

Communications Primer Step 5: Enhance Your Message



Be Ready with Anecdotes

Having a human story that illustrates and amplifies your message is absolutely critical to a successful communications effort. Often the side that presents the most compelling human story first wins, because the other side never recovers. So, it is essential that the human story be lined up before you begin communicating.

When the other side tells a story of a logger who has filed for unemployment after 30 years on the job, the forest and spotted owl do not stand a chance. When the public hears a story of a

woman who lost her home because of the government's efforts to save a kangaroo rat, species everywhere take a hit. There is no question that opponents of threatened and endangered species have used these often inaccurate "horror stories" to attract media coverage and win the sympathies of federal and state legislators.

However, environmental groups have become increasingly skillful at telling the true story of, for example, the benefits from the protection of threatened and endangered species. The Endangered Species Coalition's mid-1990s message campaign featured Jackie Buckley, who as a young child was diagnosed with leukemia. The Coalition's ads pointed out, "she is in remission and has an 80% chance of survival thanks to the medicines derived from the rosy periwinkle." The ad concluded that half of modern medicines come from natural sources, many of which are protected by the Endangered Species Act.

Here are some story angles that you can use to illustrate problems and solutions, show how to take effective action, and reinforce the value of taking action. Stories like these can make environmental issues "real", local, and personally important for people – and they're likely to appeal to feature editors across a variety of mediums.

- **Local hero** – Is there a local leader who is making a difference for habitat protection, environmental quality or a particular species? Stories of courage, conviction, and personal passion can make great features while raising the profile of the issue.
- **People coming together in unusual ways** – When unusual allies come together to achieve something good for the community—a prairie restoration, a stream clean-up, a citizen inventory of species—it is newsworthy. The "new and different allies" angle

Collecting Stories to Support Your Message

We've all heard about the incredible steps people are taking to save cherished natural places, but it can be difficult to capture the stories that will sway your audience or intrigue the media. Building and maintaining a story bank is an effective way to promote community-based stories about the environment. This technique involves building a database of stories that recount individuals' and communities' real-life experiences and illustrate social problems and their solutions.

There are a number of ways to begin collecting stories. One of the simplest methods may be to interview your volunteers - why are they fighting to protect their local wetland? how is your organization making a difference? Essay contests are another great way to uncover inspirational stories, and the contest itself can serve as a technique for catching the attention of local media.

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Quick Links

- [How to Use the Toolbox](#)
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- [Public Opinion on Great Lakes & Aquatic Habitats](#)
- [Great Lakes Facts](#)
- [Sample Press Materials](#)
- [Media Contacts](#)
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Generously supported by:

Great Lakes National Program Office of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency

Matching Funds from:

The Joyce Foundation
Great Lakes Aquatic Habitat Network & Fund
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illustrates the way common values can unite different community groups toward the goal of protecting habitat and environmental quality for all.

- **Family affairs** – “The three generations of Smiths who have been farming without chemicals because they care about Smith Creek” tells a story about family values and commitment to the community when it comes to environmental quality.
- **Charismatic, weird and otherwise interesting critters and plants** – If the flora and fauna are unique and distinctive, they can provide compelling stories. For instance, the “world’s largest fungus” story was a way to describe the critical role that mycorrhizae play in forest and prairie ecosystems.

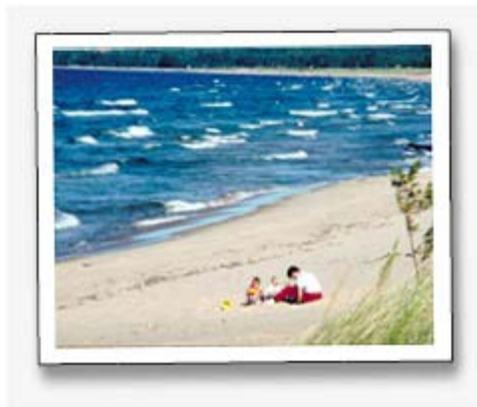


- **Alien invaders in our midst** – Likewise, “alien invasions” can provide potent copy, especially when accompanied by good visuals illustrating what all those species with long Latin names look like and how they are taking over. For example, the airborne leaps of big-headed carp provided rich fodder for news cameras; the photos raised significant public alarm and led to

emergency measures to control the carp’s spread toward the Great Lakes.

Use Compelling Images

Pictures tell a story, evoke emotions and appeal to values. They are instrumental in any communications effort on the environment, and should be chosen very carefully. This photo of a family on the shore of Lake Michigan evokes responsibility to family and future generations, and the value of the Lakes as an important place of natural beauty.



An image that is too harsh may offend your audience or be seen as extreme. One that evokes only beauty may send a message that all is well and no action is needed. A mix of positive images about what is worth protecting combined with disturbing images of the problem is often a winning formula.

