to all. Delivered through a national collaboration of eight key partners (universities, NGOs and research institutes), the project is underpinned by a multi-level volunteer engagement strategy and key messaging designed to maximise and standardise the participant experience. The strategy is responsive to change as the project develops and becomes more informed about what works and what does not. At a regional level, communications and events are tailored to fit local community demographics and interests, whilst nationally, incentives campaigns encourage participation by targeting specific groups.

Components include a strong training and support programme, website, regional and national communications, social media and regional social events. The website (~300 user logins per month) provides everything a volunteer needs in one place, including resources, a data entry portal, event information, national campaigns and project updates. Similar information can also be accessed through Facebook pages (>2,650 followers) and Twitter (>3,600 followers), which are open to everyone. Once signed up and allocated to a hub, participants receive frequent and personalised communications from them, as well as centralised national newsletters and, in the final year, feedback on research results.

In addition to core project activities, a suite of 'lite' national survey campaigns which require no training, such as "Spermwatch" and "Marine Invaders", have provided a range of entry points for engagement. Many are packaged as fun search activities with a focus on discovery and enjoyment whilst still producing valuable data. Novel naming and targeted regional promotion of campaigns has captured media attention and raised the public profile of the whole project.

This integrated communications and engagement strategy, responding to the needs and motivations of our participants, generates both a feeling of belonging to a local project through close connection to a hub and plenty of face to face opportunities with the scientists, whilst still being part of a bigger picture.

This framework provides a multitude of opportunities to motivate participants, from gamification and competition incentives, to enabling them to recognise their share in the overall successes of the wider project.

The communications strategy as a key element in the success of CoCoast will be discussed, alongside lessons learnt, legacy and the future. Furthermore, the talk will discuss how, through an external evaluation process, detailed data is being gathered to evaluate project success and identify ways to increase the overall impact with regards to participation levels, participant enjoyment and for the benefit of marine science.

Keywords: citizen science; coast; intertidal; rocky shore; communications; engagement; motivation; public participation; volunteer