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RE: The Language of Conservation 2013: Updated Recommendations on How to Communicate Effectively to Build Support for Conservation

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The following recommendations for communicating effectively to build support for conservation are based on a representative national survey of American voters commissioned by The Nature Conservancy in 2012 and conducted by a bi-partisan research team: Democratic polling firm Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin, Metz & Associates and Republican polling firm Public Opinion Strategies. In some cases, we have also drawn from regional and state research conducted over the last few years on behalf of TNC and its partner organizations to further illuminate the data.

This memo seeks to provide language and messaging recommendations in a list of easy-to-follow, broad “rules” for communication. Some of these rules reinforce long-standing communication guidelines we have tracked over time, while others were tested to reflect today’s changed political and economic context. We found few exceptions to the guidelines presented, although we note that it is always prudent to test language and messages to ensure their effectiveness in a specific state or local area prior to investing in public communication.

Talking About Safety and Health First...

Voters’ hierarchy of needs starts with health and safety, and connecting conservation to those issues helps ensure conservation shifts from a “nice to have” to a “need to have.”

- *DO talk about water FIRST and foremost.* Voters consistently tell us that nothing is more important than having clean water to drink. Ensuring reliable supplies of clean water cannot be stressed enough as a primary rationale for conservation. Pollution of rivers, lakes and streams rates as one of the most serious conservation problems tested in the most recent national survey, and has consistently been at the top of voters' priorities. Moreover, when we have asked voters to rate the importance of a variety of conservation goals in previous state and local surveys, water has always risen to the top of the list. The act of referencing water as a rationale for conserving land is more important than the specific language used; however, protecting "drinking water" implies a connection to public health which resonates on a deeper level with voters than any other formulation.

Moreover, we have seen in other research that voters believe that land conservation positively impacts their own drinking water. We find widespread agreement that "protecting land around rivers, lakes, and streams, will keep pollution from flowing into these waters and prevent it from eventually contaminating our drinking water."

- *DO connect conservation to public health.* Voters want clean air and clean water, and instinctively view caring for the land as having benefits for air and water. Messaging should continue to stress the many ways that protecting our land, water and wildlife protects our own health. Voters also see other connections between conservation of nature and public health: they recognize that nature is a source of our food; of important medicines; and of critical lands for recreation.
- *DO turn voters' views of a tough Mother Nature to your advantage – by showing how conservation of critical natural defenses keeps communities safe.* Whether wildfire, flooding, or hurricanes, voters tend to think of nature as being a force with which to be reckoned. That "one tough lady" image can pose problems – the concept of "resilience" actually serves to make voters less likely to feel we need to engage in restoration projects in recent focus groups along the Gulf Coast – but can also be an advantage. The idea that "natural defenses" can serve as flood controls or storm barriers is credible and resonates from Louisiana to North Dakota.
- *DO NOT equate nature with infrastructure.* Voters associate the phrase "infrastructure" with concrete and asphalt – with schools, sewer systems, and streets – and balk at connecting it to nature. We have tested a number of phrases that sought to establish nature as just as important as man-made infrastructure: "green infrastructure," "soft infrastructure," and "natural infrastructure." These phrases tend to be confusing at best. For example, many associated "green infrastructure" with wind turbines or clean energy. Moreover, though voters do see some urgency to investing in long-neglected public buildings and facilities, "infrastructure" is not a warm and inviting term. Linking that word to nature only serves to drag down the positive associations respondents have with nature, rather than lifting them up.
- *DO NOT make global warming/climate change the primary rationale for conservation.* While scientists clearly link global warming to increasingly extreme weather events that affect the safety of people and communities, it is not yet perceived similarly by the public. The most politically

polarizing rationales for conservation are those that position climate change as the primary reason for engaging in conservation. Republicans and Independents rated these messages significantly lower than other rationales in support of conservation.

However, referring to climate change in passing as part of a broader argument for conservation has generally not had a significant impact – positive or negative – on responses. In the interest of continuing to expand and reinforce public attention to this vital issue, incorporating subtle references to climate change into otherwise strong messages may be advisable. This, however, is an area where location-specific research is likely critical.

What To Say Next...

There are a number of other broad themes that connect broadly and should be kept in mind in communicating about conservation.

- *DO keep people in the picture.* Voters are increasingly telling us that the best reasons to engage in conservation are people-centric. As one can see in the national survey data below, a majority now say that benefits to *people* are the best reason to conserve nature:

53% The best reason to conserve nature is to preserve the benefits people can derive from it - for our economy, our health, and our enjoyment.

