

Dirty Words: How Communication is Helping Soil Science

Jeremy LeLean

University of Reading, Geography and Environmental Science, United Kingdom (j.lelean@reading.ac.uk)

Soil, from being an overlooked area of research, is now considered an area of vital interest in the solution to many of the global problems of we currently face. This importance has been recognised in several large-scale multi-disciplinary programmes one of which is the Soil Security Programme (SSP). The SSP oversees seven projects spanning 17 UK research institutions with a diverse range of stakeholders. The general perception of soil is at odds with its importance, being seen as somewhat ubiquitous and unimportant. So communicating research outputs from the SSP presents several challenges. In summary these are to ensure that communication is the two-way flow of information between researchers and end-users and is not just an afterthought but integral to research itself. These challenges were addressed by both communicating research through the programme as a whole and supporting individual researcher's and project's communication. Reflections on the potential benefits and dangers of this approach will be presented.

Whole programme communication needs were initially addressed by designing the SSP website as an informational exchange hub for the programmes as well as the academic sector more generally. Other media were utilised depending on sectoral engagement with social media generating higher engagement in the commercial and third sectors. Interaction with the policy sector has been most effective face to face and via briefing documents. For example, the SSP hosted a workshop on soil health which produced a briefing note which was taken up by DEFRA and used to steer funding in an academic/industry copartnership. Engagement with SSP communications has been driven by utilising on positive external events e.g. Global Soil Week but it is equally important to know when to keep a distance from more negative external events.

A key part the SSP is to develop the next generation of soil scientists so due focus has been placed on development of the communication skills of the post-doctoral researchers and fellows on the Programme. This has been both by workshop and through one-to-one mentoring and the achievements of these two approaches is compared and contrasted. Especially with reference to their understanding of how best to communicate their research: knowledge of the appropriate channels to use, how to adapt content to achieve the greatest impact and present their work in the most accessible ways to specific audiences. Next stage development for individuals and how this maps onto an academic research career will be considered. This will centre how to communicate strategically, recognising the importance and shortcomings of communication metrics as well as generating the best profile impact from personal appearances.