

When Nature Becomes a National Strategy, Communication Becomes a Responsibility

Cross-Sector Thinking Series

By **Majed Altir**

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The Standard Changes When Nature Cannot Wait

Most communicators build their careers in sectors where a mistake costs a campaign. In conservation and environmental communication, a mistake can cost something that cannot be recovered in the next budget cycle.

That reality sharpens everything. It sharpens the brief, the language, the choice of spokesperson, and the measurement framework. It removes the tolerance for vagueness that most brand communication quietly depends on.

Saudi Arabia is currently building one of the most ambitious environmental programmes in the world. The Saudi Green Initiative, the Middle East Green Initiative, a growing network of protected natural reserves, and high-profile species conservation efforts across land and sea are not separate initiatives. They form a strategic architecture that is being watched by governments, international conservation bodies, sovereign wealth funds, and global media simultaneously.

For the communications and marketing professionals working inside this ecosystem — and for those looking in from the outside — the stakes and the standards are different. This article explores what those differences are, and what they require.

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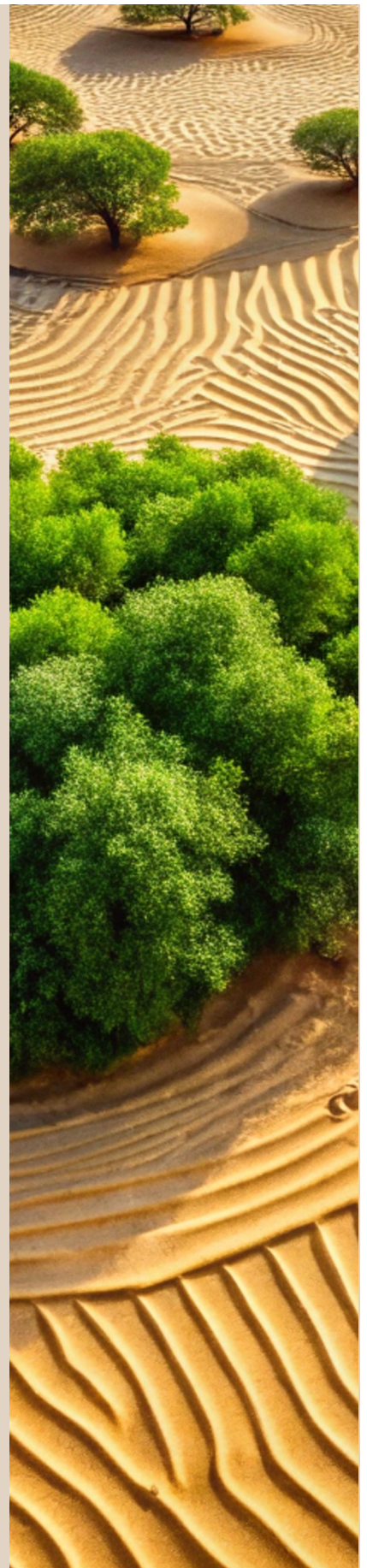
A National Commitment That Reframes is the Communication Context

The Saudi Green Initiative targets planting ten billion trees across the Kingdom and reducing carbon emissions by 278 million tonnes annually. The Middle East Green Initiative extends that ambition regionally, with Saudi Arabia assuming the role of anchor and convener. Vision 2030 has made environmental sustainability a pillar of national economic transformation — not a peripheral programme, but a stated priority at the highest level of government.

What this means practically for communicators is significant. When you are working on an environmental programme in Saudi Arabia today, you are not simply communicating a conservation effort. You are operating within a national narrative that carries diplomatic weight, attracts international scrutiny, and competes for credibility against decades of global scepticism about the relationship between resource-dependent economies and environmental commitment.

That context demands a level of precision and strategic thinking that goes beyond what most brand communication requires. The audience is not just a consumer deciding whether to visit a destination or support a cause. It is a sophisticated, globally informed network of stakeholders who will test every claim against the evidence available to them.

The communication challenge is not how to make the story bigger. It is how to make it precise enough to hold up under that level of scrutiny.



What Is Being Built, and Why It Matters Communicatively

Saudi Arabia's conservation landscape has expanded significantly in recent years. AIUla oversees Sharaan Nature Reserve, which houses the Arabian leopard reintroduction program, one of the most high-profile species conservation efforts in the region. The Arabian leopard, with fewer than 200 individuals estimated to remain in the wild, became the centerpiece of a major international communications campaign, including a dedicated World Arabian Leopard Day, bringing the species to global attention in a way that was both scientifically grounded and emotionally resonant.

