

Post-workshop report: “Tartu parks and urban nature (UrbanLIFECircles project)” half day tour – SERE Conference 2024

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This report summarises the discussions had during the workshop on education and training held at the end of the “Tartu parks and urban nature (UrbanLIFECircles project)” half day tour of the 14th European Conference on Ecological Restoration.

The workshop took place in Uueturu Park in the city of Tartu (Estonia) on August 28th, 2024, and was a collaboration between the UrbanLIFECircles project and the Working Group on Education and Training (WGET) of the European Chapter of the Society for Ecological Restoration (SERE) (Figure 1 a, b, c).

The workshop was an outdoors facilitated focus-group discussion (Figure 1b) on how to communicate about urban ecosystem restoration initiatives in a way that fosters learning. Nineteen participants were split into five teams. Each team was asked to consider five different scenarios and to propose relevant education and/or communication strategies. Workshop facilitators were responsible for a scenario each. They moved from one team to the next introducing them to their scenario. This was done so teams could build on the proposals of previous teams avoiding repetition. The workshop ended once all teams had considered each scenario separately. To conclude the workshop, the facilitators gathered everyone in a large circle and presented a summary of the discussions (Figure 1c).

Each scenario, together with a summary of the discussions and proposals made by all the workshop’s teams are outlined in the following sections of this report.



Figure 1. a) Workshop planning with facilitators; b) focus-group discussion; c) wrap-up with summary of key insights from the groups.

Scenario 1: How and when to communicate with street residents about the ecosystem restoration interventions on their doorsteps?

During the half-day tour workshop participants visited Roosi Street where they saw different urban street restoration interventions. Our first workshop scenario asked teams to think about how and when to communicate with street residents about the ecosystem restoration interventions on their doorsteps. Teams were asked to think about how communications could be targeted most effectively to different age groups, for example, kids, adults or elders. They were also asked to think about the “when” of things (e.g. seasonal changes to the flower beds; stages of the project) and to focus on how to mitigate potential negative perceptions.

The following points summarise the main proposals made by teams while considering how and when to communicate with street residents about the ecosystem restoration interventions on their doorsteps:

1. Communicate benefits with a focus on local ones.

- Focus on benefits, explaining the value of local interventions and highlighting:
 - Benefits to people’s gardens, for example pest control or pollination for plants they care about such as the apple trees in their gardens (i.e. without pollination apple trees would not produce apples).
 - Urban microclimate benefits of interventions.
 - Ecological connectivity benefits of actions.
 - Role of cities as refuges from pesticides for plants and insects.
 - Cumulative value of small interventions.
- Be explicit about seasonal changes – Talk about the importance of the “ugly” stages for plants, insects, birds...

2. Create local ownership.

- Create local ownership and responsibility by getting local input, appointing or supporting local champions, or creating physical or online (e.g. WhatsApp) groups for street residents where they can interact and share information about their street’s biodiversity.

3. Use what is already there.

- Visit schools on the street.
- Visit already existing local groups such as scout, retired people or mother and toddler groups.

4. Make it fun and engaging.

- Host local biodiversity bingos.
- Organise treasure hunts or geocaching games in intervention areas.
- Use flora and fauna identification apps (e.g. iNaturalist). This could be used to set up competitions where people take pictures of animals and plants, and identify them, with prizes for those finding the most or the rarest species.
- Organise urban foraging tours that perhaps build on existing traditions within Tartu such as leaving boxes with apples outside. The teams proposing this expressed concerns about foraged foods being polluted in an urban environment.
- Organise street parties or events.

5. Be proactive, inclusive, transparent, and targeted with communications.

- Talk to local residents from the start of the project.
- Talking to and persuading elders might be more difficult, perhaps find something they like.
- Focus on the “why?”, by this teams meant explaining the reasoning behind the interventions.
- Use personalised communications, that are sent directly to residents.
- People want to be heard, collect people’s views including different groups of local residents and get their input.
- Communicate expected timelines and changes.
- Send letters to neighbours before interventions. These should be snappy and as simple as possible. They could contain seed mixes for people to use if they wish. The seeds should be local and their locality and the importance of using local seed should be emphasised to recipients.
- Have signs along the street, targeted at different demographics (i.e. kids and adults).
- Be transparent with plans.
- Be proactive with communication and education actions, for example, contact residents before an intervention takes place.
- Send fliers explaining the cycle of things: both seasonal changes to the grasslands and the different stages of the projects.

