

## How we say stuff matters: Five lessons to guide more effective biodiversity conservation message framing

### In brief

Communication and advocacy are key to addressing conservation problems through influencing people's behaviour. The way a message is framed can significantly affect how people view, judge and respond to an issue. Subtle wording changes to statements can make them appeal more strongly to different values, activate social norms, influence a person's mood or emotions, or trigger certain biases. Each of these effects can influence people's engagement, attitudes and behaviour.

Strategically framing conservation communications can make them more effective, with little or no additional cost. We have distilled our key considerations for framing into five "lessons": paying attention to how you say what you say; emphasising things that matter to your audience; evoking helpful social norms and avoiding negative ones; reducing psychological distance; and leveraging useful cognitive biases and avoiding unhelpful ones. These lessons can help conservation communicators think about how to frame messages for greater strategic effect.

### Main aim of the research

We aimed to outline ways that conservation communicators can enhance the effectiveness of their conservation messages to most effectively influence their audiences.

### Background

Building community support for conservation is crucial for achieving successful outcomes. Much scientific communication assumes that people will adopt a behaviour if they are informed about its benefits. This perhaps reflects the instincts of scientists and practitioners to assume that facts speak for themselves. However, human behaviour is not strictly rational. It arises from numerous factors including a person's values, attitudes, and social and personal norms.

The words you choose to deliver your information to your audiences are much more than mere stylistic considerations. All information exists in some kind of frame, for example,

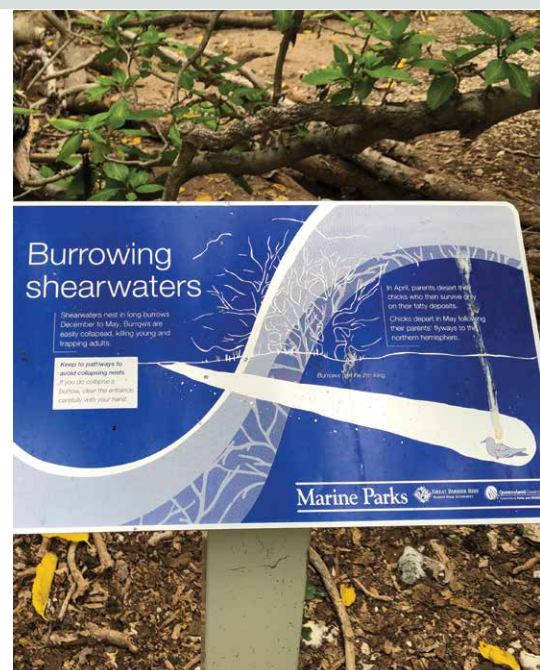
a glass half-full and a glass half-empty are alternative ways of describing the same glass of water. This frame can strongly influence how people understand that information, and how they respond to messages.

Good choices about framing can make for more effective and persuasive communication. However, framing depends on context. This means it is difficult to define absolute rules for how to best frame a conservation message. Nonetheless, we have outlined proven general principles of framing that should be considered when developing messages for any given audience and context.

### What we did

We reviewed the literature on framing from previous research across relevant disciplines such as communications, the behavioural sciences and conservation. We also drew on our own experiences, including the results of framing research experiments, and trialling strategic approaches for our own conservation communications. From this we have developed five key "lessons" to help anybody who wants to begin using a strategic framing approach in their communications.

*RIGHT: This sign on Lady Musgrave Island asks visitors to keep to the path to avoid impacting burrowing shearwaters. Image: Jaana Dielenberg*



