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# Communication at the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency

*An investigation of the communication between  
the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency  
and the County Administration Boards*

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# Abstract

This thesis investigates what a sample of employees the Swedish County Administration Boards think of their communication with the Natural Resources Department at the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency. Further the study includes an investigation of how employees at the Natural Resources Department perceive their external and internal communication. The result shows that in general the external communication between the counties and the Natural Resources Department works well but there are however some problems. The main problems mentioned are that the counties sometimes receive mixed messages from different units within the department and also that the county administrators want more face-to-face meetings with employees at the department. The internal communication is also perceived as problematic by some of the informants. The main conclusion is that it is important to improve the internal communication before the problems with the mixed messages to the counties can be prevented. The internal communication can be strengthened by encouraging and improving relations between the different units.

*Keywords: Internal communication, external communication, the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency*

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

*This chapter starts with a background and a short description of the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency's internal structure. In the following sections the problem formulation, aim, research questions and delimitations are presented.*

## 1.1 BACKGROUND

The responsibility for nature management and environmental protection in Sweden is divided between different authorities on different levels in society, ranging from the Swedish Parliament down to municipal level. In order to efficiently achieve goals and implement regulations it becomes important with coordination and communication, both between the different authorities but also within each organization. Two of the most important actors when it comes to environmental protection and nature management are the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency and the Swedish County Administration Boards.

The Environmental Protection Agency is a big organization with approximately 550 employees. The agency's main responsibility is to ensure that the government's environmental regulations are implemented in a sustainable and efficient way. The Environmental Protection Agency is also assigned to be responsible for ten of the sixteen Swedish Environmental Objectives. The Environmental Protection Agency gives guidelines and instructions to the 21 different County Administration Boards in Sweden. The County Administration Boards are hence responsible for implementing the national regulations on a regional level.

### 1.1.1 INTERNAL STRUCTURE OF THE ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY

The Environmental Protection Agency is organized in four secretariats and five departments. The Natural Resources Department works with biodiversity conservation and sustainable use of natural resources. The department is responsible for outdoor recreation and five of the Environmental Objectives. The Natural Resource Department is further divided into five units. (Figure 1)

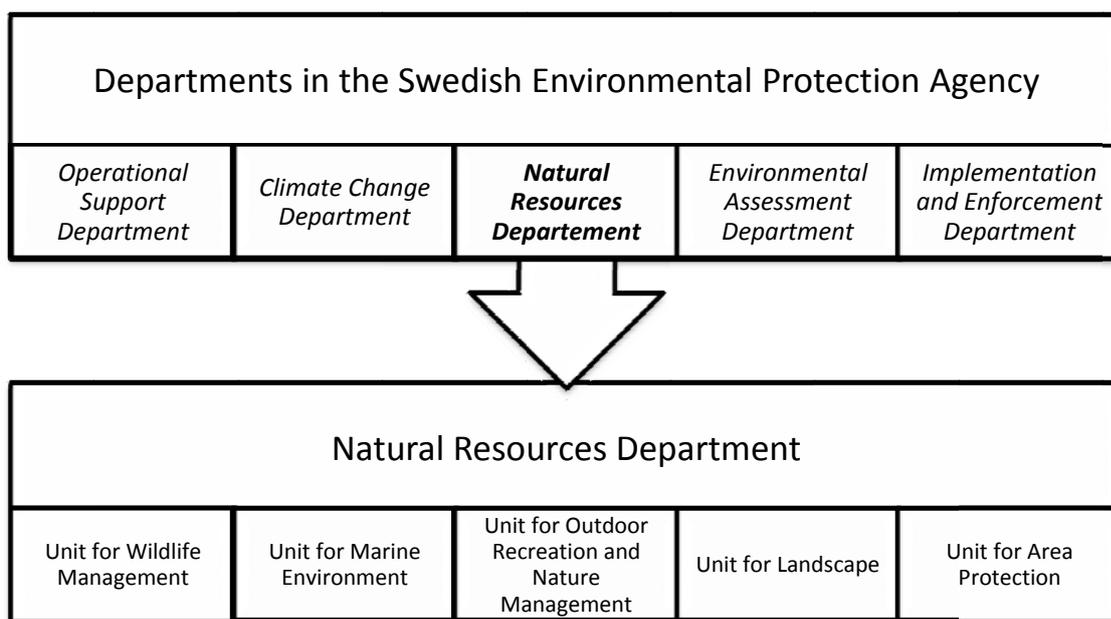


Figure 1 Organizational structure at the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency

## 1.2 PROBLEM FORMULATION

The Natural Resources Department is, as described above, a big organization with complex work assignments. Much of the work conducted at the Natural Resources Department therefore requires more or less environmental communication. The complexity and often intertwined responsibilities also creates a need for cooperation between different parts of the Environmental Protection Agency, both in order to come to good and useful agreements but also in order to secure the implementation of the regulations.

Because other actors, mainly the County Administration Boards, are responsible for implementing instructions from the Natural Resources Department, cooperation and communication between the department and the counties also becomes important. My perception of good cooperation is something that in turn requires good communication.

## 1.3 AIM

The overall aim of my internship has been to develop my understanding of how environmental communication works in practice. The aim of the thesis is, in addition to see environmental communication in practice, also to investigate how a sample of employees at the Natural Resources Department considers their communication with internal as well as external actors. The aim is also to get an understanding of how a sample of external actors perceives the communication with the Natural Resources Department.

