

The Language of Sustainability: Shouting but not being heard

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The subtitle of this conference, *Shouting but not being heard*, suggests failure. Our words are not reaching people; they're not striking a chord; not touching them in a place that moves them into action. Where is that place that moves people...the heart, the mind, the imagination...the wallet perhaps? Or a sense of compassion, hope, fear, sadness, guilt, love, outrage about injustice. This is a question that cannot be answered because, quite simply, people are different. When you strike a tuning fork and bring it close to another one of the same size then both will resonate together, but if the other fork is slightly larger it will stay still, unmoved and unresponsive. If we look at a list of words like those below we find that some appeal to us and some make us cringe, while other people will have different reactions.

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|---------------|-----------------------|----------------|-------------------|
| the sacred | biotic component | responsibility | wellbeing |
| spiritual | tipping point | ethical | life-enhancing |
| compassionate | ecosystem degradation | justice | intrinsic value |
| sacrifice | future generations | duty | community of life |

Our task then, and it is a task which stretches back to the ancient Greek rhetoricians, is to match our words with the worldview, the ideology, the passions, of those who hear them. The following is an example of a particular way of talking about the world drawn from an ecology textbook:

The structural elements of an ecosystem are stocks of biotic and abiotic resources (minerals, water, trees, other plants and animals) which when combined together generate ecosystem services.

For some the worldview encoded in this sentence is unappealing and leaves them cold. It is one where humans live alone on a dead planet. Accompanying us is not a rich diversity of plants and other animals leading all kinds of interesting lives, but instead piles of resources there for exploitation. For others, however, the disinterested and technical language offers a rational, systematic, evidence-based approach that is our best path to solving environmental problems.

Our failure in reaching people is not because there is something wrong with the language we are using, but because our words engage only a narrow audience. In the same way that the health of an ecosystem depends on its biodiversity, the effectiveness of our communication lies in the use of a diversity of discourses.

The term 'discourse' is extremely useful in a framework for developing effective communication. I'm using the term 'discourse' here with a specific meaning: discourses are particular ways of talking about the world which encode a particular worldview. So the sentence I mentioned before is a particular way of writing about the world, an example of a particular discourse. To repeat it:

The structural elements of an ecosystem are stocks of biotic and abiotic resources (minerals, water, trees, other plants and animals) which when combined together generate ecosystem services.

The way of writing is impersonal (there are no first person pronouns), it's confident (there are no hedges like 'maybe' or 'probably'), it uses specialist terms like *abiotic* and *ecosystem services*, and the grammar is formal and complex (e.g., *which when combined together*). At the same time, the discourse encodes a particular worldview. It is an anthropocentric worldview where plants and other animals are 'resources', the observer is separate from what she or he is observing, and is certain and all-knowing. The following quote draws from a different discourse:

It is not my contention that chemical insecticides must never be used [but that] we have allowed these chemicals to be used with little or no advance investigation into their effect on soil, water, wildlife, and man himself. Future generations are unlikely to condone our lack of prudent concern for the integrity of the natural world that supports all life. (Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* 29)

The language here includes personal pronouns (*my, our*), is tentative (*unlikely, my contention*), and is formal but without using specialist terms. By specifically mentioning the impact of insecticides on wildlife it shows concern not just for humans but for other animals too, treating animals as valuable in themselves. Similarly, 'all life' is mentioned in the expression 'the natural world that supports all life', which could just as easily have been 'the natural world that supports human life'. This discourse therefore encodes an ecocentric view, where humans are valued, but so are all the other species which combine together to form natural systems capable of supporting life. Rachel Carson's discourse proved inspirational, reaching very large numbers of people, because the worldview it encoded, a living world under grave threat, resonated deeply with people.

Carl Sagan (1981) uses a discourse very different to Carson's:

The present epoch is a major crossroads for our civilisation and perhaps for our species. Whatever road we take, our fate is indissolubly bound up with science (p14)...those with the courage to explore the weave and structure of the Cosmos, even where it differs profoundly from their wishes and prejudices, will penetrate its deepest mysteries (p362)

The worldview this discourse represents is one which romanticises and almost spiritualises scientific enquiry. An adaptation of this discourse could be used to popularise environmental science by making it appeal to the segment of the population in search of a deeper meaning for life outside of a religious context. The enormous popularity of Sagan's books and TV programmes shows that this segment is a large one. An example of audience reaction is as follows:

I think Carl Sagan is a beautiful writer. Eloquent and poetic. I love his respect for the planet and how he emphasises its fragility and his sense of wonder as a scientist, especially in our connection with the universe.

