

## Do's and Don'ts: What Public Opinion Research Tells Us About Conservation Communications

Public opinion research conducted over the last several years gives us insights into what works and what needs to be changed about conservation communications. Following are some do's and don'ts to follow for a more effective, audience-centered communications effort.

### 1. **Do Focus on Benefits**

When talking about the ecosystem values, or ecosystem services, focus on the benefits to the public health and safety – water quality, air quality, crop production for food, production of medicines and protection against floods and hurricanes. Encourage your audience to think broadly about all the benefits nature provides and remind them of nature's role in providing materials for medicines. Where possible, use local examples and avoid highly specific examples that may lack relevance outside their local context (e.g., the rain forests!).

### 2. **Do Talk About Funding as an Investment... Always!**

When talking about money, it's always about the investment, not about the cost. Know the value, costs and trade-offs related to acting vs. delaying 'investment' in conservation.

### 3. **Do Think Beyond Just the Dollar Value**

Voters are even more supportive of measuring value in terms other than dollars, such as jobs created (which 84% see as “helpful”), the number of people who benefit (87% support), or additional clean air and water a natural area provides (92% supportive).

### 4. **Don't Let The Economy – The Number One Issue – Dissuade You or Them**

Remember, although economic arguments work, the traditional conservation message – clean water – is still more effective. Don't assume that, because we are in tough economic times, people are more receptive to dollars and cents messages. 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 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 – still prevail. The bottom line: you should not let the current economic crisis lead you 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 your messaging.

**5. Don't Fall Victim to the Argument It's Either Jobs and the Economy OR the Environment**

Recent research on climate change confirms the public generally regards this choice as a false one and recognizes we can have both a strong economy and good environment. In fact, in many instances, with new, clean energy technologies, the public believes jobs will come from these new, environmentally-friendly, clean technology and clean energy sectors. 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, legislators should be reminded that economic growth and conservation are mutually reinforcing goals: they intuitively believe it, but given the relentless rhetoric arguing the opposite, these beliefs must be reinforced.

**6. Do Partner with Others**

Farmers, hunters, anglers, scientists (as long as they speak plain English!) and natural resources agencies – in addition to public health organizations – all make for real-world messengers. Do make them a part of you meetings and presentations.

**7. Do Erase the Term ‘Ecosystem Services’ from Your Vocabulary**

Use ‘nature’s benefits’ or ‘nature’s value’ instead and remember most folks don't actually talk like you in general. Use these terms to appeal to the middle-of-the-road viewpoint of your audience where traditional support for environmental policies is not likely.

**8. Do Use the ‘Good’ Words and Don't Use the ‘Bad’ Words**

Research shows subtle changes in words and phrase can make a difference. Use the guidelines in the table below to effectively communicate concepts in a way your audience can understand and relate to them.

Bad Words to Avoid	Good Words to Use
Environment	Land, air and water
Ecosystems	Natural areas
Biodiversity/endangered species	Fish and wildlife
Regulations	Safeguards/standards/protections
Riparian	Lakes, rivers and streams
Watershed	Water/Land around rivers lakes and streams
Environmental groups	Conservation groups/organizations protecting land, air, and water
Agricultural land	Farmland
Urban sprawl	Unplanned growth/development

**9. 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.**

The researchers 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 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, you 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, also tested were the terms “agricultural land” (too dry and not as evocative) and “farmland and ranchland” (better, but not as positive as “working farms and ranches”).

**10. 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.

**11. Don’t Count on 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.

**12. Do Use Phrases that Imply Ownership and Inclusion Such As “Our” and “We.”**

Many of the strongest messages in the research incorporate this language. So, describe “OUR natural areas” or “WE need to protect OUR beaches, lakes, natural areas and wildlife. . . .” As importantly and connected to this message is the use of place-specific language, especially when iconic, easily-recognizable areas exists (avoid esoteric mention of species, habitat and other language, no matter how tempting to talk about something that’s threatened or facing extinction). Speak to the pride of place by 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.

**13. DO talk about conservation as part of a long-term plan for a community's quality of life.**

Over the last five years, the research has found 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.

**14. 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.

**15. 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. Polling shows 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.

Public Opinion Research Footnote:

*Much of the material for this document and the public opinion research referenced has been provided by two firms who have conducted extensive quantitative and qualitative research in the field of conservation over the last two decades, the bipartisan research team of Democratic polling firm Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin, Metz & Associates (FM3) and the Republican polling firm of Public Opinion Strategies (POS). They have provided a broad range of research projects to The Nature Conservancy, Trust for Public Land and other state and national organizations. For more information, contact Eleanor Morris, Policy Associate at The Nature Conservancy, at 406.728.9531 or [emorris@tnc.org](mailto:emorris@tnc.org).*