

STONEHOUSE PAPER DRAFT

Is The Environmental Community More Concerned About Being Right Than Being Effective?

Prepared by:

Margery Moore
Brendan DeMelle

Reviewed by:

Julien Landry
Jim Hoggan

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INTRODUCTION

The gravest challenge facing the world today is not only climate change, but our inability to engage, inspire and mobilize members of the public to take action, individually and collectively. At a time when climate scientists have defined the technical problem – and when the most progressive entrepreneurs have begun to offer solutions – we find that our most daunting challenge comes in trying to inspire a critical mass of people to change social norms and to support necessary policy innovation at every level of government.

What is the best design for a national climate change engagement, education and communications campaign? How do we encourage Canadians (and Americans) to

support local, regional and national policies to reduce emissions through either passive acceptance or vocal demand?

These questions were the focus of a gathering of some of North America's leading communications professionals and academics at the second annual Stonehouse Summit held in May 2010. Throughout an intensive two-day session, delegates discussed the challenges facing the citizens' movement calling for swift action to address climate change and other sustainability issues. Working together in small breakout groups and as a full team, delegates honed in on a set of strategies to create public dialogue, improve communications outreach and inspire rapid social change. This paper summarizes the thinking of the delegates on the problem:

What is the best design for a national climate change engagement, education and communications campaign? How do we encourage Canadians (and Americans) to support local, regional and national policies to reduce emissions through either passive acceptance or vocal demand?

WHAT'S WRONG WITH THE CURRENT STRATEGY?

The environmental community has not been an effective messenger in the 21st century as climate change, dwindling resources (peak everything) and contamination of water, air, land and bodies are all combining to threaten humanity. While polls confirm that the majorities of Canadians and Americans acknowledge the reality of climate change and want to see swift government action to address it, no such swift and thorough policy response has been fully embraced in either nation. Comprehensive climate and energy bills proposed in the U.S. all fell apart, and Canada adopted a "wait for the U.S." approach, lowering its own commitments rather than maintaining a leadership role. This is in part due to a decades-long effort by polluting industries to maintain the status quo. But it also results from the failure to build a widespread social movement to demand that current leadership take the necessary actions.

Those who care deeply about climate change and protecting the environment need to explore new ways to engage the public, to create a dialogue in which all viewpoints are considered and discussed until common ground emerges. Leaders in the sustainability and environmental communities don't have all the answers and can learn from their so-called 'opponents.' In order to achieve this, climate realists must communicate outside their inner circles, coordinate joint messaging for clarity, simplicity and maximum impact across social strata, gain public trust and build momentum for massive change in the short time remaining to stem the worst effects of humankind's planetary damage.

INTERNAL RESTRAINERS AND CHALLENGES

There are both internal and external restraining forces that serve as barriers to progress in building a widespread citizens' movement to support local, regional and national policies to reduce and ultimately eliminate global warming pollution. These restrainers impede efforts needed to bring about societal transformation to a culture of ecological

stewardship and sustainability.

The “environmental movement,” as it exists presently, has failed to build the momentum needed to create public consensus on solutions to the climate crisis – although all social movements are currently constricted by overarching restraints within the present paradigm.

However, in the absence of ingrained cultural recognition of the necessity for ecological stewardship, the environmental movement struggles with several key challenges. Delegates to the 2010 Stonehouse Summit identified a lengthy list of "restraining forces" that hinder progress towards "convincing the public to support local, regional and national policies to reduce their emissions through either passive acceptance or vocal demand."

There is a growing sense – particularly among small grassroots organizations – that professional environmentalists are too insulated from the audiences they are trying to reach. And increasingly, even among the professional environmentalists themselves, there seems to be a lack of confidence, a discomfiting feeling that they are perhaps not the best messengers of change. While the root causes are not clear, the questions swirl around continuously. Are they plagued by a sense of self-importance, of superiority? Have they focused on the same problems for too long and thus unable to think outside-the-box to find new approaches? The inertia created by this type of old-style thinking cripples progress and – at least in part – may be contributing to the repeated failure of proposed political and societal solutions to climate change.

This raises the question: can environmentalists inspire the type of social movement necessary to bring about rapid, transformational change in modern society?

There seems to be a lack of trust among various stakeholders working on sustainability issues, typically demonstrated by the ongoing conflict and mistrust between fledgling local grassroots organizations and the well-established national and global groups.

There is a lack of coordination between environmental organizations, often resulting in incoherent messaging at the meta level. Lack of coordination and message discipline among environmentalists results in confusion, uncertainty and mistrust.

Structural inertia within the larger, national and global environmental organizations often impedes progress toward needed changes. Descriptors like ‘agile,’ ‘flexible’ and ‘rapidly-evolving’ are characteristics large environmental groups would like to foster and grow, but many would concede they are not accurate descriptors of these organizations at this point in time. Yet attempts at innovation or creative new forms of activism embraced by smaller grassroots organizations are often looked upon as amateurish or wasteful of time and money by the larger groups who feel they know the ‘best ways’ to campaign. At least that’s the perception of those observing the current disconnect.

