

**BELDEN & RUSSONELLO**  
RESEARCH AND COMMUNICATIONS

**Communicating Biodiversity:  
Summary of  
Focus Group Research Findings**

**Conducted for the  
Consultative Group on Biological Diversity**

**June 1995**

## I. INTRODUCTION

Survey and focus group research over the last few years have documented that the loss of biological diversity is not a recognizable, pressing concern among the American electorate.

A focus group research project was designed for The Consultative Group on Biological Diversity (CGBD), a group of environmental funders, to examine how to change this lack of interest and concern, and we are pleased to present in these pages the results of that focus group project.

Using the previously existing research as a foundation, our project identifies the current attitudes and barriers to communicating the importance of saving biodiversity and the ecosystems which support it; and identifies approaches, messages, and language most useful in overcoming these hurdles.

**Methods and target audiences:** A series of ten focus groups were held in Baltimore, Jacksonville (Florida), Chicago, Tacoma, and Sacramento, between March 2 and April 25, 1995.

To learn the most about the increasing concern about biodiversity, we focused on voters who were neither strongly committed to environmentalism nor antagonistic toward it. Thus the participants in the bulk of our groups were news-consuming, active voters, who ranked the environment as being only a middle level concern for them. These voters met in seven separate groups, generally segmented by their age and gender. The criteria for two groups was also that the voters be frequent church or synagogue attendees; and one of the seven groups was made up of swing voters -- people who have voted for presidential candidates from different parties in the past two elections.

We also felt it would be useful to take a close look at how the individuals who help shape attitudes react to the issue. So the three other groups were among select audiences: kindergarten through high school teachers; community activists and leaders; and environmentalists.

The findings in most of the groups were remarkably similar across the demographic, political, and other differences represented in the membership. Only the environmentalists distinguished themselves from the rest in more than a few areas of questioning. Thus in reporting the findings, only occasionally will the reader find mention of a different finding for a specific type of voter.

**Phases:** The first six groups were used largely to identify the attitudes and barriers to communicating on biodiversity and to explore general themes to present biodiversity; the final four focussed on the approaches, arguments and language for developing effective messages and educational campaigns.

**Contributions to the effort:** Funding for the research came from the W. Alton Jones Foundation and the Tides Foundation -- members of the CGBD. The project was conducted under a contract with the Communications Consortium Media Center and in collaboration with Douglas Gould & Company. The principals at all of these organizations have contributed enormously to the conceptualization and success of this project.

We also greatly benefitted from consultation from our colleagues -- Vince Breglio of Research/Strategy/Management, Geoff Garin and Debbie Klingender of Peter D. Hart Research, and Matt MacWilliams of MacWilliams, Cosgrove, Snider. The groups were moderated by Nancy Belden, John Russonello, Vince Breglio, and Geoff Garin.

In using this analysis, readers should keep in mind that focus groups are qualitative research and are not intended to quantify public attitudes on issues. Our purpose is to look closely at attitude formation and to discover the range of opinion and beliefs on the topics at hand; the different ways in which people react to specific pieces of information; how they evaluate information; and the judgements that people reach based on that information.

## II. HIGHLIGHTS OF THE FINDINGS

### ***Overview***

Our focus groups among non-environmentalist voters, selected opinion shapers and environmentalists show there are serious obstacles to making the salvation of biodiversity a salient issue. Chiefly the barriers center on a lack of acceptance that saving species and biodiversity matters to the quality of human life, and the concern that saving habitat and species may not be worth the price this demands in economic and social trade-offs.

Important opportunities for directly answering these problems and turning them around emerge from the research. One, refocussing the issue on *habitat and ecosystems*, rather than on specific species, helps send the message that all elements are interrelated and that damaging one aspect of the environment may have far reaching repercussions. Secondly, showing how *humans directly benefit or are harmed* by the health or degradation of ecosystems and how humans are directly served by the functioning environment are persuasive and important messages.

Also advancing the issue of biodiversity is consonant with the strong sense of *stewardship and personal responsibility* that many American voters have toward the earth and for the future, and an appreciation for the *aesthetic contribution* to their own lives generated by healthy, natural places.

### ***The General Environmental Backdrop***

**1. The targeted voters lack connection to nature.** With the exception of the environmentalists, most of the targeted voters have little real attachment to nature. Many do not experience nature in their daily lives, and much of their experiences are limited to a built, controlled environment -- including public parks, their own yards, domesticated animals, and so forth. This detachment from nature translates into a lack of urgency concerning environmental issues and only a superficial understanding of the interconnectedness of species and habitat.