Other more general suggestions for scenario 1 included:

- Using small decorative fencing around the plantings to signal they are valuable.
- Highlighting connections to other cities within the UrbanLIFECircles project, showing these are not isolated interventions but something happening across European cities.
- Minimising the use of species people do not like.

Scenario 2: How and when to communicate with local and non-local visitors of different ages about urban forests and their ecosystem restoration focused management?

During the half-day tour workshop participants visited Vabaduse Urban Grove, where they saw different urban forest restoration interventions. Our second workshop scenario asked teams to think about how and when to communicate different aspects of urban forests' ecosystem restoration to local and non-local visitors of the grove. Teams were asked to think about how communications could be targeted most effectively to different age groups, for example, kids, adults or elders. They were also asked to think about the “when” of things (e.g. seasonal changes to the forest; different stages of the restoration process) and to focus on how to mitigate potential negative perceptions.

The main suggestions made by teams to better communicate the urban forest management and restoration were:

1. Use influencers and local celebrities.
 - Influencers and local celebrities could make videos/posts about or in the Vabaduse grove, showing the wildlife and natural beauties associated with this urban forest.
2. Improve the information and the number of signs across the park.
 - Many groups said that the information was too short and difficult to find.
 - The signs should explain the project and the steps of the management, but also give information about local wildlife (e.g. species of animals or plants that people might not know that are there).
 - Signs could also change regularly with the seasons. For example, during the summer information could be more focused on temperature reduction and the microclimate inside the forest, whilst during the spring it could focus on the species of flowers blooming in the forest.
3. Use animals to explain the project and why having that type of management there is important.
 - One idea was to make a “bingo” with the animals/species that the person could see passing by the forest.

Other more general ideas regarding scenario 2 included:

- Workshop about how to handle wood materials (carpentry with the pieces of wood).
- Photo contest for the areas around the park.
- Increase the number of events inside the park and improve the advertising of the tours made.

Station 3: How and when to communicate with local and non-local visitors of different ages about urban grasslands and their ecosystem restoration focused management?

During the half-day tour workshop participants visited Kespark where they saw different urban grassland restoration interventions. Our third workshop scenario asked teams to think about how and when to communicate different aspects of urban grasslands' ecosystem restoration to local and non-local visitors to the park. Teams were asked to think about how communications could be targeted most effectively to different age groups, for example, kids, adults or elders. They were also asked to think about the "when" of things (e.g. seasonal changes to the grassland; different stages of the restoration process) and to focus on how to mitigate potential negative perceptions.

The main takeaway from the discussion was the need to communicate clearly and emotionally about the importance of not mowing, highlighting how it benefits pollination, seed dispersal, and the ecosystem overall. The teams' main proposals for how to achieve this were:

1. Improve and add more posters (signs) on important sites.
 - Posters should be more creative and include the picture and story of target species (e.g. flowers, butterflies).
 - Explain why it is important for certain species to be there in an emotive, creative and funny way.
2. Involve people in promoting the project.
 - Species ambassadors (i.e. famous people that represent a species).
 - Plot ambassadors. Ordinary people could "adopt" a plot and take care of it.
3. Collaborate with schools and nurseries.
 - Kids could actively participate in the entire restoration process by helping with seed harvesting, creating and dispersing seed balls, and monitoring progress. They could also compare mown and unmown areas, such as by collecting seeds from both types of sites. This hands-on involvement would increase their personal connection to the project, encouraging them to share their experiences and insights with their family members.
4. Create a social media account for Kespark.
 - During the winter, when site visits may be less appealing, share the results of monitoring on social media to keep the public engaged and informed (e.g. updates on the success of the restoration efforts, photos from past excursions).
 - Share personal stories about the experts involved in the project, highlighting their passion for nature and their reasons to do this work (e.g. share how each expert was inspired to work in their area or what drives their love for the environment). By

showcasing their deep connection to nature and their dedication, the project can help people understand and appreciate the value of these experts' efforts, making their cause more meaningful.

- The participation of specialists is important to combat “fake-news” and address negative perceptions about the project.

