



*Turning Questions Into Answers.*

*Fairbank,  
Maslin,  
Maullin &  
Associates*

*Opinion Research &  
Public Policy Analysis*

## MEMORANDUM

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

**FROM:** DAVE METZ  
FAIRBANK, MASLIN, MAULLIN & ASSOCIATES

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PUBLIC OPINION STRATEGIES

**RE:** LESSONS LEARNED REGARDING COMMUNICATING ABOUT STATE  
WILDLIFE ACTION PLANS

**DATE:** JUNE 6, 2006

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These “lessons learned” regarding communicating to the general public about wildlife are drawn from both qualitative and quantitative research conducted on behalf of The 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; a series of six in-depth focus groups with voters in Wisconsin, Tennessee, and Arizona; and a survey administered over the Internet to 6,348 members of environmental and sportsmen’s organizations who might be considered wildlife advocates.

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” – about the benefits and advantages of those plans.
2. 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 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 for the average voter.
3. Identify – by means of the Internet survey – whether there were any key distinctions between the attitudes of the general public and those of wildlife advocates who are considerably more active and informed on the relevant issues.

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, upcoming state-level opinion research will 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 interest, and thereby to communicate with all segments of the public. The following recommendations are designed to help us “put our best foot forward” in discussing these plans with the public.

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 the plans are referred to within your agency or among long-involved stakeholders, 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, voters 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 – among both voters and wildlife advocates – is one in which people’s self-interest is prominent and clear, while another related to public health also tested in the top tier. Notably, this is likely an area where complementing language with visual images can more powerfully convey the message, for example by showing visuals of wildlife and people in relation 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% of voters say this is a “very convincing” reason to support an increase in taxes in order to implement the state wildlife action plan, as do 77% of wildlife advocates)

*“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” among voters)

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, and should not only guide the words we use to talk about conserving wildlife, but also the images we use to convey its importance.

*“It is important to protect our wildlife for future generations, so that our children and grandchildren can enjoy wildlife and nature.”* (62% of voters say this is a “very convincing” reason to support an increase in taxes in order to implement the state wildlife action plan, as do 55% of wildlife advocates)

*“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 among voters, 44% among wildlife advocates)

Perhaps not surprisingly, this latter message – with its emphasis on outdoor recreation – was particularly effective among the general population of sportsmen.

8. *DO discuss the threat that growth and development poses for wildlife.* In the focus groups and survey research, voters clearly perceived growth and development as a major threat to wildlife, as it moves forward and consumes the places where wildlife lives. As a result, fully 50 percent of voters found the following message “very convincing” as a reason to support increased taxes to fund the wildlife action plan: *“As growth and development continue in our state, we are taking up more and more of the space where wildlife live and placing many birds, fish, and animals at risk.”* This message was even more persuasive to wildlife advocates, 65% of whom found it “very convincing” – among that group, second only to the clean air and water message.
9. *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 we tested about the action plans 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. A key element of this message is the notion that over time, as wildlife become increasingly rare, they will

also become more expensive to protect. This message provides yet another opportunity to emphasize the *pro-active* nature of the plans: by taking action now rather than delaying, we can save ourselves money in the long run.

10. *DO NOT focus on the “historic” nature of this opportunity when communicating with average voters.* Most voters spend little time thinking about wildlife or how it is conserved, and as a result the fact that strategies as comprehensive as these action plans have never before been undertaken makes little difference to the public.

At the same time, it should be noted that among the discrete subgroup of the public who are advocates on wildlife issues, stressing the historic successes of protections for animals like wild turkey, white-tailed deer, and numerous fish may help build enthusiasm for the potential of the action plans to replicate those successes in the future.

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 voter survey are extremely strong and impressive, and – not surprisingly – are even stronger among wildlife advocates. For example: Eight-in-ten (80%) voters and 99% of wildlife advocates say they favor the creation of the state wildlife action plans once introduced to the concept; and 58% of voters (and 74% of wildlife advocates) would be willing to pay at least \$25 more per year in taxes to fund their state action plan.
- *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).

In contrast, among the better-informed population of wildlife advocates, 90% say they know at least something about wildlife in their state, including 39% who know “a great deal” – and that knowledge translates into a greater desire for action: fully 87 percent say that “more needs to be done” to help wildlife in their state.

- *DO NOT overstate the threats to wildlife.* In general, 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.

This is one area where, not surprisingly, wildlife advocates have views that differ sharply from those of voters. Advocates are much more likely to agree (66%) that wildlife are “in crisis” in their state, though there is little difference between advocates and voters in their evaluation of either the numbers or health of wildlife in their state.

- *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, 7 and 8 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 attributes to 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 a plan which leads directly into concrete 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 verbal descriptions of 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 were often some of the most top-of-mind benefits focus group respondents ascribed 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.

This is another area where voters and wildlife advocates part company. Less than two in five wildlife advocates (38 percent) agree that there are higher priorities for funding in their state than wildlife. Clearly, communications with wildlife advocates do not have to shy away from arguing for the protection of wildlife for its own sake.

- *DO recognize there are powerful and credible communicators on behalf of wildlife.* Of a wide array of potential messengers on behalf of wildlife, the *most* credible ones tested among voters were 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

Interestingly, as noted above, among wildlife advocates park rangers and state agencies are significantly less credible, while biologists (68%) and conservation organizations (63%) top the list.

