



OPINION
RESEARCH
& STRATEGY



TO Interested Parties

FROM Dave Metz and Miranda Everitt
FM3 Research

Lori Weigel
New Bridge Strategy

CONTACT Adam Snyder (asnyder@tnc.org)
Global Conservation Campaigns, The Nature Conservancy

RE: The Language of Natural Climate Solutions: Recommendations on Communicating Effectively to Build Support for NCS

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The following recommendations for effective communications to build support for natural climate solutions (NCS) are based on national qualitative and quantitative opinion research commissioned by The Nature Conservancy in 2018 and conducted by a bipartisan research team: Dave Metz of Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin, Metz & Associates (D) and Lori Weigel, now of New Bridge Strategy (R).ⁱ This memo provides a list of easy-to-follow, broad “rules” for communication. It is always prudent to re-test language and messages to ensure their effectiveness in a specific state or local area prior to investing in public communication there.

Summary

In brief, the research shows that the many other benefits that co-benefits of natural climate solutions bring about are more intuitive, immediate and popular than climate mitigation itself: when advocating for specific projects, communications should focus on water quality, public health, disaster prevention and quality of life whenever we talk about nature as a climate solution.

At the same time, among a range of policies for mitigation of or adaptation to climate change, NCS is perhaps the most broadly and strongly popular, with an appeal that cuts across demographic and partisan lines in a way that many other policies do not. People find the concept of natural climate solutions intuitive and appealing. The introduction of the idea is, of course, hugely important: drawing on people’s existing associations and understandings makes the work of pitching NCS more effective and efficient.

Recommendations

- *DO describe nature using vivid and tangible elements of the natural world, like forests and water. Voters strongly connect “nature” with trees, forests, rivers, lakes, oceans, and wildlife – all things they associate with positive and personal impressions. The word conjures peaceful, serene emotions, and a sense of*

cleanliness and balance. They respond positively to assertions that nature is a place to relax and reflect, and even suggest that time in nature can be more effective at treating depression than prescription medications. Nature is something people feel compelled to cherish and protect – descriptions of NCS should be rooted in evocative descriptions of nature.

- *DO highlight the benefits of nature to people, rather than the merits of protecting it for its own sake.* Voters readily identify many extremely important benefits nature provides humans, including filtering air and water to keep it clean and remove pollution. (And these are seen as incredibly fundamental: “I like breathing,” said one focus group participant.) They also value keeping soil fertile and productive (implying the impact on food production) and providing a legacy for future generations to enjoy (which our research more broadly has consistently shown is a central rationale for supporting conservation). These clear, simple benefits appeal across major demographic and geographic categories, and they are seen as inter-related and reinforcing one another – without clean water, there is no wildlife habitat, and therefore no place to hunt and fish.

Fully 47% of voters nationally rated the message below “very convincing” – the strongest message we tested. Typically, we consider a message rated this highly by at least two in five to be highly effective. This was a slightly more positive reaction than among opinion leaders, who rated the messages about equally.

(Health) The air we breathe, the water we drink, the food we eat, and medicines that cure many illnesses all come from nature. And, studies have shown that spending time in nature is better at relieving depression than prescription medicines. Protecting our land and water will help keep us all healthy - both physically and mentally.

Ranking just behind it was a message focused on future generations, polling at 44% as “very convincing.” Given the timescale for needed action on climate, we recommend including “current generations” as well.

(Future Generations) We need to protect our beaches, lakes, natural areas and wildlife habitat for future generations – and we need to slow the impacts of climate change. Unless we act to protect these areas now, many of our beautiful natural areas will disappear before our children and grandchildren have a chance to enjoy them.

NCS should be positioned as yet another in a series of the benefits nature provides to the public – and one which can be advanced hand-in-hand with the others.

- *DO NOT dwell on the economic benefits of nature.* Economic benefits that can be derived from nature are seen as a second-tier priority; it did not stand out especially among more-conservative or rural voters over the more-fundamental benefits like clean air and water.

