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I work on community outreach within the conservation community. The tool I'm sharing is a 2009 citizen survey from The Nature Conservancy looking at peoples' reactions to different messages involving conservation issues.



Public Opinion
Research & Strategy

TO: Interested Parties

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RE: The Language of Conservation: How to Communicate Effectively to Build Support for Conservation

DATE: November 23, 2009

The following recommendations for communicating effectively to build support for conservation are based on extensive qualitative research and a representative national survey of American voters commissioned by The Nature Conservancy and conducted by a bi-partisan research team: Democratic polling firm Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin, Metz & Associates and Republican polling firm Public Opinion Strategies.

While the research had multiple goals, this memo seeks to provide language and messaging recommendations in a list of easy-to-follow, broad “rules” for communication. Some of these rules reinforce long-standing communication guidelines we have tracked over time, while others were tested to reflect today’s changed political and economic context. We found few exceptions to the guidelines presented, although we note that it is always prudent to test language and messages to ensure their effectiveness in a specific state or local area prior to investing in public communication.

What to Say First...

- *DO invoke the “Three W’s” of water, wildlife, and working farms and ranches. But spend most of your time on the first “W” – water. We asked voters to rate the importance of a variety of conservation goals, and of the ten issues they ranked at the top of their list, a stunning seven of the ten were connected to water in some way. Referencing water as a rationale for conserving land is more important than exactly how you say it. However, protecting “drinking water” – whether quality or supplies – rated as the top-priority goal for conservation we tested. Water *supplies* are also a rising concern, especially in the West.*

Protecting wildlife habitat also continues to be a top-tier concern. At the same time, we should *not* ask voters to invest in protection of wildlife only for wildlife’s sake. Voters want to know how *people*, not just wildlife, will benefit from habitat conservation – and concepts such as “biodiversity” are relatively unfamiliar and do not resonate.

Finally “working farms and ranches” continues to be a high priority for conservation. Focus group respondents placed a great deal of value on preserving small, family farms and ranches. The word “working” evokes those types of lands, and conveys that the land is productive and being used. When voters hear references to “farms and ranches,” they do NOT assume that they are owned and run by people whose livelihood depends on them – and that distinction matters a great deal. In the focus groups, we also tested “agricultural land” (too dry and not as evocative) and “farmland and ranchland” (better, but not as positive as “working farms and ranches”).

- *DO continue to use a “future generations” message.* The concept of protecting land, water and wildlife for our children and grandchildren is one that focus group respondents volunteer organically as a reason for supporting conservation; it does not have to be prompted. Enthusiasm for this concept has not waned in the last five years; a “future generations” message (shown below) is one of the strongest tested. The term “legacy” is also well-received, since it conveys this same connection.

51% “very convincing”

We need to protect our beaches, lakes, natural areas and wildlife habitat for future generations. Unless we act to protect these areas now, many of our beautiful natural areas will disappear before our children and grandchildren have a chance to enjoy them.

- *DO highlight the recreational value of land, but be specific – talk about hiking, biking, camping, fishing, hunting, viewing wildlife and enjoying nature.* The more vivid the language, the more likely voters are to see themselves using these lands and enjoying their benefits. This is particularly true if more passive recreation examples are included in the list, such as viewing wildlife or simply enjoying nature – not limiting recreation to the REI gear-laden backpacker image.

55% “very convincing”

Outdoor recreation is a part of our way of life - from hunters and fishermen to young children who play in parks. Protecting our natural areas will ensure that we still have places to hike, bike, boat, fish, hunt, see wildlife or just enjoy the quiet and peace of nature.

- *DO ensure that access to outdoor recreation is made explicit.* Without an explicit nod to continued or increased access for recreation, some voters assume that words like “protect” or “conserve” mean that lands will be “locked up” and unavailable for their use.
- *But DO NOT make access to parks or public lands the centerpiece of appeals for conservation.* Only a very small sliver of the electorate – typically, dedicated outdoor enthusiasts – recognize the need for increased conservation to create connections to other protected lands. Communications with recreationists or sportsmen who care about this issue can focus on access, but the broader public simply does not see a crisis around the issue of access.

