

## COMMUNICATING THE BIODIVERSITY CRISIS: FROM “WARNINGS” TO POSITIVE ENGAGEMENT



### AT A GLANCE

#### Before crafting the message (p3)

-  Clarify and define the objective of the communication
-  Identify a specific audience and consider what motivates them
-  Define the desired outcomes and identify metrics for measuring success

#### When crafting the message (p4)

-  Tip #1: Think of what associations are already in people's heads
-  Tip #2: Clarify what is happening to whom and why
-  Tip #3: Balance threats with positive actions or solutions
-  Tip #4: Avoid typecasting
-  Tip #5: Be open about failure as a learning experience

**Summary:** Effective communication is vital for empowering people to protect nature, but the complexity and long time scale of environmental change presents a communication challenge. If not carefully navigated, messages around environmental degradation can lead to audience disengagement and issue fatigue, when motivation, engagement and positive action are required. Communications need to reflect the grave reality of the biodiversity crisis. Some communications seek to motivate action through warnings and threats, but messages that trigger positive emotions in audiences can also help inspire long-term engagement and action. This positive approach to communication is underused. This brief presents a guide for conservation communicators to craft empowering and positive communications. As the biodiversity crisis intensifies, it is critical to imagine and develop pathways to a better future and communicate in a way that supports transformative change

**The rationale:** The experience of climate communicators, and evidence from disciplines such as psychology and communications, tell us that communicating threat alone is unlikely to motivate action. We suggest that positive communication can enable actionable framing of conservation challenges. Positive communication combines a clear description of the issue at hand with possible paths or actions that can be taken by the audience. It also uses audience-appropriate context and language while avoiding disempowering emotions. Positive communication can lead to the development of productive collaborations, relationships, and conversations, which may trigger actions to help address the biodiversity crisis. This brief aims to help policymakers communicate the extent of this crisis in a way that can support audiences' journey from understanding the threat that humanity faces to long-term engagement and transformative change (Figure 1).

#### The role of emotion:

Negative emotions, such as fear, anger and shame, help us respond to threats of a specific kind by narrowing our focus and priming tendencies towards certain kinds of action. For example, fear increases the perceived magnitude of risks being faced, while anger tends to reduce the assessed risks that might result from an action.

Conversely, positive emotions, such as hope, love, pride and happiness can enable and promote thoughts and actions marked by curiosity, creativity, flexibility and pro-sociality, which facilitate the learning of new behaviours and the appreciation of new perspectives.

Building narratives and messages that centre negative emotional experiences such as fear, anger and guilt can be an effective way to communicate urgency and mobilise action. However, the experience of climate communicators suggests that strategies relying on generating negative emotions also carry significant risks and may not be impactful for all audiences. In certain cases, they may have even contributed to a widespread sense of apathy, disempowerment, anxiety and distress.



Figure 1. The role of communications in wider transformational change.

### Bringing in positive emotion:

Positive emotional experiences have unique effects which can help catalyse the action required to address the biodiversity crisis. Communications that facilitate positive emotions in audiences can enhance the effectiveness of messaging about the threats to biodiversity and approaches to addressing the biodiversity crisis. This is for two principal reasons:

The biodiversity crisis is complex and there are often conflicting perspectives and interests. Conservation is often marked by stark power imbalances between actors, risking unjust outcomes. Positive emotions can enable cooperation, pro-social behaviour and creative thinking, which are essential qualities in resolving social conflict. Rather than prescribing solutions, communicating with others in ways that encourage reflection, mutual understanding and openness can avoid perpetuating simplistic narratives.

Socio-ecological transformations take time. Although rapid changes are required now, these will need to be scaled up, adapted and maintained into the future. For this to happen, diverse audiences may need to engage with ecological systems and their conservation throughout their lifespans, and societies may need to progressively transform over multiple generations. Positive emotions help to build resilience and the emotional resources needed to engage and adapt.

Communications can inadvertently contribute to inertia and disengagement if narratives revolve around overwhelming threats and do not provide a roadmap to a more sustainable future.

Inevitably, negative emotions will arise as individuals experience and process ecological transformations. Indeed, globally widespread feelings of anxiety and sadness among young people are attributed to the slow pace of government action in the face of climate change.

“ Positive emotional experiences can help sustain action and change in the long term and can enable individuals and groups to build resilience and adapt to challenging and changing circumstances. ”

A lack of perceived progress may lead to people giving up or resorting to personal protective strategies like disengagement.

