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Connecting GEF Projects with a Global Audience: Outreach Initiatives of the South China Sea Project



Abstract: A large number and wide variety of information and data outputs were produced as part of the South China Sea and Gulf of Thailand project (SCS project). This note covers the efforts of the SCS project to build awareness of these outputs via the Internet by: (1) building the online visibility of the SCS project website; and (2) by providing website visitors with an engaging and interactive insight into project interventions and achievements. A combined strategy of improving the search engine friendliness and content richness of the SCS project website resulted in a large increase in the number of visitors accessing the website via Internet search engines. The creation of a SCS project layer for viewing on Google Earth also assisted in building awareness of project outputs and interventions. It also resulted in several unanticipated outreach benefits, including addition of the project to Google's Outreach Showcase and its promotion in the official Google news as "a great example of how to connect with a wide audience". The technical aspects of this work represent application of basic operating practices for online businesses to a GEF project. The potential for replicating the online outreach initiatives of the SCS project in other projects is high, particularly considering the outcomes were achieved using freely available software designed for use by non-Information Technology specialists.

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Connecting GEF Projects with a Global Audience: Outreach Initiatives of the South China Sea Project

Experience of the GEF sponsored

“Reversing Environmental Degradation Trends in the South China Sea and Gulf of Thailand”

GEF Project ID: 885

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The Global Environment Facility (GEF) project entitled “*Reversing Environmental Degradation Trends in the South China Sea and Gulf of Thailand*” (SCS project) is a seven country project, addressing environmental degradation from habitat loss, land based pollution, and over-exploitation of fisheries resources. The project was launched in 2002 to create an environment at the regional level, in which collaboration and partnership in addressing environmental problems of the South China Sea, between all stakeholders, and at all levels is fostered and encouraged; and to enhance the capacity of the participating governments to integrate environmental considerations into national development planning.

The project has created and empowered a network of partners involving over four hundred national and regional institutions and organisations. The information and data compiled and generated by this network is a valuable resource for participating governments, communities, and other organisations in the implementation and coordination of environmental management interventions in the South China Sea and Gulf of Thailand. These information outputs of the project are accessible online via the SCS project website at <<http://www.unepscs.org>>.

This experience note describes initiatives of the project to connect a wide audience with the SCS project website and its wealth of information resources. These initiatives represent one aspect of the broader information management and communications work of the SCS project that has been documented in the South China Sea Knowledge Document on Information Management (UNEP, 2007).

THE EXPERIENCE

Background

The number and variety of information and data outputs produced by large multi-lateral, intergovernmental GEF projects is often large and diverse. In the case of the SCS project these include *inter alia*: four regional databases; a repository of more than 1,700 project documents and publications; online modelling tools; a large collection of regionally specific training materials; and a catalogue of multi-media public awareness resources. Ensuring ease of online access to such outputs is increasingly becoming an expectation of donors and project partners, and the common approach adopted by projects has been to make outputs accessible on the Internet via websites based on Content Management System (CMS) software.

The project document for the SCS project did not envisage the development of a project website. A basic website was created in 2002 however, to overcome problems with the electronic distribution of meeting documents caused by unreliable e-mail communication and limited e-mail inbox space at that time. During the early stages of the operational phase of the project (2005) it became apparent that the website could be used to: improve the flow of project news and information between and among project partners and demonstration sites; enhance accessibility to project outputs; and to facilitate the online sharing of information and experiences relating to project execution. The project website was subsequently redeveloped in the final quarter of 2005 using free, open source software.

How to Improve Awareness of the SCS Project Website and Information Resources?

During the project's second Regional Scientific Conference in November 2005 it was identified that the continued use of the project's information and data outputs would likely

depend on three key factors: (1) the ease of accessibility to the outputs; (2) the user-friendliness of the website and databases in which the outputs are contained; and (3) the general level of awareness of the existence of the project website. The first two factors were initially addressed as part of the redevelopment of the website in 2005, which involved the creation of databases that were intuitive and provided for high speed access to information and data. Accessibility to outputs and the user-friendliness of the project website and its associated databases was progressively enhanced during the period 2006-2008.

