

Framing the Message: Ways to Communicate Ecologically, Emotionally, Sensorially, and Culturally Connected Nature

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This chapter is focused on “framing the message,” or on ways you as naturalists communicate the “take home” message for visitors on your boats. The chapter is based on a session I led for The Whale Museum’s Gear Up naturalist workshop in 2007. My writing builds from my research on whale watching in this area and carries the overarching theme of that workshop, the notion of engaging whale watchers in education and in advocacy.

As a professor of environmental communication, I am particularly concerned with the ways we communicate about nature and how our communication might influence our connections with or separations from nature. For the past four summer tourist seasons (2005-2008), I have based myself on San Juan Island as a participant observer to study communication that takes place in the context of the transnational whale watching in this region. Every summer, I have participated and observed on whale watch boats, as well as from other sites including land-based watch sites and a marine monitor boat. I’ve collected and analyzed more than 1,000 typed pages of fieldnotes on the communication of hundreds of people, including tourists and members of the whale watch industry.

My research is not so much interested in *who* is saying what but in *how* we say what. The theoretical assumptions behind such studies of environmental communication are as follows: How we communicate is not simply a representation (or a re-presentation) of nature. Instead how we communicate significantly helps inform, create, reproduce, and transform our ways of thinking about and acting toward nature. One of my particular interests is in how our ways of communicating inform our perceptions of and relations with nature in the setting of wildlife tourism.

I deeply respect and admire the work naturalists do. What I heard from naturalists in the field is they saw themselves as the facilitators of the whale watch experience, using communication to “interpret,” to “facilitate,” and to “connect” passengers to the whales and to the nature around them. What I attempt to do in this chapter is to reflect back on some of what I have heard on whale watch boats to provide a basis for dialogue about the ways communication has and can be used beneficially to frame the message.

What is “The Message”?

Let’s start by clarifying what we mean by “framing the message.” One area whale watch tour naturalist put it this way:

“It seems like if we are serious in the industry about our role as educators, this is what we should do: Make sure that we are getting out, across the

companies, certain key information and leaving passengers with something to do.”

From this statement, it appears that in framing the message we want to not only consistently educate people about the whales and their ecosystem, but also to promote certain actions in visitors. If so, how? In turn, other questions may arise, such as how can we frame the important but often depressing news about human-induced risks to orcas without turning people off? Or what are the ways one can provide a take-home message that visitors not only internalize with deeper level understandings, but also that they propagate and even act upon?

My hope is that this chapter will help seed increased dialogue on these questions and that this dialogue will lead us to clearer messages and increasingly successful ways to frame those messages. I provide some tools for such a dialogue by sharing some of my observations of area naturalists’ message framing successes and challenges in the field and by discussing additional specific verbal and textual communication strategies.

I also want to qualify the limitations of my study. First, as a researcher, I’m not omnipresent. While I’ve listened to a lot of communication over the past four years, there are no doubt ways of communicating taking place on the boats that I have not yet encountered. Second, I’m not a naturalist. You know your job best and your knowledge of your trade and the ecosystem you live and work within is a crucial part of this dialogue. And, third, I don’t have all the answers. This is a starting point and I hope that

in current and future dialogue we can incorporate more of your collective experience and ideas to create ever more fertile discussion and direction.

Successful Strategies for Framing the Message

To begin, I illustrate several successful strategies I have observed naturalists using to frame parts of the message on whale watch tours. These strategies include providing tangible and whale- and human-grounded information, sensitizing passengers to things they might otherwise not notice, providing dimension to whales' actions, providing routes to advocacy, telling stories that provide points of connection, providing historical contexts, and hitting on key informational points.

First, naturalists who responded to tourist questions with answers that involved *tangible orca- and human-grounded information* often were successful in framing the message. In other words, naturalists pointed to the whales in front of the tourists and to people's own lives for concrete examples of the connections between human actions and whale lives. An example: Tourist question, "What does pollution do to orcas?" Naturalist response, "Have you noticed that there is only one adult male in that group – why do you think that might be?" This got passengers to do further questioning and allowed the naturalist to guide them through awakening understandings of connections between pollution, mortality, population, and reproduction. The naturalist included a human-grounded followup: "These pollutants are also in us and they come from our clothes, our furniture,

etc.” Tangible and grounded information showed passengers that we not only create problems for whales, but such problems are inextricable from our own lives.