5. Establish an annual event like "Grasslands Day" to raise awareness about the importance of restoring these habitats.

- Activities during this day: educational workshops (e.g. plant or insect species identification using mobile apps to engage in citizen science monitoring) in mown and not mown areas, guided walks, picnics...
- Involve all generations and family members by creating opportunities for them to connect and collaborate.
- Invite both ecologists and storytellers as facilitators to make the experience more emotional and compelling (e.g. having scientific insights and captivating narratives).

Other more general ideas regarding scenario 3 included:

- Communication with the public should begin during the planning phase of restoration and continue through all stages of the process.
- Mowing in sections (or mosaics) twice a year can help prevent negative perceptions about overgrown areas. You maintain a visually appealing landscape while still supporting biodiversity. If done, this should be explained to the public.

Station 4: How and when to communicate about the UrbanLIFECircles project with a scientific audience?

During the half-day tour workshop participants visited a set of urban ecosystem restoration interventions carried by the UrbanLIFECircles project. Our fourth workshop scenario asked teams to think about how and when to communicate about the project with a scientific audience. Teams were asked to think about what things might be more interesting to different scientist and the best way to share those with them. They were also asked to think about the “when” of things (e.g. different stages of the restoration process) and take an interdisciplinary view, thinking about ecology, but also beyond, looking at the social insights that could be drawn from a project like this.

The following points summarise the main proposals and some of the points raised by all teams while considering how and when to communicate about the project with a scientific audience:

1. Include data focused communications:
 - The project needs to quantify somehow what they are doing and produce data because scientists are interested in seeing data.
2. Use the right platform (from the discussion it seems all social media could be good to reach out to different generations of scientist):
 - Use social media. It is always a good way to reach out to scientists, but some platforms might be better than other to reach different groups of scientists:
 - Twitter is a good platform to reach scientists, it might be used more by older generations of scientists.
 - LinkedIn can be used to target your messages to specific audiences.
 - Instagram could be good for younger scientists (they might not use Facebook or Twitter).
 - Facebook always works well and reaches broad audiences, including scientists.
 - Use newsletters directed to scientific communities.
 - Publish scientific papers if the project plans to produce any.
 - Send direct emails to universities and individual researchers.
 - Organise conferences.
 - Call some professors/teachers/researchers. They tend to always be very busy, hence it might be good to call them if the goal is to reach someone specific.
 - Having in-person meetings could be effective.
 - Organise field trips like the one we had during the conference for scientists from local universities/institutions to explain the project and share results.
 - Use specialized magazines that your target scientists read.

3. Time communications so they coincide with the low activity periods for the scientists you are trying to target.
 - Think about which types of scientists you want to target (e.g. ecologists, biologists, urban planners, social scientists, landscape architects) and match your communications schedule to their calendar.
 - For scientist with a field season (e.g. ecologists or landscape architects) wintertime is better to post and publish, because people spend more time on the computer and social media then. Avoid summer and early autumn because of possible fieldwork.

Station 5: How and when to communicate about the UrbanLIFECircles project with local politicians?

During the half-day tour workshop participants visited a set of urban ecosystem restoration interventions carried by the UrbanLIFECircles project. Our fifth workshop scenario asked teams to think about how and when to communicate about the project with local politicians. Teams were asked to think about what things might be more interesting to these politicians and the best way to share those with them. They were also asked to think about the “when” of things, for example, the different stages of the political cycle.

The main proposals made by the teams were:

- Showcase good local examples of restoration such as restored urban grasslands or examples from similar cities.
- Invite local politicians to join events where both citizens and politicians can participate in restoration activities (mowing, planting etc.).
- Engage local citizens/community to demonstrate to politicians that citizens like and engage with ecosystem restoration solutions in the city. Make politicians feel they are responsible for this positive achievement.
- Engage high-level politicians.
- Make friendly/informal connections with local politicians.
- Emphasise how the project’s actions link to global issues (climate change, biodiversity loss etc.) and address city/country level regulations, making the connection between local action and bigger goals clear.
- Emphasise how municipalities can save money through ecosystems restoration and the activities of the project.
- Emphasise the project’s benefits for health and quality of life in the city.
- Messaging should be simple and clear. Be creative and open-minded.
- Bumblebee brooch or badge, for politicians to wear and show their support for the project.
- Communications with politicians should happen from the start of the project and throughout the electoral cycle. Particularly when an activity is completed or when the results of activities are known. City events might offer good opportunities to speak to politicians, but any other chances should not be wasted.