## Key findings: The five lessons

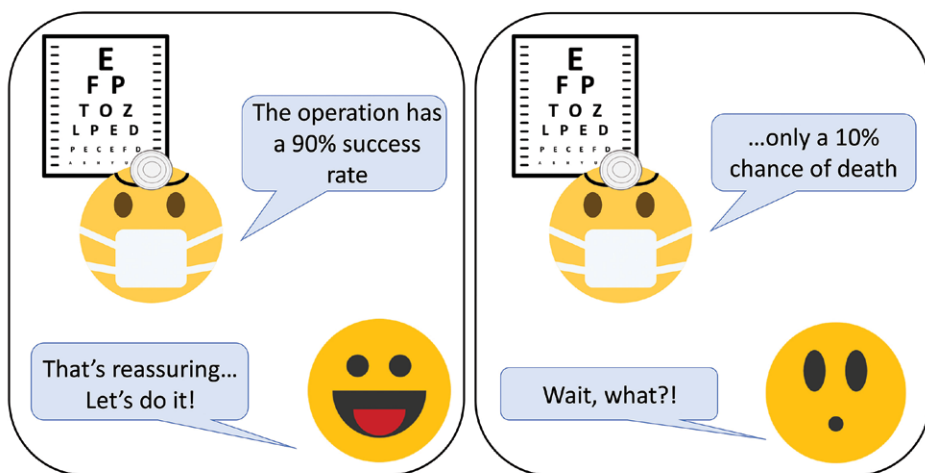


Figure 1. An example of how alternatively framing information can affect how an audience may respond.

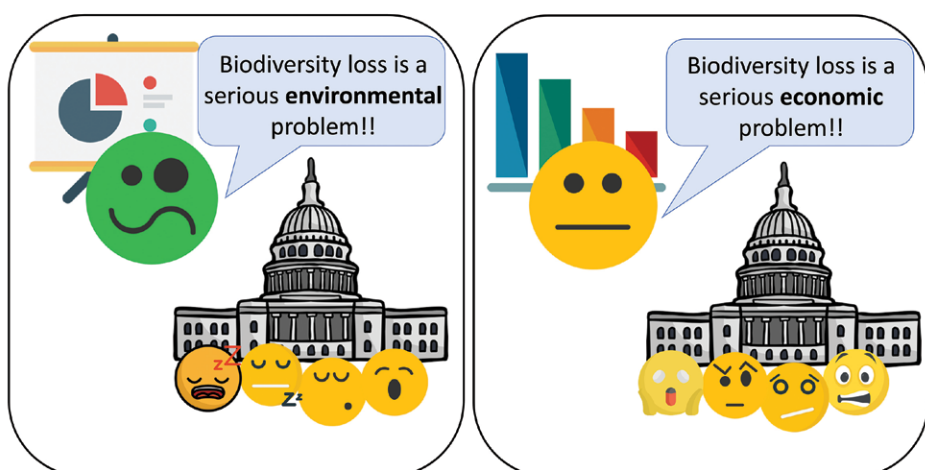


Figure 2. Example of how an issue may be strategically framed to better resonate with a particular audience. This figure is based on an original climate-change cartoon attributed to Felix Schaad.



Figure 3. Three hypothetical menu excerpts illustrating how information can be framed to activate norms, either helpfully or unhelpfully. Kuzzy's message establishes making sustainable choices as normal behaviour for customers. At Sier's, this norm is also paired with information about the social approval of this behaviour. Henry's message establishes a norm of eating seafood regardless of how it is sourced, potentially encouraging this undesirable behaviour.

### 1. How you say something can be as important as what you say.

All information exists in some kind of frame, and this frame influences how an audience responds. Advertisers and politicians have long understood this, but this knowledge has not often been put into practice within the disciplines of ecology and conservation.

Social surveys, for example, show that minor differences in phrasing can result in significantly different responses. Moviegoers asked "how long" a movie was gave a response 30% higher than when asked "how short" it was (see Harris 1973).

In another example: appeals to act on climate change had greater engagement and stronger behavioural intentions if they emphasised the personal benefits of taking action (e.g., lifestyle and quality-of-life improvements) than the need to make sacrifices (e.g., driving less) (see Gifford and Comeau 2011). See Figure 1.

### 2. Emphasise the things that matter to your audience (not necessarily what matters to you).

Messages can frame issues to suit different agendas and audiences, and to achieve different goals. Generally, you should tailor a message for a specific audience and frame it in a way that is most likely to resonate with their interests or concerns. Just because you care about protecting the habitat of a threatened species doesn't mean that your audience will, but other aspects of the issue may resonate with your audience (e.g., retaining natural areas for human recreation or wellbeing).

