

Communicating phenology through education, outreach, and training

Arnold J.H. van Vliet^{1*}, Wichertje A. Bron¹ en Sara Mulder²

¹Environmental Systems Analysis Group, Wageningen University, PO Box 47, 6700 AA, Wageningen, The Netherlands

²Foundation for Sustainable Development, PO Box 570, 6700 AN Wageningen, The Netherlands

*Arnold.vanvliet@wur.nl

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The Dutch phenological network Nature's Calendar started in January 2001. The network now involves over 8,000 volunteers, hundreds of school children and actively cooperates with over forty different organizations. Only three staff members, all working part-time, manage to keep the network running and expanding. It is because of the large network and the focus on communication that we are able to achieve our four main objectives: 1) monitoring impact of changes in weather and climate on nature; 2) determine ecological and socio-economic impacts of the phenological changes; 3) develop and implement tools and methodologies that allow society to adapt to the changes and; 4) increase public awareness on climate change and biodiversity.

Like most other phenological networks, Nature's Calendar strongly depends on the willingness of volunteers and organizations to support its activities. Thereby, communication, education, outreach and training via the media play a crucial role. In the scientific community the importance of (frequent) communication to stakeholders or society at large is often underestimated. Scientists and scientific organizations also often lack the skills to organize the communication effectively. In my presentation, I will illustrate how active and frequent communication will improve, e.g., the functioning of phenological networks, funding available, and the adaptive capacity of society to phenological changes.

Annually, over 500 newspaper articles and tens of radio- and television programs pay attention to the data, information and knowledge produced by the Nature's Calendar network. Outsiders but also direct colleagues often think that the large amount of media-attention and the involvement of many people and organizations are mainly caused by the attractiveness of the topic. However, this is only a small part of the explanation of the success. There are many factors that determine the success of the outreach. In my presentation I will explain the main elements of our strategy and the lessons we learned. I will show how we have professionalized the outreach by setting up the website Natuurbericht.nl on which we publish two reports on actual developments in nature in The Netherlands on a daily basis. The website contains a very efficient media-alert tool that allows quick communication with numerous journalists.

Although several phenological networks already have a lot of experience with communication, there are still many opportunities for improvement. The Phenology 2012 Conference is a perfect place to exchange and discuss the experiences, tools and methodologies.