**2. The environment is a lesser issue than many other concerns for them.**

Environmental issues are considered important but not a priority by most of these voters, because they view other concerns, such as crime and education, as more immediate and compelling. Furthermore, they believe the country is already addressing environmental issues, thus urgency is lacking.

"[The environment is] an important issue...but there are too many other problems I think that need to be taken care of right at this moment." -- *Woman Sacramento*

**3. What concern there is for environmental protection is largely anthropocentric and utilitarian.** Most of the targeted voters' reasoning about why environmental action and policy is important is based in two areas: 1) a desire to protect current human well-being (e.g., to have clean air and water), and 2) to preserve the environment for future generations of human beings.

### ***Biodiversity and Interconnectedness***

**1. The targeted public's understanding of biodiversity is shallow.** We anticipated from previous research (and confirmed in these focus groups) that in the broadest terms the target voters would accept the suggestion that all living things are interrelated and that the loss of one or another affects other living things, including humans. Indeed many of the focus group participants described, sometimes in detail, this interconnectedness, and stated that preserving habitat and species is important because of the impact that loss may have on the larger ecosystem.

"...one species depends upon another and we are in it together." -- *Religious Woman Baltimore*

However, the public's real concern over habitat or species extinction is paper-thin and public understanding of biodiversity is superficial. As is discussed more below, this initial lip-service to the importance of the "circle of life" or of not breaking a chain quickly disintegrated when any number of other issues entered the discussion. The participants showed themselves to be both poorly informed about biodiversity and unconvinced of its importance.

**2. "Biodiversity" as a term is poorly understood.** Virtually no one in our ten groups knew the word "biodiversity." When it was discussed among them, they complained that it did not imply "connection" -- just "difference."

### ***Obstacles to Overcome in a Communications Campaign***

There are a host of widely held ideas and concerns that permit the voters to believe the biodiversity issue is not pertinent. These must be addressed in order to communicate successfully on the importance of saving habitat and species.

**1. First, the voters are uncertain that maintaining biodiversity is related to human survival or well-being in the short term.** Scratch the surface, and many in the target audience do not believe we are losing enough species and habitat to impact human well-being. They have a hard time accepting the idea that losing some species and habitat will affect life on earth in a way that matters to them personally.

"...by the time it really may affect us, it will be a long time from now and it really won't matter." -- *Female Community Leader Jacksonville*

As we have noted, voters' reasons for agreeing to pro-environmental ideas is almost always anthropocentric. Thus, a failure to connect preserving biodiversity to human survival is an important obstacle to increasing the active concern on this issue.

**2. Biodiversity preservation goals often seem unreasonable, out of touch, or infeasible.**

Many of the voters do not believe it is possible to save all, most, or even "a lot" of habitat and species. When the group moderators presented suggestions that we commit ourselves to saving the diversity of habitat and species (for a variety of reasons), the participants replied that such a goal was unreasonable, comparing it to never throwing anything away because "you might need it someday."

**3. Some aren't worth saving.** The value of particular species or habitat often does not have a demonstrable value. When the value or function of particular habitats or species is not readily apparent to many members of the target audiences, they question the importance of saving it.

If a species appears to be harmful or a pest to humans, the non-environmental voters in particular move quickly away from advocating its preservation and often overtly call for its elimination. Some examples of species many voters do not think we should preserve include mosquitos, rats, and roaches -- even while acknowledging that these "pests" have a role in the "food chain" or some other function.

**4. When the human social or economic needs are in conflict with saving a habitat or species, human needs almost always outweigh protecting biodiversity.** This is not always so readily apparent; we find many individuals advocating the larger public good over the individual's right to destroy biodiversity when it is stated in general terms. But when the example is local or when other human-centered demands come into play, saving biodiversity begins to be sacrificed for other social and economic needs.

**5. Nature vs. human intervention: It is not clear to voters that human beings are responsible for current extinction rates.** Many in the groups believe that nature is capable of balancing itself and often suggest that extinction that is occurring today is natural and should not be interfered with. Others believe that new species are being created and that species can adapt to changes in their environments.

It is only when it is made clear that it is human behavior that is causing us to lose species and habitat at high rates that the target voters become concerned about biodiversity loss.

In addition to these notions that diminish the urgency of caring about biodiversity, we identified *two communications problems that cut throughout the presentation of arguments* in favor of saving biodiversity.

**1. The evidence is fragmented.** The examples of biodiversity loss that are given to the public to make the case for preservation are for the most part isolated instances -- a river, a bird, a snail darter -- rather than a systematic example. The bits of evidence with which advocates try to make the case do not add up to a significant problem for most members of the target audiences. Consequently, biodiversity loss is not an urgent issue to many voters.