Group dynamics within the environmental community tend to be insular rather than inclusive. We tend to talk to the people who agree with us, who don't challenge our plans or ideas, who will fall into line without questioning our chosen approach. We fail to engage in dialogue with target audiences, especially with hostile opponents.

This holds true for many of the foundations and other donors who fund sustainability and environmental work. It is difficult right now to identify funders who are focused on building long-term sustained campaigns or building up the general operating budgets of the most effective organizations. The common model espoused by environmental non-government organizations (ENGO) these days typically involves a specific set of 'deliverables' and 'action plans' to address a single topic or target on a short-term basis, with progress tracked by 'metrics' and tallied in year-end reports. Particular environmental threats are deemed important and sexy to focus on in near-term windows, while there is insufficient focus on building long-term capacity for the fundamental paradigm-shifting work needed for transformational change. Observe the level of creativity and freedom that right wing think tanks like the Cato Institute and Heritage Foundation enjoy from sustained, unrestricted general operating support. There is no visible parallel among progressives, and that might be a key indicator of why the defenders of the status quo have succeeded so far. Their financial security allows them more flexibility to focus heavily on the long game, rather than hopping from one short-term project to another according to funders' prescribed wishes.

Defending polar bears or demonizing coal are hot near-term themes that pique the interest of ENGO funders. As important as these projects are, they will not by themselves bring about systemic change even if wildly successful. This approach may be stifling long-term progress towards the ultimate goal – a livable planet for all future generations.

One Stonehouse delegate pointed out that the current progressive funding landscape is a bit like watching children chasing after a soccer ball, swarming around what's hot right now without regard to strategic positioning for the long-term. Are there too many groups working on too many disparate issues, while nobody is working on a coordinated, long-term strategy to bring about transformational change?

This has resulted in an unfortunate hypothesis: That environmentalists seem more concerned with maintaining the moral high-ground and chasing specific issue-driven projects, rather than focusing their considerable talents towards creating a sustainable future. Are environmentalists losing sight of their ultimate goals in order to be perceived as morally unimpeachable?

Reliance on Fear As a Motivating Tool Has Failed

Environmentalists have taken a page out of the right wing playbook by using fear as a tool to persuade the public. Claims that the world is running out of X (insert clean water and air, wildlife species or just plain old time here), or reaching tipping points beyond which the climate and individual ecosystems may never recover – these are common fodder in ENGO fundraising outreach materials. Even though these statements are largely true, they fail to create a sense of opportunity or empowerment among those receiving the

message. More often than not, this approach inspires not collective action but crippling despair, and scares away potential allies for the long haul journey of instilling sustainability principles into our current culture of overconsumption.

ENGO campaigns are often logic driven, fact based, data heavy, and based on reason. There is a false assumption that people armed with ‘facts’ will make the right decisions. ENGOs deploy too many strategies, when what is really needed is a sharp focus on identifying the top 3-5 most motivating messages and sticking to them.

Environmentalists have paid little attention to appealing to emotion, or morals. For instance, note that the most well-known reference to the concept of intergenerational stewardship and responsibility – the Great Law of the Iroquois – is used by a for-profit soap company called Seventh Generation, rather than by an environmental non-profit.

EXTERNAL RESTRAINERS AND CHALLENGES

While environmentalists bring a lot of their problems upon themselves, there are external forces beyond our control that must be considered when strategizing for the future.

Certainly the economic recession has been a factor. The fragile state of the economy and budget crises gripping municipalities worldwide lead many people to become increasingly risk-averse, and therefore change-averse.

Communicating with the general public on complex scientific issues is difficult due to the decline in scientific literacy and the rising threat from nature deficit disorder among young people.

Regulatory agencies operate on the notion that the solution to pollution is dilution, whether toxic chemicals or coal plant emissions. It’s not just a regulatory strategy anymore, it’s a widely held belief among the public thanks to the spoon-feeding of this argument by industry and co-opted regulators. Remember hearing in 2010 that the Gulf of Mexico is so huge, the oil is “dispersed” and will “dissipate” – nothing to see here, move along?

On average, people do not know what biodiversity means. Some even confuse it with ethnic diversity. But what people can relate to is nature – the public understands when nature is endangered. While not everyone knows about biodiversity, the concept of trophic food chains or ecosystems, they might understand that an individual species is in trouble. Everyone knows what nature is, and it’s a friendly word. (“He’s so good-natured.”)

Another key restrainer is that our opponents are far better coordinated and organized, and don’t suffer from many of the internal problems hindering ENGOs. Again, recall the think tanks like Cato and Heritage whose huge general operating budgets allow them the time and flexibility to develop long-term campaigns, constantly test new strategies, and learn from mistakes instead of repeating them over and over again.

In fact, a hyper-coordinated and effective opposition has crippled action on climate change and created mass confusion, utilizing a toolkit drawn from decades of lobbying and PR campaigns by tobacco, asbestos, chemical industry and other polluter interests.

