

Best Practices: Direct Engagement

Key Steps

What is Direct Engagement?

Integrating I&M science into park management requires teamwork. And effective teamwork is built on relationships. *Direct engagement* is a powerful way to build relationships between I&M and park staff. It means regular, intentional, two-way interaction that builds mutual knowledge, collaboration, and trust. These types of interactions help us communicate I&M science effectively.

From the start, I&M leaders recognized this need to integrate with parks. Published strategies, like [Integrating Science and Park Management](#) and the results of the [Building Park Relationships](#) work group, have moved us forward. They make clear that direct engagement is not just in the hands of science communicators. All network and program staff have a role to play.

Because direct engagement can take many forms, the best practices described here serve as examples and inspiration as networks and programs design their own plans for achieving it.

Who are the Audiences?

The audiences for direct engagement are the four key audiences for I&M science communication:

- park decisionmakers,
- the scientific community (including partners),
- internal audiences (IMD/NRSS/NPS), and
- public audiences.

Within those audiences are many sub-audiences: resource managers, planners, superintendents, regional directors, park interpreters and other non-resource staff, public affairs staff, educators, the science- and park-interested public. I&M

networks and programs don't need to directly engage with all these groups at all times. What we do need to do is be strategic and intentional about which audiences are most important for each network and program to engage, and make a plan to do so.

Planning

Establishing regular engagement with parks takes time. By making activities routine, sharing the responsibility across network staff, and learning and/or borrowing engagement activities from other networks, networks can make steady progress. Each network should build a strategy for direct engagement that represents ideal targets, and establish how to work toward it iteratively as part of their network's annual work plan.

Direct engagement can (and should!) be done anytime, as the opportunity arises. But networks and programs should also have a plan for targeted engagement. For some, this will largely be a process of putting down on paper the things already being done. Science communication targets should be included in network annual work plans, including direct engagement. Notes should outline specific actions and include how targets help meet program objectives.

One possible approach is to start by having a conversation with network/program staff about your own program. Consider the following:

- What would be the ideal outcome of effective engagement with park staff and your other audiences?
- Make a list of all the ways you're directly engaging your audiences now, and identify how—or if—those tactics are contributing to your ideal outcome. Which feel most and least successful?
- Are there conversation forums that have been so productive that you'd like to ensure they keep happening?
- Where are the gaps between your ideal and your current outcomes? How might you fill them?
- What kinds of new opportunities might you be able to pursue in consultation and/or cooperation with other networks or programs—especially those with experience in those opportunities (e.g., hosting a symposium)?
- Networks will develop different plans based on network composition and how park staff prefer to be communicated with. If possible, include your intended audiences in this conversation (this process represents an opportunity for direct engagement).

Outlining Planned Actions

The next step is to take your list and outline the purpose, goals, target audiences, strategies, and schedule for direct engagement (see below and example provided in Appendix B). After a suite of actions is established, it will likely only need to be evaluated each year and periodically updated as needed—not completely overhauled.

- **Purpose:** this should build on our core expectations and I&M communications strategies but can be tailored to meet the needs of the network.
- **Goals:** similar to your purpose, this should build on I&M goals (i.e., promote key messages, communicate value, elevate our profile, and listen/learn) and can be enhanced by network specific goals.
- **Target Audiences:** at a minimum these are park staff, but can be greatly expanded.
- **Targeted Activities (Formal, Semi-Formal, and Informal)**
 - *Formal:* these are common, planned engagements, often outlined in network charters.
 - *Semi-formal:* these are value-added and regular engagements, including face-to-face meetings, participation in planning, or a biennial symposium.
- **Schedule:** define a schedule of engagement to foster its completion.

The specifics of these elements are flexible and will vary across networks. For examples of targeted activities, see Appendix A. For an example strategy, see Appendix B.

Feedback and Enhancement

At the end of each year, evaluate and adjust for the following year. Some suggestions and strategies are provided in Appendix C.