The idea of 'resonance' can be seen here, since the way this comment is expressed draws on the same discourse that Sagan draws on. The message about the fragility of the Earth has truly reached this reader, and she may convey the message on to others using similar discourse.

None of the discourses mentioned so far use the word 'sustainability'. It's important though, to draw a distinction between the 'discourse of sustainability' and 'discourses which have an impact on sustainability'. Given the lack of progress after decades of talking about sustainability, the former is not necessarily one of the latter.

The discourse of sustainability, like all discourses, has a history. It arises originally from the now

tarnished concept of *development*. Development is associated with the smoke-stack, resource squandering path for a tiny minority in developing countries to get rich while impoverishing the majority and transferring resources wholesale to developed countries. The impoverishing aspects of development were addressed by introducing the term 'equitable development' in 1970. Then the environmentally destructive aspects of development were dealt with by using the term 'sustainable development' in the 1980s. Sachs (1999:60) writes that 'This is nothing less than the repeat of a proven ruse: every time in the past 30 years when the destructive effects of development were recognised, the concept was stretched in such a way as to include both injury and therapy' (Sachs 1999: 60).

It became clear in the 1970s (and long before in fact) that continued economic growth would lead to ecological collapse, the end of many species, and a devastating impact on the human species. Those in power were, and still are, unable to accept the idea of a steady state economy and the social and political readjustments that this would require. The new discourse of sustainable development gave them a way to combine the injury (caused by economic growth) with the therapy (resource conservation). An example of an early discourse of sustainable development is the following, from the UK government's 1999 sustainable development strategy:

[sustainable development requires meeting the four objectives of] social progress which recognises the needs of everyone; effective protection of the environment; prudent use of natural resources; and *maintenance of high and stable levels of economic growth* and employment. (emphasis added)

However, the discourse of sustainability continually evolves and has many variants. Forum for the Future (2001) moved away from the economic aspects and used instead a 'quality of life' based discourse, which later evolved into a 'wellbeing' discourse:

Sustainable Development is a dynamic process which enables all people to realise their potential and improve their quality of life in ways that simultaneously protect and enhance the Earth's life support systems.

For many, the word 'development' makes just too much of an oxymoron when prefaced by 'sustainable', and Selby (2007), for example, talks of 'sustainable contraction'. More commonly, though, the term 'development' is dropped and people just talk about 'sustainability'.

The discourse of sustainability, with its UN style formality and its bureaucratic and economic orientation, mixed with occasional vague sentiments about the future of humanity, certainly resonates with some people. It is the language of political compromise and as such can be an important and effective path for inserting environmental and social issues into agendas which would otherwise not consider them. But it just as certainly leaves that majority of people cold. And that is why it's so important to go beyond a self-absorbed tinkering with the discourse of sustainability and instead seek out a range of *other* discourses which can actually have an impact on people's lives. These are the *discourses which have an impact on sustainability*, i.e., ways of writing and speaking that inspire people to seek a better world, a world where their own wellbeing, the wellbeing their community, and other communities is enhanced, and the systems which support life are nurtured rather than destroyed.

The discursive approach can help us to avoid 'sustainability correctness', a version of political correctness where well meaning people start to dictate to others about which words or phrases are the best ones to use when talking about issues. An example comes from the work of Joan Dunayer

(2001). Dunayer follows a very constructive and useful analysis of the representation of animals with, unfortunately, a dictionary of alternative ways that we 'should' refer to them. So 'farm animal' is a term to avoid, alternatives being 'enslaved nonhuman' or 'food-industry captive'. For 'bacon, ham, and pork' the guidelines recommend 'pig flesh'. An alternative for 'pork producer' is 'pig enslaver', 'cull' is 'murder', a 'farm' is a 'confinement facility', and the farmer is a 'nonhuman-animal exploiter'.

This is an extreme example, but in general people do not like to be told how to speak and write. They do not want to be told to stop using the term 'sustainability' and instead talk about 'ecosocial equilibrium', 'sustainable shrinkage' etc. Rather than a search for the 'right' words – which will always be elusive – an alternative is to look at alternative *discourses* instead. Using an alternative discourse means conveying an entirely different worldview, and that's the level that the seriousness of the global situation demands. The search is not for the 'right' worldview, however, but a range of worldviews with both encourage people to act more sustainably and reach a wide range of people.