Raising the general awareness of the website and databases was addressed at the project level by assigning rights and responsibilities to project partners for the continued revision and update of the website and databases. Ensuring the longer-term success of the website, measured in terms of its profile as an information resource relating to the environmental management of the South China Sea and Gulf of Thailand, as well as its level of use, would require building awareness of its existence at both regional and global levels.

Challenges

The main questions with respect to building awareness of the SCS website and databases and increasing its level of usage were: (a) how to best promote the SCS project website; and (b) how to provide website visitors with an interactive and engaging insight into SCS project activities, outputs, and achievements. With Internet use growing globally during the period of project implementation, and at a high rate in most participating countries (e.g. >8,500 percent in Viet Nam from 2000-2008), enhancing the online visibility of the project website was identified as a priority activity.

Online visibility of a website is measured most broadly by website "traffic" (or number of visits). Traffic is categorised by three sources. The first being "direct traffic" which refers to individuals having arrived at the site after entering the site's URL (e.g., <http://www.unepscs.org>) into their web-browser and loading the webpage. The second is traffic from "referring sites" which involves visitors arriving at the site after having clicked on a link to the website placed on another website. The third is traffic via search engines. Search engines, such as Google and

Yahoo, are information retrieval systems designed to assist in finding information on the Internet and can contribute to a large percentage of overall traffic to an individual website.

Limited Online Promotion of Project Interventions and Outputs at the Implementing Agency Level

Web links to project websites from GEF Implementing Agency websites represent an excellent possible source of website traffic and mechanism for building awareness of GEF IW project interventions and outputs. Implementing Agency websites experience very high levels of traffic, such that prominent linkages between them and project websites could assist in directing large numbers of Internet users to project outputs. The level of support in this respect varies considerably between Implementing Agencies, and for example, the author could not find one prominent link from the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) website <<http://www.unep.org>> to the SCS project website at the time of preparing this note.

Similarly the author could not find one single reference to any SCS project output on the main UNEP website or working links to the project on the website of UNEP's Division of Global Environment Facility Co-ordination (DGEF) <<http://dgef.unep.org>>. The consequence of this is that for the 12 month period to 1st September 2008, few if any visitors to the SCS project website came via a UNEP webpage. This contrasts significantly with the efforts of UNDP to promote GEF project outputs via their "In the Spotlight" section of <<http://www.undp.org/gef>>, and similar innovative work being undertaken by the GEF Small Grants Programme at <<http://sgp.undp.org>>, a highlight being the recent launch of the SGP online training module on persistent organic pollutants <<http://www.sgp-pops.org>>. A similar facility for the dissemination of GEF project information and news exists on the World Bank website at <<http://www.worldbank.org/gef>>, although this does not appear to be updated as frequently as UNDP's GEF web pages.

Limitations of the IW:LEARN Website as a Tool for the Online Promotion of GEF Project Websites

The website of the GEF supported International Waters Learning and Exchange and Resource Network (IW:LEARN) was developed to facilitate the integration, exchange and accessibility of data and information between and among GEF IW projects, their partners, and stakeholders. Part of this initiative involved establishment of a central metadata directory of all available IW project data and information, with the aim of serving as a single entry point for access to GEF IW project information. The online repository of IW project information established through IW:LEARN includes *inter alia* a projects database linked to compilations of outputs from individual projects and programmes.

The effectiveness of the IW:LEARN website as a referring site for individual project websites is constrained at this stage by several factors. The first is the lack of a prominent link to the IW:LEARN website from any of the GEF Implementing Agency websites.¹ Such links would act to guide users of Implementing Agency websites to the IW:LEARN website and ultimately websites of individual projects. This weakness is moderated to some degree through the inclusion of prominent links to IW:LEARN in the main menu of the GEF website and the main GEF IW webpage.

Another constraining factor is the type of information contained in the IW:LEARN website itself. Whilst the IW:LEARN website is ranked highly by Internet search engines for search terms such as “IW:LEARN”, “International Waters”, and “Waters Projects”, the meta-data type information contained in the website for individual projects precludes it from ranking highly in search results for more technical, project specific terms. For example, the search terms “Mangroves Thailand”, “Seagrass China”, or “Coral Reefs Vietnam” are of high relevance to the SCS project but it is unlikely that Internet users searching these terms will connect with the IW:LEARN website. Whilst it is recognised that the IW:LEARN website was not designed for this purpose, its limitations in terms of attracting Internet users searching for specific information about individual shared water bodies should be recognised².

