



**PUBLIC OPINION
STRATEGIES**



**OPINION
RESEARCH
& STRATEGY**

TO: Interested Parties

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

DATE: October 1, 2018

The following recommendations for communicating effectively to build support for conservation are based on two representative national surveys of American voters commissioned by The Nature Conservancy in 2018 and conducted by a bi-partisan research team: Democratic polling firm FM3 (Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin, Metz & Associates) and Republican polling firm Public Opinion Strategies. These findings build on national research in 2004, 2009, and 2012 that informed the initial “Language of Conservation” communications guidelines, as well as significant regional and state research conducted over the last few years on behalf of TNC and its partner organizations to further illuminate the data.

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

Three elements continue to be the most critical to communicate regarding conservation; for ease of reference they can be thought of as the three W’s of water, wildlife, and way of life.

- **Water should always be communicated as the primary element or impact of a project.** Ensuring reliable supplies of clean water cannot be stressed enough as a primary rationale for conservation. When asked what they think of when they hear the phrase “the environment,” more voters point to “water” than anything else. Voters prioritize water as a critical reason to engage in conservation, no matter how it is expressed. Vast majorities of those polled see it as “very important” to...
 - Protect our drinking water quality (87%);
 - Protect oceans and the fish that live in them (73%);
 - Protect lakes, rivers and streams (72%);
 - Prevent pesticides and fertilizers from running off farmland and into rivers and streams (68%); and
 - Act as natural filters for our air and help keep pollutants out of our drinking water, fish, and other foods (67%).

The fact that “drinking water” is highest is consistent in nearly all our research. Protecting “drinking water” implies a connection to public health which resonates on a deeper level with voters than any other formulation. In addition, the most compelling rationale for investment in conservation out of the sixteen that we tested also evokes drinking water:

“Nothing is more important than having clean water to drink. By conserving natural areas, forests and wildlife habitat, we can reduce runoff and toxics in the lakes, rivers and streams that bring us clean drinking water.”

Another element of this message has been affirmed by our research time and time again. We have found a clear understanding that land – be it forests, wetlands, or any natural areas – helps to filter out pollutants from water. In past research we have found widespread agreement that “protecting land around rivers, lakes, and streams, will keep pollution from flowing into these waters and prevent it from eventually contaminating our drinking water.”

Concern about water – along with a number of other conservation concerns – has increased substantially in the last six years. Today, 64 percent say that “pollution of rivers, lakes and streams” is an extremely or very serious problem, up from 41 percent in 2012.

- **DO highlight how conservation benefits wildlife.** We consistently see that after water, one of the next highest priorities for voters is conserving wildlife habitat or cleaning up rivers, streams or oceans due to the impact it has on wildlife (the 2nd “W”). Nearly two-thirds of American voters (65%) say that “protecting wildlife habitat” should be a very important goal of conservation efforts. Concern has been increasing about “loss of habitat for fish and wildlife” as the economy has rebounded and pace of development increased (50% now say it is an “extremely” or “very serious” problem, up from 34% in 2012). Notably, while voters want to protect all kinds of wildlife, terms like “biodiversity” are relatively unfamiliar and do not resonate.

Voters are increasingly aware of and concerned about pollinators, adding a new element to their concern about wildlife. Again, nearly two-thirds (65%) say that helping to “conserve habitat for disappearing pollinators like bees and monarch butterflies” is a very important goal for a conservation effort. A concern about pollinators is one that voters in focus groups have told us they hear about in the news frequently – even on their breakfast cereal boxes! Its direct link to (and impact on) food supply helps to elevate it as a concern as well, making it the third-strongest message of any we tested:

“The development of millions of acres of land of vital wildlife habitat has contributed to negative impacts on pollinators like bees and monarch butterflies. Protecting and restoring these areas is critical to the survival of the insects which ensure our crops are pollinated and are vital for our food supply.”

