

## **Effective nature messages**

These notes have been developed to help you when preparing exhibitions, events and marketing about nature and natural history museums. They are based on some pieces of work that explore ways to promote engagement with nature.

In museums, we are often trying to engage, educate and inspire people about nature. As socially responsible institutions, we should aim to promote and encourage values that themselves promote the exploration, understanding and conservation of nature (more notes on this will follow).

### **From thought to action**

People are not robots, and the way that we are presented with information and ideas has an impact on our emotional state. It is this change in our emotions that motivates or demotivates us to engage further. So, the language we use in museums is really important. We have to choose our words carefully if we want to support people who want to connect with nature or to engage with environmental issues. If we don't, we run the risk of doing the opposite, and actually demotivating them, which is worse than doing nothing.

In the most general way, a few factors will influence how likely (or not) someone is to take up an activity.

- How much it connects with their personal values
- How likely they think they will be able to do it
- The perceived likelihood of success or failure
- Past experience of similar activities (and their outcomes)
- The values and opinions of people around them

If we are aiming to inspire people, inspiration can be seen as **the feeling that moves us to action**. Inspiration doesn't come from specimens and exhibitions themselves: it comes from the emotional change that they stir in us. Museums are emotional places.

In natural history museums, the great majority of visitors have some connection with, interest in, or curiosity about the natural world and their place in it. That means that messages promoting the value of nature and nature conservation readily connect with the majority of people's personal values. People often visit museums in groups, so the values and opinions of others around them are also readily surfaced in museums.

If we are promoting conservation activities they need to be a valuable and fulfilling use of people's time (otherwise we are trying to get people to do things we value, not that they will value themselves, something to be very cautious of). We

need to encourage people and to support them both in terms of skills and confidence. We should encourage people that their participation and their efforts are worthwhile.

### **Stephen Kellert, and values relating to nature**

**Stephen Kellert** is an environmentalist and sociologist at Yale University. He has developed a typology of values and attitudes to nature, based on interviews with large numbers of people (initially in the USA, but extended to many other countries). He found that values relating to nature fell into 10 categories; everyone has a profile made up of how much they demonstrate each value.

- **Naturalistic:** focuses on direct experience and exploration of nature
- **Ecologicistic:** focuses on understanding and valuing the environment as a system of interconnected species and habitats
- **Humanistic:** focuses on strong emotional attachment with aspects of nature, often on large animals, pets and anthropomorphic associations
- **Moralistic:** focuses on spiritual reverence and ethical concern for animals and nature, strong opposition to cruelty and exploitation
- **Scientific:** focuses on understanding the structure and functioning of living things

- **Aesthetic:** mainly interested in the physical appeal and beauty of nature
- **Symbolic:** focuses on animals and nature for language and thought
- **Utilitarian:** focuses on the usefulness of animals and plants to people
- **Dominionistic:** focuses on mastery and control over animals and nature
- **Negativistic:** fear, aversion or alienation from animals and nature

This is really useful to museums, as it helps us understand the range of attitudes that visitors have. It can also help us understand the biases that we (museum workers) hold ourselves. If we want to connect with a broad audience, we need to be able to connect with a range of attitudes to nature, not just our own. We can use this typology to interrogate our exhibitions and programmes: what would someone with each value get from the visit? Would it be worthwhile? It is also worth mentioning that the scientific attitude (which many museum curators, coming from scientific backgrounds, are likely to consider important) is only found in a small minority of visitors.

This work is also useful, as the attitudes that people have do not necessarily reflect the things that they do. If museums can connect people with attitudes that support nature and

nature conservation with activities that also do these, then participants are likely to regard those as useful activities.

### **Futerra's 'Branding Biodiversity'**

**Futerra**, a London-based environmental communications agency, developed a 'toolkit' for communicating biodiversity as part of the International Year of Biodiversity (2010). This is freely available, and is gold dust for anyone involved in communicating about nature (links are at the end of these notes). They see communications and messages about biodiversity as commonly being based around four themes: Loss, Love, Need and Action. This is really relevant to natural history museums, and to other kinds of organisation in the 'nature communication business'.

- Messages around **Loss** (climate change, extinction) are very common. They might sell newspapers, but they are depressing. They are worse than doing nothing.
- Messages around **Love** are based on awe and wonder. They capture the imagination. It is very powerful.
- Messages around **Need** put a price on nature. They emphasise that we need nature for our society. Bees and pollination, trees and flood prevention, ecosystem services: there are lots of examples.

- Messages around **Action** encourage people to do something, to get involved, to take personal responsibility and to do something, whether it's feeding birds in the garden, or donating to charity

Futerra came up with a simple formula:

**Love** messages + **Action** messages are effective in achieving **PUBLIC CHANGE**

**Need** messages + **Action** messages are effective in achieving **POLICY CHANGE**

In communicating nature and biodiversity, Futerra's advice is:

- Reduce the **Loss** message: it's depressing, generates apathy and a feeling of hopelessness. Use it carefully.
- More **Love**: celebrate the wonder of nature, people's personal love of nature. It is very powerful.
- Target the **Need** message carefully. It jars with people who believe in a moral responsibility for nature. The **Need** message is often not right for public engagement purposes. **However**, it can be the basis of policy and business decisions, so is useful in those situations.

- **Action** messages promote action, especially when accompanying or following **Love** or **Need** messages. They encourage people to make the difference they can. If people are emotionally engaged from the **Love** messages, or intellectually engaged from the **Need** messages, then **Action** messages help to turn emotion and belief into real action.