Not only do vested economic interests fund active disinformation campaigns to create doubt in the public mind, but also in general there is an overwhelming amount of media, advertising and lobbying done to counter sustainability messages and reassure the public that everything is fine. Even if people recognize that all is not fine, they are often convinced that their personal actions won't make a difference. Confused, cynical, overworked, tapped out emotionally and economically... a lot of people simply tune out. Some go the opposite direction, falling into complacency due to optimism bias – the feeling that experts will solve the problem, or that the government would never allow such bad things to happen to good people, that corporations would never put profit ahead of public safety and environmental health.

Constant bombardment of messages reinforcing the status quo, coupled with efforts to portray the necessary transformation as hugely burdensome, paralyze the public and create resistance to change.

The short-term political interests and mandates of shareholder-controlled companies and wealthy individuals alike pose a formidable challenge to transformational change. Factor in the high degree of scientific and political illiteracy among the general public in North America, and you have the perfect recipe for inaction.

Of course, the mainstream media shoulders a particularly large chunk of the responsibility for public confusion on climate change and other environmental issues. Mainstream TV, radio and newspapers have helped to turn climate change and the environment into extremely partisan issues, even though all partisans and moderates alike suffer the consequences of neglecting to care for our shared planet. The major media outlets now serve as either a bullhorn for the right wing echo chamber, or simply staunch defenders of the status quo that enriches shareholders.

The 24/7 news media cycle (created in the aftermath of 9/11) currently works against any hope for coherent debate and discussion; it is designed to entertain rather than enlighten or engage the public.

Consolidation of media ownership into a few hands, dominated by corporate interests, has hamstrung the role of the press as educators and agents of accountability. Gone are the days of deep investigative reporting (Ida Tarbell, Edward R. Morrow, etc.) in lieu of entertainers whose ratings are paramount to their accuracy (Glenn Beck, Rush Limbaugh, Sean Hannity). Gone are the tough questions, ad-lib emotional appeals and stern honesty of the Walter Cronkite generation, welcome the attractive anchor reading corporate-approved transcripts on the nightly news. The focus is no longer on making sure to deliver the facts needed for an informed populace to make wise democratic decisions.

News programming increasingly entertains more than it informs – and is often designed to accommodate advertising, not to foster knowledge.

Furthermore, the mainstream traditional media dumb down our capacity to have intelligent conversations on complex topics like climate science. The focus on entertaining rather than educating has hindered public understanding of critical social and ecological issues.

Thanks to this focus on who's sexy and what's funny, rather than what is seriously threatening our existence as a species, environmentalists and sustainability advocates are simply seen as a gadfly, periphery character who steps in to annoy and pester the faceless corporate villain, but who doesn't move public opinion or inspire social uprisings.

With the U.S. Supreme Court's stupefying ruling in *Citizens United v. FEC*, the trend of corporate control of government, law, media, and public opinion has been solidified into concrete certainty for the time being. Lest we devolve into a society where money buys power continuously, all social change agents working to create the equality and justice of a true democracy must seek to restore the people's inalienable right to govern and protect themselves. That would require big changes, such as U.S. congressional action to repeal *Citizens United v. FEC*, and grassroots state-level action to rein in corporate influence.

Our current political and economic systems, along with the short-term mandates and machinery of business, are ill equipped to deal with a huge problem like climate change that requires transformational adjustments to our basic systems. While our current public policy and regulatory systems are designed to be reactive to problems, the only way we can confront an issue as complex as climate change is through a proactive system designed to prevent such problems from developing in the first place.

Right now many of these restrainers serve as fundamental barriers to progress. These underlying challenges must be confronted or better negotiated.

DRIVERS OF TRANSFORMATIONAL CHANGE

Driving forces are those factors that increase the likelihood of achieving our objective. Delegates to the 2010 Stonehouse Summit identified a lengthy list of "driving forces" that move us toward "convincing the public to support local, regional and national policies to reduce their emissions through either passive acceptance or vocal demand."

First and foremost, it is important to remember that people do care. They want to do the right thing and to see problems dealt with appropriately by community leaders and government.

That is particularly true on the subject of climate change. The overwhelming majority of Canadians and Americans want swift action from government and businesses to address climate change.

Public polling confirms that there is less of a gulf in public understanding of the need for swift action than we may think. The public is deeply concerned despite the failure of their leaders to deliver solutions to date. While the U.S. Congress has failed to enact climate legislation so far, and Canada's leadership has its head in the sand as well, the majority of Canadians and Americans recognize the urgency of the situation and want to see results.

Despite the dire warnings from scientists about the near future impacts of climate disruption, optimism abounds. By a 2:1 margin, Americans see the potential for a better future. There is a widely held desire for change. People recognize that the status quo is unsustainable, and that many of the solutions to the problem will increase human happiness. Riding a bike to work or the grocery store or the beach isn't just healthier for the climate and environment, it's healthier for our bodies. Choosing to spend time together with friends and family rather than spending money on consumables isn't just good for our wallets, it's healthier for our relationships, and it reduces our carbon footprint.

Climate change is so fundamental an issue affecting all of our lives because it a problem stemming from our use of energy – the lifeblood of modern civilization.

In the past decade, we have witnessed a dramatic shift in the general public toward environmentally and socially responsible consumerism. Parents and grandparents feel an intergenerational responsibility to protect the planet so that future generations can enjoy it as they did. Young people are particularly aware of and concerned about climate change. They already play a central role in encouraging action on the local, federal and international levels, and many are gearing their education towards finding solutions to climate change.