- *DO keep in mind key distinctions between communicating with wildlife advocates and the general voting public.* The wildlife advocates that we interviewed differ from the general population of voters in a number of key ways, some of which have been detailed above:

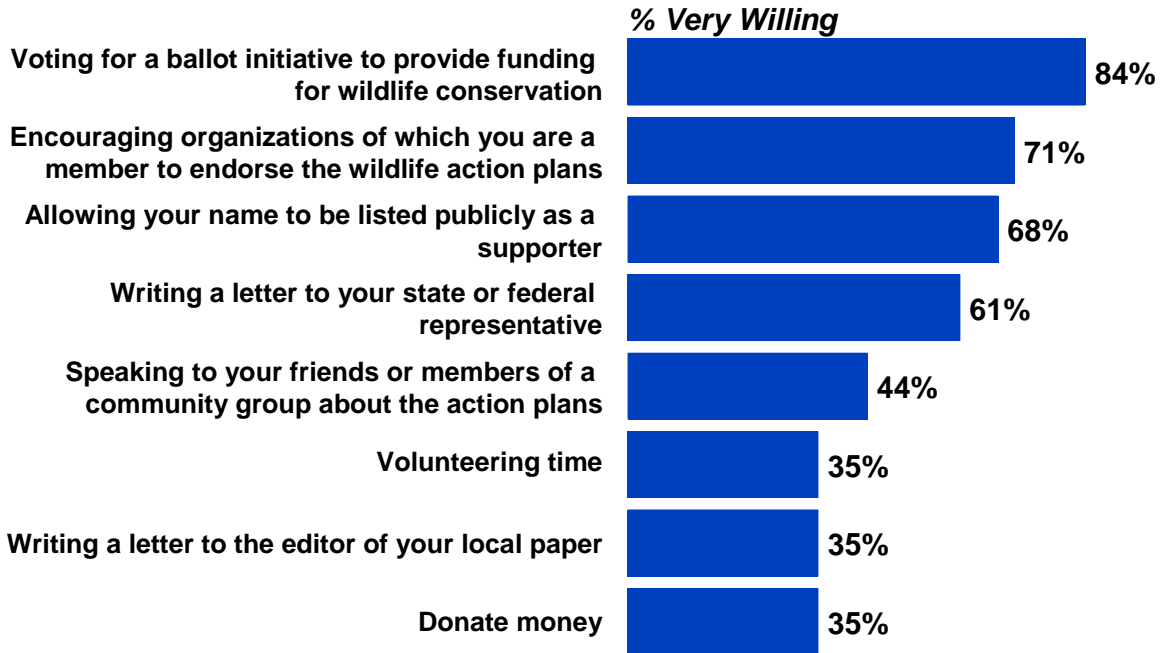
- Advocates feel more of a personal connection to wildlife, with 95% saying wildlife are an important part of their daily life (compared to 56% among voters generally);
- Advocates are better-informed, with 90% saying they know at least some about wildlife in their state, versus only 57% of voters in general;
- Advocates attach more urgency to wildlife issues – fully 66% say wildlife are in crisis in their state, while only 39% of voters say the same;
- Advocates are ready to support strong action to protect wildlife. While 88% of advocates say that more needs to be done to help wildlife in their state, only 40% of voters say the same;
- Advocates are less willing to place other priorities above wildlife. While 75% of voters agree that “wildlife are important, but there are higher priorities in my state that need funding,” among wildlife advocates that figure is only 38%; and
- Advocates are more willing to put their money where their mouth is. Sizable majorities of advocates support the idea of setting aside a portion of existing tax revenue to fund the action plans, and even support increasing taxes. a 62-percent majority of advocates would be willing to pay at least \$50 per year more to fund the action plans.

As a result, the messages and themes that are effective in communicating with wildlife advocates are not necessarily the same as those that are most effective in reaching voters in general (though in many cases the messages are in fact similar). Among the key messages for wildlife advocates are the following:

- The most effective messages (in terms of the proportion of advocates rating them a “very convincing” reason to support increased taxes to implement the wildlife action plans) were the following:
  - *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 (77% “very convincing”)*
  - *As growth and development continue in our state, we are taking up more and more of the space where wildlife live and placing many birds, fish, and animals at risk (65%)*
  - *Wildlife are an important part of nature. We simply do not know the impact that losing an animal or habitat area could have on the natural balance in our state, and what impact it might have in a crisis or disaster (56%)*
  - *We know we can have success in helping wildlife. In the past few decades, investments in protecting once-threatened animals – like wild turkey, white-tailed deer, and numerous fish – have brought them back from the brink of extinction to having thriving, healthy populations. We can do the same for other animals if we just make the effort and investment now. (56%)*
- Among wildlife advocates, there are some noteworthy divisions on messages. For example, wildlife advocates who do not have a hunting or fishing license are more likely than those who do have such licenses to find messages discussing the federal endangered species list or the unknown future harm from losing a species as persuasive messages.
- Among wildlife advocates, by far the most credible messengers are biologists (68%

“very believable”) and conservation organizations (63%) – the latter perhaps not surprising, given that those surveyed were members of such organizations.

Majorities of wildlife advocates say they would be “definitely” pay attention if contacted by e-mail or by someone they know, and large numbers indicate that they would be willing to take a variety of actions to help conserve wildlife as indicated in the graph below:



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**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. As a follow-up, between October 28, 2005 and January 4, 2006 an Internet survey was conducted with 6,348 members of 17 national and international organizations active in protecting wildlife, as well as a number of state and local environmental and sportsmen’s organizations.