

GUIDELINES FOR INTERNATIONAL PRESS TRIPS...and how to run them.

1. Background:

International and national press trips can be a very effective way of generating quality coverage across the media - TV, radio and print. If managed successfully they can generate extensive, well-researched coverage, which can substantially increase the profile of priority issues and more importantly, explain often-complex topics, which traditional sound bites cannot do. The benefits of press trips are obvious (see below). However, press trips only work as one element in an overall communications strategy. They are extremely costly in terms of resources for an organisation to set up as the logistics involved can be very complex. Costs will also often involve supplementing the overheads of the media to get to and travel around a country.

● Press trips: benefits...

- journalists get real access to the issues at hand - they can construct interviews with people on the ground; tell a dramatic story and take up-to-the minute photos and video footage which can result in extensive coverage.
- press trips can be used to generate feature coverage in the non-news driven sections of the media. They appeal in particular to features print journalists and to radio and TV journalists working for current affairs programmes.
- they have the added benefit - if managed well - of cementing relationship's with key media who learn what MFF is and does at a grass-roots level.
- they ensure that MFF takes the pivotal role in any coverage, by making the field staff heroes of the story.

● ...and challenges

- press trips often involve long preparations and complex logistics, which are time-consuming
- they can also cost a lot of money (but doesn't have to), especially if you pay for some of the costs of the invited journalists, and, sometimes, for all the costs of freelancers
- they involve a lot of work in preparing itineraries and meetings, and in researching strong stories and visuals

- they require a lot of flexibility and an air of calm, especially from the press trip organizer.

To assess whether a press trip fits in your overall communications strategy and should be organized, you should have clear and convincing answers to the following key questions:

- what are we trying to achieve with this press trip (desired conservation result and why communications activities are needed)?
- who are we trying to reach and influence (target audience)?
- what do people need to know (message)?
- what do we want to happen as a result of this press trip? (communications result)

If you are not sure whether a press trip is the best tool to achieve your communications goal, think about what other options there may be for generating coverage with a better and more immediate effect. Alternatives could include the launch of a new report with a press conference and a press release, pictures and footage, or an exclusive interview with a major paper or broadcast media. If your ultimate goal is to raise funds or is an advocacy objective you may prefer to launch an advertising campaign. If you think a press trip fits in your strategy and is an appropriate tool to get your message across to the target audience, there are still several issues to tackle.

2. The realities of a press trip: basic recommendations

• The team

Most of the time journalists – even freelancers – will not leave their home base (even freelancers) for longer than a week. And they won't do so unless they are guaranteed that the stories they are going to get are very strong and the access we have promised is certain. This often means that the itinerary has to be planned in minute detail - down to every possible interview and photo opportunity.

This is even more obvious if you have decided to take a TV crew with you. TV crews usually require more attention than print journalists, as they are subject to more constraints, such as light, silence, often tighter deadlines, not to mention filming permits, equipment to transport, etc.

They are very demanding. They need much longer to set up shots and do interviews. They will want to work when other journalists are not around to get the most realistic shots possible.

If the press trip is to an area where MFF has not filmed/photographed before and MFF is covering on the ground expenses for the visit, try to sign a contract with the TV crew for 20 minutes of rights free B-Roll footage

It is wise to limit the number of journalists invited to a maximum of five people, for example a TV crew (2 people), an international radio journalist, and two print journalists, or a TV crew and three print journalists. Try to invite at least one of the major international press agencies if you want to broaden your coverage. Also, make sure you have a second choice of journalists if those you had initially selected and contacted cannot participate or have to cancel prior to departure.

- **The stories**

If you want your press trip to be worth your investment in time and money, and if you want to attract key media for a week, you need to make sure that you have a series of strong stories to offer. Strong stories are those that have ingredients such as newsworthiness, controversy, drama, great visuals, charismatic characters and a hook.