Appendix A. Examples of Direct Engagement

Formal

- Make time for and plan to facilitate two-way conversation about network and park activities and challenges, and get feedback on operations, communication, reporting, and staffing during annual Technical Committee/Board of Directors meetings.
- Host monthly Technical Committee meetings.
- Attend park planning and management meetings (NRCS, FCA, Inventory scoping).
- Collaborate on funding opportunities.
- Organizing or participating in park science symposia or professional groups.
- Formal in-person presentations of annual monitoring results (“Face to Face briefing”)with park staff.
- Co-design in-house data visualizers with park input for specific vital signs.
- Provide technical advice to park staff / participate in broader science portfolio planning and impact evaluation with parks and partners.

Less Formal

- Plan occasional face-to-face briefings or project meetings with park staff.
- Consult with park staff to create your field schedule (then provide it), and on pre-trip scheduling and inquiries.
- Share schedules and purpose of I&M visits with park staff.
- Invite park staff to participate in occasional I&M field data collection visits.
- Create and share post-trip summaries (trip reports) intended to start conversations (such as when a rare or invasive species is found during the course of monitoring).

- Brown bag presentations at parks.
- Ongoing contacts with Board of Directors and Technical Committee members.
- Solicit feedback from parks on the content of Science Reports and public-friendly summaries of those reports before drafting or publishing them.
- Report briefings or post-publication Q&A follow-ups.
- Present an overview of network vital sign programs at park seasonal orientations.
- Assisting parks with damage assessments, storm preparation, and recovery efforts when appropriate.
- Assist parks on post-wildfire activities to support time-sensitive data collection needs and guide recovery projects.
- Public engagement (booths at park events).
- Participation with parks at park sponsored events (e.g., BioBlitzes).
- Shared training events (e.g., safety, first aids).

Informal

- Conversations or chats with park resource managers or staff.
- Talking to park staff, interns, or student groups when working at parks.
- Programmatic “elevator” pitches with the park staff or public.

For additional ideas proven to work for other networks, visit [Strategies for Building Park Relationships](#).

Appendix B. Example: Sea to Summit Network (SESN) Network Direct Engagement Strategy

Purpose

Enhance the impact of SESN science by fostering strong relationships between network staff and target audiences.

Goal

To improve integration of network science and park management.

Objectives

- Create two-way communication channels to actively hear the needs of our partners and respond effectively.
- Articulate, formalize, and normalize intentional paths for engagement.

Target Audiences

- **Primary:** Park staff
- **Secondary:** Scientific community, internal and external partners, and public

Tactics

Table 1. Formal tactics (institutional pathways).

Tactic	Description	Audience	Timing
Annual Board of Directors (BoD) Meeting	Focus on staffing, budget, work plans, and annual reports, while integrating engagement outcomes.	Park staff	Annually (October–December)

Tactic	Description	Audience	Timing
Annual Work Plan	Distribute a comprehensive work plan to BoD and Technical Committee (TC) annually, revisiting general goals and charters with ongoing updates.	Park staff	Annually (October–December)
In-Person TC Meetings	Discuss fieldwork, engagement, and emerging issues. Rotate partners (NPS or external) and incorporate new staff to broaden perspectives.	Park staff	Annually
Collaborative Project/Funding Coordination	As needed, replace regular network calls with strategic discussions on shared project proposals and I&M-focused funding sources.	Park staff	Annually (SCC preparation meeting, August–September)
Network Annual Review	Conduct end-of-year assessments with leads, peers, and park partners.	Park staff, I&M staff, partners	Annually

Table 2.
Semi-
formal

tactics (outreach and conversations).