Second, naturalists *sensitized passengers to things they may not otherwise notice*.

Tourists tend to be particularly focused on what they see in front of them and what they hear from the naturalist. In other words, vision tends to dominate our perceptions of the nature around us, as does human discourse. This, however, does not do much to get people out of the experience they might have with, for instance, a TV nature documentary. Naturalists were most successful when they helped tourists become sensitized to their other senses. For instance, one naturalist told visitors, “Listen – as the orca rises, you may hear her breathe.” This instruction helped visitors know to listen and then begin to hear a more three-dimensional world.

Third, naturalists *provided dimension to whales’ actions through word choice*. This was a delicate balance. Naturalists sometimes spoke of not wanting to over-attribute actions with intentions or emotions as they did not want to misrepresent whales. At the same time, using words such as “traveling” or “hunting” when whales were almost certainly doing such things, instead of using a generic term such as “swimming,” provided depth to the whales’ actions for visitors. Another example: When a whale would breach, some naturalists described the action as “possibly a jump for joy” or a “way to communicate with each other,” etc. Such descriptions, at times presented as qualified, gave visitors a sense for a human uncertainty and mystery that exists around whales’ lives and at the same time represented whale experiences in ways visitors could connect with.

Fourth, naturalists and whale watch companies that *provided routes for advocacy* were relatively rare but were more successful in framing the message. For instance, at the end of the tours, one company handed out postcards to passengers that they could mail in to support the dismantling of a dam that was blocking salmon runs. The naturalists had educated tourists about the orcas' reliance on salmon during the tour and the postcards provided tourists a direct and memorable way to act on their new knowledge and advocate for the whales and other parts of their ecosystems.

Fifth, naturalists *told stories that pointed to whale connection with humans*. Stories are age-old ways of passing on knowledge by sharing engaging and memorable narratives. And stories told to tourists are something they might be likely to repeat to others. Some stories naturalists told during tours included those about orcas seeming to hear people's thoughts (e.g., Alexandra Morton's telepathy stories), about naturalists' own personal and often extraordinary experiences with orcas, and about orcas bringing calves to the boats or responding to human babies on board. All of these stories served as emotional connecting points, both for the teller and those listening.

Sixth, naturalists *provided tangible historical context* by taking what tourists were seeing or had just seen and providing context to help them think of their experiences in a new light. For instance, after tourists saw gray whales, some naturalists spoke of how hunting, which they clarified was done in the waters where tourists were now seeing these whales, pushed the gray whales almost to extinction. The naturalists gave gray whale numbers

previous to hunting and after hunting, and discussed population rebound. Such historical contexts are extremely helpful in engaging tourists in the face of “generational amnesia,” in which most of us are ignorant of natural conditions previous to our own life experience. Generational amnesia leads to a “shifting baseline,” in which our notions of acceptable environmental standards shift lower and lower with each generation. Providing historical environmental contexts helps reverse these dangerous cultural tendencies.

Finally, seventh, naturalists *hit on certain key points* that seemed to sink in as tourists repeated the points and incorporated them in their communication. Key points included family relations (communicating matriarchal structure, closeknit relations, and that these are social animals); orcas as individuals (explaining the method of identifying individuals and different sexes, naming of orcas, and telling stories); drawing attention to non-whale wildlife (most effective when the orcas were not present); providing ecological messages with tangible touchstones (e.g., passenger: “Where are they going?” Naturalist: “When you’re looking at these orcas, realize you’re looking at fish. They are hunting right now.”); providing facts and anecdotes that increase respect of the orcas (e.g., brain size and complexity, dialect complexity and differences); framing the orcas as wild and not trained to respond to human desires (e.g., Tourist: “Is there any possibility they’ll surface right by the boat.” Naturalist: “Well, they’re wild, they’ll go where they want to go.” Or tourist: “When do they jump?” Naturalist: “They’re not on a schedule but we may see an orca breach if we’re lucky.”)

Challenges to Framing the Message

I also heard from naturalists about challenges and observed challenges to framing the message. I illustrate several of these challenges here, including tourists not asking questions, concerns about what or how to communicate, having no protocol to cover key orcas-at-risk facts, using passive instead of active construction, difficulty framing risks to orcas in a way that connects to passengers' lives, tourists' lack of responsiveness or positive framing of depressing information, passengers not registering the basic fact that the Southern Residents are endangered, and tours not providing passengers with venues for advocacy.