The question is, where can we find a range of alternative discourses? One way is to search the literature for writings which have inspired millions, and reflect on the discourses they draw from and the worldviews those discourses encode. Where those worldviews seem compatible with sustainability, where they promote the kind of world that sustainability envisions, then they are a valuable source of inspiration for effective communication. Rachel Carson is an example that I come back to time and time again. There is something about the way that she combines detailed scientific knowledge with her own sense of wonder and appreciation for life in all its forms that reaches people in a deep place and stirs them into action. Rachel Carson died long ago. Yet the discourse that she established could be revived – we could incorporate some of the ways that she uses language into our own descriptions of environmental issues to help make them come alive. That is more than just tinkering with language - it is nothing less than seeing the world in the same way that Rachel Carson did, or a similar way, and manifesting that worldview in words.

In the end, what we find is that the language which inspires people aligns with their deepest motivations and goals for life. For some, what motivates them, at a deep level, is a spiritual quest, for some it is a search for community, for some it is re-connection with nature, for some it is becoming more human, for some it is working for justice, for some it is re-enchantment with the world, for some it is a search for peace, for some it's a feeling of family connection, for some a search for acceptance, respect or self-esteem. The abstract concept of 'sustainability' seems unlikely to be a deep personal goal for many. If language is skilfully used, however, then the achievement of a more sustainable world can be aligned with the personal goals that motivate people into action.

Summary: a discourse based framework for developing effective communication for sustainability

- Discourses are ways of talking about the world which also encode particular worldviews.
- Different discourses will motivate different audiences.
- Discourses can be discovered by looking at the work of writers and speakers in various fields who have a track record of inspiring people and considering the worldviews that underlie their ways of writing
- The aim is to discover discourses which encode worldviews that inspire people into action for sustainability.
- Once found, the language features which make up these inspiring discourses can be incorporated into speaking and writing to provide more effective communication.
- The most highly motivating discourses allow people to align their deepest personal goals

- with creating a more sustainable society.
- Using discourse in this way is not a mechanical process but a creative one where language features from a range of discourses can be woven together and combined to communicate in new ways.

The exercise below can be used for anyone who wants to improve the ways that they communicate in order to reach a wider range of people.

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Activity for developing effective ways of communicating sustainability

Below are extracts from a range of books, each of which uses language in a very different way and encodes a different worldview. Have a look at each. Give a name of some kind to the kind of discourse being used, e.g., 'scientific', 'earth centred'. Discuss what kind of worldview it conveys. Is it one which is useful for promoting sustainability? How is language used to convey the worldview. Could you use language in a similar way to motivate people in groups you want to reach?

1. It is necessary to stop this war against small farmers. It is necessary to rewrite the rules of trade in agriculture. It is necessary to change our paradigms of food production. Feeding humanity should not depend on the extinction of farmers and extinction of species. Another agriculture is possible and necessary – an agriculture that protects farmer's livelihoods, the earth, its biodiversity and our public health. (Vandana Shiva, 2005, *Earth democracy: justice, sustainability and peace*. p125)

2. I began to recognise a sensibility among my O'odham Indian Neighbours that had none of the superficial zeal of born-again wildlife protectionists. For an untold number of generations, bighorns had embodied wildness for O'odham dwellers of the Sonoran Desert, and that is what made me look into these waters: the chance of a glimpse at how an oral tradition has expressed the relationship with *wildness*, a relationship of a quality that we may never know again. (Gary Paul Nabhan, 1997, *Cultures of habitat*, p167)

3. In keeping with the spiritual traditions of many of the world's religions, the deep ecology norm of self-realization goes beyond the modern Western *self* which is defined as an isolated ego striving primarily for hedonistic gratification or for a narrow sense of individual salvation in this life or next. This socially programmed sense of the narrow self or social self dislocates us, and leaves us prey to whatever fad or fashion is prevalent in our society...Spiritual growth, or unfolding, begins when we cease to understand or see ourselves as isolated and narrow competing egos and begin to identify with other humans...But the deep ecology sense of self goes beyond humanity to include the nonhuman world. (Devall and Sessions, 1985, *Deep Ecology*, p66)

4. Much of what humans do with their biological resources – including species harvested from natural populations - depends on our having an accurate inventory of life on Earth...The concept of ecosystem is a highly instructional tool with which humans may easily learn a great deal about their planet and significantly enrich their trips to museums and zoos...(John Janovy, 1997, *Ten Minute Ecologist*)

5. They [humans] became upright and taught themselves the use of tools, domesticated other animals. The ash of stellar alchemy was now emerging into consciousness...any account of cosmic evolution makes it clear that all the creatures of the Earth, the latest manufacturers of the galactic hydrogen industry, are beings to be cherished. Elsewhere there may be other equally astonishing transmutations of matter, so wistfully we listen for a humming in the sky. (Carl Sagan, 1981, *Cosmos*, p370).

