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Save Peatlands in Ukraine

Communication Strategy, Campaign and Results

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Imprint

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About

The fellowship project is focused on transforming the perception of peatlands in Ukraine. The primary goal of the project is to increase awareness among key stakeholders — including local communities, entrepreneurs, experts, and the general public — about the value of peatlands. The project is aimed at developing a comprehensive communications strategy to reshape how peatlands are viewed and valued in Ukraine. It is also detailing specific communication tactics and overseeing their implementation.

The strategy aims to shift the focus from exploiting peatlands for resource extraction to recognizing them as essential areas for sustainable development, climate stability, and even national defense.

Abstract

Our project, "Moore neu gedacht. Von Bedrohung zu Nachhaltigkeit," ran from September 2024 to February 2025. Its core mission was to shift this perception and promote sustainable peatland use. By targeting communities, media, and stakeholders, we aimed to reframe peatlands as essential ecosystems that regulate climate, safeguard biodiversity, and offer socio-economic benefits.

Keywords: peatlands, rewetting, linguistic framing, environmental communication, cultural perception, Ukraine, swamp metaphors, carbon storage, climate resilience, biodiversity, media narratives, strategic messaging, public awareness, wetland restoration, policy integration

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Abbreviations

CO₂ – Carbon Dioxide

UA – Ukraine

NGO – Non-Governmental Organization

gov't – Government (used as shorthand for government institutions)

CA – Communication Audience / Target Audience

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Aim

This project aimed at transforming the perception of peatlands in Ukraine – from threatening and useless areas to valuable and strategic landscapes essential for sustainability, climate resilience, and national defense.



1.2 Background

Wetlands remain poorly understood and underestimated in the public discourse in Ukraine. The Ukrainian public discourse lacks strong narratives around peatlands. Moreover, the few existing metaphors often rely on negative imagery and linguistic constructs.

Currently, peatlands in Ukraine are viewed as land to be drained for peat extraction, agriculture, or construction. They are associated with fire hazards and negative folklore, often depicted as dangerous places inhabited by evil forces. These perceptions encourage further drainage and degradation, as they are subconsciously seen as reclaiming hazardous and unproductive land.

1.2.1. Linguistic context and cultural perception

The notion mire has a persistent negative connotation, rooted in folklore. Wetlands in Ukrainian language mean:

- a heavy place with excessively moist soil, often with standing water
- a bad environment that has an adverse effect on someone; something that sucks in, destroys everything good in a person
- soggy ground
- mud on the road

Proverbs mentioning wetlands have mostly negative connotations - mire is connected with evil spirits, chiefly with a devil, mire is mentioned as a place where nobody comes back from.

Ukrainian proverbs mentioning 'swamp' (literary translation)

Negative connotation	Neutral connotation
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. You can't bake an Easter cake in a swamp 2. There's no swamp without a devil. 3. Devils dwell in still swamps. 4. You won't drink good water from a swamp. 5. It's easy to get into a swamp, but hard to get out. / Even oxen can't pull you back. 6. He who seeks a swamp will surely find one. 7. Even the devil fears a rotten swamp. 8. In swamp up to the ears. (= Up to one's neck in trouble) 9. He who steps into a swamp will get pushed deeper. 10. He who throws mud at others has dirty hands. 11. He who walks wisely on the footbridge won't bathe in the swamp. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. For every swamp, there's a devil to match. 2. Every frog praises its own swamp. / Even a frog won't sing in its own swamp. / Better your own swamp than someone else's gold. 3. The devil set the swamp on fire, but no one will put it out. 4. There's no swamp without tussocks. (= Every mess has its sticking points) 5. Help trouble out of the swamp, and it will land on your head 6. There's no village without a swamp. (= Every place has its flaws) 7. He who stirs the swamp is bound to get dirty. 8. One man's swamp is another man's gold.

Болото:—

З болота паски не спечеш.