There is a growing movement of “climate hawks” whose concern over the national security implications of climate change leads them to advocate for solutions.

The business community is also increasingly aware of the need for action. Companies want clear regulatory signals from the government, of course, but many corporate executives are also concerned that climate change poses a long-range challenge for the survival of their businesses. You can't sell products if your supply chain is affected by climate change, or if your potential customers are too busy seeking refuge and relief from floods, droughts and other extreme weather events.

The Internet serves as a key driver too, offering communications services globally that are used by scientists and researchers to share information, collaborate on research and model the potential outcomes – both good and bad – of climate disruptions and solutions. The rising e-literacy of people around the world, especially the widespread adoption of social media tools, facilitates an opportunity and a platform for sharing stories that resonate with people in your town, country or continent. Look at the success of 350.org – an admittedly obscure reference to the safe upper limit of CO₂ concentrations in the atmosphere – but an amazing success story of utilizing the power of grassroots organizing in the 21st century.

Online connections are increasingly turning into offline meetings and projects, whether it is eco-conscious groups gathering for Green Drinks or Transition Town meet-ups, or urbanites joining together in community gardening and renewable energy partnerships.

If past is prologue, these online and offline gatherings are the seeds being planted now that will lead to transformational social change. Just as the women's suffrage movement and the civil rights movement started with individuals and small groups bucking the status quo, so too are climate and social activists joining forces in increasingly vocal and effective campaigns and direct actions. From the smallest fledgling groups to the largest professional environmental organizations, there is a groundswell building, as evidenced by the formation of massive coalitions calling for action – TckTckTck for example. The best news is that the movement is comprised of diverse constituencies, from faith groups, minority groups, student groups, to economists, security experts and human rights advocates.

Although there is still a ways to go, the public increasingly recognizes that climate change and pollution threats are not simply 'environmental' issues, but also entail economic and social impacts as well. Dirty air and water, uncontrolled waste streams, and contaminated food are examples of issues that the public must continue to understand as system-wide threats, not simply as environmental problems.

Conversely, the growing awareness across social strata provides an opportunity to discuss climate change within the frames of economics, morality and religion, for instance – to broaden the conversation far beyond the small community of scientists and environmentalists who 'get it.'

Despite the failure to pass sweeping climate and energy policies in Ottawa and Washington, DC, the bright side is that more government representatives than ever are aware of the climate change issue and compelled to study up on it and return to the task of developing policy solutions.

The technologies to rapidly reduce our global warming emissions already exist, and large stimulus spending on R&D and implementation of new technologies hold promise and promote rapid advances. Money is flowing into clean technology ventures as investors see the potential of efficient and cutting-edge products.

And of course everyone is talking about how China has made climate and energy challenges a key impetus for fostering innovation.

CAN ENVIRONMENTALISTS BE EFFECTIVE MESSENGERS ANYMORE?

Yes, but we must change.

The first step may be to reclaim the definition of what it means to be an environmentalist. Environmentalists are not extremists or ideologues – but sensible, concerned, forward

thinking, rational – fundamentally conservative people from all walks of life! Since polluter interests have warped the definition in the public’s mind, we need to constantly work to present ourselves as purveyors of common sense, as careful but aggressive action heroes. It’s not a socialist plot to want to ensure a healthy future and stable climate for future generations.

Look at a handful of some of the most compelling messengers in the environmental space – Bill McKibben, David Suzuki, Dr. Helen Caldicott, Vandana Shiva, Lester Brown, Wangari Maathai, Robert F. Kennedy Jr, for example. Many of these messengers are often seen as renegades within the movement, pushing against the inertia and entrenchment of major ENGOs, communicating largely without community support. While they are often excellent purveyors of common sense, they are frequently labeled as extremists and rarely defended by their ‘own’ people. Undeterred, they continue to advocate for aggressive but scientifically-supported responses to environmental problems. They are not simply advocates of band-aid solutions to patchwork environmental threats. They are transformational change agents, and we need a few million more of them around.

ENGAGING IN DIALOGUE RATHER THAN SHOUTING INTO THE WIND

Grassroots organizing used to rely almost exclusively on information-based campaigns. The old model was about providing people with lots of facts and information, then sitting back hoping that they make the right decisions armed with your best facts.

That strategy has not worked out so well in recent years.

How can we nurture and build a thoughtful public conversation – to switch from arguing and constant debate to creating dialogue?

It is a much more complex task to create dialogue rather than to deliver information without listening to the recipients’ thoughts on the subject. What we are learning from leading social scientists, such as Daniel Yankelovich, is that starting a conversation and engaging people in a rich two-way dialogue – rather than the traditional Socratic and Platonic dialogic models, which were really good at creating argument and endless debate – opens the door to a respectful conversation that ultimately builds trust and provides opportunities to come to a consensus position. Identifying common ground and building consensus allows us to move onto the next phase – decision-making. Dialogue must come first, for without it we will continue to struggle at developing plans for concrete actions to address the commonly understood problem.

