**PROPOSED COMMUNICATIONS PLAN**

**Gulf of Maine Council and the 25th Anniversary Year**

**ISSUE**

This year marks the 25th anniversary of the Gulf of Maine Council (GOMC, the Council). Collaborative relationships between member organizations have evolved over this period and have given rise to a number of successful initiatives. However, the Council today faces a number of challenges. Its purpose and relevance are not widely understood by the public at large. Decision-makers who fund the Council remain interested in ensuring GOMC priorities continue to align with theirs, as they evolve. The 25th anniversary provides an opportunity to reaffirm and communicate to audiences locally and internationally why the GOMC exists, why it matters, and the vision it has for the future.

**BACKGROUND**

The Gulf of Maine Council on the Marine Environment was established in 1989 by the Governments of Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Maine, New Hampshire, and Massachusetts. Its mandate was to foster cooperative actions and share information on best practices within the Gulf watershed. Its mission is to maintain and enhance environmental quality in the Gulf of Maine to allow for sustainable resource use by existing and future generations.

The GOMC has achieved a number of significant milestones over the past 25 years.

(Add information in to create Appendix A.)

**OBJECTIVES**

* Position the Gulf of Maine as vital and important ecosystem spanning the east coast of North America to instil broader collective interest and ownership in its economic, environmental, and cultural assets.
* Foster a broader and more active sense of shared stewardship for this sensitive environment and its watersheds.
* Increase public awareness of the Gulf of Maine Council, its successes and its leadership role in: expanding and sharing scientific research in the Gulf; protecting and conserving Gulf of Maine resources; and advocating for responsible use and sustainable resource exploitation and development.
* Provide focused messaging about the GOMC goals and values with the aim of enhancing current partnerships and inviting broader future collaboration amongst governments, scientific and academic communities, NGO’s and other special interest groups.

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**STRATEGIC CONSIDERATIONS**

* The Gulf of Maine Council has been recognized in internal circles as a strong nation-to-nation body that has fostered excellent stewardship of the natural resources of the Gulf of Maine. However, the relevance and importance of the Council’s work is not widely known or understood. Communications efforts need to promote the Council’s work more effectively.

The 25th anniversary offers an excellent opportunity to introduce the GOMC to a broader audience, clearly highlighting its raison d’être, its achievements since 1989, its vision for the future and its plans and priorities.

* The GOMC has not established public awareness about the significance of the Gulf of Maine. Similarly, the collective stewardship role that the Council has discharged in protecting the GOM’s rich and diverse ecosystem is not widely appreciated by the general population.

Short term, strategies need to communicate the Gulf’s significance to the broader public. In the medium-term, plans will target market niches with specific messaging and communications activities intended to resonate more pointedly with those audiences.

The GOMC has established a valuable network that can help build stronger relationships and expand the number of people who can serve as ambassadors of the Gulf of Maine and the GOMC.

* The Gulf of Maine, while a distinct geographic region similar to the Great Lakes or Gulf of Mexico, is not seen by the general public as an “entity”. Rather, it is viewed more in a context of the distinct coves, rivers, harbours, estuaries, fishing grounds, and/or transportation routes that make use of the waters, each with its own focus. For many Atlantic Canadians, even, the Gulf is not immediately associated with regional interests.

A campaign to brand the Gulf of Maine as one diverse yet wholly integrated ecosystem will help to increase the numbers of individuals, community groups, business concerns, elected officials, and others, who recognize that Gulf of Maine is of shared relevance to them.

Branding will result in the Gulf of Maine being widely recognized as a valuable and valued ecosystem that: merits sustained and responsible management; instils in stakeholders a collective pride of stewardship; and invites the engagement of further partners in assuring its vitality in the future.

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The GOMC will be well positioned to capitalize on a heightened collective sense of space. This can help leverage results that address priority concerns, and meet shared/overlapping objectives. In such a collaborative atmosphere, one aimed at the shared ‘well-being and vitality’ of the Gulf of Maine, conflicting interests should move towards resolution with greater ease. The success this branding campaign hinges on the fullest endorsement of, and commitment to, the objectives by Council members. It also requires that agreement be reached on the time line and resources necessary for implementation of the strategy.

* Communication techniques have evolved significantly over the past 25 years. Widespread public use of new technologies, including social media in particular, paves the way for successfully reaching the greatest number of people, with timely and accurate information that is of more specific relevance to them.
* Communication practices throughout all levels of government, must comply with policies that dictate cost-effectiveness and the least tax possible on the environment. As such, print publications, static display production, and the creation of superfluous promotional items must be avoided. Exceptions are rare but can be made when there is a compelling rationale for their necessity. The new norms generally adopted by society demand primary reliance on electronic communications, including shared PDFs, instant messaging and feedback, as well as virtual presentations and displays.