З нічого доброго діла не зробиш.

Коби болото, а чорти найдуться.

Коби нагода, а зlobних людей є досить, щоб накоїти лиха. Народне вірування, що чорт сидить у болоті.

Нема села без болота.

Поганих, зlobних, лукавих людей найдеш усюди.

Хто болото місить, забрудитися мусить.

В кого зlobна душа, той добра не зробить, тільки лихо.

Хто обкидає болотом других, у того руки брудні.

Поговір паде на того, що його зновив.

Хто шукає за болотом, той знайде його.

Хто шукає лихого товариства, той його знайде.

Figure 1. Fragment from 'Proverbs or Ukrainian Folk Philosophy' by Pavlyuk V

Resource: 'Proverbs or Ukrainian Folk Philosophy' by Pavlyuk V., Ivan Solianychn's Publishing House, Edmonton, 1946

Moreover, “болото” [swamp] has gained new negative associations due to Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The expression “на болотах” [in the swamps] is commonly used to describe Russia as backward or malicious. The neologism “вий на болотах” [crying in the swamps] refers to hostile or absurd comments made by Russian users or officials online.

Swamps have historically also been associated with death or exile: suicides were buried in swampy areas, and unwanted household items were discarded there during rituals. This additional symbolic layer complicates the image of wetlands as positive or life-giving. As metaphors shape public attitudes and policy support, reframing wetlands in a positive light is essential for long-term sustainability efforts.

1.2.2 Peatland protection in Ukraine

Due to the lack of proper regulation, uncontrolled drainage of wetlands continues for peat and amber extraction, as well as for the expansion of agricultural land.

More than 80% of Ukrainian peatlands have already been drained and continue to be dried out without oversight. According to rough estimates, this results in around 35 million tons of carbon emissions per year, making Ukraine one of the leading emitters in Europe from drained peatlands. At the same time, this also highlights Ukraine’s significant potential in tackling the climate crisis.

There are several environmental organisations in Ukraine, dealing with wetlands protection and preservation. Still there is no organisation that focuses on the topic. Therefore there is a lack of specific scientific and management expertise that could provide strategic view sustainable usage of wetlands in Ukraine and the introduction of peatland management strategy.

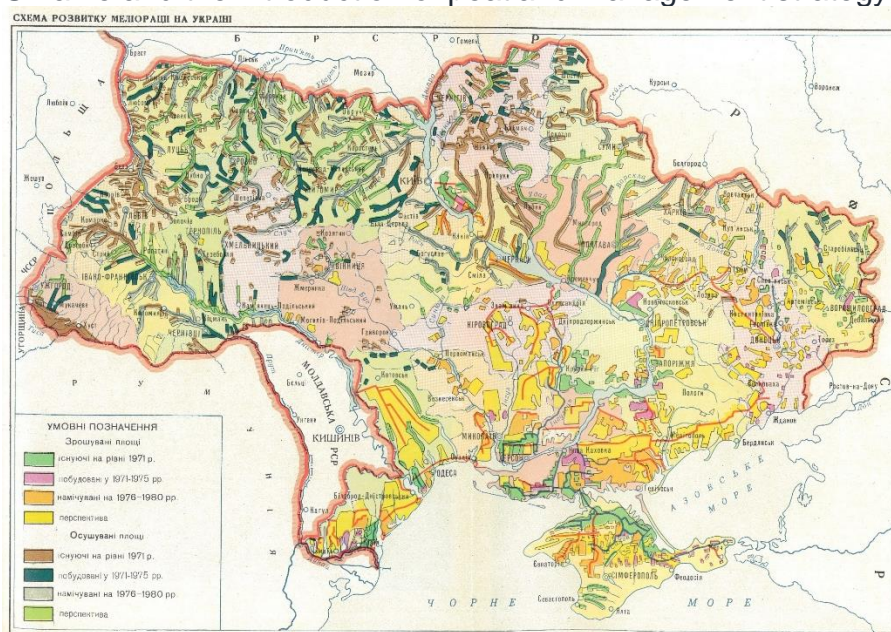


Figure 2. Scheme of development of melioration in Ukraine

Resource: Land Reclamation and Water Management of the Ukrainian SSR. Ministry of Land Reclamation and Water Management of the Ukrainian SSR. Kyiv – 1976

2. METHODS

2.1 Tools and strategies

To reach our goal, we employed the following communication tools and strategies.

