

Environmentalism or Conservationist, and Does it Matter?

-Jane Elder

When you speak out for environmental protection, are you an environmentalist, or a conservationist, and does it really make that much of a difference? To some people in the field, there is a huge difference, and they will make a considerable effort to distinguish themselves. Usually, it is a conservationist claiming that they aren't an environmentalist; and most self-described environmentalists don't seem to care that much about which label they are assigned. But, before I spark off a huge debate about Pinchot and Muir, and how hunting license fees pay for conservation and all the other things that feed into this well-worn discussion, let me call a time out. Let's not talk about the inside-the-family debate, because I doubt we'll settle it here. Instead, let's look at how the public sees these labels, and how it affects how we should use them in communications.

The public does see a difference between conservationist and environmentalist, but it doesn't necessarily see the distinctions we do. In our focus groups conducted by Belden Russonello & Stewart over the last two years we've seen a consistent pattern in how people characterize the two labels. (These observations are echoed in findings from other research projects throughout the U.S.) Here is a quick and cursory overview of general public impressions.

Environmentalism: Someone whose agenda and work is driven by a set of over-arching beliefs - an ideology
Conservationist: Someone who is working on a practical solution to a particular problem

Environmentalism: The environment is to be saved, preserved, set aside, protected from human abuse.
Conservationist: The environment is something we use, so we have to conserve it and take care of it, so that others can use it in the future.

Environmentalism: From somewhere else - a national, international, or state capitol group
Conservationist: Local, a neighbor or community member
Environmentalism: Extreme, radical, impassioned
Conservationist: Practical, balanced

Environmentalism: Rarely satisfied
Conservationist: Pragmatic

Environmentalism: Gloomy
Conservationist: Solution-oriented

Environmentalism: Plays a necessary role - a public conscience and watchdog. Makes a difference.
Conservationist: Contributes to the community. Makes a difference.

Environmentalism: Slightly superior/righteous (I don't waste energy, eat GMO food, why do you!?)
Conservationist: Just one of us

Environmentalism Stereotype: Greenpeace activist
Conservationist Stereotype: Local duck hunter

One might think from a comparison like this that it is a simple "no-brainer" to opt for the conservationist label in public communications, but it isn't quite that simple. The public perception is influenced by a level of discomfort with tactics they associate with environmentalists, but many will acknowledge that those tactics can be effective and sometimes necessary. So, in some cases, the public may not warm up to environmentalists but they respect the role environmentalists play. In other cases, tactics that the public views as extreme and inflammatory overshadow any message. As pollster John Russonello has pointed out in workshops this past year, for the environmental movement, the tactic often is the message, whether we like it or not. So just slapping a conservationist label on an environmental tactic won't succeed.

The public tends to blur all environmental groups together, so the tactics of one color the reputation of others. In focus groups people can typically name Greenpeace and sometimes Sierra Club when asked to identify environmental groups (there's that "national" notion). Beyond that, name recognition for environmental groups drops right off. For conservation groups, they often name state fish and wildlife agencies, and sometimes a local group, blurring the distinction between agencies and nonprofits.

During focus groups in Wisconsin this summer, we found that prominent state environmentalists were more recognized than the groups they came from. I guess we all have quite a way to go on organizational branding!

So, back to this environmentalist label. While it can be problematic, I think it is a mistake for the environmental movement to dispose of this label like a pair of shoes that doesn't fit anymore. Environmentalist is a term that has power and meaning in our culture, but some of that meaning is negative. We face the challenge of re-claiming it on terms that work for us. Re-staking rhetorical turf isn't easy, but the alternative is to cede the term to those who would seek to marginalize it, and the environmental movement as well. Taking back the power of our word will take time and persistence and message discipline.

One step to reclaiming "environmentalist" will be to celebrate and claim the strengths of the term - our conviction and passion and love for the natural world - while shaking up old assumptions that lead to negative perceptions. We can begin to do this by putting new faces on what it means to be an environmentalist - faces that look as mainstream as our next door neighbors, as diverse as our culture, as fresh as our children, as wise as our grandparents. We can do this authentically, because we all know environmentalists like this, and we're all as American as pumpkin pie. We're not just the stereotypical images that make it on the evening news. (But those old images make better news than thoughtful community leaders engaged in building a better future.)

We can also do a better job of claiming the tactics that have high positives. We work in diverse coalitions and partnerships, and often this means with community groups and businesses. In local coalitions, people get to know each other, and it is amazing how that "wacko" image disappears when you are working shoulder-to-shoulder with neighbors and friends. One of my favorite New Yorker cartoons is a classic. Two women are talking and one says to the other, "He's in the Sierra Club, but he's, not, you know, a 'nut.'"

Environmentalists care about people and solutions too, but we need to do a better job at communicating this. Every poll that we've been involved with over the last two years tells us we need to help people see that there are solutions and explain why they will be effective. We can put a check mark next to gloom - the public wants to know: what can we do about it?

So does it matter, this environmentalist/conservationist distinction? Yes. By better understanding public perceptions about these labels, we can craft more insightful communications strategies and use the strengths of both terms when we need to draw upon them.

We can also put ourselves back in the driver's seat on shaping how we want these terms to be framed in our culture. We can choose to be champions or victims on the rhetorical battlefield, and it is a lot more fun to be in charge of the language and terms of the debate.

We may never resolve the internal discussion (I am beginning to dread being confronted at the next conference I attend), but we owe it to our movement to get our public discourse in order. There is power and opportunity in it.

"It's so easy to be wise; just think of something stupid to say, then don't say it."

-Sam Levinson