First, *tourists often simply don't ask questions*: They may not know where to start. They may feel relieved from thinking because they're on vacation. For instance, one naturalist said, "Often I feel like I'm just talking in the background." Naturalist would at times share extremely provocative and disturbing information, such as "These whales are the most polluted animals on Earth" or "These Stellar Sea Lions have experienced a 75% reduction in population due to reduced food stock" and have not one passenger respond or ask questions.

Second, naturalists sometimes express *concerns about what to communicate or how to communicate*. Some naturalists explained, "It's hard to know how much to tell." Others shared that they were at times afraid of being perceived as "too pushy or too green." In addition, some reflected that perhaps it was their own pressure on themselves to be

overall experts that may make communication lines not as open as they could be: “I think sometimes we’re afraid of not knowing everything when we open ourselves up to questions.”

Third, naturalists had *no protocol to follow to cover key orcas-at-risk information*. The whale watch industry did not provide naturalists with key informational points to discuss about the Southern Residents’ endangered status or effective ways to communicate the key points. This oversight on the part of the industry resulted in missed opportunities to educate and in a lack of consistency among whale watch tours. In addition, opportunities to discuss particular key points were often lost. For example, most naturalists did not have a focused way of accessibly talking about pollutants as a systemic, pressing, and fixable problem or in ways that could educate, engage, and activate a substantial population of tourists.

Fourth, *passive construction often wins over active*. If one does talk about risks, it’s challenging to do so in a way that frames the risks actively and with human links. For instance, an active way to discuss one risk to orcas and their ecosystem could be, “We have overfished the ocean and destroyed a lot of freshwater salmon habitat.” A passive way would be, “Prey reduction.” The first active statement begins to provide ways for people to both understand and address their links to the ecosystem and the problems, the second passive way unintentionally obscures those connections. Scientific discourse is often framed passively and this tends to shape some of the ways naturalists talk about nature. However, such passive constructions unintentionally reproduce notions of humans

as separate from nature and separate from the problems we've created. I'll use an additional example I gave above to provide another look at passive construction: "These Stellar Sea Lions have experienced a 75% reduction in population due to reduced food stock." Here, the sea lions are actively experiencing their population reduce, however, the cause of the "reduction" sounds like a scientific presentation and provides little information to non-scientific visitors. Visitors would get more insight if one stated what the "food stock" is and who reduced it and how.

Fifth, it's challenging to frame the risks to orcas in a way that seems to connect to tourists' lives. How does a tourist who lives in Illinois or Spain connect to these orcas? Certainly there are global cyclic ways that they do intimately interconnect, but finding ways to work these less obvious connections into the tour is not always apparent on the fly.

Sixth, when one does mention specific risks, tourists often respond with silence, or one or two cursory questions, or by changing the subject to something more "positive." This tendency to want to block out bad news, especially about human-induced destruction of nature, is not limited to whales and whale watching; it's a cultural form of denial in the face of despair over so much environmental destruction. However, it does provide a challenge in framing the message on tours. For instance, one naturalist told passengers, "Orcas are toxic from pollution," and explained how, due to pollution, their first babies often die. A tourist responded by asking, "How many babies are there this year?" Upon receiving the answer, the tourist responded cheerily, "That's great!"

Seventh, *many passengers did not seem to register even the basic information that the orcas were endangered.* Even when told at the very start of the tour, and during the tour, passengers often would show surprise when I talked to them and mentioned the orcas were endangered. Again, this may be a blocking out of sad information. But if tourists did not register naturalist messages that the whales were endangered, they likely were not paying attention to information about risks the whales face either.

Eighth, tours often provided *a lack of venues for advocacy for tourists.* For those passengers who did pay attention, who did understand the human-induced risks facing whales and their ecosystems, and who wanted to do something about their new knowledge, there were few to no directions provided on most tours for them to effect change. Those times when direction was given, the routes provided for advocacy were often regionally limited (e.g., contact your Washington state legislator).

Other Communication Strategies

After reading about these successes and challenges in framing the message, we are likely left with more questions about ways to help visitors engage actively in their educations on the boat and engage in advocacy after they leave the boat. I share several communication-based strategies that you may already use or that you may find useful to add to your toolbox.

