



Turning Questions Into Answers.

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*Opinion Research &
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MEMORANDUM

TO: INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF FISH AND WILDLIFE AGENCIES
THE NATURE CONSERVANCY

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PUBLIC OPINION STRATEGIES

RE: LESSONS LEARNED REGARDING COMMUNICATING ABOUT STATE
WILDLIFE ACTION PLANS

DATE: AUGUST 2, 2005

These “lessons learned” regarding communicating to the general public about wildlife are drawn from both qualitative and quantitative research conducted on behalf of The International Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies and The Nature Conservancy by our two firms in 2005. The research included a 1,000-person nationwide voter survey, as well as a series of six in-depth focus groups with voters in Wisconsin, Tennessee, and Arizona.

The major goals of the research were to:

1. Identify how to communicate to the public, meaning the vast majority of citizens who have never heard of the goals, benefits and opportunities surrounding the drafting of “state wildlife action plans.” The research is NOT about communicating to agency staff, stake holders and others who have been involved in this process for the last few years.
2. Further, we wanted to learn how to translate the technical terms and “policy speak” of biologists and government officials dealing with wildlife issues into everyday vocabulary which resonates with the general electorate. As this is a unique and pivotal moment for every fish and wildlife agency in America to shine a spotlight on wildlife in their state, it seems prudent to use simple language which is not off-putting to the public. In no way are we ever recommending any changes in the substance of the state wildlife action plans or in the work fish and wildlife agencies do everyday. This is merely a guide to casting that hard work in the best possible light, and not unintentionally turning off the public which knows little to nothing of this process.

Therefore, we are providing these recommendations in a list of easy-to-follow, broad “rules” for

communication. While there can certainly be unique circumstances in which different communications strategies may be effective, we found few exceptions to these broad rules in terms of geography or key demographic groups in the national survey. That being said, state-level opinion research would provide a valuable supplement to these national research results in crafting state-specific messages, and is recommended before investing significant resources in a statewide public outreach program.

COMMUNICATION RECOMMENDATIONS

The development of these state action plans provides a substantial opportunity to attract media interests, and thereby to communicate with all segments of the public. This research was conducted in order to “put our best foot forward” in introducing these plans to the public, and indeed we learned a great deal about the best possible ways to communicate on this specific effort. It is NOT intentioned to suggest any changes in HOW the work of wildlife conservation is actually performed - ONLY how this work is communicated to a broad audience.

1. *First and foremost, DO call these state “action plans” in communicating to the general public.* While we are not recommending changes to official legislative names or even how this is referred to within your agency or among long-involved stake holder, it is very clear that dubbing these as “action plans” in introducing them to the public is immensely beneficial in creating a better first impression.

Why? Given voters’ great skepticism about government agencies accomplishing much, coupled with their strong desire to ensure that wildlife actually benefits from this effort, the public prioritizes taking “**ACTION.**” They do not want a plan that merely sits on the shelf. Other terms tested (including “blueprint,” “vision” and most importantly “strategy”) invoked exactly that expectation. The focus groups demonstrated quite vividly that “action plans” is by far the best term to use in providing a name or quick description of the effort (witness the representative comments below):

“You’re going to do something.” – Appleton man

“Action plan means they are going to start to do something.” -- Nashville man

“They’re actually going to do it.” – Appleton women

“Action plan. . . . Somebody is ready to do something. We’re getting ready to make progress to figure out a way to make the wildlife a better place. It just seems like you are fixing to do something.” – Nashville woman

2. *DO stress the pro-active nature of the action plans in helping to conserve wildlife.* In fact, votes surveyed told us that the most compelling aspect of the actions plans was that “the main goal of this effort is to come up with a plan to help wildlife BEFORE an animal becomes so rare that it is expensive or impossible to save it.” Fully 58% of voters nationwide say this gives them a “much more favorable” impression (83% “more favorable” overall) of the state wildlife action plans. Another way we tested this concept was by using the metaphor of a medical exam or “check-up” for wildlife; fully 43% of American voters indicate they have a “much more favorable” impression (77% more favorable overall) of the state wildlife action plans when they hear that “In many ways, the wildlife action plan is a health ‘check-up’ for wildlife to prevent more serious long-term problems.”