Along the Red Sea coast, the picture is equally significant. The General Organization for the Conservation of Coral Reefs and Turtles in the Red Sea, known as SHAMS, was established in 2021 to protect marine ecosystems and turtle nesting habitats. Two species nest along Saudi Arabia's Red Sea coast: the green turtle, listed as endangered, and the hawksbill turtle, listed as critically endangered on the IUCN Red List. Red Sea Global, as part of its regenerative development mandate, has embedded wildlife protection into its operational framework tracking dugongs, monitoring shark and ray populations, and working to protect turtle nesting sites as an integrated part of destination development, not as a separate conservation layer placed on top of it.

The Prince Mohammed bin Salman Royal Reserve adds another dimension: a protected marine corridor of 4,000 square kilometers and 170 kilometers of coastline, the longest managed by a single entity in the Kingdom forming part of an 800-kilometer stretch of protected Red Sea coastline connecting NEOM and Red Sea Global territories.

Each of these programs presents distinct communication challenges and opportunities. Together, they represent a body of environmental work of genuine global significance and a communication mandate that requires specific professional capabilities.

Six Communication Principles for Environmental and Conservation Contexts

The following principles are drawn from the experience of working across conservation, destination marketing, and national communications programmes in Saudi Arabia. They are intended as practical guidance for communications and marketing professionals working in this space — whether inside the Kingdom or engaging with it from international markets.

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Build a Multi-Stakeholder Message Architecture

Environmental programs in Saudi Arabia speak simultaneously to government entities at national and regional levels; international conservation organizations such as IUCN and WWF; global tourism and hospitality investors; international and regional media with varying levels of environmental literacy; local communities whose relationship with the land often predates modern conservation frameworks; and scientific institutions whose credibility endorsement matters more than any advertising placement.

Each audience carries different questions and different standards of evidence. The government audience asks about alignment with national strategy and measurable outcomes. The international conservation community asks about scientific methodology and long-term institutional commitment. The investor asks about viability and reputational risk. The media asks for a story that is both true and taleable. The local community asks what this means for their relationship with the place.

Map your audiences before you map your messages. Identify what each audience needs to believe in order to take the action you want. Then engineer the central narrative so it is true for all of them and calibrate the specific executions to each. The mistake is writing one message and hoping it adapts itself.



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Make the Process the Story, Not the Outcome

Conservation communication has a structural challenge that most practitioners underestimate. The most important things happening—habitat restoration, population monitoring, and ecological recovery—are slow, unglamorous, and difficult to photograph. The things that generate engagement, like a leopard photographed in the wild or a turtle returning to a protected nesting site, are rare and unpredictable.

The narrative architecture that works in this context is built around milestones rather than moments. Each stage of a program becomes a chapter in a story the audience can follow over time. This creates sustained engagement rather than a single news cycle, and it trains the audience to understand the work rather than waiting for a dramatic outcome that may or may not arrive on schedule.

Identify five to seven milestones in the programme lifecycle before the communications plan is written. Each milestone becomes a communications moment. This gives you a rhythm that does not depend on extraordinary events to maintain relevance — and it builds audience investment in the process, which is more durable than investment in the outcome.



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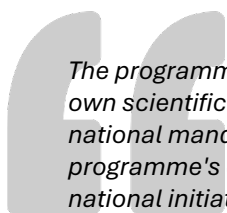
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Separate Conservation Identity from National Mandate

One of the more nuanced challenges in working within a large national initiative is maintaining the distinct identity of a specific program while aligning it clearly with the broader mandate. Too much alignment and the program disappears into the national narrative. Too little, and it appears disconnected from the strategic commitment it is supposed to represent.

The approach that works is to position the program as an expression of the national commitment rather than a subset of it. The Arabian leopard reintroduction is not one item in a long list of Saudi Green Initiative deliverables. It is what the commitment looks like when it is real — when it requires years of preparation, international scientific partnership, and genuine investment in something that cannot be faked or accelerated. This framing gives the program its own authority and, in doing so, lends credibility to the national framework it belongs to.



The programme should be able to stand on its own scientific and operational credibility. The national mandate is context, not crutch. If the programme's credibility depends entirely on the national initiative for legitimacy, it has a fragility problem that communications cannot solve.



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Measure What the Audience That Matters Is Actually Tracking

The metrics that dominate marketing and communications dashboards—reach, impressions, share of voice, and sentiment scores are insufficient for conservation and environmental communication. They measure attention. They do not measure credibility, scientific standing, or the quality of the relationships being built with the audiences whose opinions shape how all other audiences perceive the work.