"I don't think we really know how dangerous it is for the ecosystem and for humanity if species become extinct. Species have been disappearing from the universe since the beginning and they always will. I don't think we know enough to support drastic actions, to interfere with something that was going on before we showed and is going to go on after we leave. So I think it's presumptuous of us to be drastic about something that we are so ignorant about." --  
*Male Environmentalist Sacramento*

**2. Voters are skeptical regarding the facts.** Many of the group participants repeatedly questioned the evidence of biodiversity loss we presented to them. The voters were particularly wary of information regarding environmental threats because they feel that environmental issues have often been exaggerated. More importantly, they also question facts which they cannot validate in their own lives, asserting for example that there are plenty of forests, or that if one owl is gone, surely another can perform its function.

### ***Elements of a Communications Strategy***

While the obstacles -- both lack of knowledge and the variety of attitudes reviewed above -- are significant, on the other hand there are also a number of values and communication concepts that may be useful in furthering interest in biodiversity. We suggest observing the following key points:

**1. Focus on habitat.** When we focus on saving habitat and/or ecosystems, we found many more participants in the groups were concerned about the loss, than when the focus was on individual species. This appears to be true for several reasons:

**Habitat spells interconnectedness:** The terms habitat and ecosystems appeared in our groups to be assets for communication on biodiversity, because voters were familiar with both of them, and they both connote the concept of interconnectedness.

**Multiple effects:** Voters understand that loss of habitat may result in harm to or loss of many species. Most voters want to be practical, and saving habitats or ecosystems seems a more efficient orientation than saving individual species.

**Utilitarian element:** The public appreciates the ecosystem services provided by healthy habitat (even though they do not use such terms as "ecosystem services"). Assertions about the role of biodiversity in maintaining a livable planet (through wetlands, ancient forest, or the Everglades cleaning the air and water, etc.) are very compelling reasons to preserve habitats.

**Aesthetic appreciation of places:** The appreciation that some individuals have for specific places (that are in fact habitats) -- because of their beauty, uniqueness, provision of sport, etc. -- can be powerful. In particular the environmentalists appreciated places in nature that are special and that they enjoy.

---

**Habitat unifies the issue:** Habitat or ecosystem centered messages tie together the fragmented evidence of biodiversity loss presented to the public. Using habitats -- wetlands, forests, etc. -- as a common concept throughout the messages may help bring together the loose ends.

**2. Show how humans need and benefit from biodiversity.** Messages communicating the need to save biodiversity must contain a constant strain of how the survival of habitat and species enhances people's lives or makes them possible or both. In the focus groups, the messages with the broadest appeal were those that contained people in them or used imagery to connect people to biodiversity.

"...It's my feeling that unless we have a direct stake in what's happening, people are not going to be interested in change." --  
*Man Baltimore*

There are many ways of course to relate people and the environment. For example, detailing the human benefits of saving biodiversity, such as protecting our air and water, or illustrating the negative consequences of biodiversity loss on our lives here and now can have a great impact. Also, using examples of nature with which people are familiar, such as their gardens, will provide an opening to educate them about biodiversity.

**3. Lay responsibility at humans' feet.** Another important element of the message is that it must illustrate that humans -- not natural forces -- are causing extinction of habitat and species to occur. It is far from clear to many participants that the loss of species and habitat is not simply a continuation of "nature taking its course."

"How much of losing species is attributed to mankind being here?...that much of it we ought to intervene on." -- *Woman Sacramento*

When voters learn that *human* behavior is causing destruction or loss, they say humans must take responsibility and believe that humans should rectify their behavior. We

can call upon this core value of personal responsibility that is held by many Americans.

**4. Strike a practical tone.** We have noted that most of the respondents do not believe it is feasible to save all species, and many are predisposed to believe that the environmental movement too often resorts to sensationalism and exaggeration. Thus messages that call for "saving all," acting "aggressively" and that use terms like "our survival depends on it," and "impossible" are more than people are currently willing to entertain. This is especially true when more immediate human livelihood, comfort, and progress are the perceived trade-offs. So using absolute and strong language often backfires.

There are at least two ways to sound practical while making a compelling case for saving biodiversity and avoiding alienation of the public:

By advocating stopping the destruction of the things that *help humans*. The flip side to the objection that we cannot save everything is to focus on suggesting that when we destroy an ecosystem, we are destroying something that helps us.

Again, by focusing on habitat. It is easier to convey the rational need to save habitat or ecosystems, rather than attending to individual species.

---

### ***Rationales to Promote the Importance of Biodiversity***

Contributors to this project identified four overarching rationales for saving biodiversity -- survival and ecosystem services, stewardship, aesthetic values, and economic health -- that are often used in explaining biodiversity to various audiences. Our research examined the effectiveness of each of these rationales for communicating about conserving biodiversity.