3. *DO explain that the action plans were developed by a diverse coalition of scientists, sportsmen, farmers and conservationists WORKING TOGETHER, with public input.* The second most important pieces of information to communicate about the state action plans are WHO developed them – a diverse coalition that represents a wide array of viewpoints, along with opportunities for the public to provide their point of view. The phrase “working together” is very compelling, and was something that focus group participants consistently pointed to as a strong point.

In addition, fully 79% of voters nationally said they viewed the plan “more favorably” after hearing that “in each state, scientists, sportsmen, farmers, and conservationists are all working together to develop a wildlife action plan for their state;” and 77% viewed the plan “more favorably” after hearing that “each state is required to hold public meetings and ensure that its citizens have input on the development of each state’s wildlife action plan.”

4. *If necessary, DO explain that some animals will be helped first before helping other animals, but NEVER communicate that you are prioritizing one animal over another in a way that suggests that certain species will be left out or considered unimportant.* The public has a strong sense that ALL wildlife is important. Essentially everyone – a stunning 91% - agree that “we have an obligation to protect and preserve ALL kinds of wildlife.”

Voters are therefore extremely turned off by phrases such as “high-priority animals” which gave the impression that the wildlife plans “pick and choose” certain animals to help. Instead, saying that “each state will start by helping those animals that are most at risk, or those for whom they can do the most good, and then address other animals that need help” is the best way to communicate prioritization without turning voters off (43% “much more favorable” impression after hearing this information).

5. *DO talk about “conserving” wildlife as the goal.* Among a host of potential terms to describe what the action plans would do for wildlife, including “protecting,” “preserving” or even “being good stewards,” the term “conserving” tends to capture the right tone without turning off the public. When we posted up two of these terms in direct competition in the survey, “conserving” was the clear winner across every key demographic subgroup and in every part of the country:

“Which ONE would give you a more favorable impression – if you heard your state’s fish and wildlife agency was...”

58% *PROMOTING CONSERVATION OF WILDLIFE*
27% *PROMOTING STEWARDSHIP OF WILDLIFE*

6. *DO stress that helping wildlife, such as the work done to conserve and restore habitat, will also help people – principally by protecting air and water quality, which benefits public health.* By far the strongest message in favor of funding state wildlife action plans is one in which voters’ self-interest is prominent and clear, while another related to public health also tested in the top tier. Notably, this is an area where visual images in addition to language is powerful in conveying these points, for example by showing visuals of wildlife and people in relations to clean streams, lakes, rivers or coastlines.

“Clean air and clean water are essential to the survival of wildlife, but are important to our

health and our quality of life as well. Protecting wildlife and the clean air and water they need will also benefit people.” (72% say this is a “very convincing” reason to support an increase in taxes in order to implement the state wildlife action plan)

“Taking care of our wildlife is taking care of ourselves. The poor health of animals is often an early indicator of problems like disease and pollution which eventually affect all of us.” (55% “very convincing”)

7. *In addition, DO recognize the very strong mental link voters draw between children and animals; as a result, stressing the importance of conserving wildlife for future generations is highly effective. Two of the top messages tested in the survey revolve around children, These messages are essential, not only guiding in the words we use to talk about conserving wildlife, but also in the images we use to convey its importance as well.*

“It is important to protect our wildlife for future generations, so that our children and grandchildren can enjoy wildlife and nature.” (62% say this is a “very convincing” reason to support an increase in taxes in order to implement the state wildlife action plan)

“In this age of too much TV and video games, it is important for our children that we renew our shared, outdoor pastimes and family traditions where wildlife is part of the enjoyment.” (54% very convincing)

Perhaps not surprisingly, this latter message was particularly effective with sportsmen.