- *DO evoke a sense of “shared responsibility” – or, depending on the audience, a “moral responsibility” – to care for the natural world.* Two of the survey’s strongest rationales in support of conservation (as shown below) tap into this strong emerging theme – one voters also seized upon as important in the focus groups. Voters want to be – and want others to be – responsible, whether in regard to their personal finances or how they treat the natural world. These messages clearly tap into this strong value held by the public.

51% “very convincing”

All Americans have a shared responsibility to protect our natural world: to use only what we need, make smarter choices, and pass on to future generations the beauty, wildlife, water and natural resources we have today. Especially with the threat of climate change, we should invest in conservation to meet this responsibility

49% “very convincing”

Our state's beautiful natural areas are part of God's creation, and we have a moral responsibility to take care of them and protect them.

We would caution that the impact of the latter message is highly dependent on the audience. It can also lack credibility if delivered by a messenger that lacks standing among voters of faith.

- *DO use phrases that imply ownership and inclusion, such as “our” and “we.”* Many of the strongest messages in the survey incorporate this language. So, we must describe “OUR natural areas” or “WE need to protect OUR beaches, lakes, natural areas and wildlife. . . .”
- *DO connect conservation to public health.* Voters want clean air and clean water, and instinctively view caring for the land as having benefits for air and water. Interestingly, the health and safety of food is a rising concern today – voters are connecting their concerns about how food is grown and raised with the health of the environment. And while it is not a top-of-mind issue, voters also respond positively to the fact that many medicines are plant-based and come from nature. Numerous times, respondents in the focus groups pointed to the idea that new cures could still be discovered from nature, as long as these plants and natural areas are protected.

Messaging should continue to stress the many ways that protecting our land, water and wildlife protects our own health.

- *DO NOT make global warming/climate change the primary rationale for conservation.* The most politically polarizing messages we tested were two that position global warming as the rationale for engaging in conservation. Republicans and Independents rated these messages significantly lower than other rationales in support of conservation.

However, referring to climate change in passing as part of a broader argument for conservation has no significant impact – positive or negative – on responses. We tested two other messages, shown

below, in which half the respondents heard a version referring to climate change, while the other half heard no such reference. The results demonstrate that there was NO significant distinction in voters' reactions – including between partisan sub-groups – if climate change was part of a broader message, rather than the sole thrust of the message.

51% “very convincing”

All Americans have a shared responsibility to protect our natural world: to use only what we need, make smarter choices, and pass on to future generations the beauty, wildlife, water and natural resources we have today. Especially with the threat of climate change, we should invest in conservation to meet this responsibility.

50% “very convincing”

All Americans have a shared responsibility to protect our natural world: to use only what we need, make smarter choices, and pass on to future generations the beauty, wildlife, water and natural resources we have today. Investing in conservation is a critical way of meeting that responsibility.

The concept of “adaptation” in particular is not something that resonates with the broad electorate at this time. Voters do not understand this concept at first blush, and many actively resist the idea when it is explained. There is a strong sense that nature should and will change in the future, but the entire concept of devoting resources to accommodate those changes tends to smack of defeatism and “giving in” to global warming as a *fait accompli*. While these policies must be pursued, describing them as “adaptation to global warming” will not generate enthusiasm among voters. The conservation community is better served by providing broader rationales in support of conservation.

On the Economy...