2.1.1 Strategic Messaging: We created emotionally positive, vivid, and easy-to-understand key messages tailored for different audiences. Special care was taken to choose culturally appropriate wording that avoids negative connotations.

2.1.2 Media Campaign: Our efforts culminated in a high-impact media campaign surrounding World Wetlands Day. It focused on advocating for the resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers of Ukraine regarding the use of lands under peatlands.

2.1.3 Content Development: We corrected misleading terminology in the Ukrainian Wikipedia and produced high-quality content highlighting the ecological and strategic importance of peatlands.

2.1.4 Social Media Buzz: We worked with media partners and influencers to raise awareness through diversified and time-concentrated messaging.

2.1.5 Stakeholder Engagement: We engaged NGOs, government bodies, media, and experts to ensure multi-level support and visibility.

2.2 Background and recommendations for wording

To avoid subconscious resistance from the target audience, it is recommended to refrain from using the term “болото” in positive, motivating messages. Instead, the scientifically accurate and emotionally neutral term “торфовище” (peatland) should be used. It aligns with the strategic goal of this project – to shift the public perception of peatlands from being a source of peat or land for agriculture/construction toward being essential for climate resilience, biodiversity, and community sustainability.



2.2.1 Recommended vocabulary and metaphors

Instead of relying on the swamp-based lexicon, we advise using emotionally resonant and future-oriented constructions:

- зберегти воду [preserve water]
- болота — це нирки річок [peatlands are the kidneys of rivers]
- зволоження торфовищ — це стратегічний пріоритет [rewetting peatlands is a strategic priority]
- торфовища мають бути вологими [peatlands must stay wet]
- зупинити осушення [stop the drainage]
- обводнювати [rewet]

These framing tools serve as the foundation for new, emotionally positive, vivid, and easy-to-understand key messages that were created as part of the campaign.

3. RESULTS

3.1. Media Impact

Despite the extremely short preparation time and the absence of a dedicated budget, the media campaign achieved impressive results. This success became possible thanks to the joint efforts of all involved environmental organizations and the well-coordinated work of communication and project managers across institutions. The broad reach and strong public engagement demonstrate the power of united action and the growing relevance of the topic of peatland protection and restoration.

publications on NGO websites	publications in mass media	social media publications	social media reactions	reposts	comments and discussions
11	18	50	7435	882	> 1000

Table 1. [Quantitative project results, outreach and engagement]

