



ON DELICATE GROUND: COMMUNICATING ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE

BY MARINA SCHAUFFLER

Embarking on discussions of climate change can feel like venturing into a conversational minefield. Since climate science became politicized, many people hesitate to speak or write about the topic for fear of alienating others. Reticence carries its own risks, though, and land trust leaders feel increasingly compelled to break the silence.

Some land trusts have learned how to engage and inform members on this topic without sparking controversy. The accredited Pacific Forest Trust (PFT), for example, began climate outreach a quarter-century

ago when few landowners gave thought to this issue. From the beginning, says its co-founder and president, Laurie Wayburn, PFT “broached it as a triple bottom-line solution” offering ecological, social and

financial benefits. Inviting people to be part of the solution, she adds, “we’ve found to be a unifying message.”

Land trusts may decide to communicate about climate change because they are doing climate-related work and need to secure support and resources for that work. They may feel that as it represents a threat to their work they need to raise awareness among their supporters. And they may do so to attract new supporters

In partnership with researchers from Humboldt State University, UC Berkeley, NatureServe and citizen scientists, Save the Redwoods League is studying the impacts of climate change on redwood growth, carbon storage and forest biodiversity through the Redwoods and Climate Change Initiative.

PAOLO VESCIA/COURTESY SAVE THE REDWOODS LEAGUE

who have an interest in climate issues, among other reasons.

Finding the promise, rather than the peril, in climate communications takes research and effort. Fortunately, stories from pioneering land trusts and the insights of communications experts can serve as guides.

Know Your Audience

The Land Trust Alliance, in partnership with the accredited Open Space Institute and with support from the Jane's Trust Foundation, encouraged 16 accredited land trusts to survey their members last year, gathering 1,282 responses. The consultant, Water Words That Work, gauged the members' and stakeholders' receptivity to climate outreach from their local land trusts and determined if this is a topic they thought their land trusts should engage in.

In recent workshops informed by the surveys and designed to help land trusts navigate the challenges of communicating about climate change, Water Words' Eric Eckl says he "encountered a lot of resistance [among participants] to ruffling the feathers of climate skeptics, who are perceived to be more numerous than they are." Those dismissive of global warming represent only 9% of Americans in polling done by Yale, but media coverage has amplified their voices.

Eckl's group found that eight out of 10 land trust members are receptive to learning more about climate change, but they don't perceive land trusts as authorities on the topic or understand what land conservation and climate change have to do with each other. Land trusts, Eckl says, "very clearly need to connect the dots."

Recognize the Power of Beliefs and Emotions

While it's best to target outreach to the receptive majority, it can be hard

to sidestep dissenters. Climate scientist Katharine Hayhoe, in a recent webinar for Alliance members, shared her strategy for deflecting arguments, which often take the form of what she calls "sciencey-sounding smokescreens." Hayhoe, an evangelical Christian who directs Texas Tech University's Climate Science Center, is skilled at bridging divides in this polarized sphere. "Don't get engaged—more than a single sentence," she advises, "then pivot to what you want to cover. Otherwise, it becomes a whac-a-mole game."

Effective outreach is less about information sharing and more about breaking through emotional resistance and tribal identities. "Facts are filtered through... preexisting beliefs and ideas," Cara Pike and co-authors write in *The Preparation Frame*. Ironically, the more scientifically literate people are, the more polarized they become as they seek out data supporting their views. Even firsthand experiences—of extreme weather, for example—get skewed by partisan filters. "What could possibly be stronger than [the impressions of] our own eyes?" asks Hayhoe, before answering: "tribalism and political polarization," tribalism being the behavior and attitudes that stem from strong loyalty to one's own social group.

Communications experts also warn of another significant barrier, what Pike calls "climate fatalism." More than half of respondents in polls feel helpless to do anything about climate change. So while it may be important to convey a sense of urgency, experts advise against portraying climate disruption as inevitable.

