

WORDS, AREN'T THEY AWESOME! How Can We More Effectively Advocate for Plants?

Not too many years ago few people had ever heard of “ecosystems,” “bioregions,” “biodiversity,” “riparian habitat,” “watersheds,” and many more fine words that we use daily to discuss the crisis facing us in the environmental community. Now these words have become quite common. We should congratulate ourselves for expanding the general public’s understanding and appreciation for the complex scientific concepts represented in these words. NOT!

We have befuddled the public and made gaining their support more difficult by insisting on the use of *correct* words, words that convey so much meaningful information. Just because so many more people seem to use our words in no way means that they understand them or like them. In fact recent surveys and reports indicate that we are using the wrong words in our efforts to gain public support for increasing protection of native plants and other wildlife species (“*species*” likely a word we should drop from general usage).

As we have hindered our communications - we have unknowingly bought into the self-serving vocabulary of those who would destroy ecosystems and biodiversity. If you were one of these persons, would you rather be identified as a member of the “regulated community” or a “developer?” If you owned large amounts of open space land and was seeking favorable legislation would you prefer to describe your land as “agriculture and grazing land” or “agricultural habitat” or a “working landscape?” Pretty easy choices actually.

How many times have you read, heard, or used words that camouflage the real meaning? Here in Sacramento, around the Capitol, I have heard words like this often and have at times mistakenly used them myself. Not too long ago in a discussion of the options available for legislation addressing Fully Protected Species, I referred to selecting either a statewide or limited FPS fix, suggesting something was broken. A more accurate choice would have been either a statewide or limited repeal of FPS protections.

We also frequently speak of “incidental take” of threatened and endangered species, when what really is happening is these species are being killed.

The major media frequently softens its description of the issues and parties involved in the environmental debate. The Sacramento Bee recently completed an examination of significant campaign contributions to local officials from business and developer interests. Rather than use the term “developer lobby” the Bee created the “growth lobby.” How can anyone be opposed to the growth lobby?

Likewise there are better words to argue our case for conserving natural resources than those we routinely use. A recent report from a prominent California opinion research firm identified words that prompt a positive response and the corresponding words to avoid.¹ For example:

use - “land, air and water,” do not use - “environment”
use - “natural areas,” do not use - “ecosystems,”
use - “fish and wildlife,” do not use - “biodiversity,” and
use “organizations protecting land, air, and water,” do not use - “environmental groups.”

The report also suggested referring to “planning,” “balance,” and “preserving for future generations” in our arguments for resource conservation. But it warned not to wrap these distinct concepts into “smart growth” in an attempt to streamline our speech.

¹ Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin & Associates, for Environmental Media Services, January 2002.

To demonstrate how a different presentation of issues affects public response, a survey of voters asked respondents to rank various problems as “extremely serious,” “very serious,” “somewhat serious,” “not too serious,” or “not at all serious.” Just looking at those problems ranked as extremely or very serious, we see large variation in responses to similar problems.

Pollution of beaches and the coast by sewage.	69%
Pollution of bays.	51%
Pollution of the coastline and beaches.	46%
Contamination of ground water.	67%
The quality of drinking water.	52%
Pollution of rivers, lakes, and streams.	51%
Loss of wetlands.	38%
Population growth.	55%
The rate at which land is being developed.	54%
Urban sprawl.	38%
Loss of undeveloped land.	35%

To identify who influences the public, voters in three geographical areas of California (i.e., Central Coast, Central Valley, and Sierra Nevada) were surveyed to determine who and what types of organizations were most believable on environmental issues. You who are farmers, scientists, and teachers have reason to feel good, because as classes of people you ranked highest in each region as believable. While farmers ranked slightly higher than the others, on average 80% of respondents ranked these groups as either very or somewhat believable on environmental issues.

Local environmental groups and local conservation groups ranked, on average, 65% and 62%, respectively, as very or somewhat believable in the three regions. An ally we may be overlooking in our advocacy efforts is “seniors and senior groups,” ranked as believable by an average of 72% of the respondents.

There is also current information available regarding the public’s perception of land, air, water, and natural areas. A June, 2002, statewide survey conducted for the Public Policy Institute of California discovered that 55% of respondents felt that the remaining open space in California should mostly be retained as natural habitat rather than managed for more intensive recreational uses.²

We, as the spokespersons for conserving this natural habitat, must be better informed about public perceptions and more strategic in our communications. We must cure ourselves of the compulsion to use those words which we know are technically correct but which serve as a hurdle to winning the public’s support. Likewise we must guard against lazily adopting the language of those who seek to undermine our efforts and instead speak more clearly to reveal their objectives.

Vern Goehring, CNPS Legislative Advocate, Jan. 2003

² Special Survey on Californians and the Environment, Public Policy Institute of California, Mark Baldassare, Survey Director, June 2002.