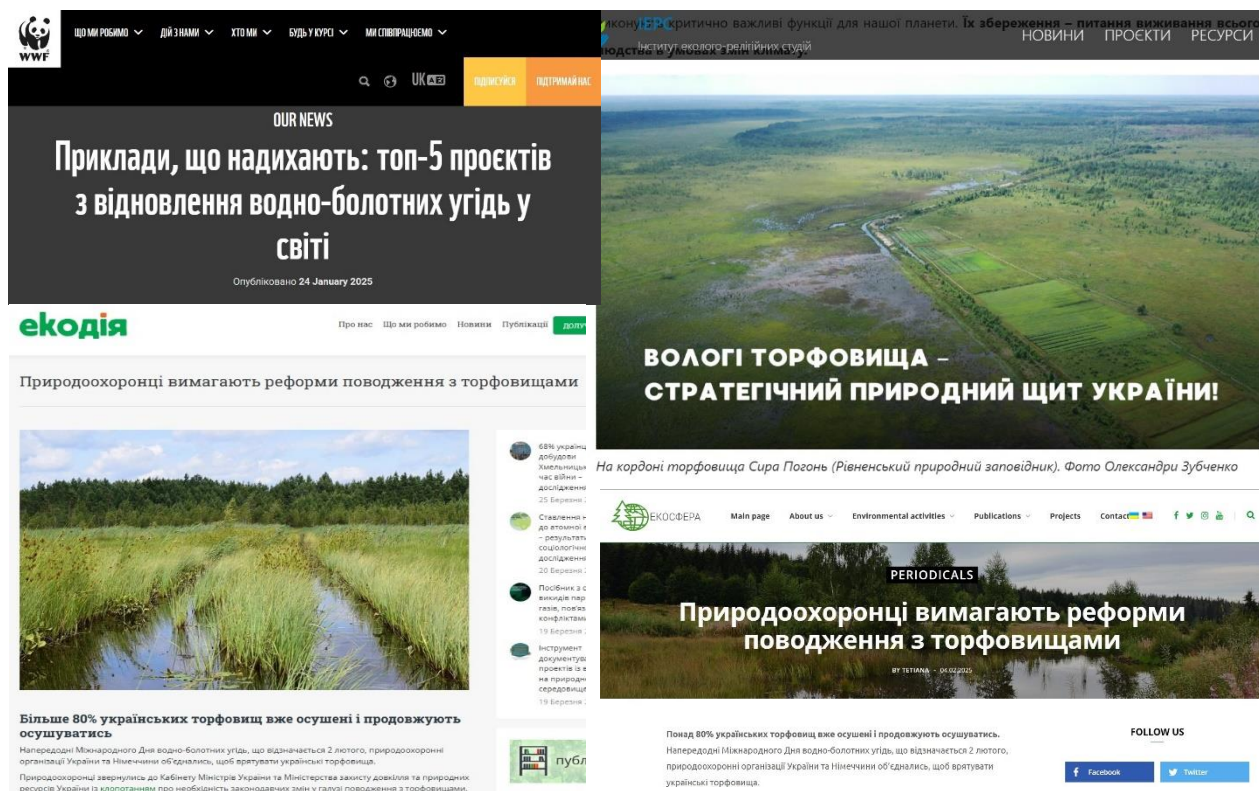


Figure 3. Examples of publications on NGO websites

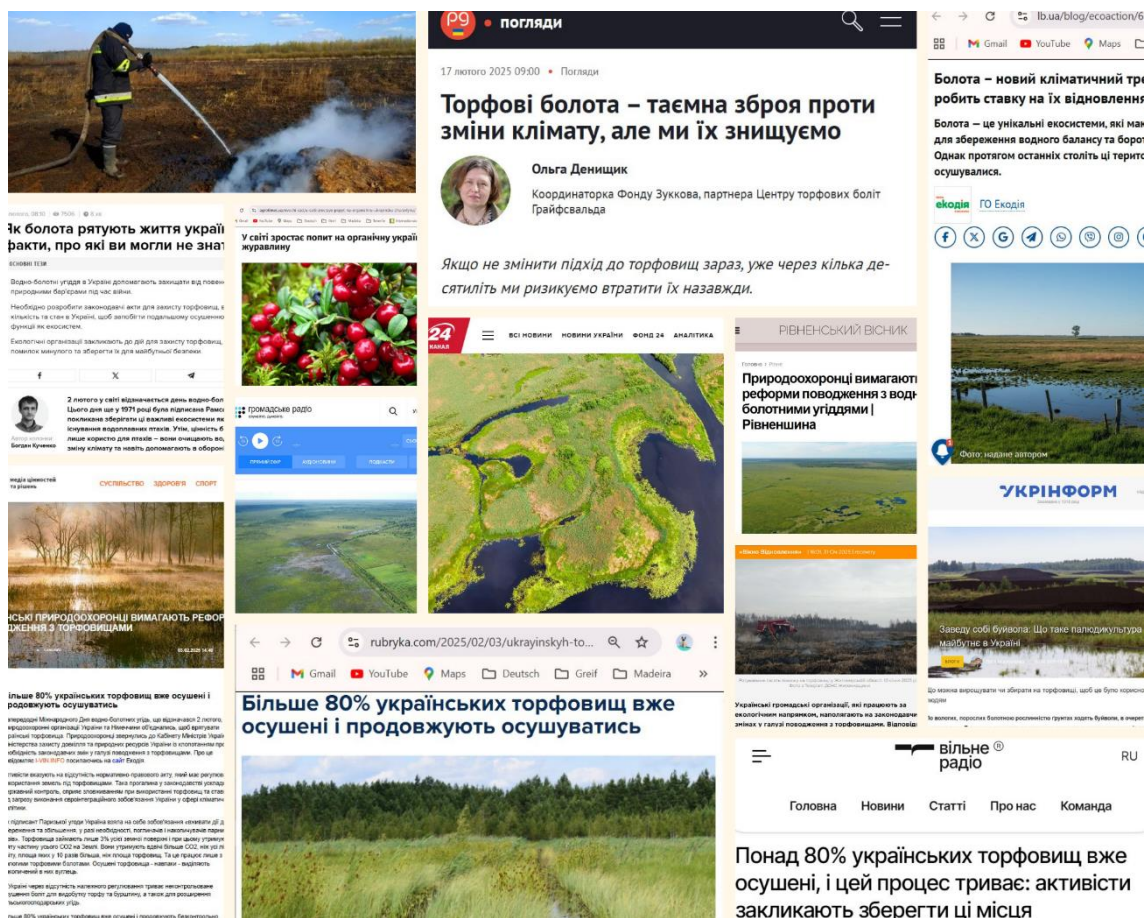


Figure 4. Examples of publications in mass media

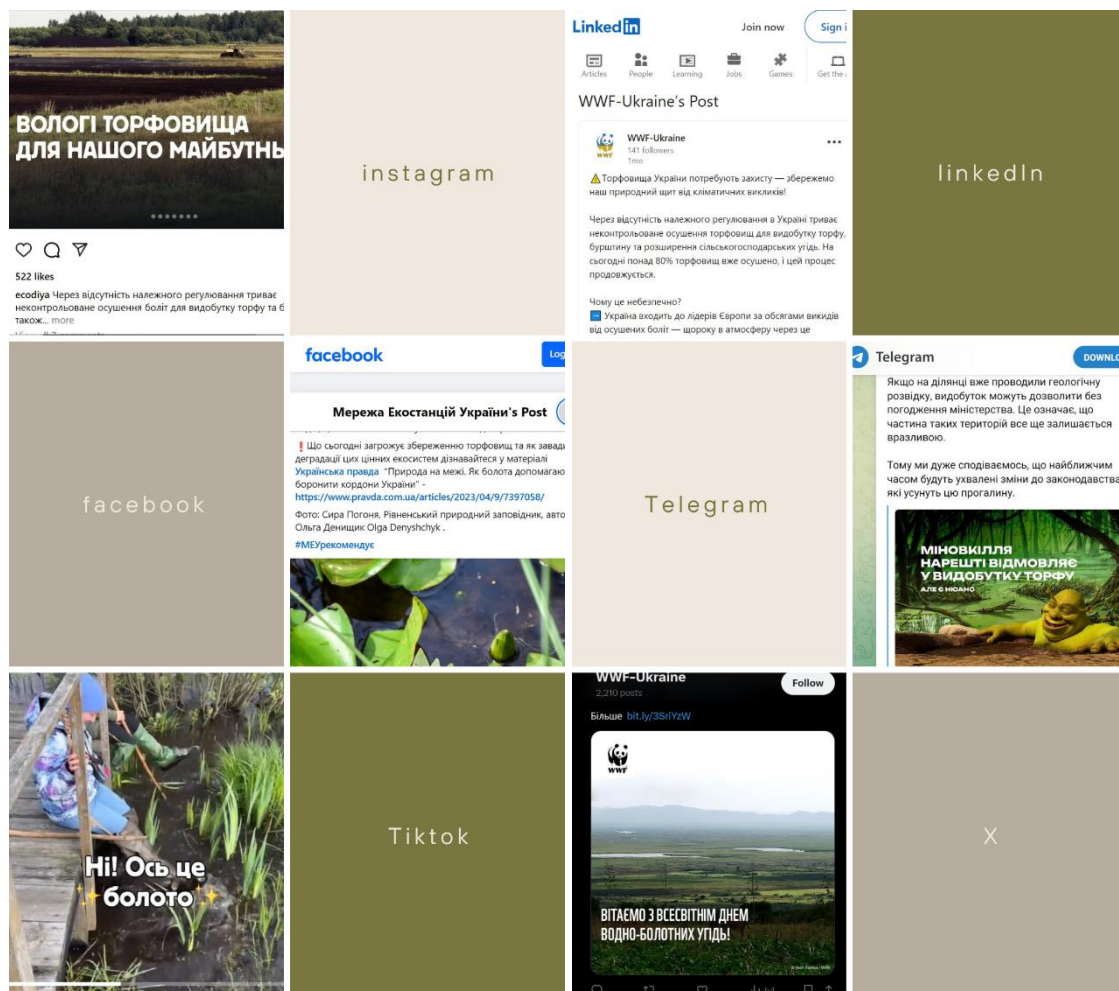


Figure 5. Examples of publications in social media

3.2 Key Messages Adoption