## 1.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- What is a sample of employees working at the Natural Resources Department thoughts about the internal and external communication?
- How does a sample of administrators at the County Administrations Boards perceive the professional interaction with administrators at the Natural Resources Department?

## 1.5 DELIMITATIONS

I have chosen to delimit the study to the communication connected to establishment and management of protected areas. It is mainly two units at the Natural Resources Department that are involved in issues connected to protected areas; the Unit for Area Protection and the Unit for Outdoor Recreation and Nature Management.

The Unit for Area Protection is responsible for acquiring land prior the establishment of a protected area and this unit is located in Stockholm together with the other units at the Natural Resources Department. The Unit for Outdoor Recreation and Nature Management works with issues connected to management of protected areas. In 2007 this unit was moved to the town of Östersund approximately 550 km north of Stockholm.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

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*The first part of the chapter includes a description of the concept of symbolic interactionism and how it has influenced the auscultation. The second part explains the methods that have been used to gather data. The last part of the chapter describes the research process; including my thoughts and reflections connected to the methodology.*

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### 2.1 SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM AND CHOICE OF METHODS

The symbolic interactionism approach provides guidelines on how to interpret the world and is a viewpoint commonly used within environmental communication. The symbolic interactionism thinking works both as a methodology, because it gives directions for the researcher to use; but also as a theoretical starting-point because it gives useful advises on how to do interpretations of the things studied. Therefore symbolic interactionism theories are presented both in this chapter and in the chapter describing the theoretical framework.

Charon (2007) writes: *“The central principle of symbolic interactionism is that we can understand what is going on only if we understand what the actors themselves believe about their world”* (Charon, 2007, p. 193) Every person has his/her own individual perspectives of the world, based on one’s own knowledge and experience. In order to increase the understanding of other actors’ perspectives the researcher must try to understand their language, how they see the reality and what they think are important. The main task of the researcher is therefore to reconstruct the actor’s reality. This might be done through different forms of interaction, i.e. participant observations or interviews with the actors. These techniques are therefore useful in order to understand the perspectives of other actors. (Charon, 2007, pp. 192-193)

The aim of the auscultation has partly been to develop my understanding of how environmental communication works in practice and therefore I perceive the symbolic interactionism as a suitable epistemology to use. Important aspects of symbolic interactionism are for example taking the role of the other, further described in the theoretical chapter. Symbolic interactionism has however also influenced how I have chosen to conduct my study. The symbolic interactionism approach recommends using qualitative methods such as participatory observations and interviews when gathering data and these methods are described more in detail in the following sections.

### 2.2 DATA COLLECTION

Information for the thesis has been gathered during a four week internship at the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency (SEPA) in April 2009. The SEPA has offices in three places in Sweden; Stockholm, Östersund and Kiruna. I have spent half of the time in Stockholm and the other half in Östersund. My supervisor at the SEPA works as a public relation officer at the Unit for Outdoor Recreation and Nature Management. This unit has its office in Östersund but my supervisor works most of the time in Stockholm. The data used in the report has been gathered mainly through interviews and participatory observations.

#### 2.2.1 QUALITATIVE SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

The internship has been done as an auscultation but I have also done an assignment where the aim has been to investigate how the communication between the Swedish County Administration Boards and the Environmental Protection Agency is working. The study has been delimited to only include communication connected to establishment and management

of protected areas, which means that it has mainly been employees at the Unit for Outdoor Recreation and the Unit for Area Protection that have been interviewed. I have however also done interviews with employees at the Unit for Landscape in order to learn how their cooperation with the County Administration works. The interviews with the employees at the units have been done face-to-face. I have used the same questions for every interview but depending on the working task and the informant's experience the interviews have been different. In order for me to be able to be flexible in the interviewing situation I have chosen to keep the interviews semi-structured.

Before the interviews I have briefed the informant what I will ask about and also said approximately how long time the interview will take. I have not had any deeper meta-discussion before the interviews. I have taken for granted that the informants decide for themselves what they want to share with me. Because of the limited number of interviews and the somewhat sensitive topic I have chosen not to use any citations or refer directly to specific statements in the text.

### *2.2.2 TELEPHONE INTERVIEWS*

I have not had the possibility to do face-to-face interviews with the informants at the County Administration Boards; instead these interviews have been carried out as telephone interviews. I have experienced it to be more difficult to do interviews over the telephone and these interviews have not generated as much information as the face-to-face interviews. This probably depends on the fact that it becomes harder for me to know how to interpret the informants' answers. The telephone interviews have been more structured than the face-to-face interviews.

### *2.2.3 PARTICIPATORY OBSERVATION*

During the internship I have had the possibility to do participatory observations at the Natural Resources Department. The experiences from the internship are not explicitly used in my empirical discussions but on a more subtle level they are likely to influence the result. The internship has increased my understanding of the issues I am studying, much thanks to the observations I have done. The observations have further helped me to increase my understanding of the perspectives of the employees at the Natural Resources Department.

Unfortunately I have not been able to visit the County Administration Boards and hence I have not, to the same extent, developed my understanding on how they perceive the communication process with the Natural Resources Department.