¹ One can locate the IW:LEARN link within three clicks via the UNDP-GEF website

² The SCS project acknowledges addition of a prominent link to www.unepscs.org from the IW:LEARN homepage in late 2007 to assist in overcoming some of these limitations.

The Approach Adopted

Recognising the above mentioned challenges in promoting the SCS project website and databases online, the SCS project embarked on a two-track approach to: (1) build the online visibility of the information base, measured by the number of visitors to the website and the ranking of the website by key search engines for search terms including “South China Sea”, combination of coastal habitat types (e.g. mangroves) and countries (e.g. Thailand), and project demonstration site names; and to (2) provide website visitors with a more engaging and interactive insight into project interventions and achievements.

Building the Online Visibility of the SCS Project Website

Enhancing the online visibility of the SCS project website involved implementation of initiatives to improve the ease of searching and ranking of the website by main search engines. The specific constraint addressed was the use of non-Search Engine Friendly URLs by the Content Management System (CMS) software which is based on the PHP coding system. Standard HTML websites are designed such that the URLs for each page reflect the meta-description and content for the pages, and include key search words for the website. The standard URLs used by new CMS software provide for little control over URL keywords, and for example, are presented to search engines and users as “http://www.unepscs.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=16&itemid=55”.

In order to enable the use of key search terms in the URLs of the SCS project website, a component that re-writes the CMS style URLs to be search engine and user friendly was installed during the first quarter of 2007. The hierarchical structure and linkages between key sections of the site were also redesigned at this time with the aim of improving the indexing of pages by search engines. The result of this action was that URLs for each page of the site now contain meaningful keywords that relate to the site’s key sections, menus, and content items. An example of a redesigned URL is “http://www.unepscs.org/Fangchenggang_Mangrove_Habitat_Demonstration_Site_in_China.htm”.

The main Content Management System files for the site were also optimised in order to obtain higher keyword densities in each of the individual pages. The site's RSS feed was redeveloped to include all content items added to the site's "blog", front page, and project e-newsletter. In addition to its' potential usefulness in syndicating project news, the RSS feed was included on the site to ensure that new content is indexed and searched by search engines promptly after addition to the site.

During the second quarter of 2007, the website's document repository and multi-media library was redeveloped to include all project outputs, which at the time involved addition of approximately 1,400 project documents, 3.5 hours of project videos, public awareness materials, and a large gallery of South China Sea related photos. All new content items were renamed using keyword dense filenames to improve the indexing of content by search engines. This led to an approximate 9-fold increase in the total SCS project content indexed as part of the SCS website by Google, with a total of 10,800 individual pages indexed for <www.unepscs.org> on 1st September 2008 (approximately equal to the total for <www.iwlearn.net> at the same time).

This combined strategy of improving the search engine and user friendliness of the website's URLs, combined with a substantial increase in the "content richness" of the website has enhanced the overall visibility of the website significantly. On 1st September 2008 the website ranked sixth from 8,220,000 web pages indexed by Google.com for the keywords "South China Sea". At the same time in 2006, the project website did not rank in the top 100 pages of Google search results for the same search terms. Data on the usage of the website from 1st October 2006 – 31st September 2007 indicates that 242,400 visitors from 119 countries accessed the website during that one year period. These visitors accessed more than 1.35 million pages or content items (e.g. documents, videos) during that year, and all seven countries participating in the project featured in the top 20 countries in terms of the number of visitors during the period (UNEP, 2007).

Development of an Engaging and Interactive Information Tool

The initiatives described above were effective in increasing the online visibility of the SCS project website. Data relating to the duration of visits and content accessed by visitors during the October 2006 – September 2007 period indicate that the website's content was relevant to approximately 25 percent of visitors. Approximately 18.3 percent of users spent between 15-30 minutes on the site, with nearly seven percent accessing site content for in excess of 1 hour. In contrast, 35 percent of users were recorded to leave the site within 30 seconds of having loaded the homepage.

