Lake Superior National Estuarine Research Reserve

Strategic Communications Plan

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Prepared by Roca Communications+

Contents

1. Introduction

Established in 2010, the Lake Superior National Estuarine Research Reserve is a vital organization with an impressive range of programs designed to meet the diverse needs of its communities. Among its professional networks, the Reserve is **highly regarded** for its transformational education programs, the quality of its monitoring data and research, and its capacity to bring diverse organizations and stakeholders together around critical issues, particularly those related to **water resources.**

This **communications plan** seeks to build on this strong foundation and enhance the impact of Reserve communications in support of its strategic objectives. It is a framework for encouraging engagement with existing partners and cultivating new partnerships to spread the word about the good work of the Reserve—along the coast of Lake Superior and throughout the state of Wisconsin and into Minnesota.

The plan is based on an **internal audit (Appendix A)** of Reserve staff and close partner perspectives, current communications activities and products, and strategic documents, as well as an **external audit (Appendix B)** of the perspectives of the Reserve's priority audiences. These assessments informed the plan's recommendations, strategies, and messages.

The plan is designed to be within the Reserve's capacity to execute in the near term (through 2022) and to respect the organization's limited resources for communications and its already hardworking staff. To this end, the plan combines existing strategies with "in reach" tactics that leverage individual efforts for greater impact. It encourages the use of content across different communications platforms for multiple purposes, includes draft messages based on perspectives of staff and representatives of its target audiences, and suggestions for communications templates.

2. Lake Superior Reserve Vision, Mission, Strategic Objectives, & Audiences

Vision

We envision a Lake Superior where all coastal watersheds and estuaries are understood, valued, and thriving.

Mission

The Reserve works in partnership to improve the understanding of Lake Superior's coast and estuaries. We address issues affecting the watershed through integration of research, education, outreach and stewardship.

Strategic Objectives (SO) Relevant to Communications

The following strategic objectives explicitly and implicitly call for enhanced communications to engage overlapping audience groups. Collectively, they encourage actions that increase access to Reserve data; improve understanding of the watershed and its natural resources; enhance natural resource management and stewardship; and promote sustainable use of Reserve facilities and lands.

SO1: Research and monitoring

Make data produced by the Reserve about the St. Louis River Estuary, Lake Superior, and surrounding communities accessible to researchers at all stages of their education and careers, natural resources managers, coastal decision makers, and educators.

SO2: Education & Public Access

- **A.** Strengthen education, collaboration between partners, and the local economy to generate public connection to, and understanding of, the Lake Superior watershed.
- **B.** Develop a sustained conservation action education program that promotes stewardship of estuaries and the Lake Superior watershed to local community/watershed residents.
- **C.** More generally promote watershed stewardship to residents, especially recreational users of the estuary.
- **D.** Develop programs that increase awareness of access opportunities and encourage responsible use of Reserve resources by all members of the community.

SO3: Stewardship

Communicate research and provide training to communities and organizations to promote the conservation, restoration, and stewardship of coastal watersheds.

SO4: Coastal Training

Coastal decision-makers have access to new knowledge and skills that will elevate their management of coastal systems.

Audiences

The Lake Superior Reserve works within a complex network of partners and audiences that span sectors and generations. Broadly speaking, Reserve programs engage public, academic, First Nations, and nonprofit organizations and segments of the general public throughout the Twin Ports area (including Minnesota), along the south shore of Lake Superior to Iron County, and increasingly, in other parts of Wisconsin. (These groups are described in greater detail in the internal audit report and informed selection of interviews in the external audits.) This plan focuses on audiences specified in the strategic objectives. (Table 1.) In cases where the objectives refer to generalized descriptions of groups that are demographically diverse (all community members), we've broken these down to segments of those audiences, which are more actionable from a communications perspective.