## **2.3 THE RESEARCH PROCESS – DIFFICULTIES AND REFLECTIONS**

As for investigating the organization that I doing the internship at, have many times been complicated and difficult for me. My goal has not been to evaluate how individual administrators are communicating. Instead my purpose has been to develop a better understanding of how environmental communication is carried out in practice. I have however sometimes perceived it as difficult to clarify this to the people at the Natural Resources Department. I think that my background as an environmental communicator confuses many of the people I have talked to. If I were for example a biologist or an agronomist I think that I had been approached in another way. Environmental communication it is a fairly unknown field of study and I think that people find it difficult to make an interpretation of what it is I am actually interested in. I think that this might influence how people approach me and how they answer the questions I am asking. At the same time this could of course only be my own

pre-assumption or interpretation and therefore mainly affect mainly how I approach people, and not the other way around.

When thinking back on the internship I realized that I changed how I introduced myself to the employees. After two weeks I went to the office in Östersund and had to introduce myself again to the employees there. In Östersund I had started to be more explicit that I was not there to evaluate their communication but instead to observe how environmental communication works in practice. Because my perception of my objective had become clearer to me I also think that the people I introduced myself to found it easier to grasp what I was there to do.

The selection of informants at the County Administration Boards was based on recommendations from administrators at the Natural Resources Department. The people I was recommended to talk to were persons that had expressed opinions or complaints about the communication. As a consequence the interviews may represent a more critical viewpoint than the general view among the Swedish County Administration Boards. But still it gives a picture of the weaknesses in the communication between the County Administration Boards and the Natural Resources Department.

A difficulty I have encountered during the research process is that it often is very difficult to get in touch with people at the County Administration Boards. This has resulted in fewer interviews with county administrators than I first intended to. Time constraints among the administrators at the Unit for Outdoor Recreation and Nature Management have further constrained my data collection. The administrators work under tight time schedules and deadlines and therefore it is difficult for them to spare time so that I can interview them.

### 3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

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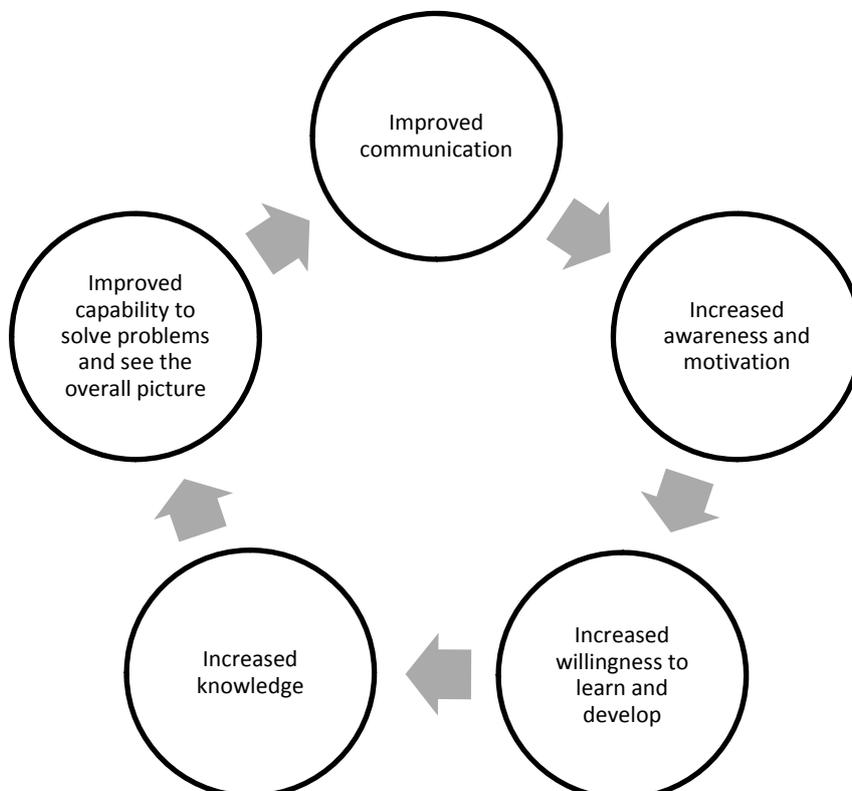
*This chapter gives a theoretical background useful to understand the observations and interviews presented in chapter 4. This chapter starts by describing the importance and benefits of internal communication within an organization and also different forms of internal communication. The second section describes the concepts of “taking the role of the other”, participation and learning which are closely connected to the symbolic interactionism approach described in the previous chapter. These concepts are used both for analyzing the results (chapter 4) but also in order to present suggestions on how to improve the communication (chapter 5).*

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#### 3.1 INTERNAL COMMUNICATION

One of the aims of this study is to investigate how a sample of employees at the Natural Resources Department considers internal communication. In order to analyze the results from the interviews it is important to first understand what internal communication is, how it influences the work conducted within an organization and how it relates to the external communication.

Eriksson (2005) claims that all of the work done by an organization starts at its home ground. Successful internal communication means that the employees are aware of what the organization stands for and which goals the organization has. If the internal communication fails it can be difficult for people outside of the organization to understand the organization’s purpose and therefore it can affect the external communication. (Erikson, 2005) Figure 2 illustrates how the different benefits with internal communication complement and are related to each other.