- *DO leverage voters’ innate sense that nature takes care of itself by showing how the natural world keeps communities safe.* There are two sides to the coin when it comes to the power of nature. Natural phenomena like hurricanes, wildfires, and flooding (all of which many voters see as occurring more frequently, and in most cases driven by changes in the climate) inspire concern. However, voters also understood intuitively that nature also provides as many protections as it does threats, offering natural solutions to some of the same threats that nature poses. Specific examples are helpful, such as restoring and conserving wetlands in areas prone to flooding along the Mississippi River. Voters understand that these investments in conservation up front can save money down the line.

A few lacked confidence that humans should “meddle” with nature in the first place – emphasizing the importance of casting NCS as a way of restoring balance by letting nature do its job.

- *DO talk about nature, land and people; DO NOT use shorthand.* We tested several labels for these policies, including “Healthy Land, Healthy People,” “Nature-Based Solutions,” “Natural Climate Solutions,” “Healthy Landscapes,” and “Nature for People.” Each was similarly appealing overall as a framework, so there is flexibility in how best to describe the policy. “Healthy Land, Healthy People” performed narrowly better than the others largely because it had more appeal for Republicans. Whichever label is used, resist the urge to use an acronym (like “NCS”); using the full evokes the underlying appeal of the policy, and keeps it out of the realm of the technical.
- *DO NOT feel compelled to provide only local examples of NCS.* In our focus group research, we tested many small-scale, highly localized examples of NCS. In general, participants found them far less engaging than descriptions of the impact of forest or wetland conservation. Overall, voters seem to react more favorably to projects with large-scale impact, or projects which offer the possibility of saving lives, compared to highly local projects that have a more modest impact.
- *DO NOT talk about nature as “infrastructure.”* Echoing a finding from our research on nature’s benefits, voters see clear distinctions between things that are man-made, like roads, bridges, and dams, and things that they see as “natural.” While voters have a clear understanding that existing “hard” infrastructure has been overlooked for too long, there is little advantage to the analogy when it comes to nature. Voters believe nature is positive, tough, and strong – it’s something we should support and protect because of all the benefits it provides, not something we need to rebuild or shape to meet human needs. This is where the infrastructure analogy falls short, even in the specific context of the protections provided by NCS.
- *DO recognize that the central appeal of NCS is its simplicity – especially relative to companion strategies for dealing with climate change.* The reality is that adequately addressing climate change will require a host of policy steps. Having voters evaluate NCS side-by-side with more complicated or contentious policies such as cap-and-invest or carbon pricing works to its advantage. The table below shows the difference in support for a range of these policies among American voters, with NCS easily the top-rated.

Ranked by % Strongly Support		Strongly Support	Total Support
Conserving natural areas like forests, farms and wetlands that naturally remove carbon from our air		71%	90%
Requiring automakers to use lower-polluting technology such as higher miles per gallon standards for cars and trucks		56%	77%
Replacing coal, oil and natural gas with renewable energy sources like solar and wind		53%	76%
Putting a fee on carbon emissions by major polluters, and investing the revenue in clean energy and forest and water restoration		52%	72%
Establishing a cap and trade system, which would require reductions in carbon pollution, and let business trade credits that allow them to emit pollution under that cap		23%	54%

While all of those policies merit support, NCS strikes the public as a much more straightforward place to start – and as a result has appeal across party lines. While care should be taken that messaging does not undermine other necessary policies, NCS does stand out as something of a “no-brainer” way to start. This dynamic often leads voters to rank NCS approaches among the highest-priority uses of revenue from carbon pricing strategies.

More than two-in-five voters (41%) rated the following message as “very convincing,” over the threshold we set for a highly effective argument.