Table 1: Communications Audiences Prioritized by Objectives

	Strategic Objectives			
Audiences	**SO1: Research & Monitoring**	**SO2. Education & Public Access**	**SO3: Stewardship**	**SO4: Training**
Scientists from the universities of Minnesota Duluth (NRI), Wisconsin Madison, Wisconsin Superior, St. Scholastica & NOAA, NPS, NERRS.	X		X	
Undergraduate and graduate students	X	X		
Natural resource agencies (including CZM and First Nations) and nonprofits (e.g., St. Louis River Alliance)	X		X	X
Decision makers: municipal & elected officials, water/stormwater managers, land-based planners/managers, parks/recreation managers, public health officials, emergency planners, tribal governments				X
Restoration scientists & practitioners (workgroup) & landowners	X	X	X	X
K through 12 students and their families, including those in underserved communities		X		
K through 12 educators & school administrators	X	X		
Recreationalists		X	X	
Native plant groups, master gardeners		X	X	
Visitors / tourists		X		
Local businesses & pro business organizations		X		X

3. Audit Findings that Informed Communications Strategies

As part of the internal and external communications audits, 29 semi-structured interviews were conducted with Reserve staff, partners, and representatives of priority audiences identified by staff. Key findings relevant to the communications strategies are as follows:

- **The Reserve is appreciated for different reasons.** For example, researchers and decision makers highly value Reserve data and science. Many appreciate the Estuarium and its meeting space. Reserve education programs are highly regarded. The ability to **coordinate and convene** different organizations and stakeholders (regardless of program) was consistently noted as an important, and in some cases, defining function of the Reserve.

- **The Reserve's physical location confers different advantages for different audiences**. For example, being able to collect data in an Area of Concern is important to researchers, being in Superior is valued by UWM NRI for the **potential to increase reach** in that region, and the location on the border is generally seen as an opportunity to work across state lines.

A. **Each program engages multiple, often overlapping audiences,** some of which are broadly defined. Prioritizing segments of these audiences (and/or enhancing relationships with influential audience members) will help Reserve staff put their resources for communications to highest use**. Repackaging and reuse of content** for different audiences and communications channels will increase efficiency and help ensure consistent messaging.

B. **Many external audit interviewees had little or no awareness of the range of Reserve programs.** This is a missed opportunity for engaging audiences that transcend individual strategic objectives, e.g., a teacher with a student at university, an elected official with a resource-dependent business, or a research scientist with young children. **Increasing cohesion of the visual brand and using consistent messaging** would leverage the good reputation individual programs have with specific audiences to support the Reserve as a whole.

C. **All interviewees value their ability to get Reserve information through interpersonal connections with staff** (emails, calls, casual breakfasts, chance encounters, collaboration on events, etc.). While appreciated, this "high touch" approach to communications is time intensive. **Asynchronous communications** (newsletter, briefings, web posts, etc.) **could enrich** these exchanges, ensure consistent messaging, and broaden the reach of information across programs and audiences.

D. While the Reserve does not have a full-time communications specialist at its location, **staff have done an excellent job of leveraging the resources at hand to promote their programs.** There are opportunities to coordinate individual efforts for greater efficiency and reach without

overtaxing a small staff that has seen significant turnover.

E. **The UWM DE NRI senior artist/graphic designer provides critical communications support.** If resources allow, the Reserve would benefit from **other NRI communications professional**s who can provide messaging, editorial, and strategic communications support.

F. **Given UWM NRI's recent reorganization, systems for reporting success/impacts are evolving in real-time.** It is critical to understand and take advantage of these to grow awareness of the Reserve in the Madison community and extension offices throughout the state.

G. **The website design is fresh, clear, and structured to easily access information about visiting the Reserve and key programs.** However, it projects the Reserve as a research-focused organization, and the relationship with UWM is a bit subtle. Updating the content and balancing the information to better appeal to the Reserve's diverse audiences and developing a strategy to drive traffic and conversions would be strategic.

