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# COMMUNICATING ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCE TO CONSERVATIVES

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THIS ISSUE:

## #85 February 2015


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By Winnifred Louis (University of Queensland) Feb 4, 2015

## Why and how



*EDG conservation scientists share perspectives on how they might reframe the communication of their science to engage with conservatives at a recent communication workshop (see section below).*

I want to make six points here, which together spell out that it's important to reach conservatives about environmental science, and that we need to change tactics to do this.

### 1. What works when we advocate for evidence-based policy?

Just as there is a need for evidence-based policy, so there is also a need for evidence that our advocacy of such policy is effective. This should be an easy message to give to environmental scientists, a group that is constantly telling us that policy should be evidence-based.

What's more, after several decades of communicating environmental science (and in particular after several years communicating the urgency on climate change), there is an evidence base for evaluating environmental campaigns. And looking at this evidence we have to say these campaigns often don't work. Indeed, they

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sometimes even decrease support for sustainable change.

## 2. Acknowledge prior attitudes and identities

The reason that environmental campaigns often don't work is that it turns out that the effectiveness of campaigns depends on audiences' existing attitudes and identities. Scientists tend to communicate about science using journal articles, jargon, and statistics, and that works well for other scientists. People who are already pro-sustainability or who identify as 'green'-minded tend to design environmental campaigns that work well for other people who are already pro-sustainability and who see themselves as 'green\*'. But it's important to acknowledge that these approaches don't work for everyone. ('Green' means different things to different people. For some it signifies environmentally-sensitive life styles, for others it's a label for an environmentally progressive political party and a political leaning. In this article the term is used to suggest all these things.)

## 3. Existing advocacy tactics often don't work

A lot of the tactics that environmental campaigns use have been shown not to work well in reaching the apathetic centre and the conservative right wing. For example, mentioning science in an environmental campaign actually decreases willingness to engage with the message among people who are sceptical. Some people see scientists as biased.

*"The reason that environmental campaigns often don't work is that it turns out that the effectiveness of campaigns depends on audiences' existing attitudes and identities."*

Similarly, evidence shows that messages about widespread problem behaviours only decrease the problem behaviour if readers don't feel similar to the group that is described. If audiences identify with the description, then reading about the problem behaviour (for example: "Australians waste energy!") actually increases the problem behaviour. Oops!

Finding out that groups have conflicting views about the environment, or reading a message about how what is being done now conflicts with what should be done, only energises people who already have strong views in favour of change. Among people who are apathetic or sceptical, it can actually reduce motivation to change. Darn it!

## 4. Partisanship can bring problems

Partly because of the intensity of advocacy in the last few years, people who are sympathetic to the green message have become more and more committed to their view, and more intense about the need for urgent change. Sometimes more left-leaning politicians and policy makers have brought about policy change in favour of environmental sustainability. But the lack of bipartisan consensus for change often

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sees these advances being reversed when there is a change in government, even where the change of government was for other reasons (such as leadership disputes). This has horrendous costs for effective environmental policy. It creates a cycle of increasingly frustrated, urgent Green-left advocates, met with increasing alienation and scepticism on the part of the centre/ apathetic voters, and increasingly unsustainable policy choices when the right-wing takes power. And this leads to even more urgency and frustration.

## 5. There is a need for consensus

There will always be a political debate between parties, and it is great to have a Green party that speaks strongly for environmental issues and attracts the most committed environmental voters. But there are many reasons to vote Coalition that are not about environmental choices; traditionally the Coalition has pitched to voters on fiscal responsibility, national security, and protecting heritage and tradition. Just as there is now bipartisan consensus about the undesirability of DDT, regardless of political party affiliation, we can imagine a time when there is bipartisan consensus about the utility of renewable energy, safe levels of carbon emission reduction, and protection and habitat conservation in the oceans and on land. The sooner we get to that consensus, the better.

## 6. Persuasion and a path to consensus

Changing the environmental views of conservatives will require many things. It will involve a division of labour among environmentalists, intermediaries and networks. It will require the framing of messages and campaigns with regard to conservative values and policy dimensions. And it will reward concessions rather than savagely attacking them.

*“One of the most robust findings in the psychology of communication is that persuasion depends on the relationship between the source and the audience as much as what people say.”*

One of the most robust findings in the psychology of communication is that persuasion depends on the relationship between the source and the audience as much as what people say. Some people are so passionate about their Green partisanship, and so clearly labelled as Green supporters, that they cannot communicate effectively with apathetic/neutral people, let alone Coalition policy makers and voters. These people can continue on in what I will flippantly call *Team Savage Attack* – aggressively critiquing the status quo, condemning half-measures, and stridently drawing attention to the need for change. They may mobilise pro-environmentalists to take action, but in so doing it's also likely they will alienate and fail to influence neutrals and conservatives, which is the problem I'm trying to address.