**Figure 2 Benefits of internal communication (from Erikson, 2005)**

Below some arguments why internal communication is important are presented:

1. Internal communication helps to provide employees with a general understanding of the organization. Many employees today have a need to understand the overall purpose of the organizations work, rather than just the purpose of their own assignment.
2. Another aspect of internal communication is to create unity when it comes to the organization's goals. If an organization has a continuous critical dialogue about the goals and the underlying reasons for these goals, it becomes easier to come to a shared understanding about the methods to use. If all employees strive towards the same goal the organization becomes more efficient.
3. Informed employees have better possibilities to make good decisions. The information the employees need includes an understanding of the organization's goals and visions. Further, what the organization wants to communicate externally primarily has to be anchored internally. Especially in bigger organizations it is easy that the goals and visions are not anchored within the whole organization or that the messages gets distorted or misinterpreted among the employees.
4. Employees with a good understanding of the whole organization and knowledge about the organization's goals are likely to develop a higher degree of motivation. Further, if the employees have a good understanding of the purpose of their assignments and can understand their role in the "bigger picture" they are more inclined to cooperate and communicate with their co-workers.
5. Good internal communication also creates an atmosphere where changes are easier to carry through. The organization also becomes more flexible and capable to handle emergent situations. (Erikson, 2005)

### *3.1.1 DIFFERENT TYPES OF INTERNAL COMMUNICATION*

Erikson (2005) divides internal communication into different six categories depending on the content and the purpose. The first five groups involve formal communication while the last one describes the informal communication within a working place.

1. **Operational communication:** Communication that is needed for the employees to carry out their daily work can be called operational communication.
2. **News communication:** This involves information about new events and situations that have emerged. News communication is needed for the employees to plan their work.
3. **Management communication:** This involves for example the organization's policies, strategies, plans, instructions, routines and budgets.
4. **Communication for change:** It can be useful to separate communication concerning the daily routines and communication concerning organizational changes. Communication for change is based on information about events that falls outside of the regular information flow.
5. **Cultural communication:** This communication category includes communication about the values and ethical aspects of the organization. In this group communication about gender issues, environmental standards and corporate responsibility are included.

6. **Informal communication:** Most of the communication within a working place has a more informal form than the previous types of internal communication. Informal communication is carried out during breaks and in the corridors. The informal communication cannot be steered or planned for and it is also through this channel issues are brought up and discussed among co-workers. The informal communication can also act as a trigger for rumors and spreading of misinterpretations.

Falkheimer and Heide (2007) provide an alternative division of the internal communication into three different, but still interdependent, categories; hierarchal communication, media communication and informal communication. The **hierarchal communication** consists of the information that is transferred between employees and the management. This type of communication is much dependent on the communicative skills of the management. The management should be able to listen to the receiver, adjust the messages to the receivers and also to help the receiver to interpret the information so that it can be applied to their specific task. It is also important that the management shows a willingness to communicate and to have a dialogue with the employees. One way of doing this is to practice the so called *management by walking around* which means that the management is visible among the employees, which in turn encourages communication between the different levels in the organization. If the management fully engages in the internal communication it becomes easier to establish a communicative atmosphere where information flows easily up and down in the organization. (Falkheimer & Heide, 2007)

**Media communication** the second form of internal communication and consists of communication through for example e-mails, web pages, newsletters or meetings. The risk with too extensive media communication is that it creates too much information, which in turn results in increased difficulties to find the most relevant information. (Falkheimer & Heide, 2007)

The third group is the **informal communication**, which to great extent is described similar to Erikson's (2005) definition. Falkheimer and Heide claims that the informal communication complements the formal communication and is used where there are information gaps. Through the informal communication interpretation processes are initiated. Informal communication also leads to the establishment of informal networks within the organization (called communities of practice) and in these networks understanding of the others is usually developed. (Falkheimer & Heide, 2007)

### 3.2 TAKING THE ROLE OF THE OTHER, PARTICIPATION AND LEARNING

As described earlier the symbolic interactionism approach works as a methodological framework for the study but is also used as a theoretical background. The symbolic interactionism claims that people have different perspectives and therefore see things in different ways. Our perspectives are however something that constantly changes as we get new experiences and interacts with people. When we interact with other people, we learn new things, and in order to learn we have to take the role of the other and see the world through the eyes of the other person. In order to communicate with the other person we need to adapt to how we believe the other person sees the world. In order to understand what the other person replies I need to understand the perspective of the other person. When we interact with people the process of taking the role of the other start and hence new understandings and perspectives are developed. (Hallgren & Ljung, 2005, p. 63)

When taking the role of the other it means that a person steps out of his/her own perspectives and instead tries to take the perspectives of the other person. To take the role of the other is something we do in every social situation. It is a process that comes together with almost all human interaction. When we take on an inaccurate role of the other it easily causes misinterpretations and misunderstandings. However, taking the role of the other is still a very important precondition for interaction. Accurate communication and role taking can to a great extent help prevent negative reactions to interaction. (Charon, 2007, pp. 104-115)

Further, people's different perspectives create learning potential when people interact. If an organization wants to create a sustainable change a key ingredient is to make the involved actors participate in the work. Participation therefore means that the actors participate in a mutual process of learning and sharing and thus taking the role of the other becomes important. (Hallgren & Ljung, 2005, p. 85) Also if an organization wishes to increase its efficiency communication can be used as a tool. Communication processes can be time consuming but in the long run communication scholars argue that the knowledge created through the communication processes becomes anchored among the participants which in turn makes the process easier. Hallgren and Ljung call this *knowledge efficiency* and claims that the knowledge produced in participatory processes are more likely to be used and implemented. If the participants are satisfied with a decision it is more likely that they implement it. (Hallgren & Ljung, 2005, p. 62)

In short the results of a participation process can be summarized as follows:

- The participants learn from each other.
- New perspectives and creative solutions are developed
- The relations between the actors becomes deeper
- The interaction and the experiences make further collaboration easier. (Hallgren & Ljung, 2005, p. 86)

In order to make a profound analysis of an organization's internal communication it is important to consider role taking and possibilities for involved actors to share their perspectives. Interaction between different subparts of an organization develops the actors' perspectives and hence also their understanding of other actors' perspectives. If the internal communication is not sufficient it is possible that the other's perspectives are misunderstood or misinterpreted and that might lead to what is perceived as internal communication difficulties.

