



Life. Nature. You. Make the connection.

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Tip Sheet: Communicating about Biodiversity

Conveying a strong, clear and effective message about the importance of biodiversity, the threats it faces, and what everyday citizens can do to help is not complicated or beyond reach. By considering these tips on communicating about biodiversity, you and your organization may more successfully relay a well-crafted message, identify who the target audience is, and through which outlets to deliver your communications.

1. DEFINE IT.

If you use the word biodiversity, explain what it means. Otherwise, talk about the web of life, nature, the natural world, ecosystems, habitats, etc.

2. MAKE IT REAL, NOT CONCEPTUAL OR ABSTRACT.

Talk about biodiversity in the context of real places, real ecosystems, real species and real issues. Ground the abstract concept of "diversity of gene pools, species and habitats" in real places and experiences. Illustrate with forests, river systems, deserts, coastlines, wetlands, etc. and the variety of life that depends on them, instead of statistics about global species loss.

3. LOCALIZE WHENEVER POSSIBLE; EMPHASIZE PLACE.

Use local examples and experiences to provide context and meaning -- a real place or problem that people can identify with, e.g., loss of local songbirds, loss of the region's sugar maple trees, destruction of a local marsh, invasions from zebra mussels, kudzu, etc. Eschew the exotic (Biodiversity: its not just for rainforests anymore!) when the local example is available. As long as species loss is taking place in far away places, it remains an abstract concept.

4. MAKE THE HUMAN CONNECTION: HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES.

Thanks to nature, life itself is possible: Illustrate and explain how healthy ecosystems sustain human life, from fresh air and clean water, to food, fiber and fun.

Healthy natural systems keep us healthy: Balanced ecosystems promote human health, from supplying clean water to protecting us from exotic viruses, exploding insect populations, and toxic pollution. Health is the primary environmental concern for Americans; fear of toxics is the #1 concern.

Nature's pharmacy: Potential loss of future sources of medicines interests some audiences (younger adults) and not others. But, don't just talk about medicines that might come someday from exotic places. Instead explain common medicines that have already come from nature (cortisone, for

example, from South African plant roots, or digitalis, from foxgloves) to illustrate how important natural sources of medicines already are. Start with the familiar, bridge to the possible.

5. FIND COMMON GROUND WITH COMMON VALUES. LEAD WITH VALUES; FOLLOW WITH FACTS.

Most Americans believe that we have a responsibility to maintain a clean and healthy environment for our families and for the future generations that will inherit the world we leave behind. This sense of "stewardship" provides common ground for starting conversations, after which the facts can be introduced.

6. IF THE VALUE FITS, USE IT.

Not everyone looks at the natural world the same way. Some think we should protect it because it is the responsible thing to do for the next generation, others, because it is God's creation, others, because it is beautiful, others because they believe in the intrinsic value of nature, etc.. Know which values your audience embraces before you invoke a particular value in your argument. When in doubt, retreat to stewardship.

7. EXPLAIN HOW HUMANS ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR LOSS OF SPECIES AND NATURAL AREAS, BUT ALSO EXPLAIN HOW HUMANS CAN HELP REVERSE THIS TREND. OFFER HOPE!

There's nothing like the imminent collapse of the planetary life support systems to really turn off an audience. Don't sugar coat the bad news, but always offer hope, alternatives, options: "there's another way of doing things."

8. CONNECT THE DOTS....MAKE THE RELATIONSHIPS AND INTER-DEPENDENCE OF NATURE CLEAR.

Talk about species or particular habitats in terms of relationships: explain the links to human well-being whenever possible. (E.g., we need spiders because they eat insects and keep the insect population in balance, which in turn protects humans from out-of-control insect populations.) People understand that nature is an interdependent system, but they don't know much about the specific relationships.

9. TAKE ADVANTAGE OF A BASIC APPRECIATION OF THE BALANCE OF NATURE TO EXPAND ECOLOGICAL LITERACY.

Most people appreciate the concept of nature as a balanced system, but many don't know what it takes for nature to stay balanced. Explain basic concepts such as diversity provides resilience/ lack of diversity makes systems vulnerable; explain the value of predators, scavengers and other "undesirable" species in terms of the whole system. Explain, explain, explain.

10. SPEAK IN PLAIN ENGLISH (or plain Spanish, etc.). Avoid scientific, technical, and other jargon.

Compiled from: "Human Values and Nature's Future: Americans' Attitudes on Biological Diversity, An Analysis of Findings from a National Survey" by Belden and Russonello and R/S/M, October 1996, and from Biodiversity Project workshop and working group discussions.