OR

39% The best reason to conserve nature is for its own sake - to leave systems of plants and wildlife undisturbed to evolve, change and grow.

- *DO reinforce the compatibility between having a strong economy and preserving land, water and wildlife.* Most voters see no reason why we cannot continue to protect land and water while maintaining the country's economic strength. More than three-quarters of voters (76%) believe we can protect land and water and have a strong economy at the same time, while fewer than one in five believe that those objectives are even "sometimes" in conflict. At every opportunity, voters should be reminded that economic growth and conservation are mutually-reinforcing goals: they intuitively believe it, but given the relentless rhetoric arguing the opposite, voters' beliefs must be reinforced.

The obvious corollary to this "rule" is that conservation efforts must actively resist, reject, and refute claims by opponents that environmental protections will hurt jobs and economic development. While on some level voters realize this is a false choice, their heightened economic anxieties make them susceptible to this kind of messaging.

- *DO stress the importance of protecting natural areas as a way of helping children spend more time outdoors.* Of 18 conservation-related problems tested in the most recent national survey, "kids not spending enough time outdoors and in nature" rated as the most serious problem. Half of American

voters (50%) rate this as a “very serious” problem, and four-in-five (82%) say it is at least a “somewhat serious” problem. This concern extends across all demographic sub-groups, partisan lines, and geographies – a rural Republican is just as likely to view children not spending enough time in nature as a problem as an urban Democrat. We see a similar dynamic in data from a January 2013 survey of voters in six western states in which 83% say that “children not spending enough time in the outdoors” is a serious problem. This issue taps into concerns about children’s use of technology and “screen time,” parenting styles, and childhood obesity.

This concern was successfully evoked in messaging we helped develop for multiple, successful conservation finance measures this past year. While parks, playgrounds and public lands are not seen as a cure-all to this problem, the idea of “preserving places where children can safely run, play and experience nature” is one that resonates today in a way we have not seen in the past.

- *DO continue to use a “future generations” message.* Along these same lines, we continue to see that the concept of protecting land, water and wildlife for our children and grandchildren is one that voters volunteer organically as a reason for supporting conservation; moreover, voters who hear it consistently rate it as compelling. The economic downturn has done nothing to diminish the resonance of this time-honored rationale for conserving nature.
- *DO evoke a sense of “shared responsibility” – or, depending on the audience, a “moral responsibility” – to care for the natural world.* Voters want to be – and want others to be – responsible, whether in regard to their personal finances or how they treat the natural world. The messages below tap into this strong public value.

All Americans have a shared responsibility to protect our natural world: to use only what we need, make smarter choices, and pass on to future generations the beauty, wildlife, water and natural resources we have today. Especially with the threat of climate change, we should invest in conservation to meet this responsibility

Our state's beautiful natural areas are part of God's creation, and we have a moral responsibility to take care of them and protect them.

We would caution that the impact of the latter message is highly dependent on the audience. It can also lack credibility if delivered by a messenger that lacks standing among voters of faith.

- *DO use phrases that imply ownership and inclusion, such as “our” and “we.”* Many of the strongest messages in our surveys incorporate this language. So, we must describe “OUR natural areas” or “WE need to protect OUR beaches, lakes, natural areas and wildlife. . . .”
- *DO speak to voters’ pride of place.* Invoking “America” or the name of voters’ own state speaks to voters’ local pride, and reminds them of the factors that have led them to choose to live where they do. At the state or national level, more often than not, what voters enjoy or appreciate about their location involves something about the land, wildlife or natural setting.

- *DO recognize that this is one issue for which voters intuit a role for the federal government.* Despite continued low ratings for Congress and the federal government, voters recognize the benefit of federal involvement in managing lands and waters. More than four-in-five believe that “*Mountain ranges, wildlife habitat, and rivers cross state borders, so it is important to have the federal government get everyone to work together in conserving our natural resources.*” Similarly, seven-in-ten go so far as to say that “*In dealing with issues like how land and water are used or protected, government plays an essential role.*” And as the 2012 polling indicates, one of the few things which voters think government is doing well is protecting some of these places as public lands: 77% agree that “*One of the things our government does best is to protect and preserve our national history and natural beauty through national parks, forests, and other public lands.*”

How Best to Position Conservation Policy Initiatives...