- **DO evoke localized examples that speak to how conservation efforts preserve a “way of life” important and unique to that area.** “Way of life” is the third most important communication point for any conservation effort (and third “W”). One of the few non-water related goals that breaks into the top tier as a priority is protecting “our quality of life” (70% of American voters regard this as very important). In state and local research, very different elements can evoke “way of life” – it can be evoking conserving beaches and shoreline along the Great Lakes in a state touching those waters, protecting working waterfronts in New England, or stopping the loss of native prairies in a Great Plains state.

Often, we see that conserving the resources that traditional livelihoods rely upon helps to convey way of life. That may be “protecting coastal wetlands, clam flats, and eelgrass beds” in Maine, or “important coastal fishery and shrimp, crawfish and oyster habitats” in Louisiana. Keep in mind though that voters generally do not feel the same way about the tourism industry – they want to conserve beaches, mountains, and forests for themselves more than visitors, even in areas reliant on tourism.

More specifically, retaining a rural way of life often connects in many types of communities. Conserving “working farms and ranches” continues to be deemed an important goal for conservation (59% very important overall; 68% among rural residents). We continue to see American voters place great value on preserving small, family farms and ranches – notably, this is in contrast to their views of larger agricultural operations, which are generally not positive. When voters hear references to “farms and ranches,” in isolation, they do NOT assume that they are owned and run by people whose livelihood depends on them – and that distinction matters a great deal. The word “working” evokes those types of lands and conveys that the land is productive and being used. In addition, we see that discussion of “working farms and ranches” is increasingly resonant due to the important role they play in voters’ concern about ensuring local food production, which 64% say is a very important goal for a conservation effort.

More Key Themes Which Resonate

- **DO instill urgency – but without doom and gloom.** Even though there is a heightened concern about conservation problems now than in the recent past, there still needs to be an impetus to take action now, rather than deferring it to the future. Voters want to see proactive plans for immediate action for many reasons, but the cost implications of delay are often well understood. The third most compelling message we tested in this latest national survey is short and to the point on this topic:

“If we don't take care of what we have now, it will cost more to restore our natural areas and water in the future.”

Especially at the state level, using statistics to demonstrate a conservation problem can be helpful in an age of skepticism about news sources and expert information. However, facts and figures only work when connected to items people care about – and need to be coupled with hope for restoration. The fourth-strongest message we tested is a good example of how to marry the two:

“Less than five percent of all native grasslands remain in our country and 40 percent of rivers and lakes surveyed by the Environmental Protection Agency are too polluted for swimming or fishing. We need to act now to conserve our natural areas that act as wildlife habitat, clean our air and water, and add to our natural beauty.”

Notably, a message that attempts to evoke urgency by decrying the federal government's cuts in funding and attacks on public lands (without mentioning the President) is only top-tier among strong Democrats, and essentially ineffective with moderates and conservative voters.

- **DO connect conservation to public health – both physical and mental.** Voters want clean air and clean water, and instinctively view caring for the land as having benefits for air and water. Messaging should continue to stress the many ways that protecting our land, water and wildlife protects our own health. Voters also see other connections between conservation of nature and public health: they recognize that nature is a source of our food, of important medicines, and of critical lands for recreation.

Increasingly, voters are also hearing about the connection between nature and mental health. In recent focus groups, voters in disparate areas of the country and on all sides of the political aisle talked about the importance of having opportunities to “get away,” “de-stress” and “relax.” In fact,

the second-strongest message among all voters – and the top one among younger voters – was one that made this strong connection between conservation and health:

“Our health is of vital importance. The air we breathe, the water we drink, the food we eat, and medicines that cure many illnesses all come from nature. And, studies have shown that spending time in nature is better at relieving depression than prescription medicines. Protecting our land and water will help keep us all healthy - both physically and mentally.”