Audiences judge not only the message but the messenger, so it is valuable to partner with the people and organisations who will best engage your target audience. For example, asking for behaviour change among recreational fishers is likely to be more effective coming

from a familiar recreational fishing organisation than from an unknown conservation organisation.

Where possible, follow the discipline of marketing in segmenting your audience according to demographic information (age, gender, income, etc.) and psychological information (attitudes, interests, opinions, etc.) for more effective communication. When considering what an audience segment values, a useful starting point is that, broadly speaking, people tend to act in ways that either maximise their own pay-off (i.e., they are motivated by self-interest), maximise the pay-off to society (i.e., they are motivated by altruism) or, in the context of pro-environmental behaviour, maximise pay-off to the biosphere (i.e., they have environmental motivations). Rather than a discrete typology though, these 'value orientations' may be best conceived of as a spectrum upon which people may display a combination of orientations, and which may vary over time.

When communication is constrained to a single mode or message, think carefully about the audience you most wish to reach and influence and frame your communication with that group in mind. See Figure 2.

### 3. Use social norms.

Social norms are the informal rules of "normal" behaviour within a particular social group, and they strongly influence the behaviour of individuals. For example, people are more likely to litter in an environment that is already littered, as the discarded litter indicates that this is normal behaviour in that environment (see Cialdini et al. 1990).

Ensure therefore that what you emphasise in your messages promotes helpful norms. Specifically, you should emphasise desirable behaviour, and also social approval for the behaviour. The flip side is that you should avoid emphasising undesirable behaviour, as this can indicate that

such behaviour is "normal" and thus (unintentionally) promote it.

Deliberately promoting social norms can be a very effective strategy. It has been successfully used to influence many different behaviours from re-using hotel towels to pro-health related behaviours and even tax compliance. See Figure 3.

### 4. Reduce psychological distance.

Psychological distance is how distant people think of a person, event or issue as being from themselves, or how separate from them.

Psychological distance includes geographic, temporal or social distance, and also relative certainty (greater certainty corresponds to reduced psychological distance).

When psychological distance is larger, people tend to think about the matter in a more abstract fashion, and may be less motivated to take action. Likewise reducing psychological distance can increase motivation to act.

To reduce psychological distance in messaging, emphasise that a problem will affect people very like the

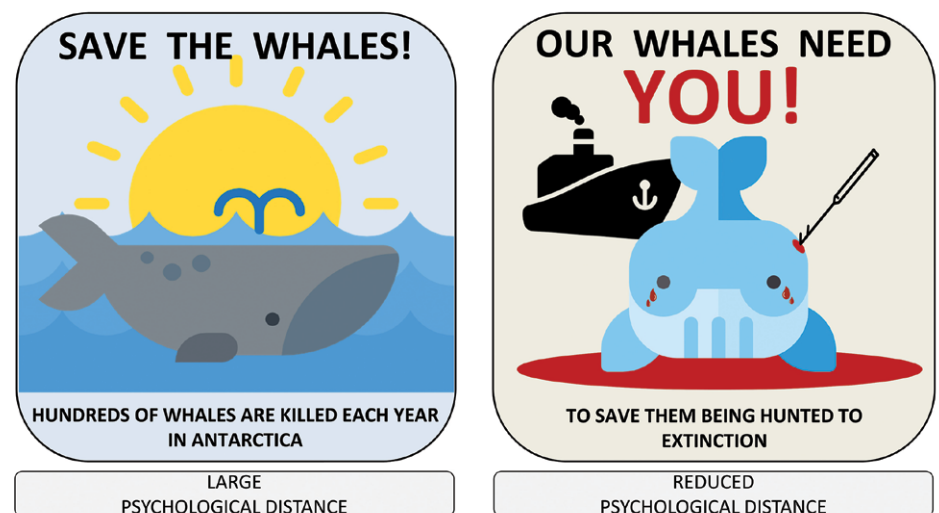


Figure 4. Examples of messages creating a large and reduced psychological distance. The would-be campaign poster on the left does nothing to reduce psychological distance between the threat to whales and the reader because it has an image of a whale in its natural state (abstract for most people) and emphasises that the threat occurs far away (Antarctica). In contrast, the poster on the right reduces psychological distance by emphasising the threat, making the whale relatable to humans (i.e., the whale has tears), avoiding mention that the hunt occurs far away, and seeking to engender a connection to the reader by referring to "our whales."