For an international press trip, you must ensure that at least two or three solid stories can be covered. This needs a lot of preparation and discussion with the policy, programme and communications experts on the ground (technical project reports will not help you). You need to make sure that they can give you a brief and simple – but convincing – synopsis of the issue, the news, the problems and MFF's solutions, what is to be seen and who are the key actors. If you are not sold by their explanations, it is doubtful that international journalists will be. If you are not sure, you might want to test the water and run the initial idea past a tame media contact for their in-put.

- **The news hook**

Even if you are confident that you have a few good stories to sell in to journalists, you should look for a strong hook to hang these stories on. This will often make the difference and convince a still undecided journalist. Conservation issues are most of the time generic – they have been around for a long-time and they haven't suddenly emerged. In order to insert news into these issues you need to find a news hook. Try to plan your press trip when there is a major conference, or a presidential/ministerial meeting, or elections, or any other major event at the same time. This will definitely increase the media interest and subsequent coverage.

- **The itinerary**

Once you have identified your stories, you need to make sure they can be covered in the best conditions possible. For example, it is not advisable to take journalists into zones of civil unrest. It is also better to avoid very remote areas. There is no point in spending a lot of time on fastidious internal travel when you have only one week for the whole press trip.

You need to work out in minute detail how the journalists are going to do the stories in the allocated timeframe. It is crucial to mock-up the itinerary with your colleagues on the ground. You need to have a clear idea of the local distances and the time needed to cover them. Also, think about the visuals that will illustrate your stories and attract a TV crew and photographers. Identify the key actors to be interviewed,

check for their availability, where they will be and for how long. Set up meetings with locals, officials, etc.

Basically, you will have to know what you are going to get in advance of the trip, so that you can have the most precise schedule possible. However, you must also remain flexible and leave some room for the unexpected, which is likely to surprise you at least once on every press trip.

It is usually a good idea to talk to the press team in detail about what they want to get out of the stories, and make sure – as much as possible – that the press trip itinerary covers these demands.

- **The local MFF office**

The first port of call once you have planned to run an international press trip is to get the involved local office on side to help identify the stories and handle most of the logistics. This is of crucial importance, as without local staff's absolute commitment and a reasonable local MFF infrastructure the press trip won't work. You cannot work through third parties - you don't have time, you may not speak the language and you probably don't understand the country or culture.

You will probably need the local MFF to take responsibility for running everything at their end - booking accommodation, cars, drivers, translators if needed, arranging meeting with officials and locals, helping with filming permits, providing background information, and supplying at least one expert to accompany you on the trip to answer all the burning questions from MFF's perspective and act as a spokesperson.

Among local MFF staff – or thanks to them – you might also well find the charismatic character or conservation hero who will make the difference in front of a camera or for magazine stories (for example a park ranger who has risked his life to protect endangered animals, or an outstanding research scientist, or a single woman who has given up a family life to dedicate herself to field conservation).

- **The budget**

Remember, a press trip is an expensive adventure! Make sure you establish a detailed budget. This should be done jointly with the local office, as most of the expenses will relate to local services (food, accommodation, transportation, etc.). In your budget, don't forget to add 10-15 per cent of the total amount for unexpected matters. This is the best way to keep within the budget.

For international press trips, MFF covers all (non private) expenses on the ground, and journalists pay their plane tickets. But there are exceptions to the rule: some media – for example the BBC – have a policy not to accept any financial support from press trip organizers, and some freelancers might ask you to cover all of their expenses, including plane tickets. As media organization budgets contract, the latter might happen more and more frequently, particularly if the press trip starts from a location that is expensive to get to.

In all, the budget for an international press trip will vary from €10,000 to €20,000 depending on the cost of living in the visited country, and the number of journalists you have on your trip.