A more relevant measurement framework for this context includes the accuracy and depth of scientific claims in media coverage, not just volume; the response and endorsement of international conservation bodies and research institutions; shifts in the awareness and attitudes of local communities, measured through direct engagement rather than social listening alone; consistency of investor and government perception of program seriousness and long-term viability; and the absence of credibility-damaging incidents, which in conservation communication is itself a performance indicator.

Present your measurement framework to leadership before the program launches. If leadership only asks about reach and impressions, the conversation about what actually constitutes success in this context needs to happen before the campaign, not after it.



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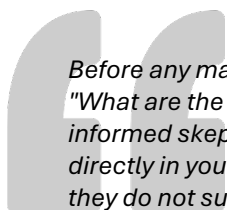
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Treat Transparency as a Strategic Tool

Environmental and conservation programs operating under national initiatives with high international visibility are subject to a standard of scrutiny that most domestic communications programs never encounter. International environmental organizations, foreign media, and academic institutions apply an evidentiary standard that is significantly higher than what a typical brand or destination campaign faces.

The response to this is not defensive communication. It is proactive transparency: publishing methodology, naming scientific advisors and institutional partners, making data accessible, and acknowledging uncertainty where it exists rather than papering over it with optimistic language. The attempt to control the narrative in conservation communication is itself read as a credibility signal and a negative one. The organizations that build lasting trust in this space are the ones that invite scrutiny rather than managing it.



Before any major program announcement, ask, "What are the three most credible criticisms a well-informed skeptic could make?" Then address those directly in your communications, rather than hoping they do not surface. Proactive disclosure of uncertainty is more credible than optimism that collapses under questioning.



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Conservation communication operates within a global calendar of awareness moments—World Wildlife Day, World Oceans Day, International Day of Biological Diversity, and species-specific observances that provide natural amplification opportunities for programs with strong content. The World Arabian Leopard Day is one example of how Saudi Arabia has used this mechanism effectively, creating a dedicated global moment that placed the Arabian leopard on the international conservation agenda and built awareness that extended well beyond the kingdom's own communications channels.

For communicators working on environmental programs in Saudi Arabia, understanding which international moments align with program milestones and planning content and partnerships around those moments is a significantly more effective strategy than creating standalone awareness campaigns from scratch.

Map the global conservation calendar twelve months in advance. Identify which moments align with your program's natural milestones. Then build the content and partnership strategy around those intersections rather than working against them. International conservation organizations, scientific institutions, and global media are already paying attention on those dates; your job is to give them something credible to amplify.



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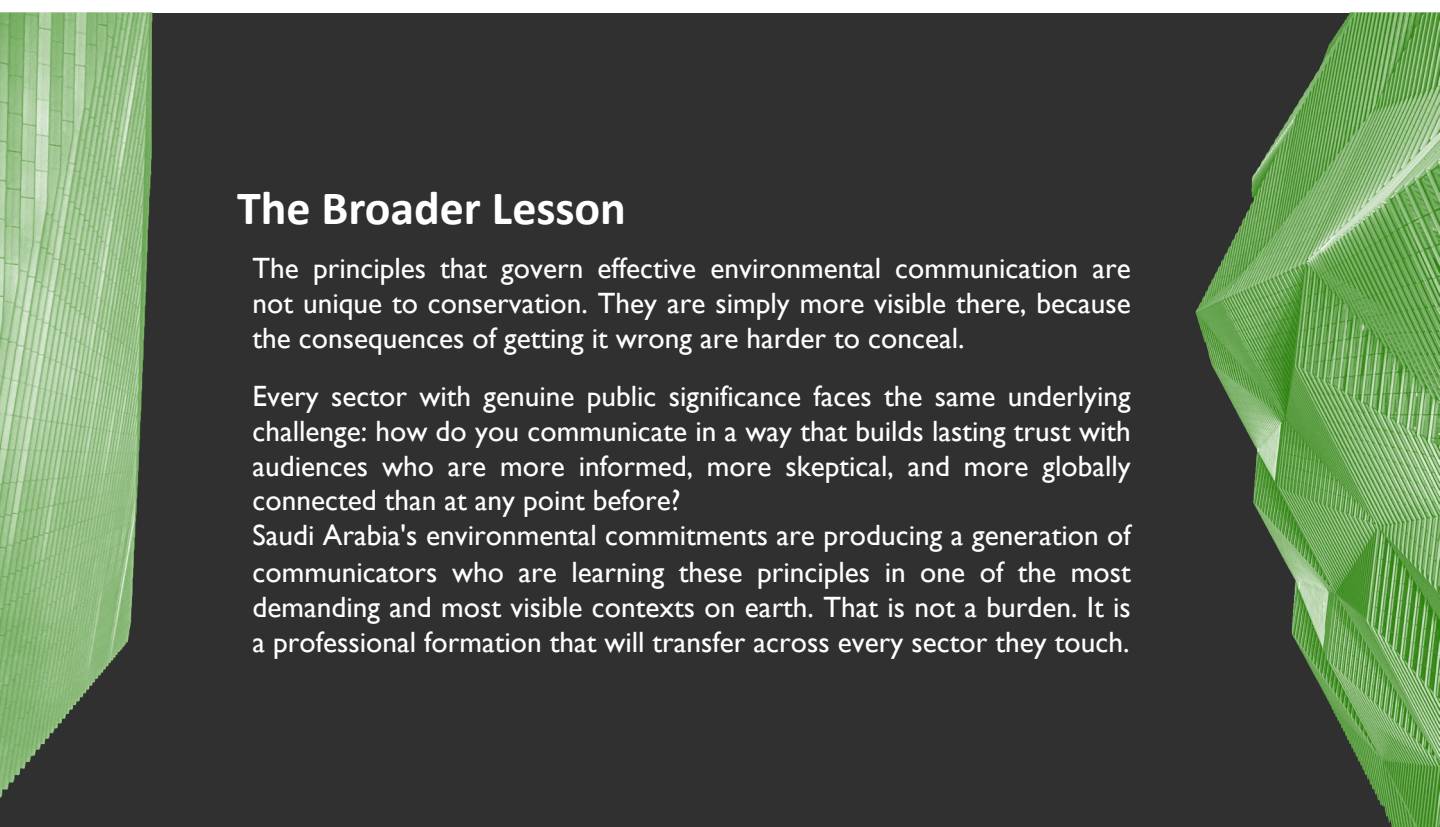