(Simple) Nature provides the simplest solution of all to climate change – our forests can remove carbon pollution from the air naturally and at lower costs than other approaches. Conserving forests, wetlands and oceans is the most cost-effective strategy we have. We can cut or remove one-third of greenhouse gas emissions – without sacrificing food production – simply by protecting and restoring land and water resources.

- *DO highlight the cost-effectiveness of the NCS approach.* Voters understand that prevention is cheaper than cleaning up after the fact – and NCS fits into that prevention framework. Voters understand that conserving forests today could mean less damage (and lower resulting costs) from climate change in the future. Having specific statistics that underscore the cost-effectiveness of the approach – like the cost of cleaning up damage from flooding related to sea-level rise versus conserving wetlands that mitigate its damage – ought to reinforce voters’ instinct in this regard.

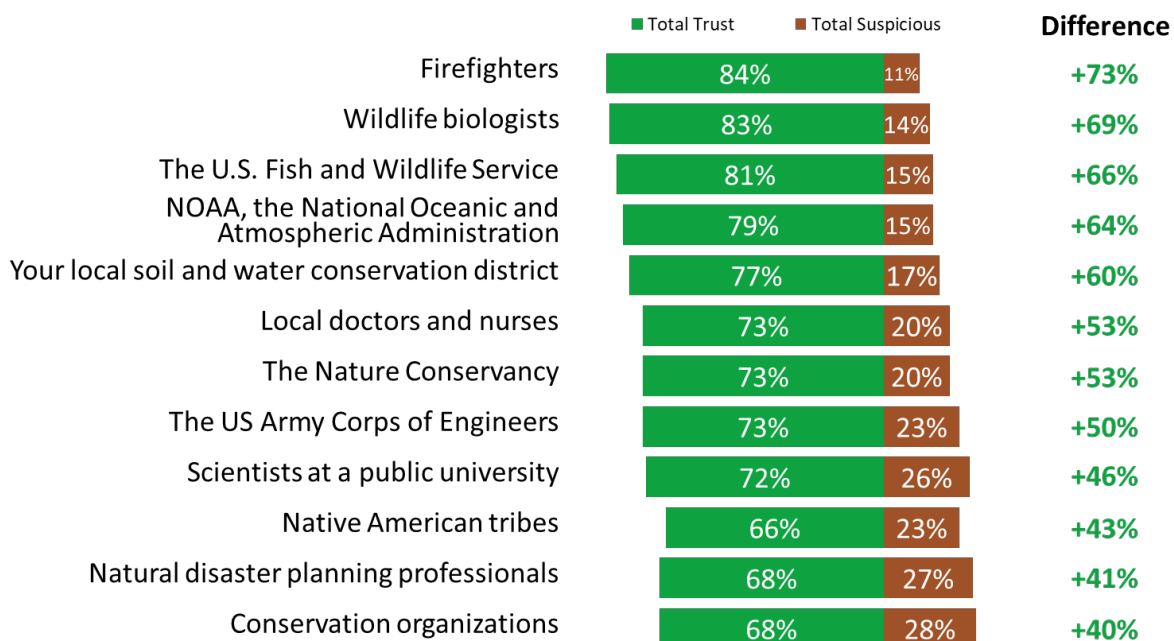
The following message ranked third in the national polling, with 43% labeling it “very convincing.”

(Prevention) When it comes to reducing our risk to storms, floods or fires, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. Smart planning before a disaster is a better investment than emergency response and clean-up afterward. A federal study found that for every \$1 invested to reduce our risk from disasters before they occur, we save roughly \$4 in emergency response. That's why investing in natural strategies in this time of climate change makes so much sense.