6. FOR THE CHILDREN

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| <p>The rising hills, the slopes, of statistics lie before us. the steep climb of everything, going up, up, as we all go down.</p> | <p>In the next century or the one beyond that they say, are valleys, pastures we can meet there in peace if we make it.</p> | <p>to climb these coming crests one word to you, to you and your children <i>stay together</i> <i>learn the flowers</i> <i>go light</i></p> |
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(Gary Snyder, 1974, *Turtle Island*, p86)

7. Conservationists have again and again tried to build an “ark for biodiversity”. Like Noah, they have been willing to usher along every kind of plant and animal as long as no other *peoples* are given a place aboard the ark, forgetting that until the very moment of crisis, a diversity of cultures served to safeguard that biodiversity. The Huaorani, Tukano and Zapara have not been offered berths to ensure their own survival. Conservationists have given them little place in their plans except as bystanders, allowed to watch as all the animals go two by two up to higher ground (Gary Paul Nabhan, 1997, *Cultures of habitat*, p37)

8. Sounds do not always give us pleasure according to their sweetness and melody; nor do harsh sounds always displease. We are more apt to be captivated or disgusted with the associations which they promote, than with the notes themselves. Thus the shrilling of the field-cricket, though sharp and stridulous, yet marvellously delights some hearers, filling their minds with a train of summer ideas of everything that is rural, verdurous and joyous. (Gilbert White, 1788, *The Natural History of Selbourne*, p228)

9. [the narrator has suddenly found himself in a utopian future and is struggling to make sense of it] ‘What building is that?’ said I eagerly; for it was a pleasure amidst all these strange things to see something a little like what I was used to; ‘it seems to be a factory’. ‘Yes’ he [the guide] said ‘I think I know what you mean, and that’s what it is; but we don’t call them factories now, but Banded-workshops; that is, places where people collect who want to work together...folk collect in these Banded-workshops to do hand-work in which working together is necessary or convenient; such work is often very pleasant...It’s a nice place inside, although as plain as you can see outside... [glass blowing] makes a lot of pleasant work’ said he smiling, ‘for however much care you take of such goods, break they will, one day or another, so there is always plenty to do’. I held my tongue and pondered. (William Morris, 1890, *News from Nowhere* p40)

10. Corncrackes don’t feature on Christmas cards, or sing after the rain. Their migration has none of the romance of swallows’, though they cover the distance. They arrive in spring, but we’ve forgotten they are spring’s heralds...They offer us no metaphors about fidelity or maternal dedication; they are just medium sized brown birds. Nonetheless, I feel robbed – denied one of the sounds of the summer, which all our forebears would have known...why conserve them, other than it being our moral duty to another life form on this earth? If there is no ‘clam’rin craik’, no ‘noisy

one of the bushes', it betokens something out of kilter with the larger ecosystem on which ultimately, in mysterious as-yet-undiscovered ways, we all depend. (Kathleen Jamie, 2005, *Findings*, p.98)

11. There was a strange stillness. The birds, for example – where had they gone? Many people spoke of them, puzzled and disturbed. The feeding stations in the backyards were deserted; The few birds seen anywhere were moribund; they trembled violently and could not fly. It was a spring without voices...A grim spectre has crept upon us almost unnoticed, and this imagined tragedy may easily become a stark reality we all shall know (Rachel Carson, 1962, *Silent Spring*, p22).

12. The neglect, indeed the rejection, of wisdom has gone so far that most of our intellectuals have not even the faintest idea what the term could mean. As a result, they always tend to try and cure a disease by intensifying its causes. The disease having been caused by allowing cleverness to replace wisdom, no amount of clever research is likely to produce a cure. But what is wisdom? Where can it be found? Here we come to the crux of the matter: it can be read about in numerous publications but it can be *found* only inside oneself. To be able to find it, one has first to liberate oneself from such masters as greed and envy. The stillness following liberation – even if only momentary – produces the insights of wisdom that are obtainable in no other way. They enable us to see the hollowness and fundamental unsatisfactoriness of a life devoted primarily to the pursuit of material ends, to the neglect of the spiritual (E.F. Schumacher. *Small is Beautiful*, 1973, p30).

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