Don't worry if you don't have any photos on file!

The Toolbox contains a wealth of high-resolution images in the public domain (i.e. available free-of-charge for non-commercial uses, as long as you cite the photographer and source). Click on the [Image](#) link above to access them!

Perhaps the most exciting innovation in photography, and print graphics in general, has been the development of digital imaging. Software, like Adobe Photoshop, allows users to enhance and correct the color and lighting of photographs that might have previously been unusable. Compression technology, such as JPEGs and GIFs, allow photos to be sent via email, or posted on the Web, without taking up an enormous amount computer memory. These powerful technologies provide tremendous freedom, but they also come with their share of problems. [Click here](#) for some simple notes to help you avoid the big ones!

When Using Facts, Be Specific

Your message and images must be backed by specific facts. Journalists and the public have become increasingly skeptical of information presented by advocates; so facts should be specific, not general, in order to have the most credibility.

Do Your Homework on Issues

Marshaling the facts and figures that best

For example, it is better to provide the number of acres of forest that will be lost due to a certain action by government or industry, rather than to simply say “vast

fit with your communications is a prerequisite to success. If you're hoping to stir the public to act to support wetlands protection, for example, you might have such information as:

- The rate of wetlands loss in your community and a comparison of that rate to losses elsewhere or to earlier times;
- Examples of harm that have resulted in your community from wetlands loss;
- A description of the benefits that wetlands provide to people and wildlife;
- Expert quotations or references on the values of wetlands; or
- Examples of successes other communities have had in protecting their wetlands.

Compile as much relevant information as you can, double-check it for accuracy, and hone it to the essentials. Developing fact sheets is an excellent way to identify the most relevant pieces of information, and they're handy for dealing with the media and helping staff stay on message.

amounts of forest." Rather than alluding to the "high costs" of aquatic invasive species, note that U.S. and Canadian tax-payers pay \$15 million annually to keep sea lamprey populations under control, or that the monitoring and maintenance of zebra mussels are estimated to have cost the United States \$750 million to \$1 billion from 1989 to 2000.

Simplify statistics - "3 out of 4" instead of 75%. Package facts so your audience easily grasps them.

And use facts that relate to people's daily lives or experience, such as "the water we drink every day," "the lakes we fish," and "the view from our windows."

Choose Your Messenger

Choose a messenger that complements your message and carries weight with your audience. It's quite possible that it won't be you!

The choice of a messenger for a communications effort must depend on what message you want to convey and whom you are addressing. All three elements—message, audience and messenger—must complement one another. The biggest mistake an organization can make is to decide on a

messenger before it knows the audience and message for communication.

Messages are typically most credible when they come from people affected by an issue or problem rather than those far removed. For example:

- Environmental organizations supporting tougher EPA clean air standards to curb smog and surface level ozone worked with physicians and asthma sufferers. Doctors and patients were the best messengers for a story about health threats.
- When communicating a spiritual message about biodiversity to religious Americans, clergy are far more likely to be persuasive messengers than executive directors of environmental organizations.
- When paper companies want to send a message to families that they care about the future by planting trees, they use six- and seven-year-olds to carry their message instead of corporate CEOs.

Possible messengers for protecting the Great Lakes and related aquatic habitats include:

- For your base – members of your organization and other environmental or conservation organizations – you can be your own messenger. But, this is not likely to work for other audiences, most of whom can only name Greenpeace when asked to identify environmental groups (sometimes the Sierra Club);
- Alternative messengers might include scientists within the region's prestigious universities, but the climate change battles have proven to us that "my scientist vs. your scientist" may just confuse the public;
- Nurses (often trusted more than doctors) that can speak to water quality issues;



- A local well driller who can talk about how tough it is to get good water these days;
- Older residents talking about how much things have changed;
- Farmers doing the right thing on run-off;
- Community leaders who are ahead of the curve on groundwater conservation;
- Homeowners “just like me” who are putting in rain barrels, ditching lawn chemicals, or otherwise doing something positive for local action;
- Families who are trying to use the beaches;
- Children, who can appeal to concerns for future generations;
- Moms concerned about drinking water and the health of their families.

Repeat! Repeat! Repeat!

Once a message is decided, make it the mantra that is repeated over and again. Do not assume anyone has heard the message, even if you are quoted in the media two or three times. Most audiences—public, media, legislators—have other things to think about than your issue. If your core message is different from one week to the next, your audience will not comprehend any one thing. You must have one core message and stay with it.

Communication is not effective if it presents a variety of arguments in the hope that one resonates. A diversity of messages results in a lack of clarity. Instead, you need to decide on the most effective message and repeat it until it makes you crazy.

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