4. Communications Objectives (CO), Strategies, & Tactics

Suggested communications objectives, strategies, and tactics based on the internal and external audits are defined below and summarized in Table 2 (page 11). For the purpose of this plan, communications objectives are the destination (where you want to be as a result of your efforts), strategies are the path you will take, and tactics are the steps along the way.

CO A: Recognition of the Reserve's value and impacts is increased across programs and audiences.

- Strategy 1: Increase visual brand cohesion and use consistent messaging to leverage the reputation of individual programs to support the Reserve as a whole.
    - Tactic: Reconcile logos for the Estuarium and the Reserve and integrate the Estuarium more in communications about other programs and activities. The Estuarium and its meeting space is an intersection point for partners, visitors, locals, and a resource for educators. A consistent logo and messaging are the foundation of helping them recognize that the Estuarium is part of a larger organization with multiple benefits for everyone. Ideas to implement:
        - Change the bird on Estuarium logo to match bird on the Reserve logo.
        - Add tagline "Home of the Lake Superior Reserve" to the Estuarium logo.
        - Add name of Reserve above Estuarium in logo.
        - Integrate mentions of estuarium more in communications focused on other aspects of Reserve.
    - Tactic: Develop universal messages with cross-audience appeal that can be used in all critical communications vehicles, e.g., website, legislative briefings, program overviews, press releases, impact statements, etc. *See messaging section for suggested messages based on external audit.*
    - Tactic: Make minor adjustments (e.g., to color palette) to the branding guide to bring the Lake Superior Reserve's visual brand closer to its partner at UWM NRI. For example, make sure the red in the Reserve palette is the same as the UWM logo and use that accent in situations where you want to highlight the partnership.
    - Tactic: Develop branded, editable templates for different use cases, e.g., one-pager for programs, powerpoint deck, invite postcard, poster, estuary (data) trends report, e-newsletter or info blast, and/or progress/call to action briefs for boards.

      All program leads can use these to share basic information with boards and workgroups, announce events, etc. Engage editorial and design expertise from UWM DE NRI to develop templates. If these are created in InDesign, consider using UW Madison's Adobe Acrobat licence to enhance staff's ability to update and populate pdfs as needed. *See templates section for recommendations on templates.*

- Strategy 2: Coordinate individual efforts to communicate with specific audience segments to advance awareness of, and engagement with, the Reserve as a whole.

    - Tactic: Dedicate time at staff meetings to coordinate individual communications needs, strategies, resources, stories, and opportunities in support of promotion of the Reserve as a whole. Keep a universally accessible log of stories, info-nuggets, etc., that can be used for higher level updates to UWM NRI, the legislature, the Friends of the Reserve, etc.

    - Tactic: Engage a marketing or business student intern to develop a centralized database that captures audience contact information and organizational website and social accounts. Segment it so that sublists can be generated based on interests in issues and participation in Reserve programs and advisory boards and workgroups.

    - Tactic: Maximize the use of content across communications products and channels—most news can be shared many times for different purposes. Content developed for top-level products (e.g., legislative briefs, impact statements, success stories for NOAA and NERRA) can be repackaged to populate the website, social media, e-communications, presentations, etc. This will help ensure consistency of messages.

    - Tactic: Consider a short update (e-newsletter) on Reserve activities and impacts for workgroup and board members, partners (including elected officials) and influential representatives of key audiences. Establish regular timing, e.g., monthly or quarterly.

    - Tactic: Use Hootesuite to establish open source social media calendar with post guidance that all staff can contribute to. Engage a student intern to manage social media. Include handles for partner organizations. (Examples available from NERRA and NOAA.)

    - Tactic: Build on the UWM NRI senior artist's project list to develop an annual calendar that includes major events and high level communications products. Emphasize the marketing and implementation phase of the St. Louis River Summit and Lake Superior Day as opportunities to disseminate information.