Experience during the periods April-June 2007 and July-September 2007 indicated that regular additions of new and diverse website content and promotion of this content in a "Highlights" section on the website homepage was an effective means of increasing the number of visitors moving through the site rather than immediately out, after having arrived. Redevelopment and promotion of the South China Sea document repository, and establishment of the online multi-media library and catalogue of community awareness materials during the June-July 2007 period, led to marked increases in the number of visitors accessing these parts of the website.

It was identified in the third quarter of 2007 however, that accessibility to and use of project outputs could be improved by providing visitors with a more engaging and interactive insight into project interventions and achievements. The following outlines the steps taken to do this and highlights several unanticipated outcomes:

1. Selection of the Google Earth Platform

The Google Earth system <<http://earth.google.com>> was launched in 2005. The technology was first introduced to the SCS partner network during the 2005 round of working group meetings (July-September) and was discussed briefly during the project's second Regional Scientific Conference (November 2005). The potential uses for Google Earth identified at that time included: the validation of information regarding the extent of coastal habitats (particularly mangroves and wetlands); estimation of the number of small fishing vessels in remote coastal areas; the extent of mariculture activities; and general coastal use planning.

Since then the freely available Google Earth system has been installed by more than 350 million individuals, drawing more installations than Microsoft's Windows XP operating system. It is available in 14 different languages, and includes sub-metre high resolution satellite images for 30 percent of the world's land surface and 50 percent of the world's population. It is now a widely used feature of the Internet, and has been developed by Google to enable non-IT specialists to use the system as a Geographical Information System (GIS) by integrating placemarks, textual descriptions, images, video, and 3D models into the global GIS. These features coupled with the interactive 3-dimensional Google Earth browser, led to the selection of the platform as a tool to provide website visitors with a more engaging overview of project interventions, outputs, and achievements.

2. Development of a Project Layer for Google Earth



Development of content for viewing on Google Earth has been simplified through the creation of the Keyhole Mark-up Language (KML) by Google. Based on the Extensible Mark-up Language (XML) known by most web developers, KML enables the setting of variables (e.g. latitudes/longitudes and altitude) which dictate how content is displayed on Google Earth maps. The KML coding language was developed to be sufficiently flexible such that pure HTML webpage code can be embedded within it. This feature enables the creation of files which combine the interactivity with Google Earth provided by KML with well crafted HTML web pages or "description bubbles" for individual sites or an entire layer of sites for viewing within the Google Earth browser.

This technology was used to create an extensive layer for the SCS project for viewing within Google Earth. The layer provides website

visitors with an opportunity to interactively access information about the project's partner network, explore the project's suite of habitat demonstration sites, and access information and data for more than 135 mangrove, coral reef, seagrass, and wetland sites studied during the project. The description bubbles developed for each site also contain links to key project information resources, e.g., publications relating to the project's scientific and project management innovations. The key to this initiative has been putting project information and outputs together with 3-dimensional satellite images and Google Earth's rich information base. This enables website visitors to view project information in the context of information relating to nearby cities and coastal communities, local terrain, proximity to other projects, and the enormity of environmental issues facing the South China Sea.

3. Unanticipated Outcomes of the Google Earth Initiative

The development of the Google Earth project layer resulted in several unanticipated outcomes. The first and perhaps most beneficial in terms of outreach was the selection of the SCS project layer by Google for inclusion in the *Google Earth Outreach Showcase*³ in February 2008. The *Google Earth Outreach* programme was launched in June 2007 to provide non-profit and public benefit organisations with the knowledge and resources required to put the hundreds of millions of Google Earth users into contact with their work. The addition of the SCS project layer to the Google showcase was supported by the posting of a news item on the project in the official online Google Earth news⁴. This news item highlighted the layer as "a great example of how to connect with a wide audience", and was widely syndicated across the Internet.

The SCS project was featured as the most recent entry to the *Google Earth Outreach Showcase* for more than one month during the first quarter of 2008, and was one of the six Google Earth layers featured on the showcase homepage for much of the second quarter of 2008. Similarly a notice posted in the

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http://earth.google.com/outreach/kml_entry.html#SouthChinaSeaProject

⁴ <http://google-latlong.blogspot.com/2008/02/south-china-sea-project.html>

environment section of the Google Earth e-forum highlighting the SCS project layer received more than 27,000 views within one week of its posting. This coupled with the wide syndication of the Google news item on the SCS project led to a marked increase in the number of visitors to the project website. Website usage data compiled for the period 1st April – 30th June 2008 (260,912 visits) indicate that 5 times more individuals visited the website compared to the same period in 2007 (53,566 visits).