- **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 act now to conserve our natural areas...”
- **DO use “front-line” messengers to communicate in support of conservation efforts.** Obviously, a messenger needs to have a logical connection to the message they are communicating, but messengers viewed as being on the “front lines” – either as out on the land or independent examiners of an issue with no financial stake in the outcome – are seen as most credible. Firefighters are the most trustworthy, followed by nurses and scientists. And, while voters generally dislike “government” these days (primarily with reference to elected officials), state agencies which deal with natural resources are seen as extremely credible, as evidenced here:

| Ranked by All Voters % Total Trust | |
|--|-----------------------------------|
| | All Voters Total Trust |
| Firefighters | 92% |
| Nurses and other health professionals | 86% |
| Biologists | 85% |
| Farmers and ranchers | 84% |
| Scientists | 83% |
| Your state department of natural resources | 75% |
| Professors at a major research university | 74% |
| Conservation organizations | 74% |
| Hunters and fishermen | 73% |
| Your local church or place of worship | 71% |

Churches and places of worship can be a tricky messenger for conservation groups to employ, as it can be extremely personal. However, it is also important to note that a message that evoked God's creation ranks weak overall, but was fourth highest among Republican voters: *"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."* Just as with the messenger, evoking this message is highly dependent on the audience.

Finally, it is no surprise that elected officials – even a local Mayor – are viewed as the least credible to communicate about efforts to protect and restore land, water and wildlife. Of course, having the support of elected officials is still a prudent step for any conservation effort.

- ***DO continue to use a "future generations" message and images of children in the outdoors.*** While a message focused on future generations rates lower overall than it has in the past, we continue to see that the concept of protecting land, water and wildlife for our children and grandchildren is one that voters volunteer organically as a reason for supporting conservation. It also tends to resonate more with some key audiences such as sportsmen and conservatives, especially when we use language that evokes passing on "outdoor traditions" to the next generation. In other research, images of children playing outdoors, particularly in streams or on beaches, are highly compelling visuals.
- ***DO NOT make access to public lands or natural areas the centerpiece of appeals for conservation.*** Only a very small sliver of the electorate – typically, dedicated outdoor enthusiasts – recognizes the need for increased conservation to create connections to protected lands. Providing "greater access to outdoor recreation for all Americans" is the third least important of the 30 goals we tested (38% say it is very important). Moreover, providing "access for hunting and fishing" is the least-compelling goal for a conservation effort of the 30 that we tested (28% very important). It ranks only slightly higher among anglers (44% very important, 22nd of the 30) and with hunters (53% very important, 20th of 30). In other research among sportsmen we have also tested other language and opportunities to engage in their sport, and the subtle changes in language have minimal effect. 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 and opportunities to recreate.
- ***DO couple outdoor recreation with economic impact.*** As a goal for a conservation project, we consistently see that outdoor recreation elements tend to fall to the bottom of voters' priorities, and far below the most resonant items like water or wildlife. However, we are seeing more Americans recognizing the economic benefits of outdoor recreation in their states. In fact, 88% of voters in this national survey say that the outdoor recreation economy – meaning "people who come to hike, camp, see wildlife, fish or hunt, as well as those who manufacture and sell equipment for those activities" will be important for "the economic future" of their state. Nearly half (49%) say it will be very important.

While a message that couples outdoor recreation with specific economic impact facts was lower-tier in this survey, it ranks as second highest among sportsmen, typically a key constituency in conservation efforts. Moreover, this type of message – when individualized for a state – has tended to be a top-tier rationale to fund conservation efforts in a number of different statewide surveys conducted over the past few years:

“Outdoor recreation like wildlife viewing, boating, and hiking is a wonderful part of many Americans' way of life that wouldn't be possible without clean water and beautiful natural areas. But it also benefits our economy. It generates \$887 billion dollars in consumer spending, \$59 billion dollars in state and local taxes, and provides 7.6 million American jobs.”

It is also important to be specific in talking about outdoor recreation – 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 a gear-laden backpacker image.

- **DO reinforce the compatibility between having a strong economy and preserving land, water and wildlife.** Voters today are even more likely to see no reason why we cannot continue to protect land and water while maintaining the country's economic strength. Fully 84% believe we can protect land and water and have a strong economy at the same time (up from 76% in 2009). Just 15% 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.
- **DO NOT make global warming/climate change the primary rationale for conservation.** The most politically polarizing goals or rationales for conservation are those that position climate change as the primary reason for conserving. More conservative voters rate these significantly lower than other rationales in support of conservation. For example, even very soft language such as helping “conserve areas threatened by changes in the climate” provokes a partisan response. While it is seen as very important by 55% of American voters, responses break out along party lines: 75% of Democrats say it is very important, compared to 54% of independents and just 32% of Republicans. Among strong Republicans, it ranks 26th of the 30 goals we tested. At the same time, this research shows that climate change is one of the most top-of-mind conservation problems for Democratic voters, providing a real tightrope for conservation organizations to walk in broad-based public communications.