- *DO NOT count on public support for conservation unless you work to make it happen.* Conservation is less of a concern today than in the recent past; economic issues have pushed it further down the list of most pressing concerns in voters' minds. While voters value land, water and wildlife and want to conserve them, issues related to conservation simply are not everyday concerns for them. At the same time, when conservation issues are brought to voters' attention they are every bit as important as they have been in the past. This means the only way to get the public to act on conservation issues is to more forcefully place the issues before them and give them opportunities to get involved.
- *DO reinforce the compatibility between having a strong economy and preserving land, water and wildlife.* Most voters see no reason why we cannot continue to protect land and water while maintaining the country's economic strength. More than three-quarters of voters (76%) believe we can protect land and water and have a strong economy at the same time, while fewer than one in five believe that those objectives are even “sometimes” in conflict. At every opportunity, voters should be reminded that economic growth and conservation are mutually reinforcing goals: they intuitively believe it, but given the relentless rhetoric arguing the opposite, voters' beliefs must be reinforced.

The obvious corollary to this “rule” is that conservation efforts must actively resist, reject, and refute claims by opponents that environmental protections will hurt jobs and economic development. While on some level voters realize this is a false choice, their heightened economic anxieties make them susceptible to this kind of messaging.

- *DO NOT focus on economic rationales for conservation.* We acknowledge that our own survey data – like that of every other comparable survey conducted over the past year – shows the economy and jobs to be far and away American voters’ top concern. And of course there can be specific states or communities where tourist visits to natural areas or beaches are recognized as major economic engines (as evident in many state and local surveys we have conducted around the country in the past year). Nonetheless, explicit economic rationales for conservation should be considered second-tier messages for broad, national communications.

The two messages focusing on economic rationales for conservation that we tested in the survey (shown below) rated lower among nearly all sub-groups than did the tried and true pro-conservation messages – those focusing on the non-economic values of land, water and wildlife, messages that conservation organizations have used successfully (in good economic times and bad) for decades.

41% “very convincing”

Tourists and visitors are drawn to the beauty of beaches, mountains, parks, and natural areas. Recent economic studies found that for every dollar invested in national parks and wildlife refuges, four dollars was generated for the local economy. Preserving those areas helps our economy, retains jobs, and preserves home values.

39% “very convincing”

Conservation of land and water is a smart economic investment. At least one in twenty U.S. jobs relies on having a healthy environment, and outdoor recreation alone contributes over seven hundred billion dollars annually to our economy. Investing in our land, water and wildlife will help our environment and secure good jobs.

The bottom line: we should not let the current economic crisis lead us to take our eyes off the ball. Voters want clean air and water; a natural legacy for future generations; and locations for outdoor recreation every bit as much now as they did in a stronger economy. These timeless values should continue to be the focus of our messaging.

- *DO NOT talk about “sustainable jobs” and expect voters to connect the idea to natural resources.* Across eight focus groups, after having discussed conservation issues for nearly an hour, not one participating voter understood the term “sustainable jobs” to have any relation to sustaining natural resources. Instead, focus group respondents tended to view “sustainable jobs” as implying a good-paying, long-term job in an on-going field. For example, one swing voter respondent defined sustainable jobs as “*Perpetual. You are not going to lose your job, or you can retire and somebody can take your place.*”

For the concept of “sustainable jobs” to resonate, it must be given a few more words of explanation. Voters must understand that sustainable jobs are those that provide good jobs and protect the long-term health of forests, farms, or fisheries.

- *DO NOT use “green jobs” either.* Many voters are tired of the term “green”. It is described by voters as being trendy and trite, and a phrase that immediately gives them the feeling they are being marketed to, due to its association with so many consumer products. As one swing voter in a focus group explained his ambivalence to the term, “*I just kind of get numb to the word. Everything is green. Green cars, green buildings, green gases. I’m getting numb to it.*”

How Best to Position Conservation Initiatives...