Ministry of Environmental Protection and Natural Resources published three times more Wetlands-related posts than the previous year.

Government messages adopted our framing: peatlands protect against floods, sequester more CO₂ than forests, and support biodiversity.

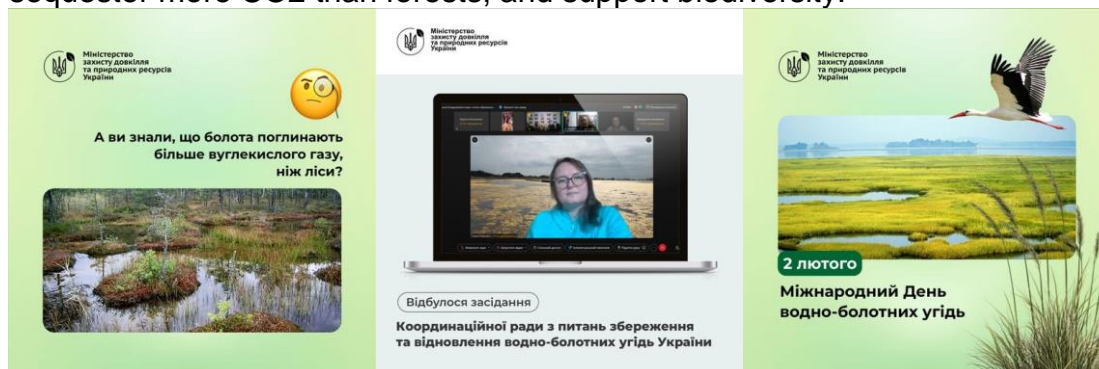


Figure 6. Resource: Ministry of Environmental Protection and Natural Resources Page

3.3 Policy Advocacy

16 NGOs signed a joint petition demanding reform in peatland legislation. An expert group (Ministry + NGOs) is now taking over the implementation of petition requirements.

Прем'єр-міністру України
Шмигалю Д.А.