A recent positive impact of this has been that a couple based in the United States accessed the project website via Google Earth and have subsequently requested their friends and family to make donations to coral reef related activities of the SCS project in Thailand rather than buy gifts for their upcoming wedding. It was subsequently agreed that donations would be made directly to Thailand's Mu Koh Chang Habitat Demonstration Site and it is anticipated that funding of up to US\$5,000 will be contributed to the project as a result of this.

The Google Earth layer has also subsequently been embedded into the SCS project website and it is anticipated that this will act as the regional GIS database for the South China Sea during the period of Strategic Action Programme (SAP) implementation <<http://gis.unepscs.org>>. This has provided a cost-effective means of filling a long term need of the SCS project, i.e., an interactive and intuitive GIS that can be easily accessed and updated by project partners online via the project website.

RESULTS AND LEARNING

The large number and wide range of outputs generated through the operation of large multi-lateral, intergovernmental GEF International Waters projects creates a need for repositories that provide for the efficient online storage, searching, and download of project outputs. In many cases such outputs will act as inputs to future interventions or as important references in gauging the effectiveness of past and on-going activities. Well designed online repositories of project information and outputs also have significant potential in terms of promotion of GEF and participating country interventions, and as useful reference material for external organisations in the design and implementation of projects. Ensuring the continued use of such information and data requires facilitating ease of

access to it and raising awareness of its existence at both the project and global level.

Need for Content Rich and Search Engine Friendly Websites

Despite minimal promotion of the SCS project and outputs at the Implementing Agency level, it has been demonstrated that it is possible for individual GEF projects to connect with a global audience by (a) improving the online visibility of their websites and (b) via the development of tools that enable Internet users to interact with project information in an intuitive and engaging manner. The former was largely achieved in the SCS project by improving the structure of the project website and by ensuring the systematic and regular uploading of content and project outputs. This strategy enabled the ranking of the project website on a Google search of the terms "South China Sea" to jump more than 100 places from 2006 – 2007, such that the website has ranked in the top 10 of more than 8 million pages indexed by Google for the South China Sea continuously since then. This has led to a large and increasing number of visitors accessing the website via key search engines.

Harnessing the Power of Google Earth

Greatest outreach success has been gained by linking the project website with the global geographical search engine, Google Earth. It is unlikely however, that the SCS project's layer on Google Earth would have received the same level of recognition by Google or level of interest by its large community of users if it was not backed by the content rich SCS project website. It is apparent that Google Earth is a highly effective outreach tool for GEF projects and programmes, although the experience of the SCS project suggests that it should ideally be utilised by a project only following the substantive development of its own website. Given the large number of Google Earth users, the establishment of Google Earth layers by projects which link to content poor websites could possibly have negative outreach impacts for the project. A well designed Google Earth layer featuring the entire International Waters portfolio with links to information for each project could possibly act as a highly effective "referral tool" for waters projects. Such a tool currently does not exist and could be a cost-effective way of meeting this need, whilst simultaneously

raising global awareness of GEF International Waters interventions.

Dependence on Effective Communication Mechanisms

The large number of SCS project outputs, which represent the cornerstone of the SCS project website, and which justify the outreach actions of the project, would likely not have been achieved without the effective operation of the unique project management framework developed for the SCS project (see UNEP, 2005). The extensive project partner network which features the direct involvement of more than 100 organisations in the execution of project activities, and more than 400 institutions indirectly involved through individual participation in meetings and national activities, represents numerous entry points to an enormous number of national level sources of data and information relating to the science and management of habitats, fisheries, and land-based pollution in the South China Sea and Gulf of Thailand.

The project management framework facilitated the effective flow of information and data between and among all partners. The structure emphasised and fostered networking from the regional to local level, and established strong feed back loops between regional, national, and site level entities. This enabled the full range of scientific information and data required to address the issues identified in the Transboundary Diagnostic Analysis for the SCS to be compiled and used as part of the process of revising the regional Strategic Action Programme for the South China Sea. Collectively these information and data achievements of the project are of regional and perhaps global significance.