    - Tactic: Adjust website messages and content to balance representation of Reserve programs and thus appeal to the range of audiences who may have different uses for content, e.g., access to data for science or decide if they want to visit the Reserve. Use vivid, high resolution images that reflect the different audience segments engaging with the Reserve. Update redirects from old site pages to the Estuarium to improve tracking.

COB: The University of Wisconsin at Madison NRI's is better positioned to represent the Reserve and share its work throughout Wisconsin.

- Strategy 3: Leverage UWM NRI's existing communications channels, statewide programs, and events to increase understanding of Reserve work and impact.

- Tactic: Track evolving protocols for briefing NRI leadership on program success. Use dedicated communications staff meeting time to identify what to submit and when.

- Tactic: Engage the UWM NRI communications office whenever possible on strategic communications and public relations matters.

- Tactic: Where possible, align descriptions of programmatic focus areas with UWM NRI categories.

- Tactic: Look for opportunities to inform state-wide Master Naturalist curriculum with Reserve data, science, and education products and knowledge.

- Tactic: If feasible, one or more staff members attend the UWM All Colleague Meeting.

COC: The Reserve's constellation of partners are better prepared to communicate about its work, its value, and the niche it occupies.

- Strategy 4: Improve the capacity of the Friends of the Lake Superior Board, the Reserve Advisory Board, and other advisory groups, to represent the Reserve among their constituencies and support community outreach on behalf of different initiatives and events.

    - Tactic: Ensure that board and group members have access to current program information, legislative briefings, annual reports, etc. e.g., through a dedicated folder on your drive.

    - Tactic: Use a uniform template to provide briefings in advance of board meetings that, when appropriate, include requests for action commensurate with the constituencies they represent. For example, ask elected officials (Jim Paine) to share specific info with their community, on their websites, social platforms, etc.

    - Tactic: When possible, align stewardship and education initiatives with Friends volunteer opportunities and emphasize these on social media platforms, e.g., the excellent promotion of the High Water photo project.

    - Tactic: Crosslink the Friends and Reserve websites and social media.

    - Tactic: Look for strategic opportunities for programs to partner with Friends and organizations represented on the Reserve Advisory Board on diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice issues, e.g., reaching and supporting underserved communities with education resources or enhancing connections with the Fond du Lac band.

    - Tactic: Provide legislative briefs to Friends to prepare them for reaching out to local, state, and federal representatives.

- Tactic: Ensure that Friends have the information they need to take advantage of national communications tools developed by NERRA for legislative outreach and to participate in national social media campaigns.

- Strategy 5: Work with other key partners to extend audience reach around specific programmatic objectives and build awareness of Reserve as a whole.**

  - Tactic: Continue leading with partnership in how you communicate about the Reserve. Tagging partner names and organizations in social media makes it easier for them to share. Adding them to news stories makes it more likely they will forward, etc.

  - Tactic: Leverage the planning and marketing of high profile events, especially the St Louis River Summit and Lake Superior Day, to communicate the value of all Reserve programs and drive traffic to the Reserve website and social media.

  - Tactic: When appropriate, integrate Reserve data, science, and other products into programming for high profile events, particularly St Louis River Summit and Lake Superior Day, but also Lake Superior Highs and Lows conference, yearly retreat with Master Naturalist instructors, and the Lake Superior Ice Festival.

  - Tactic: Increase visitors at Estuarium by partnering with Great Lakes Aquarium to cross-promote events and offerings.

  - Tactic: Collaborate with Sea Grant to develop and share messages that establish complementarity with the Reserve and cross promote program offerings.

  - Tactic: Collaborate with after school or youth club programs to enhance broader access to the Estuarium and other educational resources.

  - Tactic: Promote coordination of the Habitat Workgroup in Reserve communications. Promote appropriate Reserve program information in workgroup meetings, etc.

  - Tactic: Work with the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources to crosslink websites and recognize products and programs that benefit by Reserve data and education programs.