## 4. INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL COMMUNICATION AT THE NATURAL RESOURCES DEPARTMENT

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*This chapter consists of four parts. The first part summarizes some of the main communication documents used by the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency. The second part presents the results from the interviews with the county administrators' and the employees at the Natural Resources Department, concerning the external communication. The third part describes the informants' at the Natural Resources Department's view on the internal communication. An analysis of the results is presented in the fourth section. The fourth section also includes a comparison between communication in theory (the communication documents) and in practice (the result from the interviews).*

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### 4.1 COMMUNICATION DOCUMENTS

The Environmental Protection Agency has several different documents dealing with communication issues, for example a communication policy and a communication strategy.

#### 4.1.1 COMMUNICATION POLICY

The communication policy says that communication is not a goal in itself; instead it should be seen as a tool for reaching the operational goals. The communication channels that are prioritized are the external website and personal meetings. The personal meetings are encouraged because they increase the knowledge and understanding among the actors. Internal communication is also mentioned as something important because it will lead to an increased feeling of participation, responsibility and trust among the employees and hence it will help to reach the operational goals. One of the aims with the internal communication is that all employees should know about, understand and work after the agency's vision, assignment and goals. Further the employees should feel that they have the possibility to participate in decision-making processes. The policy also gives the manager for each department and unit the main responsibility for both the external and the internal communication. The internal communication should focus on dialogue both within their unit but also with other units and departments. The managers are also assigned to make sure that communication measures are included in the operational plan and budget. (Naturvårdsverket, Komplement till Naturvårdsverkets Kommunikationspolicy , 2007-12-10)

#### 4.1.2 COMMUNICATION STRATEGY

The communication strategy points out four prioritized communication areas between 2008 and 2010 and the internal communication is one of them. The goal with the internal communication is to make sure that the employees have a broad and general understanding of the organization. One of the focuses is that the Environmental Protection Agency should work as *one* and the internal communication will secure internal participation, engagement and quality. The communication strategy also establishes some strategic goals, for example that a majority of the external actors should feel that the Environmental Protection Agency is open and clear in their communication. (Naturvårdsverket, Kommunikationsstrategi för Naturvårdsverket Nr 140/08, 2008-09-12 )

### 4.2 EXTERNAL COMMUNICATION WITH COUNTY ADMINISTRATION BOARDS

The County Administration Boards in Sweden are one the main target groups for the Natural Resources Department's work. The County Administration Boards are responsible for implementing the directions from the department. The administrators in the County Administration Boards therefore have regular contact with many administrators at the Natural Resources Department.

Telephone interviews have been conducted with people working at different County Administration Boards in Sweden. The informants that have been chosen are mainly working with establishment and/or management of protected areas. This sample implies that the result from the interviews mainly concerns the cooperation with the Unit for Outdoor Recreation and Nature Management and the Unit for Area Protection. Employees at the Natural Resources Department have also been asked about how they perceive the communication with the County Administration Boards.

#### *4.2.1 LACK OF COORDINATION*

The result of the interviews with the county administrators shows that there is room for improvements in the communication processes. Some problems are mentioned by several of the informants and the issue that seems to be perceived as most problematic is the lack of coordination between different the units. One informant expresses that, because the mixed messages, it could be seen as there are currently two separate environmental protection agencies; one in Östersund and one in Stockholm. According to the informant these differences concern smaller issues as well as more strategic directives.

When the County Administration Boards have got, what they perceive to be, ambiguous messages from the units it has occasionally created difficulties for them. The lack of coordination means that if two different administrators in a county both are working with the same protected area and both anchor their decisions with administrators at the Natural Resources Department; they can still get different messages. This results in a potential conflict situation at the County Administration Board because both administrators are “right” according to the guidelines from the Natural Resources Department. The difficulties with the internal communication therefore have the potential to trickle down and create communication difficulties internally at the county level.

Even though this perceived lack of coordination between the units rarely ends up in such problematic situations for the counties, the interviews still show that the county administrators’ trust for the Natural Resources Department risks decreasing because of the sometimes ambiguous messages. The county administrators cannot be certain that the answer they get is actually anchored on higher levels in the authority. The coordination is by some perceived to have worsened during the last year. One informant thinks this could depend on the fact that the employees in Östersund have become more confident to take their own decisions. Many of the informants believe that the main reason why they get different messages is that the views on nature management differ between the units.

Employees both at the Unit for Outdoor Recreation and Nature Management and the Unit for Area Protection have heard complaints from the counties concerning the coordination problems. Some employees are really concerned about this problem while others emphasize that it is not something that happens very often.

#### *4.2.2 PERSONAL MEETINGS*

The informants at the County Administration Boards are to a great extent satisfied with the cooperation with the different units. They get the practical guidelines and handbooks they need and they mostly experience that it is easy to get in touch with people at the units. A majority of the communication between the counties and the Natural Resources Department takes place by phone or e-mail. The county administrators’ have no complaints about the communication channels.

