

The Creation of Environmental Networks

by Mark J. Spalding, J.D., M.P.I.A.

1. Introduction.

Part of the success of the environmental community(ies) in North America relates to its (their) ability to form networks around particular topics. At one time built on personal relationships through traditional means of communication, these networks are intended to deal with highly complex environmental challenges in the most efficient manner possible. Over the last 25 years, various forms of communication have been added to go beyond personal knowledge and to reduce the cost of networking and to broaden the geographic reach of network efforts--in progression: the telephone, facsimiles, and now, electronic mail and the Internet. The problem is that some members of the North American environmental community have all of these means of communication, while others make do without, or with less. This is the issue for which we must diligently search for solutions.

Networks can be used to share problem resolutions, technology and expertise, and as a means of democratic communication and decision-making. It is often necessary to coordinate activity among a number of communities and individuals to counterbalance the well-established policy-making influence of multinational corporations and governments. While industry and governments are often interested in forming and participating in networks, they sometimes act on different motivations.

2. Issues.

2.1. Who should participate. Special efforts should be made to see that all "major groups" (for example indigenous peoples, women and NGOs) in civil society are included when channels of communication and cooperation are established.

2.2. Access to information. To facilitate public participation, the CEC should promote timely access to information relevant to environment and development held by the NAFTA parties.

2.3. Capacity building. The CEC and the NAFTA parties should augment the capacity of various groups by facilitating the creation of networks to disseminate the expertise and experiences in the environmental community throughout North America.

2.4. Democratization of decision-making. Networks can be used to promote democratic decision-making on a very direct level, e.g. polls of many interested parties can be taken in a very short time frame.

2.5. Electronic communication. Electronic communication includes two vehicles, Internet web pages and electronic mail (E-mail). Internet web pages provide a more static, but still transparent, discussion of particular issues, and the distribution of information. E-mail, meanwhile, is direct point-to-point communication capable of sending a message to one or several recipients.

Electronic communication is becoming more widely used every day. Most importantly, Internet and E-mail are relatively inexpensive ways for the CEC and the public to communicate with one another over the large geographical area which falls under the CEC's mandate. The problem is how environmental networks can be created prior to the development of more universal access to electronic communications.

2.6. Cost of communications over large geographic areas. The entry cost of obtaining hardware, software and access to E-mail and the Internet are often higher than obtaining the means to use any other form of communication. However, the cost of communication on average is much lower with this form of contact. A multi-page document can be sent from Canada to Mexico via E-mail and be delivered instantaneously, incurring considerably less charges than a fax of the same document.

2.7. Languages/translations. To some extent, because of the origin of electronic communications, English has become the common language of E-mail and Internet. This leaves those who only speak French, Spanish or other languages disenfranchised.

3. The Current Status of the Creation of Electronically Based Environmental Networks.

3.1. Listservs. The CEC's bulletin style listservs, "What's New at the CEC" and "The CEC Newsletter," are a valuable source of information. However, a number of other organizations' participatory two-way listservs, such as the Border Environment Cooperation Commission's "BECCNET", the United Nation's Environment Programme's "INFOTERRA," and SEMARNAP's "Proders," have proven to be dynamic sources for the exchange of information. BECCNET has also proven to be of benefit in the creation of a constituency for the Border Environmental Cooperation Commission and the North American Development Bank. In addition, the use of participatory listservs is beneficial in identifying experts and interested publics.

3.2. Internet WWW pages. The North American environmental community can also create networks with Internet web pages containing information about themselves, ENGOs and others. The web pages allow people to learn about the communities' work and are a means for the CEC and the NAFTA parties to quickly and inexpensively disseminate information. The CEC has already made important steps forward in the dissemination of information through its web page, and there are plans for its National Advisory Committees and the Government Advisory Committees to also establish Internet web pages for the distribution of information.

3.3. Networks. Since 1986, the Institute of Global Communications through EcoNet, has served individuals and organizations working toward environmental protection, and sustainable and equitable development by linking over 13,000 members and an additional 20,000 activists and organizations via its membership in the Association for Progressive Communications (APC). APC

is the most extensive global computer network dedicated specifically to serving non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and citizen activists. It has a strong presence in the Mexico, Canada and the US.

Composed of a consortium of international member networks, APC provides a means of communications with over 50 partner networks worldwide, creating a link to tens of thousands NGOs, activists, educators, policy-makers, and community leaders in 133 countries. According to APC, its member networks share a common mission: to develop and maintain the informational system that allows for geographically dispersed groups who are working for social and environmental change to coordinate activities on-line.

A university-based Internet system, (Red Tecnologia Nacional (RTN)) initiated in Mexico in 1994, carries about 90% of that nation's electronic communication traffic. Commercial providers can also be found in about 50 Mexican cities. It is also expected that Internet access will be augmented by the opening of Mexico's long distance market to competition in January 1997 because the major limitation in access within Mexico is its underdeveloped telecommunications infrastructure.

4. Opportunities for North American Cooperation.

The use of electronic communication systems are generally cheaper and faster than other forms of contact allowing greater transparency and message control. The CEC and any member of any network can self publish its message and thus ensure it is not diluted or abbreviated. The networks can also be used to share directories of experts and organizations, share information and best practices, promote institutional strengthening, as well as capacity building and democratic decision-making.

The already existing networks listed in Section 3 are potential vehicles for the creation of an environmental network for North America. The CEC's tripartite activities and each nations' actions to make information available electronically are on the right track. The CEC can add value by

linking all of these resources in a manner which is clear, concise and accessible by all interested communities.

5. Key Considerations.

How can the CEC, the NAFTA parties and others:

- help to diminish the technology gap between the haves and the have-nots?
- support the creation of environmental networks in ways which do not require new networking technology?
- provide incentives for creating networks and for sharing information within networks?
- help to overcome different cultural responses to new networking technology?
- help to overcome different gender responses to new networking technology?
- help provide access to networks to those who speak different languages?
- help to provide training in the use of new networking technology?
- help to develop telecommunications infrastructure?