  - Tactic: Look for other opportunities to crosslink with other partner websites, e.g., City of Superior (environmental services), AOC WDN, Great Lakes Diver Data Consortium, https://www.lakesuperiorstreams.org/stormwater/rspt.html, *MN Department of Natural Resources*, St. Louis River Alliance

** Interviews with partners and stakeholders generated many possible opportunities to leverage partnerships to extend communications reach. These are just examples.

Table 2: Communications Objectives (CO), Strategies, & Tactics

COA: Recognition of the Reserve's value and impacts is increased across programs and audiences.							
Strategies	Tactic	Tactic	Tactic	Tactic	Tactic	Tactic	Tactic
Increase visual brand cohesion & use consistent messaging to leverage reputation of individual programs to support Reserve as a whole.	Reconcile logos	Develop universal messages	Adjust branding guide	Develop editable templates			
Coordinate individual efforts to communicate with specific audience segments to advance awareness of, and engagement with, the Reserve as a whole.	Dedicate staff meeting time	Develop contact database (intern)	Maximize use of content across platforms	Brief, monthly newsletter	Social media calendar	Annual calendar	Website: Balance messages & photos across programs
COB: The University of Wisconsin at Madison NRI's is better positioned to represent the Reserve and share its work.							
Leverage UWM NRI's existing communications channels, statewide programs, and events to increase understanding of Reserve work and impact.	Track & leverage evolving reporting protocols	Engage NRI comm. office on PR, etc	Align program descriptions with NRI focus areas	Inform Master Naturalist program with Reserve science	All Colleague Meeting		
COC: Reserve's constellation of partners are better prepared to communicate about its work, value, and niche it occupies.							
Improve capacity of FOLSR Board, RAB, and other advisory groups, to represent the Reserve among their constituencies and support community outreach on behalf of different initiatives and events.	Uniform template to brief in advance of board meetings	Align steward. & educa. programs with friends volunteer activities	Crosslink Reserve & friends websites and social	Partner with FOLSR and RAB on JEDI issues	Provide legislative briefs to friends	Leverage NERRA tools	
Work with other key partners to extend audience reach around specific programmatic objectives & build awareness of Reserve as a whole.	Lead with partnership on messages, etc	Leverage marketing of Summit and other events	Integrate Reserve science/ data in events	Partner with GL Aquarium	Collab with Sea Grant on message etc.	Collab with after school programs	Promote habitat work group
	Cross link with DNR	crosslink with					

	website	other partner websites					

5. Messages

Figure 1. Wordcloud created based on responses to the external audit question: who benefits from the Reserve?

Draft Messages: (Strong estuary/strong communities)

- The Lake Superior Reserve brings people and organizations together to find solutions to the challenges facing communities on the St. Louis River Estuary—the largest estuary in the Great Lakes.
- Water is what makes life on the Great Lakes special. The Lake Superior Reserve works with communities, schools, and businesses to understand and care for the waters that connect us all.
- We deliver ecological science, data, education, training, and technical assistance programs that help communities sustainably manage our shorelines and adapt to a changing climate.
- Every day, every 15 minutes, the Lake Superior Reserve tracks the health of local waters and habitats. Resource managers, scientists, teachers, and students use this data to make decisions to protect the people and natural places of Lake Superior.

- The Lake Superior Reserve's Estuarium is your gateway to the water. It's a great place for your family to explore the St. Louis River Estuary, Lake Superior, and the communities on their shores.

- Through our Rivers2Lake Program, the Lake Superior Reserve helps teachers across the curriculum bring local science data to the classroom and energize students with outdoor learning and support a **thriving** estuary.

6. Communications Template Recommendations

Recommended editable templates for different use cases:

- One-pager for programs
- Powerpoint deck
- Invite postcard, poster
- Estuary (data) trends report
- E-newsletter or info blast
- Progress/call to action briefs for boards

7. Appendices

a. Internal Audit Report

b. External Audit Interview Questions and Interview Notes, Organized by Objectives