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How to Communicate Successfully Regarding Nature-Based Solutions: Key Lessons from Research with American Voters and Elites

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The bi-partisan polling team of Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin, Metz & Associates (D) and Public Opinion Strategies (R) recently partnered to complete a national quantitative survey of voters and “opinion elites” throughout the United States to explore their attitudes toward “nature-based solutions” to infrastructure needs. This research built on focus group research previously conducted in three diverse location as well as in-depth interviews with “thought leaders” which includes community officials, journalists, corporate executives and other “elites” engaged on these issues. In all of this research, a primary focus was on testing language and messaging to better understand how to communicate about this issue.

The following are some of the key communications recommendations to emerge from this extensive research program, framed as quick “rules” to follow:

- **DO call this concept “nature-based solutions.”** The phrase itself is only slightly more positive than others we tested in the survey to describe this concept, but after respondents hear more about this issue they tend to believe that “nature –based solutions” best describes the actual concept as one can see here:

<i>Best Description of Concept Ranked by Voters</i>	Voters	Opinion Elites
Nature-based solutions	43%	39%
Natural Defenses	21%	18%
Natural Infrastructure	17%	24%
Green Infrastructure	14%	14%

Importantly, most voters just do not think in terms of “infrastructure.” The most top-of-mind association is to roads or transportation, which lacks a direct connection to these issues. Even when respondents “get” the comparison, it seems less personal and goal-oriented than finding a “solution.”

Thought leaders were more divided over the best phrase, in part because some were already accustomed to other phrases like “natural infrastructure.” They also are more used to thinking in terms of infrastructure needs and comparing the costs of infrastructure to other potential needs in the community.

Note that “natural” solutions was not as positive, as a number of focus group respondents thought that it sounded more like holistic medicine or an organic food product. We occasionally encountered this association in reaction to “nature-based solution,” but far less often given that “natural” had stronger connections to consumer products and how they are marketed.

- **DO NOT say “green.”** We continue to see that many voters think of “green” as over-used and related to marketing products. While some certainly have positive associations, the divisions in reactions clearly mean that using this word risks turning off and alienating these voters. The most positive reception to “green” came from journalists we interviewed, but the word was still viewed less favorably among the other thought leaders.
- **DO position nature-based solutions as complementary to engineering solutions.** We consistently saw a more positive response when we talked about the way nature-based solutions could complement and work with engineered solutions or existing man-made infrastructure. This dynamic was evident when we asked survey respondents to choose whether they would prefer investing in nature-based solutions, engineered solutions or both, and a majority chose “both” as seen here:

<i>Preferred Method For Problem-solving</i>	Voters	Opinion Elites
The engineering solution	14%	15%
The nature-based solution	24%	21%
A combination of the two	56%	61%

- **DO talk about how communities can make better-informed choices if they are considering nature-based solutions along with engineered solutions.** We saw overwhelming support for the idea of requiring that when “local communities are considering investments in new infrastructure, they must also examine existing scientific and economic data to evaluate the costs and benefits of protecting natural areas and using similar nature-based solutions that would provide equivalent benefits to the community.” That concept was so popular partly because we explained that it would then allow communities “to make an informed choice about whether to invest in nature-based solutions, man-made infrastructure, or a combination of the two.” That idea of having all the information in order to make an informed choice resonated strongly in the focus groups.
- **DO use examples in explaining the concept of “nature-based solutions.”** Voters essentially required hearing an example or two in order to better grasp this concept. And even after having some tangible examples, messaging that reiterated the benefits of nature and how it can help solve problems their community might be facing still rated as some of the most compelling. As the following graph illustrates, the three top messages for voters all provide a clear example of a nature-based solution:

<i>Top 3 Support Messages %Very Convincing</i>	Voters
We spend billions every year to treat our drinking water. But it is more cost effective and simpler to prevent water pollution naturally – by protecting and restoring areas around sources of drinking water like wetlands -- than it is to treat water after it has been contaminated.	40%
Including nature-based solutions as a key part of community planning provides a wide range of benefits to communities. For example, healthy forests help protect drinking water at the source, can reduce or avoid costs of filtering and cleaning water, enhance the quality and taste of drinking water, and improve the quality of life by providing places for relaxation and recreation close to where people live. Natural infrastructure can be used in conjunction with concrete and steel built infrastructure to cost-effectively deliver safe drinking water to millions of people.	38%
In coastal states, wetlands are the first line of defense to slow down and absorb storm surges and hurricane winds. Yet, every day, states along the Gulf Coast lose huge areas of coastal wetlands. We need to recognize the value natural areas like wetlands have in protecting communities – both from catastrophic storms and the billions of dollars in damage they cause.	37%

While it is not often possible in practice to get voters to focus in on an issue for as long as they do in focus groups, we did see the value of the case studies and video examples we tested in those groups (highlighting examples from Cape May, NJ; Bloomington, IL; and Northern AZ forests). Whenever possible, providing these types of regionally comparable examples and a case study of how a community benefited from this approach is incredibly powerful.

- **DO talk about communities; NOT cities.** We heard quite clearly that “community” is often a more applicable term than is “city.” Everyone in our focus groups thought of themselves as living in a community. Only those living in a city proper – such as a couple of respondents in Miami – thought of themselves as living in a “city.” “Community” also implies the people residing there, and not just the geographic location. It also can have positive connotations related to people working together which are not evoked by “city.”

