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On Environmental Communication

by George Lakoff

Today, September 28, 2010, [EcoAmerica](#) is hosting an important environmental conference, America The Best, in Washington, DC, for a small group of specialists in environmental communication to see what ideas emerge. Because of the number of distinguished participants, I compressed my ideas to just a few pages. I have written about these issues at length in the journal *Environmental Communication*, No. 1, 2010, but since a condensed version has a chance of actually being read, I thought I would send it out beyond the conference participants to see if it can get some discussion started on a national level.

An understanding of communication is necessary, as the communication failures of the Obama administration have made clear. The environmental movement as a whole shares such failures, which is why the conference is being held. The importance of communication in politics has not been recognized sufficiently by environmentalists, and by progressives in general.

When a huge number of Americans hear mainly from anti-environmental conservatives all day every day, they put pressure on their representatives in Congress. That affects voting on legislation. It is getting late to act on global warming. If the Republicans take over Congress it may be too late. The fate of the planet hangs in the balance. Here are a few pages to begin a conversation that should be engaged immediately.

These notes are about ideas that have to change in the wider public and how to change them. They are not about short-term slogans.

Notes on Environmental Communication

Some Brain Basics

We think with our brains. We think using conceptual systems that are physical. They use brain circuitry, structured to characterize frames and metaphors. All language is made meaningful by activating these frame-circuits.

Activation of a frame-circuit makes its synapses stronger. Just listening to or using language that activates a frame-circuit strengthens that frame-circuit.

Negating a frame activates that frame. Using conservative language to argue against conservatives just reinforces conservative framings. Environmental language must avoid activating anti-environmental frames and anti-environmental language.

For example, defending science activates the idea the science needs defending and so is questionable. Go on offense, not on defense.

All Politics is Moral: The system of concepts used in political discourse is grounded in conceptions of what is moral. Every political leader claims he or she is doing what is right, not what is wrong. But Conservative and Progressive moral systems differ profoundly (see *The Political Mind* and *Moral Politics*). Parts of the conservative moral system contradict environmental values -- Man over Nature, Laissez-faire markets, personal not social responsibility, etc. Environmental values derive from a moral system centered on empathy and social responsibility.

Biconceptualism: Many, if not most, people have two contradictory moral systems, applied to different issues. They may be progressive on some issues, conservative on others. The brain makes this possible via mutual inhibition -- activating a moral system strengthens it and inhibits, and hence weakens, the other. This means that one should talk using the positive language of an environmental (and hence progressive) moral system, and avoid the language of the anti-environmental (radically conservative) moral system.

Political bi-conceptuals include something like 15 to 20 percent of the voting population. It is crucial to think of them all the time.

Moral Versus Merely Factual Arguments: Facts matter. But for their importance to be communicated at all, they must be framed in moral terms. Facts by themselves are not meaningful to most people. Just arguing the science of global warming is not effective. If done defensively, it can be self-defeating.

The Conservative Communication System: Over the past 40 years, conservatives have built an effective communications system better than anything progressives have. It consists of a prior understanding of the conservative moral system, dozens of think tanks working from that system, talented framing professionals, training institutes that train tens of thousands of conservatives a year to think and talk from a radical conservative perspective, a system of trained spokespeople, and booking agencies to book their spokespeople on radio, TV, and in venues like civic groups, colleges, corporations, etc., and more recently, a blogging community. The result is that, throughout the country, millions of people hear consistent messages day after day. The environmental community has not built such an effective system, and does not have the long-term framing needed to go with it. Just running ads doesn't compete with an effective communication system!

Language Changes Brains

Language is crucial, because language activates frame-circuits and hence can change brains. Most brain change is slow, long-term, and requires constant repetition. Some brain change is fast -- mostly in the case of trauma. The recent environmental disasters have been opportunities for fast brain change. The environmental community was not able to take advantage of those opportunities.

Long-term versus Short-term Messaging: The conservative message system has been activating the conservative moral system in the brains of listeners for over 30 years. Their anti-environmental messages have been affecting brains for a very long time, and in recent years their messaging has been very effective. Such long-term, morally-based, anti-environmental messaging cannot be countered effectively by short-term messages and mere ads.

Disaster Messaging: When environmental messaging has failed and faces a communication disaster like the present one, the response has been "disaster messaging" -- an ad campaign to "get the facts out there" and be bipartisan. This fails because (1) without the moral language and ideas behind them, the facts by themselves don't register, and (2) attempts to be bipartisan do not activate the environmental moral system in bi-conceptual brains, and may even hurt if the messages use conservative language.

Why Conservatives Message Better: In business school, they studied marketing, and marketing professors study cognitive science to learn how the mind really works. Progressives tend to study political science, law, economics, and public policy, which assume Enlightenment Reason, which is not how the brain really works. Those fields get reason wrong and thus give conservatives a big advantage.

Needed Long-term Messages: In order to decide on short-term messaging, one has to have a very good idea of the long-term ideas that are necessary to make sense of and to integrate short-term messages. The long term-ideas that have to be understood and accepted by the broad public are mostly are moral in character. Here are some of those ideas.