- *DO highlight diverse coalitions and collaborations in support of conservation efforts.* Doing so speaks of broad, consensus support. It suggests economic efficiencies. It bypasses partisan divisions. It avoids cynicism that attaches to government or environmental organizations when they are acting alone. Finally, it helps convince voters that foresight and long-range planning are in play.
- *DO recognize that voters are generally not aware of many “hot” conservation topics.* While local communities may be squarely focused and irate over certain threats such as oil and gas drilling, we often see that these types of issues simply have not made it onto the broader electorate’s radar screens.
- *DO describe conservation policy proposals in concrete and specific language, without getting too caught up in the details.* Such communication can be a difficult balancing act. In general, we know that voters are much more concerned about how they benefit from conservation, rather than the mechanics of how those goals might be achieved. Separate national polling our firms have conducted shows that trust in government is declining. In the focus groups testing various conservation proposals, it was clear this skepticism affects voters’ views of any government policy proposal. The loftier the language, the less believable the proposal was deemed. By providing a few key facts such as where land might be conserved, who would administer the effort, and where revenues would originate, voters were less likely to regard a proposal as “too good to be true.”

At the same time, avoid the reverse danger. Do not get caught up in the process of HOW conservation will take place, such as referring to land acquisition, purchase of development rights, etc. Focus on *outcomes*, and on how people will benefit – not on processes.

- *DO address voter skepticism about accountability whenever public funding enters the discussion.* Given declining confidence in government, conservation efforts MUST ensure that strong fiscal accountability provisions are attached to any government spending proposal. The inclusion of provisions such as regular audits, public disclosure, time limits, and citizen oversight in each and every funding plan ought to be a primary focus.
- *DO maintain an essentially hopeful, optimistic tone.* Explaining how voters will benefit from a policy beats describing how they will be threatened by its absence every time. There’s a place for highlighting the problems that conservation will solve – but only if you also articulate the solution. In other polling we have completed, we have consistently seen that voters who share the positive vision

– that a polluted body of water CAN be cleaned up, for example – are significantly more likely to support policy changes or investing in that endeavor.

- *DO talk about conservation as part of a long-term plan for a community's quality of life.* Over the last five years, we have found that there are few stronger words than communicating that there is a “plan” for managing growth, conserving land, and protecting a community’s character and quality of life. One of the strongest rationales for conservation has consistently been protecting the good quality of life voters feel they have in their community. Voters want a pro-active approach to preserving it; they want someone looking ahead, past the next 24-hour news cycle and the next election. All too often, on a wide range of issues, they believe that kind of long-range thinking has been absent from government’s actions.
- *DO NOT hesitate to point to growth and development as a rationale for conservation – but be conscious of the current context.* The data shows that nationally, concern about growth and development has dropped over the last five years. But there are still more voters who think it is moving too fast than think it is moving too slowly – especially in cities, suburbs, and the West. And voters have long memories; even if growth is slow now, their frame of reference for thinking about their communities can extend back decades – a period over which the impact from development has in many cases been dramatic.

Language must reflect the reality voters see on the ground. In the immediate present, homebuilding is not moving at the pace it used to. Messages that invoke the impact of growth must address this by focusing on impacts over a longer period of time, and projecting what is likely to happen in the future.

- *DO NOT point to more parks or outdoor recreation as a way to solve childhood obesity.* Focus group respondents rejected messaging that attempted to connect childhood obesity with conservation efforts. They do not think that a lack of parks and access to outdoor recreation is the problem. Instead they point to children’s preference for television and video games, unhealthy foods, and even the reluctance among parents to allow children unstructured or unsupervised outdoors play. Voters may see a serious problem with childhood obesity, but they do not think that conserving more natural areas is a critical part of the solution.
- *DO speak to voters’ pride of place.* Invoking “America” or the name of voters’ own state speaks to voters’ local pride, and reminds them of the factors that have led them to choose to live where they do. At the state or national level, more often than not, what voters enjoy or appreciate about their location involves something about the land, wildlife or natural setting.
- *DO NOT refer to “landscape scale conservation.”* Voters respond to the idea of preserving large, connected areas like entire forests, mountain ranges, wildlife habitats, or wetlands, and think conservation should be planned and carried out on a regional, integrated level. They do not think of this as “landscape scale” nor can they articulate the rationales behind why “landscape scale” conservation might be important (“wildlife migration corridors” is another term that is not recognized or understood).
- *In fact, DO NOT use the term “landscape” in connection with lands to be protected.*