Land trusts successful in climate outreach often avoid discussing causes or placing blame on humans for precipitating this crisis. "Having a conversation about whether or not you are guilty is not a productive discussion," cautions Wayburn. Focus

Choose Words Carefully

In discussions of climate change, sidestep jargon that may be clear to specialists but not to the general populace. Words like resilience, mitigation, adaptation and sequestration should give way to more accessible terms like readiness, reducing pollution, disaster preparedness and carbon storage.

See www.lta.org/climate-language for more help.

instead on the importance of stewardship and solutions, themes that land trusts traditionally emphasize.

Meet People Where They Are

Framing climate in terms of shared values, such as prosperity, public health or security, can be more effective than approaching it as an environmental issue. Most critical of all, Hayhoe notes in a recent *Sierra* magazine interview (see Resources), "You need to enter the conversation as if the person you're speaking with has exactly the right values they need to care about climate change—that, in fact, they're the perfect person to care and act."

Rita Hite, who co-chairs the Forest Climate Working Group in her role at the American Forest Foundation (AFF), operates from a similar assumption and connects with forest owners across the political spectrum. She emphasizes what no one disputes—that trees take carbon dioxide out of the air and store it. For forest owners, she says, that means "we're not part of the problem; we're part of the solution." If landowners aren't concerned about climate change, she emphasizes other benefits of careful forest management, like enhanced wildlife habitat or reduced wildfire threats.

Land trusts need to be "culturally sensitive" when broaching climate change, observes Greg Abernathy, executive director of the accredited Kentucky

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Natural Lands Trust (KNLT). Working in Appalachia—which, he points out, media often demonize in broad-brush “coal country” portraits—KNLT emphasizes how conservation of a large and connected forested landscape can foster tourism and help create communities that retain and attract the talent needed for a region in transition from coal to outdoor recreation. The land trust forges strong alliances with artists, who he says provide “critical crossover points with all sorts of issues.”

Many KNLT events present multiple perspectives on the land, like its free Wildlands Social Club gatherings, held in partnership

with a contemporary arts hotel and area brewing company. Each event features music or poetry and short talks on conservation science, art, the economy and health that, Abernathy says, often touch on climate concerns. Integrating art, he adds, helps information “ripple through more audiences.”

Focus on Local Impacts

Where people are already noticing local changes in weather and wildlife, land trusts can help link those observations to larger climate trends. The accredited Northwest Arkansas Land Trust (NWALT) uses its website to extend awareness of “observed changes,” like earlier leaf-out dates or a longer ragweed season to “predicted changes,” like higher average temperatures and decreased water availability.

NWALT summarized local climate impacts in a four-minute video that its program coordinator, Pam Nelson, describes as one of the trust’s most effective outreach tools; the trust consistently tries to share “local voices of people with an intimate connection to the land.” Hite echoes the power of having “real people tell real stories” about climate impacts.

For the accredited Save the Redwoods League (SRL), citizen science offers a way to engage people in documenting local impacts. Climate change is not new for redwoods, which have evolved over millions of years, explains Emily Burns, SRL’s science director. “But the way they’re experiencing it now, the unprecedented rate of change, is novel.”

Examining impacts on this beloved species and related plants in the understory is “a softer way to have that conversation,” Burns says. “People are hungry to get involved and engaged in data collection,” she adds, and they come to see that “it’s just good management to understand how your land responds to climate.”

SRL, NWALT and the accredited Kennebec Estuary Land Trust (KELT) in Maine are among a number of land trusts that engage young people in studying and documenting climate change. They have found students, teachers and administrators to be highly receptive, and a recent Yale study reported overwhelming public support nationwide for teaching students about the causes, consequences and potential solutions of climate change.