- *DO highlight the diverse coalitions and collaborations in support of conservation efforts.* Doing so speaks of broad, consensus support. It bypasses partisan divisions. It avoids cynicism that attaches to government or environmental organizations when they are acting alone. Finally, it helps convince voters that foresight and long-range planning are in play.
- *DO provide the public a few key specifics to make policy proposals credible.* Separate national polling our firms have conducted shows that trust in government is declining; and in focus groups testing various conservation proposals over the past year, it has been clear this skepticism affects voters’ views of any government policy proposal. The loftier the language, the less believable the proposal is deemed. But by providing a few key facts (such as where land might be conserved, who would administer the effort, and where revenues would originate), voters can be made less likely to regard a proposal as “too good to be true.”
- *At the same time, DO NOT get bogged down in the details about how conservation policy initiatives are implemented.* Voters are much more concerned about how they benefit from conservation, rather than the mechanics of how those goals might be achieved. Do not get caught up in providing unnecessary detail about the process of HOW conservation will take place – such as referring to land acquisition, purchase of development rights, etc. Focus on *outcomes*, and on how people will benefit – not on processes.
- *DO address voter skepticism about accountability whenever public funding enters the discussion.* Given continued low confidence in government, conservation efforts MUST ensure that strong fiscal accountability provisions are attached to any government spending proposal. The inclusion of provisions such as regular audits, public disclosure, time limits, and citizen oversight in each and every funding plan ought to be a primary focus.
- *DO maintain an essentially hopeful, optimistic tone.* Explaining how voters will benefit from a policy beats describing how they will be threatened by its absence every time. There’s a place for highlighting the problems that conservation will solve – but only if you also articulate the solution.

In other polling we have completed, we have consistently seen that voters who share the positive vision – that a polluted body of water CAN be cleaned up, for example – are significantly more likely to support policy changes or investing in that endeavor.

- *DO talk about conservation as part of a long-term plan for a community's quality of life.* Over the last five years, we have found that there are few stronger words than communicating that there is a “plan” for managing growth, conserving land, and protecting a community’s character and quality of life. One of the strongest rationales for conservation has consistently been protecting the good quality of life voters feel they have in their community. Voters want a pro-active approach to preserving it; they want someone looking ahead, past the next 24-hour news cycle and the next election. All too often, on a wide range of issues, they believe that kind of long-range thinking has been absent from government’s actions.

And on the flip side, we have seen that voters who are actively alienated by the notion of government planning, or who subscribe to Agenda 21-style anxieties about an active public role in land use, are a tiny portion of the electorate and one that is unlikely to support public land conservation in any context.

- *DO NOT count on public support for conservation unless you work to make it happen.* Conservation is less of a concern today than in the recent past; economic issues have pushed it further down the list of most pressing concerns in voters’ minds. While voters value land, water and wildlife and want to conserve them, issues related to conservation simply are not everyday concerns for them. In recent research in six western states, we found that a majority (54%) admitted they had no idea of the positions their Member of Congress has taken on protecting land, air and water.

At the same time, when conservation issues are brought to voters’ attention they are every bit as important as they have been in the past. This means the only way to get the public to act on conservation issues is to place the issues before them more forcefully and give them opportunities to get involved.

- *DO NOT focus on “green” jobs as a primary rationale for conservation.* While the economy still tops voters’ priorities in our own polling, voters continue to find other more traditional, aspirational rationales for conservation more resonant – like leaving a legacy for future generations and protecting sources of clean air and water. In addition, some of the language used to describe these jobs can be off-putting. Many do not understand the term “sustainable” for instance. Similarly, many voters are tired of the term “green”. It is described by voters as being trendy and trite, and a phrase that immediately gives them the feeling they are being marketed to, due to its exploitation by so many consumer products. As one swing voter in a focus group explained his ambivalence to the term, “I just kind of get numb to the word. Everything is green. Green cars, green buildings, green gases. I’m getting numb to it.” Notably, jobs are more apt to be intuitively linked to clean energy projects.
- *DO highlight efforts to promote renewable energy development and energy efficiency.* We continue

to see significant, bipartisan support for clean, renewable energy – support that far outpaces the divisive and partisan reaction voters have to addressing climate change. Voters like the idea of blending conservation with the promotion of renewable energy, and intuitively believe that expanding the use of renewable energy will create jobs. Specific descriptions of jobs in the renewable energy sector can avoid many of the pitfalls associated with more generic descriptions of “green jobs.”

Notably, we see equally strong support for the idea of promoting “energy efficiency.” Though voters are more likely to think of renewable energy when asked about solutions to America’s energy challenges, the idea of improving energy efficiency is one that consumers connect to on a personal level, strikes them as cost effective in the long-term, and therefore yields a strongly positive response.

How to Explain the Specifics of Land Conservation...