According to the county administrators, a weakness in the cooperation with the Natural Resources Department is however that there are too few occasions for county administrators to meet the employees at the department face-to-face. The counties often invite administrators at the Natural Resources Department to attend to meetings but they rarely have time to come. Even though the county administrators would appreciate if the employees at the department visited the counties more often, they understand that the employees at the Natural Resources Department have much to do and that time is a constraining factor. Each unit arranges annual meetings to which the counties are invited. All of the informants are positive to those meetings and consider them as a good way to discuss and learn together. Interviews with employees at the Unit for Landscape have shown that their cooperation with the counties works very well and one reason for this is perceived to be that the counties are responsible for arranging the meetings. The informants at the Unit for Landscape believe that the fact that the counties are responsible make them act in another way.

The informants at the counties say that they meet the employees at the Unit for Outdoor Recreation and Nature Management more often than employees at the other units. Some believe that this have to do with the different assignments at the units, where the work conducted by the Unit for Outdoor Recreation and Nature Management requires more visits. Some informants do however think that the employees in Östersund generally are more interested in visiting the counties.

Personal contacts are mentioned as important by many of the informants. Employees at the Natural Resources Department say that they have more contact with some counties and they believe that extent of the communication with the counties depends much upon the interest among the employees at each county.

#### *4.2.3 THE ROLE OF THE NATURAL RESOURCES DEPARTMENT*

The interviews show that the views differ when it comes to what role the Natural Resources Department should have. The informants at the units say that the Natural Resources Department should not engage in the management of specific areas; that is up to each county administration to decide upon. Most of the county administrators would however appreciate if the Natural Resources Department acted more as a body of knowledge and were able to give site-specific answers and give practical advices how to manage their protected areas. Further some of the county administrators would like the Natural Resources Department to be more active and engaged in the work done in the counties.

Informants at the Unit for Outdoor Recreation and Nature Management say that it has been difficult for them to work with strategic and long-term planning because so much has been new for them. One informant at the counties also talks about this but from a different angle. According to the administrator, who is positive to the cooperation with the Unit for Outdoor Recreation and Nature Management, says that the relations with the unit is so good partly because the counties have had the possibility to influence how the unit work. Further, the informant says that since most of the employees at the department were new, they had to do a lot of visits in order to learn and develop their understanding. The informant believes that might have contributed to the good relations with the unit in Östersund.

### 4.3 INTERNAL COMMUNICATION

Some of the informants at the Natural Resources Department think that the internal cooperation works well, and only at a few occasions have they experienced problems caused by lack of internal communication. Other informants at the department do however have a more negative view on the cooperation between the different units. Also informants at the counties expressed a need for better internal coordination between the units. Most of the informants experience that it is the cooperation and communication between the Unit for Outdoor Recreation and Nature Management and the other units that is the most problematic one.

Some believe that it is the geographical distance that is the underlying cause for the lack of internal communication while others believe that other aspects are involved as well. Many emphasize the importance of meeting each other face-to face on a daily basis, both in order to get to know each other and also to discuss specific issues. Most informants mention that meeting each other during lunch and coffee breaks are important. Ever since the Unit for Outdoor Recreation and Nature Management moved to Östersund the informal meetings are very rare.

Most of the informants think that it is hard to come up with any solution to the problem. Some suggests more meetings but point out that time is a constraining factor. Today the employees in Östersund and Stockholm meet a few times per year. One suggestion is that all of the Natural Resources Department moves to the same place (both Stockholm and Östersund are suggested). Technical solutions have been tested but the informants are not satisfied with the results. The video conference equipment has been used occasionally but the informants are not satisfied with the quality of these meetings. Phone meetings works better but still the discussions are not the same as if they would have had the meeting together. The intranet is also used to spread information within the agency. The intranet has become used more and more lately, but it can still be improved.

The interviews also show that some of the informants perceive that people working at different units sometimes seem to have different views on the issues they handle. This is brought up by employees both at the Natural Resources Department and in the counties. The traditional respectively the “new” view on nature management is mentioned as a difference between the units, especially when it concerns forest management issues. Even though the different administrators have occasional meetings the coherence is still perceived insufficient. Some informants at the Natural Resources Department experience that it is the “old” against the “new” employees. Since almost all of the employees in Östersund are “new”, the friction between the units becomes extra obvious.

There are discussions about the problems with the internal communication and the higher chiefs and directors are said to be aware of the issue. Some initiatives have been started in order to find a solution. However, it is mentioned that the head of the department and the director-general rarely (or never) visits Östersund. Some informants say that if communication should be prioritized it is important that this is done on every level of the agency. Today it is much easier for the employees in Stockholm to have frequent contact with the management staff. Further, some informants perceive it as unfortunate that it is always the employees in Östersund that need to go to Stockholm, never vice versa.

When the unit of Outdoor Recreation and Nature Management moved only a few of the employees followed, therefore most of the people working there right now are newly employed. Some of the employees in Östersund fear that the employees in Stockholm consider them to be somewhat odd and inexperienced. The interviews with the county administrators have shown that the Unit for Outdoor Recreation and Nature Management is perceived as easier to cooperate with. One county administrator says that the counties have had the possibility to “shape” this unit because most of the employees were new and therefore they find it easy to cooperate.