8. *DO reinforce the cost-effective and long-term nature of the plans, but DO NOT stress that they are linked to millions of dollars in taxpayer money. Voters want to know that government is not only taking “action” but is doing so in a responsible and cost-effective manner which plans for the long-run. However, one of the weakest pieces of information about the action plans we tested was that “each state will receive millions of dollars from the federal government to partially fund their state’s wildlife action plan.” Focus group respondents quickly thought about the impact on their pocketbook and taxes, raised concerns about what other priorities might be losing money if wildlife are receiving “millions” and were generally unenthusiastic hearing about millions of taxpayer dollars being spent.*

Accordingly, our messaging should stress that the action plans will cost far less than current approaches, and will certainly cost less over the long term than doing nothing.

9. *DO NOT focus on the “historic” nature of this opportunity. Most voters spend little time thinking about wildlife or how it is conserved, and as a result the fact that these action plans have never before been undertaken makes little difference to the public. While the small subgroup of the electorate that pays close attention to wildlife issues may find this message compelling, it has little resonance with average voters.*

Other key findings from our research should not only assist in communication efforts regarding the state wildlife action plans, but should prove useful in more general conversations about wildlife in your state.

- *DO keep in mind that overwhelming majorities of voters see great value in having wildlife, and are willing to back that support up with public spending.* The levels of public support throughout the survey are extremely strong and impressive. For example: Eight-in-ten (80%) say they favor the creation of the state wildlife action plans once introduced to the concept; 71% say they support their state spending more to implement its action plan to conserve wildlife; and 80% are willing to pay more in taxes to fund those plans knowing that federal funds will not cover all the needs.
- *DO recognize that voters feel relatively uninformed about wildlife in their state.* Just 17% of American voters say they know a “great deal” about wildlife in their state, and a bare majority (57%) say they know even “something” about wildlife. This lack of information has consequences. When asked whether more needs to be done to help wildlife in their state, whether enough is being done, or whether they do not have enough information to know, fully one-third (33%) of the voters say that they don’t know enough to say (while 40% say more needs to be done and 19% say enough is being done).
- *DO NOT overstate the threats to wildlife.* Voters do not perceive wildlife to be in dire straits, as less than half (39%) agree that “wildlife are in crisis.” In the focus groups, respondents indicated that if wildlife were so severely threatened, then surely they would have heard more about the problems in the news. Therefore, majorities assume wildlife are faring pretty well in terms of both their health (58% rate wildlife’s health in their state as “excellent” or “good”) and in numbers (58% rate the numbers of wildlife in their state as “excellent” or “good”). Importantly, the more voters think they know about wildlife in their state, the more likely they are to assess wildlife’s condition as “excellent” or “good.”

From the qualitative research, it is also very clear that voters think of wildlife as doing poorly only when there are “too few” wildlife. Scarcity of wildlife - and not its overabundance, with consequences for disease, lack of food, or impacts on the environment - is voters’ customary concern related to wildlife. This is perhaps an unintentional impact of the Endangered Species Act being voters’ main frame of reference for wildlife conservation.

- *DO NOT rely on reciting statistics and percentages of endangered or threatened species.* While voters’ lack of information and their assumption that wildlife are faring well would seem to indicate that voters need to be “educated” about the real problems facing wildlife in their states, the research indicates that generally conveying these types of statistics does *less* to convince voters of the need to conserve wildlife than does conveying other messages (such as the ones mentioned above in points 6 and 7 regarding the state action plans).
- *DO incorporate PLACE into how you talk about the threats and opportunities for wildlife.* Our goals must be described as conserving wildlife AND the places they live. This recommendation is based in a number of qualitative and quantitative research findings which clearly demonstrate the close linkage voters make between wildlife and the places they live. For example, the vast majority of focus group participants, when asked what mental image or pictures appear when they hear the phrase “wildlife,” describe a PLACE first. Some representative comments follow:

Nashville Man: “Smokey Mountains... We annually take a trip to Chalet. . . Some of us hike. But it’s just being there in the midst of it.” MODERATOR: “Any specific wildlife you see, or is it just the place that is the image?” *Nashville Man:* “It’s really the place.”