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Копія:

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Клопотання

про необхідність розроблення та прийняття постанови Кабінету Міністрів України «Про особливості правового режиму використання земель під торфовищами та можливі види їх цільового призначення» (пункт 5 доручення Прем'єр-міністра України від 12.08.2020 № 31347/2/1-20 до Закону України «Про внесення змін до деяких законодавчих актів України щодо планування використання земель» від 17.06.2020 № 711-IX)

Громадські організації, що підтримують клопотання:

1. Ян Петерс, Директор Фонда Зуккова, Партнера Грайфсвальдського Центру Торфових боліт
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4. Громадська організація "Еко клуб"
5. Громадська організація "Інститут еколого-релігійних студій"
6. Громадська організація "Центр екологічних ініціатив "Екодія"
7. Громадська організація "Український екологічний клуб "Зелена хвиля"
8. Громадська організація "Українське товариство охорони птахів"
9. Громадська організація "Мережа екостанцій України"
10. Громадська організація "Українське товариство охорони птахів"
11. Громадська організація "Центр економіко правової аналітики"
12. Юридична клініка з екологічного права Національного лісотехнічного університету
13. Комітет аграрного, земельного та довкілля права Національної асоціації адвокатів України
14. Всеукраїнська громадська молодіжна організація "Зелена молодь України"
15. Громадська організація "Київ для людей"
16. Всеукраїнський благодійний фонд "Серце до серця"

Figure 7. Joint petition demanding reform in peatland legislation, signed by 16 NGOs

3.4 Community Building

For the first time, Ukrainian peatland advocates spoke with one voice. Formation of a committed "Peatland Community" of professionals and activists.

3.5 Cultural Narrative Shift:

We initiated the process of neutralizing negative folklore through education and storytelling. New language and metaphors are entering public discourse.

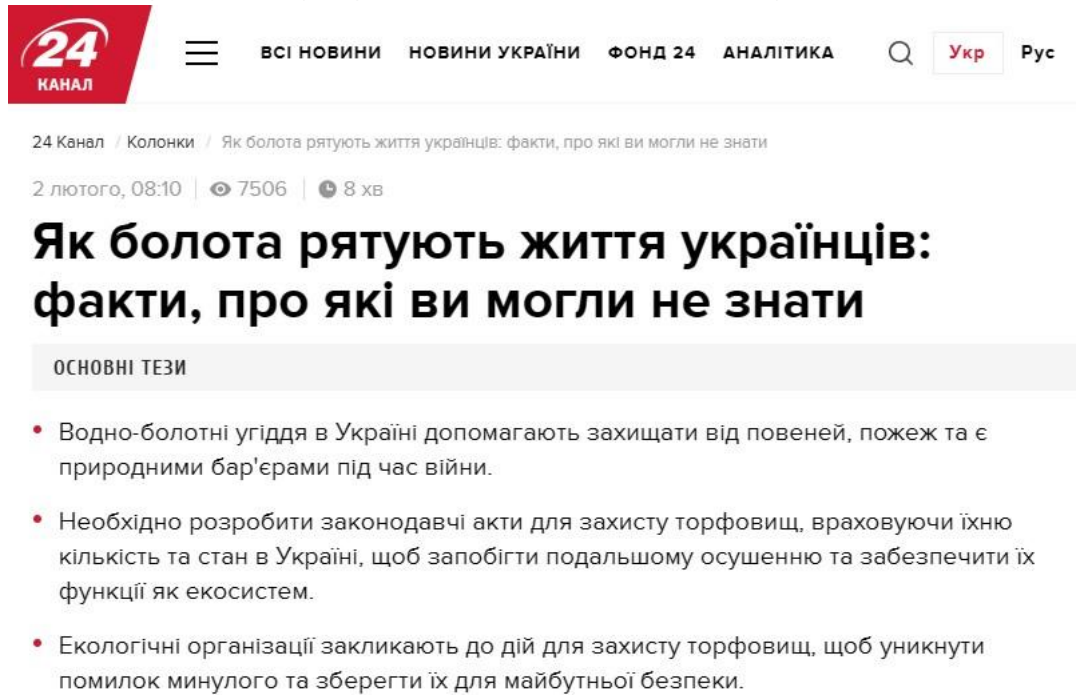


Figure 8. Example of an article initiated in the course of campaign. The heading says: “How the wetland can save lives: facts you may have not know before”

4. DISCUSSION

This project demonstrated the power of strategic communication in reframing ecological narratives. Ukraine's peatlands are still under threat, but the conversation around them has changed.