Some informants mention that it is important that the job descriptions are clearly defined so that there are no question about who is responsible for what. When the employees in Östersund were hired they did not receive any specific job description, instead it is the operational plan that works as the main steering document. The operational plan is however not very detailed and therefore it is up to each employee to decide how to work (of course within the information given in the operational plan). The informants think that this is both positive and negative. It opens up for creativity and the possibility to decide which methods that is most useful. On the other hand it can easily become too personal to comment on what the colleagues are doing, and this might further favor departmentalization of the work.

#### 4.4 ANALYSIS

The informants at the counties mention that there is a problem with mixed messages from the different units at the Natural Resources Department. With support from Eriksson (2005) (see section 3.1) my analysis is that this could depend on shortages of internal communication within the department. Eriksson claims that if the internal communication fails it can be difficult for external actors to understand the messages received from the organization. This would mean that it is important to improve the internal communication before it is possible to deal with external communication difficulties.

The county administrators perceive that the messages they get from each unit is synchronized and that shows that the internal communication *within* the units works satisfactory. However, the interviews have shown that the problems arise when the different units give different messages and I analyze that as insufficient communication *between* the units. The county administrators think that the reason why they get mixed messages is mainly because the different units have different perceptions of how to manage protected areas. That could be a sign of the organization’s goals not being anchored among the employees or perhaps interpreted in different ways between the units. That in turns shows a need to improve the internal communication between the units and also between the units and the management group. These issues are mentioned in the Environmental Protection Agency’s communication policy, which states that it is on each manager’s responsibility to make sure that the internal communication flows easily within and between the units.

Eriksson describes the benefits of internal communication (Figure 2). If the internal communication is not working, these benefits can instead be used to describe threats to the organization. If the internal communication is restricted it could for example lead to decreased motivation among the employees, less willingness to learn and decreased possibilities to deal with complexity. Eriksson claims that if an organization has a continuous dialogue about the organization’s goals and visions it becomes easier to come to a shared agreement. If the employees are familiar with, and jointly agrees upon the goals it is easier to create an efficient organization where everyone strives towards the same goal. (Erikson, 2005)

Connected to this is the hierarchal communication described by Falkheimer and Heide (2007). Good communicative skills of the management are important in order to create a deliberative dialogue about the goals and visions and also to anchor them in all levels of the organization. Further, it is important that the superiors help the different departments in the organization to interpret how the goals and visions should be applied to their department's specific responsibility. (Falkheimer & Heide, 2007) The difficulties with the mixed messages given by the different units at the Natural Resources Department could be a sign of lacking hierarchal communication. The Environmental Protection Agency is *one* organization and has shared goals and visions. If these are not spread and implemented in every level of the organization the result is likely to be that every department and unit develop their own goals and methods that works for them. The fact that the county administrators experience that there are two separate Environmental Protection Agencies, one in Stockholm and one in Östersund, signals that the hierarchal communication needs to be improved. This is also something that is mentioned in the agency's communication strategy.

It is also possible that the hierarchal communication flows are different between the units in Stockholm respectively the one in Östersund. The closeness to the head of the department and other highly placed persons is likely to be greater when they share the same office. This is not the case for the employees in Östersund. Falkheimer and Heide (2007) say that one way of establishing hierarchal communication flows is to practice *management by walking around*. (Falkheimer & Heide, 2007) Management by walking around is to some extent exercised at the Natural Resources Department, at least with the superiors at each unit who have their desk together with the other employees. Some of the employees in Östersund have however expressed that they have rarely seen higher superiors at their office and that probably has the effect that the employees in Östersund do not have the same relationship with the management group. That makes it more difficult for these employees to participate in a continuous dialogue about strategic issues compared to the employees in Stockholm. Hierarchal communication can therefore become difficult when the working place is spread over geographical distances.

The hierarchal communication can be seen as a continuous and sometimes informal participation process. A well-functioning participation process can result in participants learning from each other, developing of new perspectives, creative solutions and deepened relations among the participants. (Hallgren & Ljung, 2005) If some of the relevant actors are partly excluded from this process it will lead to perspectives not being considered and the mutual learning therefore is not as broad as it could be. This could be the case if the employees in Östersund do not regularly interact with the management group.

The interviews show that it is mainly the informal communication (see section 3.1) that is perceived as a constraining factor when it comes to communication within the Natural Resources Department. The lack of informal communication could, according to Eriksson (2005), also be a reason why the internal communication is perceived as restricted by some of the employees. Falkheimer and Heide (2007) further claims that informal communication leads to the establishment of informal network, which in turn is the starting-point for developing understanding of others and mutual interpretations. The lack of informal communication between the unit in Östersund and the units in Stockholm can thus lead to differentiated informal networks and hence mutual understanding and role-taking are restricted among the employees in the different offices. If the employees do not meet regularly it also becomes more difficult for them to understand the perspectives of the "others" and that might further constrain the possibilities to collaborate.

Another issue that might also need to be discussed within the organization is what role the Natural Resources Department should have in relation to the County Administration Boards. Today the involved actors seem to have different views and wishes about the collaboration between the Natural Resources Department and the County Administration Boards. This shows a need for creating a more strategic discussion between the counties and the Natural Resources Department. If the actors meet and discuss these issues together it is more likely that they understand each others' perspectives and hence could take on a more accurate role of the other. Based on the interviews with employees at the Unit for Landscape the annual meetings could be a good forum for doing this.