Positive emotional experiences can help sustain action and change in the long term and can enable individuals and groups to build resilience and adapt to challenging and changing circumstances. Experiencing positive emotions following pro-environmental behaviour, such as the warm glow following action that is aligned with pro-environmental values, can motivate further action. By developing opportunities and fostering expectations for such positive emotional experiences, individuals can enter into a long-term “virtuous cycle” of motivation and emotional reward that can sustain action leading to transformative change.

### A practical guide to communicating positively

We offer a practical guide to crafting messages that can empower audiences to act by engendering positive emotions.

The guide outlines four key elements of a communication strategy and offers five tips for crafting messages that build connection and avoid disempowerment. These are intended to help communicators navigate the challenges of communicating on the biodiversity crisis.



**Key element #1:** It is essential to clarify and define the overall objective of the communication. With a clear objective, it is possible to define the appropriate audiences to target, and ultimately inform the design and implementation of the communications.



**Key element #2:** It is unrealistic for a single message to appeal to everyone, so having a specific audience in mind helps to tailor the message. A clear profile of the intended audience enables the communicator to think carefully about what this audience might respond to and resonate with.



**Key elements #3&4:** Clearly defining the desired outcomes of the communication is a crucial step. Objectives set out goals and a vision, while outcomes comprise the evidence required to assess whether objectives are achieved. The metrics chosen to measure these outcomes are also important.

With a clear objective, audience, desired outcome, and appropriate measure of success, communicators can begin to craft an effective message. Applying the following five tips can help to ensure that messages are positive and empowering, and therefore can support the prolonged societal engagement required to engender transformative change.

**Tip #1: Think of what associations are already in people's heads**

Every word, sound or image has the potential to evoke different sets of associations in different audiences. Those associations depend on the audience's interactions, memories and experiences, and so are likely to vary between social groups. It is easy to forget that other people may have different associations with the same word, sound or image. Although it may not be possible to predict the complete set of associations a given word, sound or image evokes for a given audience, it is important to anticipate how a word, for example, might be perceived and understood to avoid unintended consequences.

**Tip #2: Clarify what is happening to whom and why**

Writing in the passive voice can cause readers to feel like the situation described is inevitable. In the worst cases, this can cause them to feel fatalistic and hopeless. Hope and action arise from clarity of understanding. When describing a conservation challenge, it is vital to be clear about who is doing what to whom and why. This brings the actors (be it a person, animal, plant, or object) into the frame and highlights their agency in causing a particular situation. This clarity will also enable the audience to identify their own agency to effect change. At the same time, it is also important not to oversimplify the narrative described or typecast the actors identified as causing the problem (see tip #4).

**Tip #3: Balance threats with positive actions or solutions**

Conservation is a crisis discipline, and many of the issues we wish to communicate are threats to both human well-being and biodiversity. When communicating about the issues we want to tackle, it is necessary to be clear about the threats, but also to show that actions to address these threats are available. Achieving a balance between these two things can help to increase the audience's motivation and perceived ability to engage with a specific issue while avoiding feelings of complacency or fatalism.

**Tip #4: Avoid typecasting**

There is a tendency for communicators to create simplistic narratives around people, wildlife and institutions, and to describe them as either victims or villains. Often, these rhetorical strategies aim to provoke pity for the victims and anger towards the villains. However, portraying a person or another actor (or even a place) as a helpless victim may give the impression that it is impossible for them to break out of their position. An alternative to provoking pity could be to provoke empathy and fellow-feeling. Similarly, vilifying an individual or a group can preclude the possibility for positive change on the part of that individual or group, which may polarise debate and reduce the possibilities for collaboration.

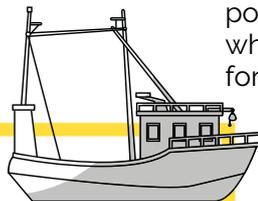
**Tip #5: Be open about failure as a learning experience**

While highlighting solutions can provide audiences with an idea of what is possible, demonstrating how to learn from failure to overcome future challenges is also empowering. Learning from what fails in a specific context and why may also prove helpful in other contexts. Techniques such as establishing systems to encourage the reporting of failures or providing training on how to conduct reflective debriefing sessions can help promote a culture that encourages a more positive outlook on failure. By showing audiences that failures do happen and framing them as learning opportunities, transparency can be maintained. The communicator can build a relatable human narrative and avoid provoking despair.