Everyone in a dialogue has a piece of the answer. In a dialogue, you’re listening to understand what those pieces of the answer are. If you don’t actually think you have anything to learn from others, you aren’t employing the dialogue model.

Another leading proponent of the dialogic model, Dr. Steven Rosell, contends that a world without dialogue is a world without consensus.

Our current modes of governance and media promote retrenchment, solidifying opposing positions rather than building mutual trust and understanding. That is certainly the case with the belligerent world of talk-back media, in which participants remain poised to pounce on any chance to talk, yet few are actually listening to the ‘opposing viewpoint’ put forth by the requisite challenger in the chair across the table (or increasingly in a darkened studio booth hundreds of miles away). Mainstream media are experts at creating argumentative debate, not at fostering consensus or trust among participants.

In true dialogue, there is no victor and loser. You cannot ‘win’ a dialogue, instead you seek to understand and learn from one another. Although dialogue is not the best recipe for TV ratings, it is a critical tool for saving the planet from climate chaos, which we can all agree beats even the most popular and contentious arguments on Fox News or YouTube.

Traditional methods of promoting environmental awareness and supporting the need for eco-minded initiatives have been unsuccessful in fostering long-term change. The narrative of climate change must become one that induces people to change their behaviour quickly. Rather than having a static story of climate change, educators should be promoting a dialogue about the consequences of climate change.

It can no longer be about ‘environmentalists’ telling the public information to encourage their actions and voting preferences. It requires a larger number of conveners to encourage a dialogue among all facets of society, because we are all affected by climate change and environmental degradation.

HOW DO WE TRANSCEND AN ENVIRONMENTAL MOVEMENT AND BECOME AN ENVIRONMENTAL CULTURE?

It’s not about an environmental movement anymore. Sustainability is a hot topic of discussion in every sector, from corporate executives to military generals to small business owners to government.

We have now the extremes – the media loves this model. Put two opposing sides up and let them argue, without any hope of resolving differences or reaching consensus on solutions. It’s designed to be adversarial not conversational. That turns off the public, who tunes out.

An open dialogue will bring out a fairer picture of the problems at hand, and present a range of perspectives on climate change, engaging a wider range of people.

Dialogue does not start with certainties where one party says it knows what to do and what the solutions are. It starts with uncertainty, an open conversation where all ideas are valued and all opinions considered. But the goal is to reach common ground to create the desired transformation.

Environmentalists must learn to be promoters of dialogue as well as storytellers. Telling people what to do is less respectful of human rights than helping people figure out for themselves what they want to do. Individuals choose their own behavior, so what they do must be up to them, not influenced by an external force.

Fear works but it isn't the only motivator that works, and it shouldn't be used as a way to communicate with the public. Scaring people isn't educating them, it's petrifying them into inaction. It's what the opponents of climate solutions use to maintain the status quo. It is not about persuading individuals but creating a dialogue where climate change is a primary concern for governments and individuals alike. Trust the public. They don't need persuasion, they need opportunities to understand the situation and make sensible judgments. Trust them to do that. They don't want to be told what to do nor to have the necessary changes defined for them. Recognize the complex, multi-level nature of the problems and the need for innovation, creativity and adaptive response.

Persuasion can work, of course. Just look at the success of advertising. But empowerment, not persuasion, will reap greater results in the long run than simply trying to coach the public along.

While persuasion works, it is not sufficient by itself to bring about transformational change. There must be dialogue – which empowers everyone to become involved in finding solutions, rather than being fed solutions by persuaders. Even some product developers and advertising agencies increasingly recognize this, and have started involving their consumers in the design and marketing of products, whether through contests to pick certain product options or create YouTube ads of their own, etc.

The most compelling message is often the most simple and natural message. As one delegate put it:

Talking about the public and how to engage them, we were WAY too intellectual, but communications is about simplicity – really meaningful and simple and clear. Not simple, but plain talk! (Terry O'Reilly)

OPPORTUNITY KNOCKS ALL THE TIME, WHY AREN'T WE ANSWERING THE CALL?

TEACHABLE MOMENT: THE GULF DISASTER

Crises like the BP blowout provide a rare opportunity when people are paying attention to incidents that are really symptoms of larger problems. Yet we as an environmental community missed the chance to use the disaster in the Gulf to engage the public in a dialogue about the underlying root causes of the disaster. It was one of those moments that begged a deeper reflection on the unsustainable nature of our fossil fuel addiction, of our corporate culture that rewards risky behavior and fails to protect our common resources from the recklessness of an entire industry. It was even one of those rare

chances to spark a public conversation about the message – constantly reinforced in politics and media – that conspicuous consumption and endless growth are sustainable.

Moments of distress and disaster provide the best opportunity to change minds, a condition that advertisers and marketers have known for decades. Just as in more personal crises like divorce, house fires, loss of a loved one, there is a narrow window of opportunity to change directions before the status quo starts to feel comfortable again.