We Are Part of Nature: The term "environment" provides a misleading image, as if the "environment" were outside of us, around us, not inside us and part of us. The reality is that we are not separate from our environment. This is obvious from air we breathe, the water we drink and the food we eat -- but also what we experience of nature, since experience is physical, part of our bodies and brains.

Nature Nurtures Us: We cannot exist without all that we get from nature. Human beings are who we are because of Nature as it exists. Nature nurtures and shapes us.

The Greatest Moral Issue of Our Time: Nature as we know it is being destroyed by human action. The issue of global warming is the issue of the destruction, or the saving, of Nature as we know it, at least where optimal conditions still occur such as clean air, abundant water, available food, mild climate, disaster-free life, extensive

habitable regions, animals that share nature with us and that we are linked to through evolution, and our biological and ethical connections to the living world.

Children and Grandchildren: Will our children and grandchildren be able to know nature as we know it? Only if we stop global warming.

We All Own The Air: Support the Cantwell-Collins CLEAR ACT now. Every adult citizen gets a significant financial dividend as the carbon pollution is cleaned up.

There are only a couple of thousand distribution points for carbon fuels in America, and they are already monitored. To sell polluting fuels, each company would have to buy dumping permits for the pollution to be dumped into the air. The number of permits would be reduced each year, cleaning the air and producing a market in permits. The permit money would go, three-quarters to adult citizens equally, and one-quarter to alternative fuel development and repairing previous environmental destruction. Most people will make money, even if fuel prices go up. That money will be spent and will create jobs all over the nation. The bill is 39 pages long. Read it.

The Global Economic Crisis Is The Same As the Global Environmental Crisis.: Tom Friedman has expressed this in economic metaphors: Both of crises arose from Underestimating Risks, Privatizing Profits, and Socializing Losses. Both are consequences of human greed in a Greed-Is-Good economic system.

Systemic Causation and Risk: Every language represents direct causation in its grammar. No language in the world represents systemic causation in its grammar. Yet both the global economy and global ecology are systemic in nature, with large-scale overall causes, positive and negative feedback loops, and so on. Systemic causation must be taught; it does not arise naturally as a concept. We must learn to think in systemic terms. Systemic risk is different from local risk.

The Cost of Doing Business: Dumping pollution, blowing off mountain tops, leaving pipelines in the ocean, letting fertilizer run off -- these are all "externalizations of costs;" that is, they increase profits by harming nature.

Businesses should not be allowed to externalize costs. A moral business should not destroy Nature. Oil companies are in the business of destroying nature.

Cost-Benefit Analysis: The use of cost-benefit analysis is inherently anti-ecological. The mathematics works by a formula: The integral (or sum) over time of a local environmental benefit minus the corresponding local business cost, times the following factor: e to the minus discount (interest) rate times time. Since money is worth less in the future than in the present because of compound interest, any environmental benefits go down exponentially relative to business costs and soon approach zero. Since nature should continue indefinitely, while business is transitory, the mathematics itself has a hidden anti-ecological bias.

Energy Saved Is Worth Far More than Energy Used: Energy savings are multiplicative. Suppose you insulate your house. Next year you will use X barrels of oil less to heat it. That means X barrels of oil not needed to be extracted. But each year after that, again you will not need X barrels of oil. Thus, the savings are

multiplicative: you keep not needing oil year after year.

When it is claimed that business "needs" dirty energy (fossil and nuclear fuels), the possible multiplicative savings from conservation and alternative fuels -- that is from not needing dirty fuels -- is usually not factored in.

Amory Lovins of the Rocky Mountain Institute has observed that, via conservation alone, we could save 23 times all the energy we get yearly from coal. Even if he is only ten percent right, it would mean that coal is not needed as an energy source.

Distributed, clean, capital-lite energy is more efficient, profitable, and moral than centralized, dirty, capital-intensive energy (like coal mines and plants, oil wells and refineries, huge dams, nuclear power plants, natural gas fracking, etc.). This is crucial to developing countries as well as developed countries.

Political Action is More Important than Symbolic Action: It was nice of Jimmy Carter to put solar cells on the White House, and Michelle Obama's White House organic garden is a fine gesture as well. But neither of those has changed much. A presidential order putting solar cells on all military and government facilities, and having all military and government agencies require fuel-efficient vehicles, would change a lot. Buying senators is more effective than buying new light bulbs. Effective communication can "buy" political leaders by changing what voters hear. Ecological moral action is fundamentally political action.

Effective communication and education constitute political action:

Whatever changes brains on a massive scale in an ecological direction will result in material change.

Business is central to the effort: Business can save, and hence make, a lot money by going green and developing green technology.

Food: It is important to move from mostly oil-based food (using pesticides, fertilizers, global transportation) to sun-based food (local and organic) and from huge, centralized, unhealthy, polluting feedlots to small local operations.

Ecological development creates jobs and prosperity: People want to live, and business want to locate, in places that are ecologically attractive and responsible, and the conversion to such values means new businesses will thrive.

Ecological Education is the Most Essential Form of Education: The saving of Nature depends on it. Our economic future depends on it.

Women's Education is one the most important ecological issues: Population control depends on it.

True Morality is Ecological Morality: The saving of Nature depends on it.