Overwhelmingly, in the focus groups voters connected the term “landscape” with paintings and/or planned plantings one might have in a backyard (landscaping). Neither concept is one that invokes accessible nature in which people are included. “[It sounds] like you are not supposed to touch it. It’s to look at,” explained one focus group respondent. Moreover, “loss of scenic vistas” (at 13% “extremely” or “very serious”) was the single least compelling conservation concern we tested.

A Few Words About “Ecosystem Services”

This research also began to explore a complex policy issue much discussed in the conservation community today – that of “ecosystem services.” While upcoming survey research will delve into the topic in more detail, our research to date leads to a number of conclusions about how to discuss this difficult concept.

- *DO NOT use the term “ecosystem services.”* The term “ecosystem services” - does not adequately convey the concept to less knowledgeable audiences. Few voters spend time visiting “ecosystems” – they visit forests, wetlands, rivers, deserts and mountains. And some resist the idea that nature provides “services” to people – while they acknowledge that people depend upon and benefit from nature, the idea that nature exists to “serve” them is off-putting to some. Other metaphorical language used in connection with this concept – infrastructure, safety net, life-support, health and safety systems – is greeted with similar indifference.
- *DO talk about the “benefit of nature” or “nature’s benefits.”* Focus group respondents readily embrace the concept that there is value and benefit to the public in nature. They do not need to be talked into the concept. Notably, food safety and health – and of course, clean air/clean water – were mentioned in all the groups we conducted. Once raised, the fact that many medicines come from nature is also something that resonates strongly.
- *DO clarify the economic value of conservation.* Voters get, intuitively, that there is economic value to clean air, clean water, and plants and wildlife. And quantifying those benefits – in terms of dollars or other metrics – allows voters to compare the relative benefits of different land use decisions.

As noted above, such economic arguments will not necessarily compel voters to support conservation policies – but they may at least help them to recognize that conservation provides specific, quantifiable benefits to the public that must be considered as a counterbalance to the benefits of development or resource extraction.

- *DO highlight the numbers of people that stand to benefit from the protection of nature.* An element of the ecosystem services concept that voters found appealing was the breadth of the sharing of benefits from conservation. While developing a piece of land may yield, say \$100 million in benefits for a single developer, conserving it might yield \$50 million in natural benefits to the general public. Voters prefer the second option to the first: while it may not maximize the economic value of the land, it allows a broader group to benefit from it.
- *DO NOT forget to invoke the unquantifiable value of nature.* Even the steeliest non-environmentalist in our focus groups acknowledged a value to nature that is difficult to quantify on a balance sheet. Many spoke of its calming, spiritual benefits – simply having the opportunity to be away from a city

and from people was seen as enormously valuable. For some, discussions of nature's benefits that are too practical and utilitarian seem to slight these very real benefits.

Research Methodology: From September 8 to 13, 2009, Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin, Metz & Associates (D) and Public Opinion Strategies (R) completed interviews with 800 registered voters throughout the United States (700 conducted via traditional land-line and 100 conducted via cell phone). The margin of error associated with a sample of this type is $\pm 3.8\%$. Interviews were also conducted with a total of N=500 voters in the non-California West (AZ, NM, CO, WY, NV, UT, ID, OR and WA), which has a margin of error of $\pm 4.38\%$. Comparisons are made to a similarly conducted national survey in April 2004. The 2009 survey was preceded by eight focus groups conducted among a variety of audiences, including voters of color, in Kansas City, MO; Denver, CO; Charlotte, NC; and Tampa, FL.

<i>Final Notes on Language and Messaging</i>

In summary, the following table provides a short reference – building on prior research and drawing on this year’s work – to the best and worst language that can be used in developing support for conservation.