Appleton woman: “I just had it going up to my cottage and sitting out in front of the cottage by the lake. We get a lot of eagles up there, and we watch them and the ducks. It’s just so serene out there.”

Phoenix woman: “Camping by a lake . . . Up north where it’s cooler. Clouds with mountains around the trees. You see all kinds of different animals that you don’t see here. Different birds and things like that.”

- *DO recognize the power which the public perceives in education and information.* Beyond conserving wildlife and the places they live, voters place a great deal of faith in the power of education to change behavior and overcome problems. Voters believe that three potential actions related to learning and education could be very effective in helping to conserve wildlife:

Action	% “Very Effective”
Educating children, such as in school nature programs, about what animals are at risk and steps they can take to help wildlife	62%
Improving our knowledge about what kinds of wildlife are in trouble, by researching and monitoring their numbers and health, so we can take action	59%
Educating the public about what animals are at risk and steps they can take to help wildlife	57%

In fact, our research guided us in very carefully steering away from purely talking about “research and monitoring.” Instead, this concept is posited within a framework of education (“improving our knowledge”) and then taking action (“so we can take action.”) Again, this is due to voters NOT wanting research to be merely “reports on shelves,” but put into concrete steps for action.

- *DO acknowledge that the often “softer” benefits of wildlife are the most top-of-mind.* Upon hearing descriptions in the survey, voters did not rank images like the peaceful serenity of watching a bird or rabbit in their backyard, or the natural beauty of a fawn in the woods as very compelling reasons to increase taxes to fund wildlife. Yet, these are often some of the most top-of-mind benefits focus group respondents ascribe to having wildlife in their lives. It may be that communications with a strong visual component can evoke these feelings in a way that written words cannot.
- *DO NOT overreach and put the public in an uncomfortably close relationship with wildlife.* Voters clearly do not want abundant communities of wildlife overflowing in areas where they live. While voters are very positive about seeing wildlife occasionally and ensuring that wildlife have safe places away from people, they do not necessarily want more wildlife near them. A bare majority (53%) agree that “(they) would like to see more wildlife nearby in (their) community” but just 29% “strongly agree” with this concept. This comment from a woman in the Phoenix focus group clearly illustrates the reaction of a significant subgroup of voters with objections: *“Behind my backyard... there is a nature preserve...so we get the javelinas and coyotes ...and I like seeing them on the other side of the fence. But when it starts to get into my personal space, then I have more a problem with it.”*

- *DO NOT put yourself in the position of asking voters to fund wildlife in place of or instead of other priorities. Wildlife for wildlife's sake alone would likely lose out.* While 40% say more needs to be done for wildlife in their state, three-quarters (75%) of the electorate agrees that “wildlife are important, but there are higher priorities in my state which need funding.” Wildlife must be connected to more personal and compelling issues – such as clean air and clean water – in order for it to move up the list of voters’ priorities.
- *DO recognize there are powerful and credible communicators on behalf of wildlife.* Of a wide array of potential carriers of a message on behalf of wildlife, the *most* credible messengers out of a number of different ones tested are professionals who work on behalf of wildlife conservation:

Park Rangers	64% very believable
Biologists	54% very believable
State fish and wildlife agencies	53% very believable

Methodology: From May 23 to 25, 2005, the bi-partisan research team of Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin & Associates (a firm associated with Democrat candidates) and Public Opinion Strategies (a firm associated with Republican candidates) conducted telephone interviews with 1,000 registered voters across the United States (with a margin of sampling error of +/-3.1 percent). The survey research was preceded by six gender-specific focus groups with urban, suburban and rural voters. The groups were conducted in Arizona, Wisconsin and Tennessee.

For further information on these recommendations, please contact:

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