First, *framing your main message positively* helps. This does not mean creating an overly optimistic vision of the hard realities the whales and their ecosystem face. Instead, one approach to this strategy is the notion of emphasizing “party over protest.” In many ways, whale watching is already accomplishing this. Whale watching is fun, it draws a range of people in and opens them to nature in often exciting ways. Another approach is the notion of emphasizing visions or dreams over nightmares. Martin Luther King did a particularly memorable job of this with the issue of racism and within the context of the Civil Rights Movement. With endangered whales and ecosystems, this could be communicated by focusing on ways to address risks and visions of a healthy ecological future for whales that visitors can take part in making a reality.

Second, *employ active, informative, and empowering grammatical constructions in explaining the risks orcas face*. Instead of passively constructed terms and phrases such as ‘pollution’ or ‘lack of salmon’ (e.g., “The biggest threat to the orcas are the lack of salmon, pollution, and the changing temperature of the ocean.”), provide active explanations of why these risks have come to exist. Focus on who/what brought them to be. Make the links for people to both their individual actions and to systemic political/corporate structures and allowances. And focus on concrete actions that passengers can take to beneficially address these risks.

Third, use *evocative communication*. Some naturalists are especially good at this. Using evocative communication, like all the observations in this chapter, requires reflecting on the communication you do use during tours and considering ways to make those

messages more expressive, meaningful, and consequential. For instance, instead of the phrase “industrial pollutants” one might use “toxic waste whales.” The second choice will likely (though not always, as we have seen) elicit questions and concern, while the first choice will be less likely to raise even an eyebrow.

Fourth, *stress interconnection*. Find evocative ways to show how someone in Michigan, Florida, or Minnesota not only emotionally and culturally, but also environmentally, connects to these whales and their ecosystems.

Fifth, *create a communicative context for the trip*. Some whale watch companies in their brochures through strategic texts and images create a certain context for the trip that shapes tourist expectations so they arrive expecting a particularly educational experience that is both fun and empowering. This can be done in brochures and web sites, and in naturalists’ or captains’ introductions at the start of the trip.

Sixth, *culturally situate human-whale relations*. Most tourists leave their tour not knowing about human relations with whales besides those they experience during whale watching. Some naturalists, for instance, are especially good at discussing historic and contemporary orca captures and marine parks in ways that raise tourist awareness and critique about such practices. Only a few naturalists I observed discussed area First Nations/Native American beliefs about orcas. Tourists generally seemed especially interested in Native beliefs, such as the view of the orcas as another tribe that walks the

land at night, or as the purveyor of justice in the sea. Such cultural contexts gave tourists one more way of perceiving the orcas and to think about human connections to them.

Seventh, moving from bits and pieces of educational input to crafting a series of experiences that result in an accretion of knowledge. The challenge then is to take the many important pieces of information one has and, through communication, to facilitate a congruent experience that tourists actively absorb and can take home with them in ways that raise awareness and help create change. This involves considering the aspects of your naturalizing that you find most successful, changing the aspects you find least successful, and reflecting on ways to build a cohesive and holistic approach to frame the message.

In Addition to Your Words...

I want to offer two ideas for textual accompaniments to your words that you might consider developing as a naturalist community for use on tours. Both of these ideas arose in my discussions with naturalists. I introduce them as dialogue enhancers. In other words, these ideas are not intended to be prescriptive from some academic expert, but instead as an aid to help as you focus on your goals for framing the message. Both ideas involve providing handouts on the tours to help ground discussion and provide routes for advocacy and are intended to help address the challenges to framing the message I observed in the field.

Fill-in-the-Facts or Fact Question Sheet:

This first text idea is aimed at motivating and empowering tourists to be active in their learning. One way to do this is to uncover an imbalance between visitors' knowledge base and current perceptions. This creates a teaching moment. Instead of a fact sheet, which is a relatively passive way to learn, a fact question or fill-in-the-fact sheet could engage tourists by giving them a foundation from which to ask questions, and fill in the blanks.

Such a handout *could help increase participation* by allowing tourists to be more active, more engaged, and more likely to be open to information they hear. It also could provide naturalists with *a framework to touch on key basic and important risk information*. The handout could also provide *a way of checking to see who is listening and who is willing to be active – to gauge how much of an effect you are having*. Finally, the handout could *include ways to be an advocate for the orcas*: Once passengers learn about the risks and their systemic participation in these risks, they may be especially open to things they can do to change the situation. This handout can be framed positively as a puzzle or game.