What This Means for Communicators Outside Saudi Arabia

For international communications professionals engaging with Saudi Arabia's environmental programs, whether as agency partners, media, investors, or institutional collaborators, the same principles apply in reverse. The credibility you bring to the engagement is your primary asset. Saudi Arabia's environmental commitments are large, visible, and subject to significant international attention. The partners who add the most value are those who bring genuine scientific literacy, an honest assessment of what is and is not working, and the willingness to engage with the complexity rather than reducing it to a simple story.

The brands, agencies, and institutions that are building real credibility in this space are treating Saudi Arabia's environmental programs not as a market opportunity to be packaged but as a serious body of work to be engaged with seriously. That distinction shows in the work, and the audiences who matter can see it immediately.





The Broader Lesson

The principles that govern effective environmental communication are not unique to conservation. They are simply more visible there, because the consequences of getting it wrong are harder to conceal.

Every sector with genuine public significance faces the same underlying challenge: how do you communicate in a way that builds lasting trust with audiences who are more informed, more skeptical, and more globally connected than at any point before?

Saudi Arabia's environmental commitments are producing a generation of communicators who are learning these principles in one of the most demanding and most visible contexts on earth. That is not a burden. It is a professional formation that will transfer across every sector they touch.

About the Author

Over the past fifteen years, working across multiple sectors shaped a way of understanding how systems actually function. Not as isolated industries, but as connected environments where decisions, narratives, and incentives intersect. Each sector holds part of the picture, but clarity only emerges when those parts are read together

My work focuses on marketing, communications, and positioning as strategic systems. While the discipline remains consistent, context shifts constantly. Some environments demand structural depth, attention to governance, and institutional narratives. Others demand speed, execution, and the ability to translate strategy into action without losing coherence

Different strategic traditions inform this perspective. European thinking emphasizes context, structure, and long-term consistency. American approaches prioritize iteration, execution, and momentum. Working within a Saudi context highlights the importance of integrating global thinking with local identity rather than replacing it

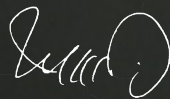
Across national projects, initiatives, and programs, one principle remains consistent. Effective strategy simplifies complexity without diluting meaning. It turns ambition into clarity, and clarity into action

These observations lead to a clear conclusion. The most resilient ideas emerge at the intersection of disciplines, not within isolated silos. Understanding how systems interact reveals patterns others often miss, and those patterns are where effective strategy begins

Cross-Sector Thinking was created to explore that space. It is not a collection of step-by-step frameworks, but a perspective on strategy, change, and meaning in a world that continues to evolve

If you are interested in shaping the future rather than simply keeping pace with it, this series is written for you

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