- *DO NOT use technical terms like “carbon capture.”* While voters instinctively recognize that carbon in the atmosphere is not a good thing (even if they don't fully understand why), the notion of “capturing” and removing it from the air is not widely understood. Focus group participants struggled to articulate the mechanics of how climate change – or photosynthesis, for that matter – works. And some resist the idea of “capturing” and “storing” a harmful substance, rather than getting rid of it entirely. They fear it could be released again someday. A better alternative is simply to focus on natural processes that remove the pollution that causes climate change from the air; the basic concept of the natural “air filter” that forests provide is at least generally understood.
- *DO focus on the range of other benefits of NCS, but make climate change a part of that broader picture.* While a central focus on climate change still turns off those who are deeply skeptical, most people understand that the climate is changing. However, significant shares still believe it is part of a natural cycle, and even those who are not “deniers” may feel it is an issue too big to fully “solve.” Because so many other benefits are important and intuitive, those should be the central focus. When it comes to threats to nature, climate change ranks behind water pollution (92% rate that a “major” or “minor threat”), air pollution (89%), and even littering (90%) among opinion leaders; among voters overall, the same patterns hold, with Democrats the only group for which climate change is seen as a major threat by a majority. And our research showed that voters embrace NCS as part of a set of solutions; they understand that we will need to take many different approaches to mitigate climate change.
- *DO use everyday analogies, like “equivalent to X cars taken off the road” – not tons of carbon – to describe the impact of NCS.* Voters do not have a clear concept of what a ton of carbon means; it's not something they can picture or translate to their lives. Analogies like “cars taken off the road” are much more effective, drawing as they do on daily life, and on something people already understand to have a negative impact on climate pollution.
- *DO NOT dwell on the mechanics of removing carbon pollution from the air – or on halting new emissions.* After a bathtub analogy (draining water from the tub as well as turning off the faucet) failed to gain traction in the focus groups, a simpler message (below) was tested in the survey of opinion leaders – where it too failed to rank highly.

(REVERSE) Today, climate emissions are flowing into the atmosphere about twice as fast as they are draining naturally into plants, soils and oceans. The amount of greenhouse gases are rising, and it's not enough to limit what we put into the atmosphere – we have to remove carbon, too. Forests, wetlands and oceans can soak up and store these emissions, helping slow and reverse climate change and its impacts.

- *DO expect hesitations around cost and feasibility.* While most reactions to NCS were overwhelmingly positive, further probing uncovered similar sticking points - both in focus groups and the survey. Voters are concerned, of course, about where the money for this type of work would come from (imagining it as a stand-alone program they may be asked to support with a specific tax), and whether it is truly feasible. They have the same questions about NCS policies that they do about any government initiative: Who will oversee it, and can they be trusted? Where will the money go? Who will have to pay, and how much?
- *DO NOT rely on industry representatives as your best messengers.* For the most part, voters lack trust in them because they could be self-interested. While some believe that people in the timber industry, for example, would have a vested interest in healthy forests, those who have an expertise without money on the line are much more believable. Those include the same types of messengers people look to when it comes to conservation issues: scientists, nurses, firefighters and environmental nonprofits. Of course, the messages each can deliver are distinct to their role, such as a nurse discussing air quality, or a firefighter explaining the benefits of NCS for wildfire management and prevention. The graph below provides a summary of the most effective messengers from our national survey of opinion leaders, based on the proportion that would view them with trust or suspicion on this issue.



ⁱ **Methodology:** From Sept. 14-20, 2018, FM3 and NBS conducted 600 online interviews with voters in the United States. These voters were screened to be "opinion leaders" as defined by meeting five of the seven following conditions: 1) voting in "most" or "every election," 2) having a four-year college degree, 3) being employed full-time, 4) having a household income over \$60,000 annually, 5) reading or watching the news at least 5 days a week, 6) having written a letter to the editor or commented on blogs, and 7) donating or volunteering with a civic organization. Due to rounding, some percentages do not add up to 100. Those interviews were complemented by a shorter national survey of 800 registered voters, conducted November 10-14, 2018. This memo is also informed by a meta-analysis of existing research on natural climate solutions, six focus groups conducted with voters in Memphis, TN, Roanoke, VA, and Ashland, OR, and in-depth interviews with opinion leaders nationwide on issues of forestry, water and agriculture.