Importantly, we also saw that some respondents think of a “city” as a space dominated by buildings

and concrete, which often was lacking in nature. Therefore, we heard comments that a “natural city” was an oxymoron, for example.

- **DO NOT talk about how government agencies or entities could use this approach – instead focus on how it affects communities.** Even just the mention of “government agencies” in the focus groups derailed some more conservative voters who began to see it through a “big government” lens of concern. Keeping the focus on how it affects communities appears to be far more important – and less confusing – than focusing on the entity implementing these solutions.
- **DO NOT talk about “resilience” except with thought leaders.** We have now tested the word “resilience” or “resilient” in a dozen groups for TNC in six cities and in eight other groups on a complementary topic with exactly the same less than enthusiastic and often confused reaction. Resilient implies that something negative has happened and the community is “bouncing back” from that negative event. Therefore, some respondents point to the fact that there is an implicit negative associated with “resilience.” As one survey respondent explained in defining a “resilient city” as “a city able to bounce back from problems, (but) instead of being resilient it would be better if it didn't need to be resilient but instead made efforts at prevention of problems.”

That said community leaders and elites recognize problems will inevitably come up, and therefore resilience has more positive connotations of having planned well for the inevitable.

- **DO talk about having “safe” or “sustainable” communities.** It is clear that “safe” adds a significant increase in positive regard when added to one of the phrases. Unfortunately, while “healthy” has very positive connotations, those are often not related to the issue at hand. Instead, voters often think of physical health, such as a community seeking to reduce obesity.

<i>Mean Rating of Terms Ranked by Voters</i>	Voters	Opinion Elites
Healthy and safe communities	64.9	70.7
Healthy communities	57.5	67.6
Sustainable communities	55.6	61.7
Sustainable cities	55.3	63.4
Naturally resilient communities	52.7	58.1
Resilient Communities	52.5	60.2
Natural communities	50.8	54.9
Resilient cities	49.5	53.4

It is worth noting that in other recent research we have tested language about “prepared” communities, and in places where there is a specific challenge, this language has tested even better than “safe.” Therefore, we would strongly suggest considering employing descriptions like “flood-prepared communities” or “fire-prepared communities” where applicable.

- **DO stress how nature-based solutions are a way for communities to be proactive and cost-effective in responding to challenges.** Opinion elites consistently responded very positively to messages which focus on the proactive nature of this approach. Of all the messages we tested one of the most positive with voters and opinion elites is a message which we have seen resonate in

previous research on behalf of TNC as well:

Support Message % Very Convincing

Smart planning and preparation through investments in nature-based solutions before a disaster strikes is a better investment than costly emergency response and clean-up afterward. A FEMA-funded study found that for every \$1 invested to reduce our risk from disasters before they occur, we save roughly \$4 in emergency response.	Voters
	34%
	Opinion Elites
	48%

A similar message also resonated just as strongly with opinion elites:

“Smart investments made before a disaster strikes can help protect a community’s quality of life, save lives, and reduce the cost to taxpayers. Yet, the government makes it easier for communities to receive funding to rebuild after a disaster and provides few resources to reduce risks before a disaster strikes. We need a proactive, practical approach to help communities be prepared for disasters.”

- **DO NOT be defensive about costs or effectiveness of these strategies.** Voters in the focus groups and surveys tended to view nature-based solutions as just as effective and likely costing less over the long-term. While there obviously could be a different level of skepticism among decision-makers, know that the public embraces the concept on many levels.
- **DO use “front-line” messengers.** It also matters who communicates information. The four most credible messengers about this issue for both voters and opinion elites are...
 - ✓ *Fire fighters*
 - ✓ *Red Cross and other non-profit organizations which respond to natural disasters*
 - ✓ *Nurses and other health professionals*
 - ✓ *Water quality scientists*

All of these messengers are viewed as being on the “front lines” dealing with these problems directly. Conservation organizations broadly, and The Nature Conservancy specifically, tend to be trusted but with less intensity than these “front-line” messengers.

Conversely, government-related agencies or officials tend to be less trusted, with the exception of the Army Corps of Engineers. The least trusted messenger we tested among both voters and opinion elites is “homeowners’ insurance companies.” We would note that we have seen in other research that insurance agents – especially if a person has a personal relationship with an agent – can be far more compelling messengers than the “insurance company” broadly.

Thought leaders often wanted to hear from people who had success with such a nature-based approach in a comparable situation or community. They also viewed conservation organizations as credible communicators as well (although we should remember these are all respondents who had

some connection with TNC and therefore may be predisposed to viewing these types of organizations positively).

Methodology: *FM3 and POS conducted on-line interviews with 500 registered voters and 300 “opinion elites” across the country. Opinion elites are all college graduates or have higher education attainment, have incomes of \$75,000 or greater, are 25 years or older, and had to indicate that they pay “a lot of” attention to the news. Interviews were conducted October 26 - November 2, 2015.*

Six focus groups preceded the survey research. They were conducted in St. Louis, Miami, and Salt Lake City (representing different topographies facing different natural challenges). The groups were segmented by partisan affiliation. Each session was approximately two hours long and included eight to ten participants.

In addition, we conducted 18 in-depth interviews with “thought leaders” – such as community leaders, corporate environmental officers, and journalists – to complement this research.