## 5. DISCUSSION

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*This chapter contains a discussion of the result presented in the previous chapter. In section 5.1 I present some concluding thoughts.*

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My interpretation of the results is that the informal communication is perceived as the main problem when it comes to the communication within the Natural Resources Department. I have also assumed that the lack of coordination in the department is what creates most problems for the County Administration Boards. When I have interacted with the informants I have tried to understand their perspectives and hence this interpretation is the result of a process where I try to take role of the employees at the Natural Resources Department and the County Administration Boards. The result is therefore based on my interpretation of their interpretations and hence there is of course room for misunderstandings and misinterpretations.

The Environmental Protection Agency focuses much on communication with external actors (or rather helping external actors with their communication) but along the way the internal communication seems to have been forgotten, at least in practice. After reading the communication policy and strategy I see that the agency has knowledge and understanding of the benefits of well-functioning communication, and the main challenge is now to transform this knowledge into practice and actual behavior changes. The potential to create good communication lies within each employee but the work to improve the internal communication also requires that the management is really interested and focused on communication in order to make it work. However it is equally important that the employees are allowed to participate in discussions about how to implement the communication documents otherwise it risks becoming a top-down project that is not anchored on lower levels. Further participatory processes are more likely to generate sustainable and creative solutions.

Some of the informants have mentioned that too much “communication talk” means less time to conduct the work they are hired to do. I do however believe that the problems aired by the informants are a result of lacking communication. I do not see communication as something that necessarily takes time from something else. Communication is instead a prerequisite for action. Within the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency and the County Administration Boards a large number of people are working, and in order to accomplish the goals the organizations have set up, collaboration is of vital importance. No one can do all work by them self. Therefore it becomes important that the communication function, both internally and externally.

The thing that might take time is the meta-communication (the discussions about how to communicate) but as soon as these discussions have lead to a shared agreement and routines that are implemented, the work is likely to become more efficient and hence the employees will probably not experience communication as something time consuming and frustrating.

Another important aspect is the fact that the relations between the different units should be improved. The unit for Outdoor Recreation and Nature Management and the Unit for Area Protection have tasks that often are interdependent. That creates a need for synchronizing their work. Many of the informants at the Unit for Outdoor Recreation and Nature Management think that it is really embarrassing when the counties get mixed messages from

the department. Further it can become problematic for the counties when this happens. I think it is important to make sure that the employees at the two different units meet more often, both in formal and informal settings. Informal networks are important and as long as the collaboration between these units is so limited it is not very likely that any informal cross-unit networks are developed. This constrains the possibility to synchronize the messages to the counties. The fact that so many of the employees are newly employed means that there are few relations (established prior to the transfer) to build on, that makes it even more important to arrange team-building activities. Improved internal relations are likely to create both better internal communication and more coherent external communication.

My experiences during the internship can also be worth noticing here. I have found it difficult to get in touch with employees, especially at the County Administration Boards, but also at the Natural Resources Department. Time constraints can therefore be understood as an underlying factor for the communication difficulties. If the employees have tight time schedules it is of course hard for them to increase their interaction with each other. Finally I want to point out that my experience of phone interviews being less informative than personal contacts also can be understood as a communication constraint on a more general level. Much of the communication between the counties and the Natural Resources Department takes place over the phone and that could be a constraint for the external communication.

## 5.1 CONCLUSION

A good solution to the problems described in this thesis should not be based on what the management group or communication consultants think. The best solution will come from a participatory process where the employees engage in a constructive and deliberative dialogue. My main suggestions are therefore the following:

1. Arrange participatory workshops where employees can discuss their needs when it comes to internal communication.
2. Encourage and arrange cross-unit workshops so that the employees develop their understanding of the situation at other units and departments. These meetings should not only be held in Stockholm. Topics that can be discussed in those meeting could be “How do we interpret the agency’s goals in relation to our unit/department’s operational goals?” or “How can we put the communication policy/strategy into practice?”
3. The management group should regularly visit the units and departments outside of Stockholm in order to establish closer relations with these employees as well.

I believe that if measures are taken to improve the internal communication, the problem with mixed messages to the counties will eventually cease to exist. Because the county administrators also mention that they would appreciate more face-to-face meetings with the administrators at the Natural Resources Department I also suggest to do similar actions to discuss how to improve the communication between the counties and the agency, especially in order to clarify the actors’ different communication needs and constraints.

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### 6.2 INTERVIEWS

- Telephone interview with an administrator at the County Administrative Board in Västernorrland: 2009-04-17
- Telephone interview with an administrator at the County Administrative Board in Östergötland: 2009-04-20
- Telephone interview with an administrator at the County Administrative Board in Jönköping: 2009-04-27
- Telephone interview with an administrator at the County Administrative Board in Halland: 2009-04-28
- Telephone interview with an administrator at the Unit for Outdoor Recreation and Nature Management: 2009-04-09
- Interview with an administrator at the Unit for Area Protection: 2009-04-02
- Interview with an administrator at the Unit for Outdoor Recreation and Nature Management: 2009-04-23
- Interview with an administrator at the Unit for Outdoor Recreation and Nature Management: 2009-04-23
- Interview with an administrator at the Unit for Outdoor Recreation and Nature Management: 2009-04-24
- Interview with an administrator at the Unit for Landscape: 2009-05-04
- Interview with an administrator at the Unit for Landscape: 2009-05-05
- Interview with an administrator at the Unit for Area Protection: 2009-05-05
- Interview with an administrator at the Unit for Area Protection: 2009-05-05