While every community is unique, we have seen certain consistent patterns in opinion that help explain the specific benefits that people perceive coming from land conservation – at a national, state or local level.

- *DO remember that retaining a rural way of life often connects in many types of communities. Conserving “working farms and ranches” continues to be a high priority for conservation. Over the last decade we have continued to see American voters place great value on preserving small, family farms and ranches – notably, this is increasingly in contrast to their views of larger agricultural operations, which are generally not positive. When voters hear references to “farms and ranches,” in isolation, they do NOT assume that they are owned and run by people whose livelihood depends on them – and that distinction matters a great deal. The word “working” evokes those types of lands, and conveys that the land is productive and being used. In addition, we see that discussion of “working farms and ranches” is increasingly resonant due to the important role they play in voters’ concern about local food production.*
- *DO highlight the historic value of lands that are conserved if possible. A segment of the electorate skeptical of the environmental value in protecting natural areas – Tea Party supporters, older men, and more conservative voters – has been shown in other polling to be more likely to consider themselves to be “history buffs.” Emphasizing the historic importance of lands and waters under consideration for conservation may be a way of maximizing support among some of these tougher constituencies.*
- *DO highlight the recreational value of land, but be specific – talk about hiking, biking, camping, fishing, hunting, viewing wildlife and enjoying nature. The more vivid the language, the more likely voters are to see themselves using these lands and enjoying their benefits. This is particularly true if more passive recreation examples are included in the list, such as viewing wildlife or simply enjoying nature – not limiting recreation to a gear-laden backpacker image. The following language has tested well...*

Outdoor recreation is a part of our way of life - from hunters and fishermen to young children who play in parks. Protecting our natural areas will ensure that we still have places to hike, bike, boat, fish, hunt, see wildlife or just enjoy the quiet and peace of nature.

- *DO ensure that opportunities for access to outdoor recreation on conserved lands are made explicit.* Without an explicit nod to continued or increased access for recreation, some sportsmen and highly-engaged voters assume that words like “protect” or “conserve” mean that lands will be “locked up” and unavailable for their use.
- *But DO NOT make access to parks or public lands the centerpiece of appeals for conservation.* Only a very small sliver of the electorate – typically, dedicated outdoor enthusiasts – recognize the need for increased conservation to create connections to other protected lands. Communications with recreationists or sportsmen who care about this issue can focus on access, but the broader public simply does not see a crisis around the issue of access.
- *DO NOT refer to “landscape-scale conservation.”* Voters respond to the idea of preserving large, connected areas like entire forests, mountain ranges, wildlife habitats, or wetlands when described as such, and think conservation should be planned and carried out on a regional, integrated level. However, they do not think of this as “landscape scale” nor can they articulate the rationales behind why “landscape-scale” conservation might be important (“wildlife migration corridors” is another term that is not recognized or understood).
- *In fact, DO NOT use the term “landscape” in connection with lands to be protected.* Overwhelmingly, in the focus groups voters connected the term “landscape” with paintings and/or planned plantings one might have in a backyard (landscaping). Neither concept is one that invokes accessible nature in which people are included. “[It sounds] like you are not supposed to touch it. It’s to look at,” explained one respondent in a past focus group, summing up a general theme we have heard repeatedly over the years. Moreover, “loss of scenic vistas” (at 13% “extremely” or “very serious”) was the single *least* compelling conservation concern we tested in the most recent national survey.

Explaining “Ecosystem Services”

Our research over the past few years has also explored a complex policy issue much discussed in the conservation community today – that of “ecosystem services.” That research provides some clear guidance on how to convey this concept to the broader public.

- *DO NOT use the term “ecosystem services.”* The term “ecosystem services” - does not adequately convey the concept to less knowledgeable audiences. Few voters spend time visiting “ecosystems” – they visit forests, wetlands, rivers, deserts and mountains. And some resist the idea that nature provides “services” to people – while they acknowledge that people depend upon and benefit from

nature, the idea that nature exists to “serve” them is off-putting to some. Other metaphorical language used in connection with this concept – safety net, life-support, health and safety systems – is greeted with similar indifference.

- *DO talk about the “benefit of nature” or “nature’s benefits.”* The terms “nature’s value” and “nature’s benefits” were rated as highly appealing by clear majorities of voters nationwide. And in focus groups, both terms were seen as intuitive and self-explanatory. Either provides a vastly preferable alternative for general communications to “ecosystem services.” The term “ecosystem” is unfamiliar and unappealing, and even the term “services” causes discomfort for some voters – who bristle at the concept of nature as “serving” people and therefore subordinate to them. For these voters, the idea of nature as existing in a mutually beneficial relationship with mankind is more comfortable.