Tactic	Description	Audience	Timing
Monthly SESN-TC Calls	Share updates on SESN initiatives and emerging resource management issues.	Park staff	Monthly
Regular BoD/TC Check-ins	Establish a standard schedule for informal check-ins with board members.	Park staff	TBD
Park Visits	Schedule visits with the field crew and park staff to foster relationships, building familiarity and engagement. Encourage SESN staff to visit park offices and visitor centers, fostering personal connections.	Park staff	According to field schedule
Regular Newsletter	Distribute updates highlighting key developments and engagement successes at least annually.	Park staff, scientific community, internal and external partners, public	Quarterly/Semi-annually/Annually (TBD)
Outreach Participation	Engage in local to national events on behalf of the network to promote awareness and collaboration.	Park staff, internal and external partners, public	Opportunistically
One-Way Engagements	Share quick updates, itineraries, and relevant articles through email to keep audiences informed.	Park staff, scientific community, internal and external partners, public	Opportunistically
Meeting Attendance	Invite park staff to regular meetings focused on other park-related topics, enhancing collaboration	Park staff	Opportunistically

	and inclusion. Attend park meetings to achieve the same outcome.		
Brown Bag Sessions/One-off Presentations	Host informal sessions to share staff insights or redo key conference presentations to reach broader audiences.	Park staff	Opportunistically

Appendix C. Suggestions and Strategies for Feedback and Enhancement

General Suggestions

1. **Metrics for Success:** Include specific metrics for each strategy to evaluate effectiveness, such as participation rates, engagement levels, and feedback quality.
2. **Timeline Visibility:** Create a visual timeline of all scheduled activities to ensure transparency and keep everyone informed about upcoming engagements.
3. **Follow-Up Mechanisms:** Establish follow-up processes after engagements to assess outcomes and gather additional feedback from participants.
4. **Continuous Improvement:** Build a culture of continuous improvement by setting up regular feedback loops where lessons learned are incorporated into future engagements.

Evaluation Ideas

1. Formal Surveys and Feedback

- **Post-Event Surveys:** Utilize structured surveys immediately following events to gather participants' reactions, insights, and suggestions for improvement. Include both quantitative (e.g., rating scales) and qualitative (e.g., open-ended questions) elements.

- **After Action Reviews (AARs):** Conduct AAR meetings post-event to discuss what went well, what didn't, and what could be improved. This collaborative reflection encourages input from all stakeholders involved.
- **Targeted Discussions with Board of Directors (BoD) and Technical Committee (TC):** Schedule dedicated sessions to solicit feedback regarding engagement efforts, discuss strategic insights, and refine future approaches.

2. Peer Mentor and Feedback (Coaching)

- **Peer Observation:** Arrange for peers to observe direct engagement events and provide constructive feedback. This can enhance the presenter's skills and introduces diverse perspectives.
- **Invited Participating Mentors/Colleagues:** Invite Program Managers (PM) or Central Support Office (CSO) representatives to participate in direct engagement activities and offer feedback on content delivery and audience interaction, similar to interpretative program critiques

3. Webpage and Social Media Metrics

- **Analytics Review:** Leverage built-in analytics from websites and social media platforms to evaluate the impact of your communication efforts (e.g., engagement rates, and content reach).
- **Set Annual Goals:** Establish clear, measurable goals for the number of web articles and news releases each year. Use these benchmarks to track progress and impact.

4. Network Participation Review (Internal)

- **Evaluate Engagement Trends:** Assess how frequently parks engage your subject matter expertise (SME) for planning, participation in events, or staff assistance. Understanding this dynamic can reveal the effectiveness of your outreach efforts.
- **Reflection on Science Communication:** Develop a systematic evaluation process similar to how fieldwork is reviewed. Encourage regular reflection on your direct engagement efforts, documenting findings in annual reports.

5. Establishing Routine Evaluation Habits

- **Integrate Review into Network Culture:** Make review a habitual part of engagement activities, ensuring that reflections and assessments occur regularly and inform future strategies. Regularly check in about whether parks are seeking your expertise and involvement in their planning processes.

6. Annual Reporting

- **Achievement of Engagement Goals:** Assess whether the network met its direct engagement plan objectives. Review if all targeted engagements occurred and analyze participation levels, especially requests for additional engagement.
- **Integrate Discussion Points in BoD Meetings:** Beyond budget and staffing, make engagement with parks a regular agenda item. Use discussions to gather insights and enhance strategies for the upcoming fiscal year, ensuring alignment with overall goals.