**CASE STUDY**

Fishing subsidies are provided to fishing sectors for various reasons. Some subsidies are thought to contribute to overfishing and researchers have sought to estimate the monetary value of these perverse subsidies provided by different fishing nations.

- I- Objective** Phase out subsidies that have negative impacts on the environment
- II- Audience** Government decision-makers
- II a- Language** Factual, non-emotive
- II b- Medium** Academic publications, working papers, policy-briefs
- III- Outcome(s)** Reach low emissions, sustainable fish stocks and profitable fishing businesses
- IV- Metrics** Newspaper reports on political positions, parliamentary & government records



A positive communications approach does not mean that everything in a message must be positive. Indeed, blind optimism and false hope can be strong enablers of inertia and resistance to change if people convince themselves that the issue will be taken care of by others or if they set themselves unachievable goals. Negative trends in biodiversity should be communicated. A positive communications approach acknowledges, however, that moving from awareness to action will also require more than provision of information about threats. This is because highly informed populations may not act if the changes required are perceived as too threatening, and because positive emotions can help to build the psychological and social resources needed to sustain action in the long-term. Experiences of small positive changes and reasons for optimism have historically been

necessary to build momentum for more sweeping radical change, and positive visions or experiences of alternative futures can be essential for breaking individual and societal inertia.

Moving forward, conservation researchers and practitioners need to communicate effectively in order to empower everyone to work towards restoring nature. In particular, they need to communicate in ways that help audiences to maintain a sense of urgency, whilst motivating and inspiring long-term engagement and action leading to transformative change. Messages that shock and invoke fear can capture attention, but they can also lead to individuals distancing themselves and feeling overwhelmed. Messages that trigger positive emotions are also needed to maintain motivation in the long-term, to empower diverse audiences to think and act creatively and cooperatively, and to enact transformative changes in their lives.

Table summarising the five key tips, with examples of their application to harmful fishing subsidies. We provide examples of mistakes these tips are intended to help avoid.

Tips	Description	Consider saying this	Rather than this
<b>1. Think of what's already in people's heads</b>	Thinking about the associations that people may already have in their heads to specific words will help you tailor your communication to a specific audience	Using the term "industrial fishing" will give people a clear idea of the connotations that you are associating to that specific term	In certain contexts, the word "fishing" may be associated with a recreational activity. This may not resonate with your audience in the way you intended
<b>2. Clarify what is happening to whom and why</b>	Bringing the actors into the frame, explaining why things have happened, and being clear about who is involved, helps your audience see how a situation can be changed	"The subsidies provided by government X to industrial fishing sector Y each year contributes to overfishing, which threatens the livelihoods of Z many people who earn their living from fishing."	"The global fishing sector is provided with X level of subsidies per year."
<b>3. Balance threats with positive actions or solutions</b>	Bringing solutions into the spotlight can help build a sense of efficacy and encourage personal engagement	"If perverse fishing subsidies were instead reinvested in ways that promote innovation and sustainability, marine resources and fishers would both benefit."	"Perverse fishing subsidies threaten marine resources and adversely affect the livelihoods of fishers."
<b>4. Avoid typecasting</b>	Steering clear of villains and victims, unless there is no ambiguity or complexity in the situation, enables audiences to relate to the issue in a more nuanced and realistic way	"While China is thought to provide \$X in perverse fishing subsidies per year, perverse subsidies of \$Y per year to fishing fleets in [the audience's country] also contribute to overfishing."	"China provides \$X in harmful subsidies to its fishing fleet each year."
<b>5. Share learning from failure</b>	Demonstrating that failure happens, but can be learned from to enable better outcomes next time, builds trust and transparency	Although perverse fishing subsidies remain a huge global problem, the picture is mixed across the world. In some parts of the world, governments seem to have reduced the amount of subsidy in recent years."	"As of yet, members of the World Trade Organization (WTO) have failed to reach an agreement to end perverse fishing subsidies."



## FOR MORE INFORMATION:

This policy brief is based on an article published in *Tropical Conservation Science* on October 21 2022. You can read the original paper here: **de Lange, E., Sharkey, W., Castelló y Tickell, S., Migné J., Underhill, R., Milner-Gulland, E.J.. (2022) 'Communicating the Biodiversity Crisis: From "Warnings" to Positive Engagement', *Tropical Conservation Science*, 15, pp. 1–14. doi: [10.1177/19400829221134893](https://doi.org/10.1177/19400829221134893)**