We lost the opportunity to use the BP blowout as a teachable moment. Instead, media coverage focused largely on oil-soaked beaches and dying animals, lost jobs, incompetent and corrupt regulatory bureaucracies, and whether or not Gulf seafood was safe to eat, and when the deepwater drilling moratorium would be lifted – not because deepwater operations were suddenly safer and fully prepared to handle a similar blowout in the future, but because there were oil workers in limbo.

We hardly heard anything that placed the BP disaster within the bigger picture. Once again, who remembers hearing anything about the BP blowout as another symptom of our oil addiction? Or heard anything about the Gulf Coast from Corpus Christi to Pensacola being held captive by a single industry whose products – oil and gas – are increasingly scarce? Why wasn't the story about the prospect of shifting away from oil rigs to offshore wind and solar rigs, maximizing energy efficiency, and making our cars run on something besides oil, or at least on as little oil as possible? Why do we focus so much on putting band-aids on the problems right now rather than shifting to a more sustainable economic engine?

The choices we've made to continue to rely on dwindling sources of fossil energy didn't get a whole lot of attention.

Worst of all, note the total failure to connect the BP disaster to the elephant in the room – climate change. Who remembers hearing anything about the fact that the oil and gas we harvest from beneath the Gulf of Mexico – to burn in our cars, to fertilize our monoculture-obsessed agribusinesses, to make our plastic trinkets – is literally killing the planet?

Instead, in the aftermath of the Gulf crisis, the discussion was hijacked by business interests who used fear as a motivator to dissuade a deeper look at the underlying conditions that led to the disaster. Within a short time period, the public conversation was about jobs lost in the oil industry thanks to the temporary moratorium on offshore drilling.

Few questioned whether high-risk drilling rigs operating miles beneath the ocean surface were a good idea in the first place. Other than some imagery of closed beaches, colorful slicks of oil and dispersant, and some pointed clips on CNN, there wasn't much deep or lasting talk about the devastating impacts on the fragile Gulf Coast ecosystems, the source of much of the U.S. seafood supply.

The months-long gushing of oil, gas, and methane from the sea floor, the needless loss of life on the Deepwater Horizon, the devastating and long-lasting impacts on the economies and public health of Gulf residents was all quickly reduced to a “spill” or an “incident” by the media. The power of words and framing a story has a critical impact on the audience.

Lost In Translation

What could we have done differently to be more prepared for this situation? Could we have had a coordinated crisis management strategy, a coordinated stable of speakers quickly prepared for media appearances to connect the dots to the bigger picture implications of such a disaster? (There were certainly ample opportunities to get on the TV news, radio shows, print interviews, etc. in the weeks that the Gulf Coast was crawling with press.)

Imagine a mayor of a Gulf Coast community talking about the BP blowout as a prime example of why we need to move beyond oil and shift to renewable energy? (In a disaster, the local victims speak with the most credibility. The public simply trusts them more.) Why were we unable to command the nation’s attention on the broader lessons? Why was it all about how fast the oil companies could get back to drilling?

U.S. residents did not hear too many candidates in the midterm elections talking about the need to fully clean up the oil mess or to regulate this reckless industry, let alone a conversation about getting off oil entirely. In fact, quite the opposite message became popular – blaming ‘evil regulations’ for killing local economies. That was a bitter pill to swallow for anyone who thought the public would easily translate the meaning of the disaster – another clear signal that unregulated industry threatens the Gulf, public health, and the climate – into a call for transformational change.

The fact is that nobody was there to serve as translators.

PREPARING FOR FUTURE TEACHABLE MOMENTS

In order to succeed in moving the needle of public opinion during a crisis, a sort of SWAT team must be ready to go into action immediately. There is no time for gathering thoughts or being cautious. The first frame that is presented to the public is usually the one that dominates the rest of the conversation and leaves a lasting impression that defines an incident for years to come.

We know these scenarios will keep happening as long as we remain addicted to fossil fuels – oil spills, coal mine tragedies, natural gas explosions, coal ash impoundment failures, etc.

We also know there will be extreme weather, hurricanes, droughts, food shortages, melting ice caps, calving glaciers, species extinctions and other indicators of a climate run amok.

Why are we not planning our communications response now, before the next inevitable crisis strikes? Instead, we reinvent the wheel each time, on the fly, with limited impact.

So far, the environmental community's ability to recognize and quickly deploy teachable moments has been like grabbing a bar of wet soap – always slipping away by the time we grab it, always just slightly out of reach.

The marketing world provides ample evidence of success. Advertisers possess a very proactive, disciplined skill set that allows them to take advantage of current events, finding ways to communicate that resonate with the public. The NGO community just does not have those skills – but that could be corrected pretty quickly and inexpensively if we put our minds to it. We have armies of grassroots organizers who could quickly identify local victims in the wake of disasters. We know a bit about how to contact press outlets to suggest interview candidates. But we don't have rapid-response capabilities yet. Each disaster seems to come as a surprise even to those who know better, and then scrambling ensues, meetings on how to respond are held (meetings that could have occurred at any time before the predictable crisis.) If we are going to have coordinated crisis management approach, who are the dozen or so experts that need to be ready?