It should also be noted that the term “value” may prompt people to think about the benefits of nature in economic or dollar terms – which may be advantageous in some circumstances and less so in others.

Voters readily embrace the concept that there is a benefit to the public in nature. Water quality, air quality, production of crops for food, production of medicines, and protection against floods and hurricanes are seen as the most important benefits of nature by voters, although not all were generally intuitive and top-of-mind in focus groups. And though our research has not explored it in this framework, it is likely that voters would view renewable energy – particularly wind and solar – as a key benefit of nature as well.

- *DO remind people of nature’s role in providing materials for medicines.* Relatively few voters name medicines as a top-of-mind benefit that nature has for people. However, when prompted to think about the idea – and particularly when given information like the number of prescription medications that come from natural sources – voters see it as an urgent rationale for protecting nature.
- *DO highlight the benefits of nature for providing food.* Similar to medicines, voters do not instinctively name the production of food as a benefit of nature. However, when prompted more than three-quarters of voters rate benefits such as “pollinating plants and crops to help them grow,” “preventing erosion of fertile soil,” and “keeping soil fertile and productive” as “very important” benefits of nature.
- *DO express the value of conservation in terms other than dollars whenever possible.* Nearly three-quarters of voters nationally (73%) believe that it is at least “somewhat” helpful to calculate the benefits of nature in dollar terms. But even higher numbers favor evaluating the benefits of nature through other metrics, like the number of jobs created (which 84% see as “helpful”), the number of people who benefit (87%), or the additional clean air and water a natural area provides (92%).
- *DO position ecosystem services as a way of acknowledging the long-term impacts of resource*

decisions. Voters regularly express frustration that decisions about land use and resource management are too often made with short-term convenience and profitability in mind, rather than a long-term evaluation of a community’s needs. The “nature’s benefits” framework can be positioned as a way of helping decision makers understand – and take into account – the longer-term impacts that decisions about resource use can have on a community’s health and safety.

- *DO NOT position nature as subordinate to people.* Many voters actively resist the idea that nature exists to “serve” people, or merely to provide them resources to be consumed. Communications should be crafted to avoid framing nature in this context.
- *DO NOT forget to invoke the unquantifiable value of nature.* Even the steeliest non-environmentalists in our focus groups acknowledge a value to nature that is difficult to quantify on a balance sheet. Many spoke of its calming, spiritual benefits – simply having the opportunity to be away from a city and from people was seen as enormously valuable. For some, discussions of nature’s benefits that are too practical and utilitarian seem to slight these very real and important ways that nature touches their lives.

Final Notes on Language and Messaging

In summary, the following table provides a short reference – building on prior research and drawing on this year’s work – on the best and worst language that can be used in developing support for conservation.

Bad Words to Avoid	Good Words to Use
<i>Environment</i>	<i>Land, air and water</i>
<i>Ecosystems</i>	<i>Natural areas</i>
<i>Biodiversity / endangered species</i>	<i>Fish and wildlife</i>
<i>Regulations</i>	<i>Safeguards/protections</i>
<i>Riparian</i>	<i>Land along lakes, rivers and streams</i>
<i>Aquifer</i>	<i>Groundwater</i>
<i>Watershed</i>	<i>Land around rivers, lakes and streams</i>
<i>Environmental groups</i>	<i>Conservation groups / organizations protecting land, air, and water</i>
<i>Agricultural land</i>	<i>Working farms and ranches</i>
<i>Urban sprawl</i>	<i>Poorly planned growth/ development</i>
<i>Green jobs</i>	<i>Clean energy jobs/jobs protecting water quality/etc.</i>

<i>Ecosystem services</i>	<i>Nature's benefits</i>
<i>Landscape-scale conservation</i>	<i>Large, connected natural areas</i>

Research Methodology: Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin, Metz & Associates (D) and Public Opinion Strategies (R) have conducted three major national surveys on behalf of The Nature Conservancy over the last decade. The most recent was completed in June 2012 with 800 registered voters throughout the United States conducted on both traditional land-lines and cell phones. The margin of error associated with a sample of this type is $\pm 3.8\%$. Previous surveys were conducted in 2009 and 2004. The 2009 survey was preceded by eight focus groups conducted among a variety of audiences, including voters of color, in Kansas City, MO; Denver, CO; Charlotte, NC; and Tampa, FL. We have also drawn in corroborating findings from numerous regional, state and local surveys conducted on conservation conducted throughout the country by our two firms, individually or jointly, over the last several years.