<i>Bad Words to Avoid</i>	<i>Good Words to Use</i>
<i>Environment</i>	<i>Land, air and water</i>
<i>Ecosystems</i>	<i>Natural areas</i>
<i>Biodiversity / endangered species</i>	<i>Fish and wildlife</i>
<i>Regulations</i>	<i>Safeguards/protections</i>
<i>Riparian</i>	<i>Land along lakes, rivers and streams</i>
<i>Aquifer</i>	<i>Groundwater</i>
<i>Watershed</i>	<i>Land around rivers, lakes and streams</i>
<i>Environmental groups</i>	<i>Conservation groups / organizations protecting land, air, and water</i>
<i>Agricultural land</i>	<i>Working farms and ranches</i>
<i>Urban sprawl</i>	<i>Poorly planned growth/ development</i>
<i>Green jobs</i>	<i>Clean energy jobs/jobs protecting water quality/etc.</i>
<i>Ecosystem services</i>	<i>Nature’s benefits</i>
<i>Landscape scale conservation</i>	<i>Large, connected natural areas</i>

Summary of Messages - Ranked By % Very Convincing

Messages	% Very Convincing	% Total Convincing
Outdoor recreation is a part of our way of life - from hunters and fishermen to young children who play in parks. Protecting our natural areas will ensure that we still have places to hike, bike, boat, fish, hunt, see wildlife or just enjoy the quiet and peace of nature.	55%	89%
We need to protect our beaches, lakes, natural areas and wildlife habitat for future generations. Unless we act to protect these areas now, many of our beautiful natural areas will disappear before our children and grandchildren have a chance to enjoy them.	51%	83%
All Americans have a shared responsibility to protect our natural world: to use only what we need, make smarter choices, and pass on to future generations the beauty, wildlife, water and natural resources we have today. Especially with the threat of climate change, we should invest in conservation to meet this responsibility.	51%	82%
All Americans have a shared responsibility to protect our natural world: to use only what we need, make smarter choices, and pass on to future generations the beauty, wildlife, water and natural resources we have today. Investing in conservation is a critical way of meeting that responsibility.	50%	85%
A healthy environment is vital to the health of all Americans. The air we breathe, the water we drink, the food we eat, and medicines that cure many illnesses all come from nature. Protecting our land and water is a cost-effective way to help keep us all healthy, and reduce health care costs.	49%	85%
Our state's beautiful natural areas are part of God's creation, and we have a moral responsibility to take care of them and protect them.	49%	80%
By protecting open space, natural areas forests and plants, we can protect the quality of the air we breathe. Forests provide natural filters that remove dangerous pollutants, making our air healthier.	48%	87%
Nothing is more important than having clean water to drink. By supporting this proposal, we can reduce runoff and toxics in the lakes, rivers and streams that bring us clean drinking water.	48%	82%
Tourists and visitors are drawn to the beauty of beaches, mountains, parks, and natural areas. Recent economic studies found that for every dollar invested in national parks and wildlife refuges, four dollars was generated for the local economy. Preserving those areas helps our economy, retains jobs, and preserves home values.	41%	81%
Global warming will bring major changes to our land, water, plants, and wildlife. We need to not only shift to cleaner sources of energy, but protect and restore our threatened natural areas to help protect people and wildlife from the impacts global warming will have.	40%	70%
Conservation of land and water is a smart economic investment. At least one in twenty U.S. jobs relies on having a healthy environment, and outdoor recreation alone contributes over seven hundred billion dollars annually to our economy. Investing in our land, water and wildlife will help our environment and secure good jobs.	39%	83%
This proposal will help protect wildlife habitat and our rich diversity of plants and animals. Each species plays an important role in the natural balance of life, which is important to the health and safety of the environment and people as well.	39%	82%
Safeguarding forests is a cost-effective and common sense ways to decrease the amount of carbon in our atmosphere, thereby reducing global warming.	37%	69%