We can prepare for future teachable moments by developing a coordinated crisis response strategy internally. This would involve building a contact list of experts on various issues to handle media interviews and information requests. It must be proactive as well as reactive. A proactive outreach plan to get out of the gate quickly to set the tone of the coverage, to use the best keywords early and often, to define the moment within the overarching context of climate and sustainability.

However, the dilemma remains, what organization will take on this role of coordinator? Will that role be respected and supported by the rest of the community? Can and should environmental organizations attempt to do it themselves? Where is their united voice going to come from?

ACTION PLAN FOR TESTING NEW APPROACHES

Environmentalists can use smarter communication, framing, messaging – this skill set can be learned.

We can experiment with focusing on local and regional issues and examples. People care more about their local area and their own neighbors than distant lands, peoples or planetary systems which are too abstract. Let's keep it tangible and local.

We can learn to better amplify outside messengers, to monitor the effective communications strategies being used outside the environmental community, to build more inclusive coalitions that are representative of the population as a whole. There is no good reason why the demographic makeup of the environmental movement hasn't changed much since the 1960s.

Reclaiming Fundamental Frames

There seems to be an untapped opportunity to capture back from our opponents the dominant frames of freedom, independence and self-reliance. For decades, conservatives in the U.S. and Canada have claimed ownership of these frames, inappropriately suggesting that their policy solutions deliver these inalienable rights to all, when in fact their policies tend to protect and enrich the wealthiest minority segment of the population.

Sidebar: Is it ethical to ‘exploit’ a tragedy in order to teach?

Some say the idea of using oil disasters and coal mine tragedies as teachable moments raises an ethical dilemma. When might you be seen as taking advantage rather than simply trying to educate using a current example?

This is almost exclusively a liberal dilemma. The neo-conservative right (the Right) has successfully used whatever messages and exploited whatever tragedies they needed to serve their ideological agenda. The Right is especially fond of using fear and sensationalism to attract support for its policy platform. How many times has the Right used fear of government threatening freedoms, fear that regulation drives jobs overseas, fear that the government wants to kill your grandmother or your unborn baby, fear that we’ll have to live by candlelight in caves if we don’t extract the last bit of coal and oil to power our economies and lifestyles?

Over and over again, the Right has demonstrated that fear works to persuade the public, particularly when the goal is to maintain the status quo.

But fear isn’t the only thing that works, and it shouldn’t be exploited to dupe the public. Scaring people isn’t educating them, it’s petrifying them into prolonged inaction.

As long as you’re not trying to spread panic, or exaggerating the worst-case scenario, it’s fine to use some scary language to motivate people. Clearly it works, look at the success of the Tea Party, which is entirely based on fear framing.

We learned years ago the efficacy of using messages based on empowering people rather than scaring them. Yet we still don’t rely on empowerment as regularly as we do fear. There are some segments of the population that respond to fear, but identifying those segments at any given moment is difficult. Therefore, it would be wise to have a variety of messages.

Caveat: All must be credible, not sensationalized or exaggerated. For example, a few years ago the Sierra Club showed the lower mainland of British Columbia,

near Vancouver, under a few meters of water, and it really was divergent from credible sea level rise. It was classic fear mongering. And of course it failed and backfired on the Club. Messages must always be credible. It is a good idea to use visual examples to show facts, not simply tell them. By all means, demonstrate the facts with real examples. But make sure they are real and supported by scientific evidence.

THREE PROJECTS UNDER WAY

Citizen Scientists

A project that invites and enables citizens of all ages to gather, track and document sensory evidence of climate change around where they live, in order to build a more visual and local sense of how climate change is impacting our communities, and collectively, our planet.

Why?

- While climate change is widely understood to be a problem, people don't have a visceral understanding of the urgency. It's seen as a problem for the future, not now.
- This project seeks to make climate change local and real for individuals in order to increase engagement that supports policy change.
- By having everyone in the world looking for indicators of climate change, we can gather new data and raise public awareness of the issue.
- Citizen evidence helps ground existing high-level science and policy solutions.
- Helps build an accessible, popular narrative about the impacts of climate change.
- Provides a springboard for talking about local causes and solutions to climate change between different types of community groups and across generations.

Who?

- people most easily engaged in indicator of choice (birdwatchers, fisherman, hikers, gardeners, etc.)
- retired professors
- elders
- youth
- influencers (doctors, clergy, teachers, etc.)
- media (local newspapers and radio)
- local/regional data collectors

How?

- Identify the relevant local indicators (birds, weather, fires) in a given area, and the resources need to analyze them.
- Identify the people who could be involved in observing, monitoring and tracking climate change in their own backyards.
- Develop consistent reporting methods and consistency across indicators to ensure accuracy of data.

- Find local partners who can help organize the citizen scientists, and support getting their data out to other members of the public.
- Use community-driven momentum and data to influence/lobby government and businesses.
- Create a community-based model that can be scaled up through the participation of more and more communities.

The Right to a Healthy Environment

Use a high-profile public engagement campaign to rally support for a charter amendment that includes the right to a healthy environment by 2016 (David Suzuki's 80th birthday).

Why?