A Direct Advocacy Packet:

So you want to help the whales... Once passengers have seen the whales and are riding home on their post-whale high, a direct advocacy packet could be handed out to those interested. The packet could contain detailed, explicit, and human-linked information about the major risks the whales face and clear ideas about what passengers can do to help the whales and their ecosystem. These risk actions can range from personal choices to political actions to effect change.

For example, human impacts on salmon can be explained in clear and active ways. In addition, suggestions for action might include don't eat farmed fish, work for habitat restoration, vote for certain legislation, advocate against specific dam construction, etc.

In explaining human-created point and non-point pollution, explanations can include ways that those who live both close and far contribute to pollution that negatively affects whales. For non-point, for instance, the handout can include information about alternatives to PBDEs and a clear explanation about the damage PBDEs do to humans and orcas, as well as other beings. Action suggestions might include voting for legislation banning PBDEs and directions for looking for PBDEs in things you buy and writing companies that use PBDEs. Other information and action can address our area sewage and waste dumping (get educated), our pesticide and fertilizer use (buy organic, don't treat your lawn), etc.

Many naturalists already touch on vessel impact by explaining why whale safe boating regulations are important and how they protect the whales. Action suggestions could include asking passengers to only patronize tour companies that follow the guidelines – this could serve also as a branding exercise for good-practice whale watch companies. Naturalist who explain boating regulations already help to turn tourists into witnesses, helping to move them from a place of wanting to be closer to whales to looking out for whales and wanting to exemplify good practice. One study I looked at indicated that if viewing guidelines are clearly explained, tourists are likely to be satisfied with staying

farther away from the whales. Whale watch boats can be heroes here – certain companies can talk about using biodiesel or special boat design or other things they are doing that helps the passenger make a difference by being on that boat. Types of vessel impact beyond whale watch boats could also be addressed and possible actions could be provided. This final point, along with the advocacy packet as a whole, can help address the current ambivalence about whale watching both within and outside of the industry.

In Closing and Opening

Observations I share here from my research are a starting point, both in that they represent only one part of my overall study analysis and in that they are intended to be only one way into discussions about framing the take home message as naturalists. These kinds of initiatives, if they seem helpful, could be supported and built upon via reoccurring sessions in the annual pre- and post-season workshops for area Canadian and American naturalists.

Initiatives discussed here could inform collective projects that are industry wide, and reworked every year by naturalists in the workshops. Each year, initiatives could be informed by the newest research and your findings on the boats in terms of insights and effectiveness. Therefore, if you do want to make something together, an industry-wide handout for instance, it is possible to think of this as a collective work in progress that can be created among naturalists for the whale watch season.

I've focused here on strategies for framing the message and shared some of your success stories and challenges. We began to consider important questions about how one can frame crucial but often depressing news (e.g., human-induced risks to orcas) without turning people off and how one can provide a take-home message that visitors not only internalize with deeper level understandings, but that they also propagate and act upon. I have focused here on what we say and how we say it and how this not only informs our perceptions but also our actions toward nature.

However, I've done little to address the cultural constructs about whales and nature that tourists arrive with and that you must interact with in your work. Nor have I mentioned things like silence and the profound effect silent moments might have on visitors (and naturalists and researchers, for that matter) in the presence of whales and other wildlife. Nor have I discussed the terms we use to discuss the whale watch experience as a whole, such as "show" or "encounter" or "great day" and their different ways of framing the experience. As I stated, this chapter is merely a beginning, a starting place for focusing on the communicative elements of the important work you do.

Author's note: For links to some of my published research, please visit my web site:

www.unm.edu/~tema/. Also, please feel free to email me if you have questions or

comments about this chapter or my ongoing study: tema@unm.edu.

Further reading:

- Milstein, Tema. (2008). When whales “speak for themselves”: Communication as a mediating force in wildlife tourism. *Environmental Communication: A Journal of Nature and Culture*, 2 (2), 173-192.
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- Milstein, Tema. (in press for 2009). ‘Somethin’ tells me it’s all happening at the zoo.’ Discourse, power, and conservationism. *Environmental Communication: A Journal of Nature and Culture*. 3 (1).
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