KELT Executive Director Carrie Kinne sees land trusts as well-positioned to talk

Resources

Find the Water Words That Work report at the Alliance’s climate change site: <http://climatechange.lta.org/communications-report>. Also, the Alliance’s Learning Center has a “land and climate” discussion forum (<https://learningcenter.lta.org>)

Katharine Hayhoe recorded webinar at www.lta.org/webinar/demand-2018-webinar-series; also “Katharine Hayhoe Reveals Surprising Ways to Talk about Climate Change” in *Sierra*, March 20, 2018, by Katie O’Reilly at www.sierraclub.org/sierra/katharine-hayhoe-reveals-surprising-ways-talk-about-climate-change

Research reports and Climate Opinion Maps by the Yale Program on Climate Communication at <http://climatecommunication.yale.edu/publications>

“*Connecting on Climate: A Guide to Effective Climate Change Communication*” (2017), a joint publication of ecoAmerica.org, Columbia University and the Center for Research on Environmental Decisions at the Earth Institute. Available as a PDF online: <http://ecoamerica.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/ecoAmerica-CRED-2014-Connecting-on-Climate.pdf>



A Wildlands Social Club evening sponsored by Kentucky Natural Lands Trust gathers people to talk about conservation, art, health and economy, but often segues into discussions about climate change.

MARC EVANS, KNLT BOARD CHAIR

Kennebec Estuary Land Trust works with local middle school science classes to present a unit on climate change. These students are measuring potential sea level rise impacts on Bath's downtown infrastructure along the Kennebec River. They measured what infrastructure would be impacted by 2 feet, 4 feet and 6 feet of sea level rise.

about climate change impacts because “we can see in practice what is happening”—whether in water-quality testing, wildlife changes or tree die-offs due to saltwater intrusion. KELT and other regional land trusts recently prepared maps that illustrate which areas are most vulnerable to expected changes and most critical to protect.

Sharing those maps with community members provides “a confirmation that we’re doing the work we need to be doing,” says Anna Fiedler, director of land conservation at the accredited Midcoast Conservancy in Maine. It also offers a chance to explain the importance of linkages among conserved parcels—so that wildlife can move and better adapt. “We can offer a solution,” notes Ruth Indrick, KELT’s project coordinator. “We can do things that make the place better for other species and make it more vibrant.”

Highlight Solutions

Increasingly land trusts recognize the importance of emphasizing solutions in climate outreach. Yet many of their members remain unaware of the significant ways that conserved lands can lock up atmospheric carbon dioxide and help buffer some climate disruptions—like droughts and more heavy downpours. Hite notes the “constant education work that needs to be done” to help people understand the huge potential that conserved tracts and sound land management have to absorb and store atmospheric carbon (see the article on natural carbon solutions in *Saving Land*, Spring 2018). American foresters asked about the carbon storage potential of ecosystems talk about “avoiding deforestation in the tropics,” Hite says, not management practices they can employ on their own lands.

“People often don’t think there are any palatable, sensible solutions” to climate change, Hayhoe told *Sierra*, “but of course there are in spades!” Land trusts can emphasize not only the important role that natural ecosystems and well-managed woodlands and farmlands play but also progress being made in renewable energy. “You want to talk about solutions that will



RUTH INDRICK

make people feel like better versions of themselves,” Hayhoe adds, “more pragmatic, more competitive, more innovative, maybe even more fiscally conservative.”

NWALT has found its climate change initiative igniting broader conversations. “As we moved forward,” notes Nelson, “we saw community leaders taking on a stronger voice” and recognizing how “land conservation brings value to climate resiliency.” Now the land trust is going a step further, organizing a roundtable discussion where community leaders will discuss what they’re doing to address climate change. In this event, as in other forms of outreach, Nelson’s goals are the same: “Highlight local impacts and local voices; identify potential partners; consider solutions; and leave people feeling empowered.”

MARINA SCHAUFFLER IS A FREQUENT CONTRIBUTOR TO SAVING LAND.

Seven Guiding Principles

- Focus on local, observable impacts
- Begin with what audiences care about
- Build on nonpartisan values (such as stewardship and responsibility)
- Tap uncertainty as a reason to prepare (“it’s prudent to take precautions”)
- Emphasize the cost of inaction
- Promote practical solutions
- Articulate what will get better if action is taken

(adapted from *The Preparation Frame: A Guide to Building Understanding of Climate Impacts and Engagement in Solutions*, Climate Access, 2015)