3. Next steps: briefing the media

- **Background information**

Once the trip is set up and sold in, you need to make sure the press team travelling with you is fully briefed and that the MFF person accompanying the trip is experienced at this sort of media event. Send the press team information on the stories, the itinerary, and the people they are likely to meet on the area before you go. Prepare one-page, easy-to-read factsheets on potentially complex issues. Also send them reading material on MFF projects, causes and threats to the environment, and the culture/politics of the region/country. Additional background information on MFF should also be handed out to ensure they have an accurate knowledge and perception of the organization.

- **Practical information**

Being briefed not only means about the stories and the itinerary, but also the weather conditions and the light, which are always very important for photographers and TV crews; what you can and cannot offer (e.g. boundaries - we can take you here but we can't take you there); vaccinations, suitable clothing and anything else they need to bring with them. This is crucial to make sure everyone involved is well prepared.

It is also a good idea to prepare a document with medical and emergency contact information for all the participants. This can be particularly useful in case of accidents or emergencies in remote locations.

4. After the trip: return on investment

- **Coverage, contacts, conservation and branding benefits**

On returning from the trip, you need to ensure that lines of communication with the press team are open and positive. Make sure each piece of coverage fairly reflects MFF's position – this does not mean you can see their copy before it runs (actually never ask for this, it is infringing a journalists basic right to tell the truth as they see it and will be met with real resistance. Journalists are not there to do MFF's PR).

You should check and double check that the press have got everything they need and get an idea of the sort of story they are planning to run. You might ask some of the journalists to let you have footage after it has been used and photos for MFF's own publications. Also, make sure that you collect all the clippings, tapes, web links of the published materials, and compile a press book (hard copy and/or electronic version).

You probably will have established good contacts with most of the journalists that have come on your press trip. Stay in touch with them, put them on your media list, they might come on another MFF press trip, or show special interest in other

communications activities. You might also be a prime source of information and a key contact point for them.

Finally, it is very important to debrief with the local MFF staff about the press trip and its outcome. Prepare a short memo, include "a lessons learned" section (what worked? what could have been done better?). Look at the initial purpose of the press trip, and match the results with the objectives: did you achieve your communications goal? Did this communications activity help bring a conservation benefit? Did you keep within the budget?

ANNEX: CHECK LIST FOR TV CREWS ON PRESS TRIPS

- Go over stories with the producer and find out what visuals they need to illustrate stories. This may involve staying longer in some locations than anticipated to get the right elements ie. fishing on a lake, sunsets/sunrises, general shots of life in the particular location that print journalists don't need.
- Clarify with MFF spokespeople what they will say on camera - is messaging and branding right? Do they understand they need to speak in soundbites? Practice doing 30 second soundbites with them
- Take T-shirts or MFF pins. They look good on camera and brand MFF without being too obvious. See how much can be set up in advance ie. scenes of people working on a project - and make sure that there are concrete things for a crew to film. It's important to be able to shoot MFF "at work" - something radio or print journalists can hear about but don't need to see.
- Check where and when the journalist wants to do pieces to camera/or stand ups...this will take time. Warn other journalists they may have to wait - it may be best to set them down at a bar/restaurant!
- When you are planning the trip check power sources. A television crew will need a reliable source of electricity to re-charge batteries and other equipment.
- Film equipment is worth tens of thousands of dollars so make sure hotel security is adequate to store all of the film kit.
- If the group will need to walk long distances to visit/see something in particular, can someone help a cameraman carry equipment if he's working alone?
- Are carnets or filming permits needed? MFF may have to help with obtaining these and the requirements will differ for locally based or foreign film crews.
- If MFF is covering airfare costs, make sure it's clear who is paying for excess luggage expenses. Also determine in advance exactly what costs MFF will cover and what it's expected the film crew will take care of.
- Do the media trip leaders or film crew have enough cash for location expenses. Many remote places don't take credit cards.
- Take into consideration cultural difficulties. In many countries it's inappropriate or sometimes even offensive to film certain things. Check this when planning the itinerary.

- Ask for a copy of the edited final story. Ask where and when it will be aired and the potential audience figures. It's always useful to know where our efforts in organizing press events are broadcast.