- Eighty-eight nations have the right in their constitutions already.
- For the vast majority, the benefits of having the right to a healthy environment enshrined in a national charter have been large, and the concerns unfounded.
- Such a right increases the enforcement of laws based on powerful principles (polluter pays, etc.).
- The right is grounded in deeply held Canadian values and cherished accomplishments, such as the right to health care.
- Many new Canadians have come from countries where the right to a healthy environment already exists.

Who?

- Medical and public health community
- Youth groups
- First Nations groups
- Anyone and everyone

How?

- David issues a personal challenge to Canada that he wishes to see the charter of rights and freedoms amended by his 80th birthday.
- Create a social movement around this by engaging key stakeholders at the front end, and having them promote the idea within their networks.
- Hold summit in Canada, hosting nations who have already implemented constitutional change and have them talk about what they did and debunk myths.
- Start the process with provincial and municipal governments – have them adopt declarations that show symbolic support for a charter amendment.

The Terrawatt Project

A global, target-based challenge to all nations to set international clean energy targets, and to see who can generate the most clean energy in the shortest amount of time.

Why?

- By 2025, the world will need 20 TW of clean electricity (we currently produce < 2 TW).
- To set the stage for a positive, ambitious global goal that also presents a vision of how we can maintain and improve our quality of life.
- To overcome restrictive, negative barriers associated with the typical race to reduce emissions.
- To provides a familiar space for nations to negotiate on binding targets, but could morph into a form of international agreement that becomes binding law in signatory countries.

Who?

- Broad public
- Elected officials - regional, national, international
- Businesses
- Capital markets

How?

- Independent analysis conducted by credible experts examining existing data to anticipate clean energy needs in the future, and develop national and international energy goals, targets and milestones.
- Adopt catchy 10/10/10 launch date (because 10x10x10 equals a terawatt).
- Scheduled progress reporting on each nation's birthday to allow an ongoing source of stories and regular reporting dates.
- Uses multiple spokespeople (government, businesses, scientists, economists) to spread the message across channels and to various audiences.
- Offers incentives for participation via a prize strategy (supports this as a competitive model).
- Could be run by one organization or treated as a coordinated campaign executed by several.
- Presented through an economic and energy lens (not environmental).

Conclusion

What are we mobilizing for? What do we want our future to look like?

Whether we stand on the Right or the Left, whether we work in the non-profit or environmental sector or the oil industry, whether we are members of the scientific community or a gated community, we can all come up with an answer to these question. And these answers will all be grounded on the assumption that the future is valuable and

worth preserving, protecting and fighting for. Although there is perhaps no common understanding around what we need to get there, the acknowledgement of environmental stewardship and sustainability are cross-cutting and must become widespread, culturally-engrained and resistant to industry deception campaigns if this future is to exist in any intelligible and desirable sense.

The exchange and outcomes of the 2010 Stonehouse Summit represent a solid foundation upon which practitioners and thinkers can move forward in developing the next generation of communication strategies to move us in this direction: strategies that will acknowledge the mistakes and shortcomings of past attempts, build on the opportunities and drivers of change to overcome the myriad challenges and restraints.

In the same spirit of dialogue we relied on to generate and formulate the ideas outlined in this paper, we must approach the challenge of mobilizing the public and policymakers and creating transformative change with a recognition that we have much to learn, particularly from those who espouse fundamentally different viewpoints. Moving beyond arguments and towards honest dialogue, positioning ourselves where we can effectively and coherently respond to the next ‘teachable moment’, framing the opportunity that lies within the challenge of sustainability and becoming effective messengers not only of the problems, but also the solutions, are essential steps.

How do we do it? The three nascent projects described here – and the next Stonehouse Summit – we believe, are good starting points. They are necessary but insufficient steps in the process of creating tools for tipping points, fostering meaningful dialogue around the most difficult questions of our time, and generating the kind of transformational change we cannot afford to forego.

RESOURCES

Anthony L. work
John Harich work

Americans' Knowledge of Climate Change
Yale Project on Climate Change Communication
October 2010

<http://environment.yale.edu/climate/publications/knowledge-of-climate-change/>

Dan Vergano story in the USA Today about scientists not being good story-tellers.
http://www.usatoday.com/tech/science/columnist/vergano/2010-11-05-climate-story_N.htm

"Scientists, academics, and politicians on the left, do not do stories very well," says Harvard political scientist Michael Jones, who earlier this year led a Policy Studies Journal report on the use and misuse of narrative in policymaking. "You have to tell a story, though, if you want people to retain information."

Okay, Climate Scientists: Time to Fight Smart
By Chris Mooney

<http://blogs.discovermagazine.com/intersection/2010/11/08/okay-climate-scientists-time-to-fight-smart/>

Michael Jones on heroes, villains and the science of narrative

<http://niemanstoryboard.us/2010/09/28/harvard-michael-jones-on-heroes-villains-and-the-science-of-narrative-and-policy-analysis/>

The Costs of a Climate of Fear

When scientists are attacked professionally and personally, independent science and the public suffer.

By Michael Halpern

<http://www.aaup.org/AAUP/pubsres/academe/2010/ND/feat/halp.htm>

Americans' Knowledge of Climate Change
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<http://environment.yale.edu/climate/publications/knowledge-of-climate-change/>