**TARGET AUDIENCES**

* Decision-makers (federal, state, provincial, municipal elected officials) and their bureaucrats
* Prospective funders
* NGOs, Scientists,
* Scientists, natural resource professionals
* Universities and academia
* General public (youth, educators, special interests, community groups)

**KEY MESSAGES**

* The health and resilience of the Gulf of Maine environment is essential for us now and for future generations. It is an important and unique marine habitat that requires collaborative efforts to remain environmentally healthy and economically viable.

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* The Gulf of Maine Council works at the national, international, state and provincial level for sharing science and best practices across borders. Together, the Council members provide effective best practices for the stewardship of the Gulf of Maine.
* For 25 years, the Gulf of Maine Council has advanced long-term stewardship, sustainable development, and environmental management of the Gulf of Maine and its watershed.

**COMMUNICATIONS APPROACH**

This communications plan is an overarching strategy, based on close and proactive collaboration with the sub-committees of Council, and Council members themselves. It is intended to form the foundation for all future Council communications over the next several months and into the future.

All future communications activities for the GOMC should present a common look and feel (part of the branding exercise). Design options for a logo and identifier currently are being developed. It will be critical that they be ready to apply on all materials covered in the overarching plan.

**COMMUNICATIONS ACTIVITIES**

**Communications Strategies**

Three interrelated strategies appear to be required immediately and are outlined in what follows. More specific tasking is detailed in the attachment.

1) There is an urgent need to develop a communications plan in support of the GOMC’s participation at Coastal Zone Canada 2014. This should cover: messaging about what the Council intends to achieve at the conference; development of key materials promoting the GOMC members (biographies, bibliographies of published materials, etc.) and their contribution to the conference; media pitches about the participants on the Speakers Panel, being put together by the GOMC; an outline of the achievements of the Council since its inception; frequently asked questions/position papers; as well as any closing comments the Council members may wish to make public in a news release at the conclusion of the conference (broad strokes reinforcement of the Council’s policy). Implementation of this plan should already be underway.

2) A Media Plan should be drawn up, shared and approved by the Council, so activities can begin informing the public at large about the 25th anniversary of the Council and its achievements to date. To be most effective, the plan should link to and promote activities underway in relation to the 25th anniversary. These include: ongoing outreach; the planned publication release; the geocaching initiative; and profiling the recipients of the Gulf of Maine Council’s Awards after the presentations are completed. …/5

Implementation of the plan should commence no later than the end of February/early March, as a lead up to participation in Coastal Zones Canada 2014.

Media opportunities in advance of Coastal Zones Canada 2014 can get the message out about the Councils achievements over the past 25 years.

A news release profiling the recipients of the GOMC Awards could be released following the presentations.

3) An overarching Social Media plan needs to be approved and expedited to make better use of Facebook and Twitter as low-cost options for informing the broader public about the work of the GOMC. Social media, more specifically Facebook and Twitter, will be the main communication activities used to increase awareness and understanding for the Gulf of Maine Council.

Currently the GOMC has a Facebook page with 119 likes and a Twitter account with three followers. The GOMC needs to build a framework around the use of social media, with guidelines for content, processes for feeding the Tweets, and objectives for tracking the uptake, and integration with the website. A list of organizations will be recommended for following and linking with. Hoot Suite offers the capacity to track uptake and streamline information flows to select audiences.

The full Social Media plan should be ratified for implementation no later than late March. A draft plan has been developed and is attached.

**Website**

Currently the GOMC website functions more as a share point site for all Council members. The website is in the process of being overhauled to make it a more useful resource for the general public. At present, though the website provides important and valuable information, it is difficult to navigate.

**BUDGET**

**(TO BE DEVELOPED BY WORKING GROUP AND APPROVED BY COUNCIL)**

**EVALUATION**

The success of the overarching strategy and its related components will be measured by a number of factors:

Increased public recognition of the Gulf of a Maine as intended by the branding;

Number of hits on the website, and contact made with the GOMC, as well as linkages made to the site;

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Number of followers on Twitter, number of re-tweets;

Media coverage (print, radio and television) of GOMC’s 25th anniversary and GOMC activities

Requests for Speakers Bureau members

Number of presentation requests to various target groups (elected officials, community based, international, special interest groups, etc.)

Number of new partnerships launched

**(TO BE DEVELOPED FURTHER BY WORKING GROUP)**