



Environmental Communication: What it is and Why it Matters

In the simplest terms, environmental communication is communication about environmental affairs. This includes all of the diverse forms of interpersonal, group, public, organizational, and mediated communication that make up the social debate about environmental issues and problems, and our relationship to the rest of nature.

Anyone who is participating in these discussions is engaging in the activity of environmental communication. That includes everyone from the most passionate environmental advocates, to the fiercest opponents of ecological protections. In this sense, it is both a lay activity that anyone can undertake, and a field of practice that professional communicators have created.

It is both a lay activity and a field of professional practice

It should be noted here that former U.S. Vice-President Al Gore shared the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize with the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) for his work in communicating about climate change. That makes him the most distinguished environmental communicator today.

It is also an interdisciplinary field of study

Environmental communication is also an interdisciplinary field of study that examines the role, techniques, and influence of communication in environmental affairs. Basically, it studies the activity and in doing so, it draws its theory and methods primarily from communication, environmental studies, psychology, sociology, and political science. There are university courses and programs in environmental communication, research centers dedicated to its study, scholarly journals focused on the subject, and books on various aspects of the field.

Work in this area is concerned with several interconnected dimensions of the communication. These are most easily explained with reference to the standard questions of who, what, where, when and how. In each of these dimensions, we might also ask why and so what?

Who gets to participate in the discussions? Why are certain voices privileged and others marginalized? Among those are the voices of citizens, politicians, civil servants, scientists, corporations, religious institutions, labour unions, indigenous peoples, environmental organizations, and other civil society groups, not to mention journalists and other media workers.

What are the facets of the environmental issues that are being discussed? Why are some emphasized over others? What are the implications? Among the key facets that might be discussed are the science, costs, risks, problem definitions, possible responses, values, agency, responsibilities, future visions, and ideas about nature, as well as the patterns of those discussions known as discourses.

Where and when does the communication take place? What are the limitations and opportunities associated with those different contexts? These include traditional news media, public participation fora, policy-making venues, advocacy campaigns, advertising, street protests, social media, popular culture and the public sphere generally.

How are people communicating? Why are they using certain words, metaphors, visuals, frames, music, art, narratives, and other rhetorical devices? Why not different words, etc.? What are the consequence for those who hear and see these messages? How should people be communicating?

A central goal of the field is to discern and promote good practices

These are some of the core questions that environmental communication researchers explore and practitioners face. However, despite tremendous growth in the literature of environmental

communication in the past two decades, there is still much to learn and a lot of work to be done in order to fully answer them.

Because many of the people who study this field see it as a “crisis discipline,” akin to conservation biology, their work often goes beyond describing, explaining, or critiquing the communication. They feel a responsibility to see that communication concerning environmental affairs be as ethical and effective as possible. That’s because such communication is essential if we are to avoid violent conflicts and address environmental health and justice issues in the most effective ways possible. Accordingly, a central goal of the field is to discern and promote good practices.

Environmental communication is a practical, and indeed essential, tool for action

As with communication in general, environmental communication serves two broad social functions. The first is that we use communication to do things. For example, we communicate in order to inform, persuade, educate, and alert others. Similarly, we use communication to organize, argue, reconcile, and negotiate with each other, among other things. In this way, environmental communication is a practical, and indeed essential, tool for action. As such, it deserves careful scrutiny.

Whether you are using environmental communication to advocate for a policy, raise awareness, change behavior, influence public opinion, collaborate to address conflicts, pass legislation or challenge assumptions, how you communicate will affect your outcomes. Whether you seek technological, political, economic, behavioral or cultural solutions, you need effective communication to succeed.

The second broad social function of communication is that it plays an important role in creating meaning. Communication shapes how we see and value the world of things, events, conditions, ideas and so forth. In environmental affairs, communication guides our understanding of the issues, the problems that underlie them, the people and organizations involved, the possible approaches that can be taken, potential futures, and most importantly, the natural world itself.

Communication shapes how we see and value the world

Many people working in this field understand how important meanings and values are to guiding everything from the kinds of technologies people develop to the policies they support to the day to day personal choices they make. Of course, meanings and values don’t fully determine how people act, but they can greatly influence it.

How well we communicate with each other about nature and environmental affairs will affect how well we address the ecological crisis

Better policies, cleaner energy sources, new technologies, carbon taxes and all of the other innovative approaches to dealing with environmental issues will only take us so far. In order to achieve lasting ecological sustainability, human culture (especially in wasteful Western societies) is going to have to change as well. This will require some significant shifts in our views and values towards the natural world, ourselves, and each other. So, how well we communicate about nature and environmental affairs will affect how quickly and thoroughly we can transform our cultures and ultimately how well we address the ecological crisis.

This One-Planet Talking Point was written by Mark Meisner (mark@theieca.org), Executive Director of the International Environmental Communication Association, November, 2015. It is based on an earlier note “What is Environmental Communication” and also incorporates “Why Environmental Communication Matters,” both from the web site of the IECA.

Further reading

- The International Environmental Communication Association (IECA) <https://theieca.org>
- Robert Cox and Phaedra C. Pezzullo (2016) *Environmental Communication and the Public Sphere* (4th ed.). Los Angeles: Sage Publications.
- Anders Hansen and Robert Cox, (2015) *The Routledge Handbook of Environment and Communication*. London: Routledge.