

A Community Education Strategy for Burrowing Owl Re-Introduction in the Thompson-Nicola Valley



**Nadine Gomm
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A. Background

The following strategy was developed to assist the Burrowing Owl Conservation Society of BC (the “Society”) raise awareness of issues affecting the Burrowing Owl in British Columbia. Community education, in this context, includes both information distribution and community engagement.

“Community engagement” is defined as “a process of working collaboratively with groups of people affiliated by geographic proximity, special interest, or similar situations to address issues affecting their well-being” (Fawcett *et al.* 1995). The term is often used in the context of community development and activism. However, I use the term in the context of outreach, citizen participation, and collaboration. Direct participation and involvement in community issues is known to be a powerful agent of change and a meaningful environmental education tool (Smith and Williams 1999; Thompson and Kinne 1990; Yoder and Maine 2000).

The concept of “community” has numerous dimensions, but its sociological meaning emphasizes a “common ground” based on shared geography, interests, or traditions (Mattessich and Monsey 1992). With this in mind, there are two primary “audiences” for a community education strategy on Burrowing Owl conservation:

- 1) The Thompson-Nicola Valley community, sharing common geography and land-use traditions;
- 2) The wider community of individuals or groups interested in Burrowing Owls and/or endangered species.

B. Objectives

- To develop key messages that will guide community engagement, education, and media interaction;
- To suggest products that will assist in the planning and coordination of community education activities and media interaction;
- To suggest enhancements to existing education and communication venues;
- To assist in organizational capacity building through the identification of collaborative and outreach opportunities.

C. Key Messages

In order to provide a strategic approach to community education and media interaction, the Society can adopt certain key themes or “messages” that will shape outreach activities. Human relationships with the land are important to their understanding of, and participation in, restoration activities (Higgs 2003; Sobel 1995). With this in mind, the following messages are suggested:

- “The Burrowing Owl is a native species – a traditional resident of the grasslands. It is part of the history of our community;”
- “Even though Burrowing Owls have been affected by human activity, people are now helping to bring them back. Ranchers in the Thompson-Nicola valley are facilitating re-introduction on their land, and volunteers from around the province are helping raise and release owls;”
- “Burrowing Owls help humans by controlling other animals like grasshoppers and mice. However, dangerous pesticides used against this ‘food supply’ can hurt Burrowing Owls;”
- “Burrowing Owls need grasslands. They can’t live in cities. Our grasslands are important to both owls and people. They preserve our ranching heritage, and they provide the “big space” needed for native species to flourish. Breaking up the grasslands brings more roads, weeds, and non-native predators to the Burrowing Owl’s environment;”
- “Burrowing Owls need some of their old “neighbours” to join them in the grasslands. For instance, badgers and marmots provide abandoned holes that are perfect for Burrowing Owl nests. Some “burrowing mammals” are rare or endangered. Like the Burrowing Owl, they also suffer from vehicle collisions, loss of habitat, and pesticide use.”

D. Communication Products

The Society provides a reference source for people interested in Burrowing Owl and grassland conservation. In order to be responsive to these needs, and to “spark interest” in other audiences, it helps to have certain products readily at hand. Examples are:

- A Burrowing Owl **Fact Sheet**: A concise, attention-getting “backgrounder” that would be suitable for a variety of audiences such as the media, teachers, youth-group leaders, winery visitors, etc. This would supplement existing, more detailed pamphlets;
- A short **Video** documenting the recovery efforts: This could feature the participation of local landowners and volunteers. It would situate the project

within the local community, and also emphasize the positive impact of a grassroots, volunteer-based effort. Such a video could also be posted on YouTube;

- A **Teacher’s Toolkit**: This would provide links to readily available reference material that could supplement a school field trip or presentation. In addition to Burrowing Owl references, links could include references for other endangered grassland species, stewardship efforts, or youth-oriented nature education such as Robert Bateman’s “Get to Know” project. The Toolkit would also suggest follow-up activities, such as having students post photos, comments, poems, or artwork on school websites, “blogs,” “YouTube,” etc. Links to these follow-up activities could also be provided on the Society’s website;
- A **Newsletter**: This would provide information about year-to-year progress on recovery efforts. Topics could include ongoing research, owl “return rate,” owl sightings, interesting discoveries (e.g. an “albino” owl). The Newsletter would be posted on the website, and could be distributed to organizations with related mandates. It could also be distributed directly to volunteers and landowners as a way of providing positive feedback;
- **Presentation/Kiosk Kit**: This would include a bundle of products such as PowerPoint presentations, promotional merchandise, slide shows, etc., that could be gathered together quickly for use in presentations or public-events booths.

E. Enhancing Existing Education Venues for a Wider Audience

a. Website

The Society’s website provides a good introduction to the issues and the program. Photos from “the field” help illustrate the nature of the work and the power of volunteers. The site could be further enhanced to provide more in-depth information. “Products” developed under section D could be posted, as well as links to online articles and reports, and a “reading list” of selected articles on Burrowing Owl research. Some of this “architecture” is already embedded in the site. It just needs to be populated with data, and maintained. As this is time-consuming, recruiting a volunteer with skills in this area would be helpful.

b. Other

A basic “Google” search of Burrowing Owl re-introduction in BC produces close to 600 hits. Some of these sites have credible and relevant information on the program, but much of the material needs to be updated. For instance, the Royal British Columbia Museum’s website provides a good briefing on the species and its history in BC, but some information regarding Osoyoos re-introductions are outdated. Government sites (BC Min. of Environment and Canadian Wildlife Service) also

need up-to-date information regarding owl populations and return rates. Sending the Newsletter to these organizations would be a simple way of providing updates.

F. Collaboration and Outreach

As a volunteer-based non-profit organization, the Society needs to take advantage of as many collaborative opportunities as possible. “Piggy-backing” onto community events or participating in environmental and other professional gatherings can also encourage community participation in stewardship or volunteer opportunities. Some suggested activities are:

- Participation at a teacher’s Professional Development day. “Products” developed under section D above could supplement the presentation. Contacts with local teachers may help generate ideas regarding direct community participation in conservation activities;
- Attendance at Grasslands Conservation Council meetings, and distribution of the Newsletter to organizations with related mandates (e.g. South Okanagan-Similkameen Conservation Program; Desert Society, Osoyoos);
- Hosting a meeting of the National Recovery Team, Species at Risk, or other professional conference. (This also provides a good reason for a Press Release). The Burrowing Owl Estate Winery is an excellent venue for networking events;
- Continuation and enhancement of “open house” events around Merritt and Kamloops, as well as continued attendance at local fairs and community celebrations, including First Nations conferences or events;
- Inviting local landowners to participate directly in activities that will bring them close to the owls (e.g. banding, monitoring). These opportunities for individual participation (away from the crowds associated with major release events) take time, but usually have a positive impact;
- Liaison with Thompson Rivers University in Kamloops, so that opportunities for student participation might be developed. Similar networking with UBC and BCIT has proved effective.

It is hoped that the suggestions contained in this strategy will assist the Society in short-term and long-term planning of community education activities. Implementation of some ideas may require funding or additional volunteer participation. However, much of the strategy involves building on numerous initiatives already established over the past 15 years.

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