To me, it seems clear that the sense of urgency and commitment among Greens

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### What's the point?

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has pushed communicators farther and farther to the Green left. This has decreased our ability to communicate with centre and conservative voters and decision-makers. There is an urgent need for environmentalists to step up to fill the vacuum in environmental leadership for the right wing – I will call this group *Team Centre Forward*. Team Centre Forward may have the same goals as Team Savage Attack, but their tactics should be evidence-based around what works to influence conservatives.

Persuasion requires a degree of trust and perceived similarity. Accordingly, Team Centre Forward should refrain from condemnation of conservatives or conservative leaders. If anything they should seek to express (genuine) praise and points of agreement where possible. Rather than saying what is wrong with the centre/right position, advocates should focus on the desired positive change. While keeping the end goal in mind, half-measures and incremental steps put forward by other centre/right sources should be welcomed. Shades of grey should be clearly differentiated, and the better options and candidates should be publicly labelled as such.

Team Centre Forward advocates should try to pitch the applied implications of environmental science to conservatives in terms of the core dimensions of their policy concerns: the case that fiscal stability in the long term requires risk management and investment; that national security requires us to orient towards new challenges and opportunities; and that protecting Australia's heritage requires us to take action because that heritage is faced by external threats. Focusing on fairness and the suffering of animals addresses values that are more left wing, according to research, which is not core to the constituency Team Centre is trying to reach.

Finally, to bridge the credibility gap to the other side of politics, intermediary groups are helpful. For example, scientists could work to convince the Queensland Farmers Federation who could convince farmers, who could convince the Nationals, who could convince the Liberal National Party. Team Centre should identify conservative forces in industry who are impacted by climate change (eg, insurance, agriculture), and science-friendly conservatives (eg, medicine, law), and work to persuade these intermediaries, who might in turn have credibility to persuade others.

In general, a message for everyone persuades no one. Team Centre Forward advocates should look at audiences who are receptive but more right wing than they are, and try to convince them not only of the message, but also of the need to carry the message further to the right.

The natural members of Team Centre Forward, it seems to me, are people who are frustrated by politics (like many neutrals) or by the perception that some Green left politicians are insensitive to financial and practical constraints (like many right-wing voters). I suspect that many members of the Environmental Decision Group might qualify, while still being extremely committed to pro-environmental policy change as quickly as possible.

So, what about it? Someone needs to pick up the ball for Team Centre Forward, and

the sooner the better. I look forward to any responses.

**More info:** Winnifred Louis [w.louis@psy.uq.edu.au](mailto:w.louis@psy.uq.edu.au)

## The psychology of communicating environmental science effectively

(University of Queensland, Nov 2014)



*Kelly Fielding (on the left) and Winnifred Louis lead the workshop on the psychology of effective communication.*

Could it be that, with the best of intentions, our efforts to communicate our conservation science are failing? Even worse, could we be actually turning some decision makers away from the outcomes we strive for? These uncomfortable questions were posed by UQ psychologist Dr Winnifred Louis when she gave a seminar to the EDG last year. The

response from our scientists was an overwhelming “we want to know more”, which led to the staging of a whole day workshop on the psychology of communicating environmental Science effectively. The workshop was led by Winnifred and colleague Dr Kelly Fielding.

Winnifred's article in this issue of *Decision Point* explores some of the arguments she presented at the workshop. In addition, workshop participants were given an overview of the psychological theory and research that can inform strategies for the effective communication of environmental and conservation science. Themes presented included framing your message for different audiences and media formats (what works and what does not work), targeting conservative audiences, and evidence-based advocacy.

The workshop was coordinated by Hawthorne Beyer from EDG and jointly run by CEED, the School of Psychology (UQ), the Network of Environmental Social Scientists, and the Centre for Research in Social Psychology. Online videos will soon be available of the sessions run on the day.

**More info:** Hawthorne Beyer [h.beyer@uq.edu.au](mailto:h.beyer@uq.edu.au)

**More info:** Winnifred Louis [w.louis@psy.uq.edu.au](mailto:w.louis@psy.uq.edu.au)

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Legislative Leadership Program	Originally developed to provide training for fellows working with decisions makers beyond academia, including the US Congress.	Year-long program book-ended by intensive residential training in Wisconsin. Other activities take place virtually, with fellows participating from their place of work and within the context of teams organized during the first gathering.	Highly select mid-career or academic role focused on the
Field Immersion Experience for Leadership Development (FIELD)	Findings from a global review of MBA programs indicated team leadership skills were falling short in graduates despite their excellent critical thinking capacities.	Three components completed in first year of MBA training: (i) leadership skills training in communication and negotiation in globalization field, education, and (ii) integrating intelligence in team marketing assignment.	Roughly 100 enrolled in the year MBA pro



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