By using low-cost, high-impact tactics, we reached stakeholders at all levels and secured tangible commitments. Our approach combined content development, media advocacy, and stakeholder mobilization.

Challenges included deeply rooted cultural myths, lack of awareness, and initial fragmentation among NGOs. However, by focusing on common goals and leveraging media timing (World Wetlands Day), we achieved resonance.

The continuation of this work lies in three directions:

- Support for the expert group in drafting and promoting the new legislation.
-
- Maintaining the momentum within the Peatland Community.
-
- Continuing public awareness campaigns with positive storytelling.

The quick wins of this campaign showed that change is possible when the narrative is coherent, emotionally compelling, and backed by broad alliances. Ukrainian peatlands are no longer seen solely as swamps – they are starting to be recognized as life-saving landscapes.

5. CONCLUSION

The campaign confirmed a key hypothesis: linguistic framing significantly affects public perception of peatlands. Negative cultural connotations associated with the word “болото” create subconscious resistance to positive messaging about wetlands. By replacing it with the neutral and science-based term “торфовище” and introducing emotionally engaging metaphors (e.g. “peatlands are the kidneys of rivers”), we successfully shifted the conversation toward climate resilience and ecological value.

The reframing strategy resonated across various audiences – from media to civil society – and demonstrated that when narratives are accessible, visual, and rooted in shared values (such as water preservation and safety), they can spark genuine interest and support.

5.1 Key recommendations for long-term impact:

a. Strategic vocabulary and narratives:

Continue using the tested terminology (“торфовище”, “зволоження”, “стратегічний пріоритет”, “зберегти воду”) and metaphors in public communications, policy briefs, and media stories to ensure consistency and reinforce new associations.

b. Media engagement:

Pitch human-centred stories that show local benefits of rewetting: e.g. protection from fires, water security, or biodiversity revival.

Offer journalists ready-made expert quotes, visuals, and “explainer” content to reduce their entry barrier into the topic.

Collaborate with eco- and agri-focused media outlets as well as regional newsrooms close to drained peatland areas.

c. Institutional cooperation:

Engage environmental ministries and local governments with evidence-based communication tools, such as narratives that align with Ukraine’s climate goals and EU integration.

Facilitate cross-sector dialogues (e.g. climate + agriculture + safety) to frame peatland rewetting as a shared priority.

Involve non-governmental actors (youth organisations, environmental NGOs, educators) as amplifiers of new narratives.

d. Educational integration:

Co-develop modules or short courses on wetlands and climate resilience for high schools, universities, and teacher trainings.

Create multimedia educational resources (videos, posters, interactive maps) for use in classrooms and public events.

Highlight Ukraine's unique role and potential leadership in peatland restoration in a European context.

e. Long-term narrative shift:

Peatlands must become part of the national conversation not as marginal or obscure spaces, but as living systems essential for the country's sustainable future. This requires continuity, partnerships, and embedding the new language into multiple layers of society – from local schools to government strategies.

6. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Special thanks to media professionals and environmental opinion leaders who helped amplify our key messages and reframe the perception of peatlands in Ukraine.

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<https://diasporiana.org.ua/wp-content/uploads/books/7784/file.pdf>

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Fig.2., Figure 2. Scheme of development of melioration in Ukraine
Resource: Land Reclamation and Water Management of the Ukrainian SSR.
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