Attempts to establish a global network for the sharing of experiences and knowledge between International Waters projects have been implemented as part of the IW:LEARN project. The experience of the SCS project is that the effectiveness of this system in terms of promoting project interventions and achievements will be limited without increased support in terms of online networking from Implementing Agencies. The low profile of and complete lack of links in some instances to the IW:LEARN website on Implementing Agency websites is cause for concern, particularly if it

reflects the importance assigned by these organisations to inter-project and inter-agency information sharing.

The effectiveness of the IW:LEARN website may have been improved significantly by the simple addition of prominent links to the IW:LEARN project from the GEF agency websites, all of which experience significantly higher volumes of traffic compared to most individual project websites. Similarly, it was only through the preparation of this note that the scarcity of SCS project related information on the UNEP and UNEP/DGEF websites became apparent. Such “firewalling” of responsibility for information and knowledge sharing between those executing and implementing projects appears to restrict the level of information exchange required to maximise global awareness of GEF project interventions.

REPLICATION

The potential for replication of the outreach initiatives of the SCS project is high, particularly considering that the outcomes were achieved using freely available open-source software. The main challenges other projects will face in replicating the activity will likely relate to the selection of user-friendly and intuitive information and data management tools, as well as the regular development and uploading of content to keep their websites current and ranked highly by Internet search engines. For busy Project Co-ordinating Units which are often staffed with non-IT specialists the latter can at first appear daunting. The increasing user-friendliness of modern Content Management System software makes this task easier although it would likely require decentralisation of responsibility for the submission of news and information to project partners within the participating countries.

Similarly the potential for replicating the Google Earth initiative of the project is also high. The Google Earth Outreach webpage <<http://earth.google.com/outreach/tutorials.html>> contains a wealth of online guides, video tutorials, and templates to guide first time users through the development and integration of project information into Google’s global GIS. The Google Earth Community <<http://bbs.keyhole.com>>, an online forum with more than 1,000,000 registered users, is another excellent source of information and

guidance for projects wishing to develop their own Google Earth layers.

SIGNIFICANCE

The SCS Project Steering Committee noted during its eighth meeting in August 2008 that the SCS project website provides a rich and extremely valuable source of information, data, databases, training materials, models and other items of relevance to the South China Sea. This intergovernmental body recommended that online accessibility to the information resources currently available on the website should be maintained during Strategic Action Programme (SAP) implementation, and that re-design of the website should be undertaken where appropriate to facilitate the online sharing of information with respect to implementation of both National Action Plans and the regional SAP. The Project Steering Committee went further. They directed that the COBSEA Secretariat, as the permanent regional intergovernmental body take responsibility for maintaining a South China Sea website, encompassing the entirety of the data and information generated through the South China Sea project. In doing so they recognised that these data and information would form an invaluable resource for the countries of the region in implementing the SAP.

The actions of the SCS project to improve ease of access to and general awareness of the SCS website and its databases will contribute to ensuring that existing information resources are used by staff of regional and national organisations concerned with SAP implementation. This is significant as the vast majority of data and information accessible via the website was used in setting SAP targets and the design of proposed activities, and will act as a baseline in assessing the effectiveness of future interventions.

The technical aspects of this experience do not represent a real innovation of the project, rather application of successes achieved elsewhere to a GEF project. The technical approaches adopted by the project and reported on in this note represent basic operating practices for online businesses. Similarly, the Google Earth technology has been used successfully by a large number of other environment organisations and NGOs involved in waters management. To the best of the author's knowledge however, the

achievements of the SCS project represent the most successful use of Google Earth by a GEF project to date.

The objective of this work was to enhance awareness of the SCS website and databases, with the aim of contributing to the longer-term goal of ensuring the continued use of SCS project outputs and information resources. The true significance of the work described in this note will perhaps be best measured at regular intervals post project, particularly during the period of SAP implementation, when the use of project information and data can be best measured.

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- ◆ Outreach
- ◆ South China Sea
- ◆ Gulf of Thailand

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