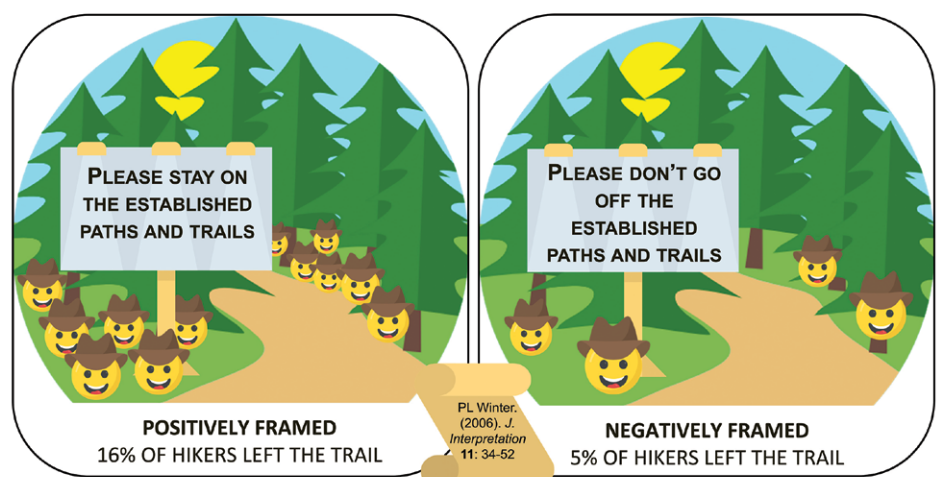


Figure 5. Example of negative and positive framing of the same message (see Winter 2006).



## Reference

This factsheet summarises key findings from:

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audience themselves, will take place nearby, and is highly likely to occur sometime soon. See Figure 4.

### 5. Leverage useful cognitive biases (and avoid unhelpful biases)

There are many cognitive biases that influence how we think and behave. Messages can be strategically framed to either take advantage of, or to avoid, particular biases. The bias in “prospect theory”, by which people tend to weigh losses more heavily than equivalent gains, has often been used to demonstrate framing effects. In one example, environmental policy options were viewed more favourably when framed as a “restored loss” rather than as a “new gain” (see Gregory et al. 1993).

A similar bias occurs with negative framing being often more effective at influencing people than the equivalent positive framing (though this is certainly not universal). Context plays a large role in whether and how a particular bias (and framing) will influence a person’s response.

Other common biases include:

- the “scarcity heuristic”, in which items or commodities perceived to be in short supply, including time (“Hurry, sale ends soon”),

are considered more desirable and therefore more valuable. This strategy may be well-suited to conservation messaging given the increasing scarcity of threatened species and habitat and the genuine need to act quickly to avoid extinctions.

- the “endowment effect”, in which people tend to value something more highly when they own it than when they do not, even if they have only owned it very briefly. It could be useful to avoid evoking the endowment effect in landholders when, for example, promoting policies that involve restrictions on vegetation clearing.
- the “status quo bias”, which is the preference to avoid change, so that when people are presented with alternatives, they will tend to prefer the status quo. (This is one reason why the “default” option is often a popular choice). The status quo bias may make it advantageous to frame a conservation policy, where possible, as continuing existing and already accepted policies or principles. See Figure 5,

## Implications

An awareness of framing effects is important for anybody who has messages to deliver about conservation and wants to influence others. Even those who are not primarily concerned with deliberately framing their messages for greater effect should ensure that they are sufficiently aware of the importance of framing to avoid activating unhelpful norms, biases or other effects, and thus undermining the effectiveness of their conservation work.

Strategic message framing offers relatively easy and low-cost gains for enhancing the effectiveness of conservation messages. Our five key lessons offer a foundation for strategically framing messages and can help guide conservation communicators in such framing. It will also be to your advantage to test your messages before you disseminate them, where it is practicable to do so.

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## Further Information

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