### **Common Cause, values and frames**

**Common Cause** is a UK-based civil society network working on values to promote a more sustainable society. Values are “a driving force behind many of our attitudes and behaviours... Working at the level of values helps us address the structural causes of ecological, economic and social injustice.” The report ‘**Common Cause for Nature**’ and the accompanying ‘**Practical Guide to Values and Frames in Conservation**’ (freely available online) offer recommendations on how organisations communicating about nature can make sure that their work strengthens the values that motivate people to protect and enjoy nature.

This work was produced in collaboration with 13 UK conservation organisations (notably, museums were not among them). As natural history museums generally recognise themselves as some kind of ‘nature organisation’,

and as it is likely that the public identify natural history museums with nature education, much of this work is highly relevant to museum workers.

Their advice is to **try to:**

- show how amazing nature is
- share the experience of the natural world
- talk about people, society and compassion as well as the natural world
- explain where and why things are going wrong
- encourage action and creativity

When communicating about nature **avoid:**

- relying on messages that emphasize threat and loss
- appealing to the desire for power and money
- attempts to motivate people with conflicting values

**When responding to the communications, policy or work of others:**

- question the language that is commonly used. Look at the phrases that are frequently used by government and media—what values are they likely to promote?
- don't reinforce unhelpful terms and ideas: avoid repeating language that appeals to values related to self-interest



- create new terms and ways to express ideas that foster environmental values
- work together to spread these terms and ideas: reframing the debate requires a concerted group effort

**When talking about your work:**

- be open about the values your organisation holds and why you consider your work is important

**In your wider work**

**When engaging people in nature:**

- create and promote accessible natural places
- encourage hands-on activity

**When lobbying decision-makers:**

- question the use of unhelpful or anti-environmental language
- be proactive and set the agenda: do not simply respond
- encourage decision-makers to experience hands-on conservation

**When engaging the media:**

- be aware of the implicit values in the language you use
- avoid framing issues in economic terms wherever possible
- think carefully before using celebrities

### **When measuring success:**

- measure what matters: connection with nature, values and wellbeing
- don't focus solely on economic measures

### **In your working practices:**

- encourage creativity
- talk about why you value nature at work

### **Campaign on common causes:**

- consider new interventions that will strengthen intrinsic values
- work with other organizations

### **Work together:**

- focus more on collective action
- try not to undermine others' efforts
- avoid appeals to values related to self-interest, or language that impedes action on conservation

### **Nature connectedness**

The fast-developing field of **nature connectedness studies** seeks to explore and quantify connectedness to nature and its effects on people. It is a social sciences and applied

psychology discipline. Being based on rigorous social sciences methods, this can be a powerful tool in advocacy work.

For example, Russell *et al.* 2013 (*Environment and Resources* 38: 472-502) reviewed research on the contributions of nature to human well-being. They report that “The balance of evidence indicates conclusively that knowing and experiencing nature makes us generally happier, healthier people.”

The **Nature Connectedness Research Group** at the University of Derby aims to understand nature connectedness and its applications. Dr. Miles Richardson’s blog (link at the end of these notes) reviews recent publications relating to nature connectedness, many of which have a bearing on natural history museums and their programmes.

## **Persuasive messages around natural history and museums**

Be **completely clear** (in your own mind at least) about whether you are advocating for museums as social spaces, learning spaces, for the importance of nature, or for the importance of natural history collections for understanding ‘living’ nature beyond the museum. You might be advocating for all of these, but it is good to really interrogate whether your intentions are matched by your marketing and communications, let alone your exhibitions and events. Be consciously aware of your own biases, and question whether these biases are helping or hindering the ways that you communicate nature and natural history. It is worth being aware that natural history museums are heavily identified

with children and families; if you want to engage with adults, you will need to put some work into this to get over this bias.

Exhibitions and events that allow people space to **personalise** their own connections with nature and natural history collections will promote stronger engagement.

**Don't only appeal to scientific viewpoints:** most people aren't scientific, and people aren't entirely rational. Appeal to stories of childhood, memories, the full range of senses, people's own subjective experiences, both of nature and of museums. Make it special. Make it personal. Make it emotional. Put out messages that give people the scope to find their own 'answers'. Don't think this means that the science is somehow being diluted: quite the contrary, it is giving more people to engage with scientific topics.

**Images** of people doing things, both inside the museum and out, or people talking about what they do, will promote engagement: children with pond nets, people contemplating a landscape, people walking in groups in the countryside, school classes with a nature table, anything like that. If you are interested in targeting particular groups, or are concerned that some groups are under-represented, make sure that the images you use will encourage them to take part. Remember that natural history museums are heavily identified in people's minds with children and

families, and that you'll have to provide opportunities for adults to have something to do in order to encourage them to visit.

**Be honest** about where collections came from, and don't try to justify the killing that was involved in modern terms: those were different times, and you (hopefully!) didn't shoot the specimens. At the same time, be cautious about criticising people from the past. Put their activities in context, show how they contributed to the modern world.

**Stories** that reflect ecological and moralistic views of nature will connect more strongly with people. Stories that emphasise the experience and exploration of nature will connect readily with people.

Stories that individualise plants and animals will connect with people.

**Resources:**

**Kellert, SR 1997. *The Value of Life: Biological Diversity And Human Society*. Island Press.**

**Futerra, 'Branding biodiversity: the new nature message'**

[http://www.futerra.co.uk/downloads/Branding\\_Biodiversity.pdf](http://www.futerra.co.uk/downloads/Branding_Biodiversity.pdf)

**Common Cause, 'Common Cause for Nature'**

<http://valuesandframes.org/initiative/nature>

**University of Derby Nature Connectedness Research Group**

<http://www.derby.ac.uk/science/research/centres-groups/psychological/groups/nature-connectedness/>

<http://findingnature.org.uk>

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