However, referring to climate change in passing as part of a broader argument for conservation has generally not had a significant impact – positive or negative – on responses. In the interest of continuing to expand and reinforce public attention to this vital issue, incorporating subtle

references to climate change into otherwise strong messages may be advisable. This, however, is an area where location-specific research is likely critical.

Additional insight into communications about climate change based on [other research we have conducted on behalf of The Nature Conservancy](#).

How Best to Position Conservation Policy Initiatives

- **DO highlight the 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 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 focus groups testing various conservation proposals over the past year, it has been clear this skepticism affects voters' views of any government policy proposal. The loftier the language, the less believable the proposal is deemed. But by providing a few key facts such as where land might be conserved, who would administer the effort, and where revenues would originate, voters can be made 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 plummeting 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 a 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 investments.
- **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 proactive 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 speak to voters’ pride of place.*** When communicating solely with U.S. voters, 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.

Final Notes on Language and Messaging

In summary, the following table provides a short reference – building on prior research and drawing on this year’s work – on 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> |
| <i>Landscape</i> | <i>Lands / mountains / etc.</i> |
| <i>Resilience</i> | <i>Creating prepared communities (for flood, fire, etc.)</i> |
| <i>Nutrient loading</i> | <i>Harmful levels of nutrients like nitrogen and phosphorous</i> |

TOP MESSAGES FROM 2018 SURVEY

| Ranked by All Voters % Very Convincing | All Voters | Millennials |
|--|-----------------|-------------|
| | Very Convincing | |
| (WATER) Nothing is more important than having clean water to drink. By conserving natural areas, forests and wildlife habitat, we can reduce runoff and toxics in the lakes, rivers and streams that bring us clean drinking water. | 60% | 58% |
| (HEALTH) Our health is of vital importance. The air we breathe, the water we drink, the food we eat, and medicines that cure many illnesses all come from nature. And, studies have shown that spending time in nature is better at relieving depression than prescription medicines. Protecting our land and water will help keep us all healthy - both physically and mentally. | 52% | 57% |
| (MORE MONEY) If we don't take care of what we have now, it will cost more to restore our natural areas and water in the future. | 50% | 50% |
| (POLLINATORS) The development of millions of acres of land of vital wildlife habitat has contributed to negative impacts on pollinators like bees and monarch butterflies. Protecting and restoring these areas is critical to the survival of the insects which ensure our crops are pollinated and are vital for our food supply. | 45% | 43% |
| (PROBLEM) Less than five percent of all native grasslands remain in our country and 40 percent of rivers and lakes surveyed by the Environmental Protection Agency are too polluted for swimming or fishing. We need to act now to conserve our natural areas that act as wildlife habitat, clean our air and water, and add to our natural beauty. | 45% | 48% |

Research Methodology: FM3 Research (D) and Public Opinion Strategies (R) have conducted multiple national surveys on behalf of The Nature Conservancy over the last fifteen years that focus extensively on how to communicate about conservation. In addition, we have conducted focus groups, state and regional research which also laid the foundation for this analysis. The most recent national surveys were completed in June and July 2018. One was conducted on-line of 1000 voters, with 400 additional interviews to reach a total of N=728 Millennial/younger voters (ages 18-37). The overall survey responses were weighted back to reflect the true age representation of voters, but allowed us to examine younger voters' views with greater confidence. Due to their nature, online surveys report a confidence interval which for the overall sample is +3.53%, and for the younger voters is +4.14%. We also conducted a national survey to track core questions with 800 registered voters throughout the United States conducted on both traditional land-lines and cell phones. The margin of error associated with a sample of this type is ± 3.46%. Previous national phone surveys were conducted in 2012, 2009 and 2004.