**1. Ecosystem services and survival:** Messages about ecosystem services and their relationship to human survival were the most constructive of the four rationales in gaining the voters' attention, teaching them about biodiversity, and in enhancing the significance of saving biodiversity.

Establishing that an ecosystem, kept healthy and biologically diverse, functions to clean air and water and overall positively impacts human well-being, is very effective in making the case for protecting biodiversity. Also persuasive is making the case for the negative consequences, if biodiversity is not preserved.

"I think the only real reason as humans that we need to save [biodiversity] is because it helps us." -- *Man Tacoma*

Messages about the direct and indirect benefits to humans provided by ecosystems, such as controlling air quality and controlling floods, are useful because they answer the question raised in almost every group: "How does biodiversity loss affect me?"

The medicinal uses of species is just one of the areas of ecosystem services, and is useful as an example of a service provided from nature. It is a tangible reason with which some participants are already familiar. However, when the medicine argument communicates "saving everything," or saving things for which we do not yet know their value, then it is sometimes seen as extreme and dismissed.

**2. Stewardship:** Preserving the earth for the next generation and acting as stewards to preserve biological diversity was also a very useful value to call on. Using the stewardship rationale focusses the voters' attention by asserting something they already espouse (that we should take care of our own world) and helps to increase the saliency of saving biodiversity.

"We love our kids. We want to see our kids grow up in a nice, safe environment. That's the main reason. I don't think you want to see your kids grow up in a slum hole." --  
*Male Swing Voter Chicago*

Stewardship is an intrinsic value that the participants start out with, volunteer, and hold onto throughout the discussions.

Most members of the target groups consciously ascribe to a belief in stewardship and the need to care for the earth. Members of the target audiences were attracted to stewardship because it connotes planning for the future and taking personal responsibility for protecting the environment.

Stewardship is a generally benevolent environmental concept that does not directly teach the audiences about biodiversity. Nevertheless, it is an excellent point of entry to use in establishing a positive footing and should be woven into the messages.

**3. Aesthetics:** On a third level of utility is the appreciation for wild creatures and wild places for themselves -- because they are beautiful, unique, or otherwise appealing to an individual's aesthetic sense. For a minority of the members of the target audiences the aesthetic value of nature is a key reason to protect biodiversity. Images of natural beauty set a positive stage, and for some voters they enhance the salience of concern for biodiversity.

"There's a lot of ugly things already. And when I think of nature, I think of beauty, of seeing the Grand Canyon, or seeing a mountain or a plains. And I feel it's something worth saving." -- *Man Baltimore*

This value is readily expressed without prompting by some participants, especially the environmentalists who held a greater appreciation of the natural world than the other voters.

Similar to the stewardship rationale, using aesthetics does not particularly offer an opening to teach or instruct about biodiversity. Therefore, while it is useful in establishing a positive background for delivering other rationales, it cannot be relied upon, on its own, to further the cause of saving biodiversity.

**Economic self-interest:** The concept that healthy ecosystems contribute to economic health is believable initially to most of the target voters, but it begins to lose its credibility when specific cases are introduced. And pushing the point with assertions that healthy ecosystems (or saving biodiversity) are *necessary* to economic well-being is less credible. The economic arguments we presented had the least appeal of the four rationales for most of the voters.

More work needs to be done to explore this rationale in-depth and to help develop convincing examples in which the economic benefits are perceived as credible and tangible.

### ***Language***

Our research also examined terminology and expressions that could be most explanatory in bringing a relatively absent concept to the fore. "Biodiversity" is largely unknown by the members of the target audiences and unfortunately its meaning is not self-evident even on close examination. Biodiversity implies differences rather than connection, and for purposes of public education, it is not an asset.

When read a definition of biodiversity, most participants do not think the term accurately fits the definition. Instead, they offered "ecosystem," "life," "natural habitat," "food chain," "ecology," "nature," and "co-existing" as alternatives to describe the relationships among living things.

"Ecosystem" emerges above other terms, as very useful in conveying the concept of biodiversity's interconnectedness. This term is familiar to most participants, most have

relatively accurate ideas of its meaning, and it implies life that is linked together in a "system." Thus the interconnection message is inherent in this term.

### ***In Summation***

Three key elements to include in efforts to increase awareness and to demonstrate the importance of saving biodiversity are:

Focus on preservation of *habitat or ecosystems* as the way to illustrate that biodiversity matters;

Stress *human intervention as the cause* of habitat and species extinction; and

Demonstrate clearly the benefits of saving biodiversity, and the negative consequences of not saving it on *human well-being*.