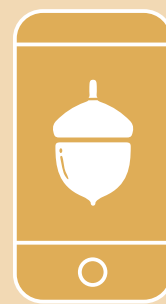
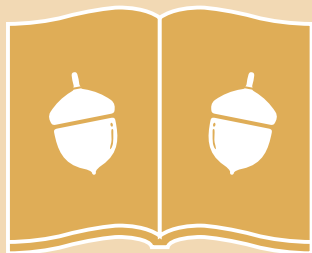


# THE LANGUAGE OF CONNECTION: RAISING THE BAR FOR SCIENCE COMMUNICATIONS



The language we use and how we approach the audiences of botanical institutions is a vital tool to engage the public in large-scale, often scary, environmental issues that frequently make headlines. How can we use language to the fullest, in the name of influencing behavioural change, to aid conservation?

An acorn drops to the forest floor, is buried, and eventually germinates. It grows amongst the other species that create the forest ecosystem, growing ever taller until the tips of its branches finally reach the point where they feel the warmth of the sun beating down upon them. This is the natural way of things; it has been happening for millions of years but increasingly there is disruption to the course of nature. Our ancestors would wander freely amongst the diversity of the Earth without having to face the often-overwhelming realisations that plague the minds of modern generations. The planet is in trouble, which is not even news anymore, but our society has become numb and alienated from the facts as a form of misguided self-preservation – if I don't acknowledge the issue, then maybe it's not real.

To counteract this, we need to actively pursue ways to connect visitors with the realities of nature, so they feel like part of the natural world, and not separate from it. The language we use can make or break the level of understanding of environmental issues. Large scale, often scary, topics such as biodiversity loss and climate change can overwhelm audiences and encourage indecision as to what path to take, which hinders behaviour change and progress. As organisations that are public facing, botanic gardens have the potential to significantly influence behaviour change in visitors, but only if they engage in effective science communications which connect with a variety of audiences (University of Minnesota, 2016). To do this we need to raise the bar of what, and how, we communicate as a conservation community.

This can be achieved by something that I call the **RAISE** approach. It is simple - science communications surrounding environmental issues should, at their heart, be:

- Realistic
- Accessible
- Inclusive
- Solution-based
- Educational



*The language we use when conveying complex matters to the public is paramount to ensure a positive, united outcome which is clearly understood by the masses.*



*We need to raise the bar of what, and how, we communicate as a conservation community.*

Let us look at how these can be used effectively.

Being realistic, or telling inconvenient truths, is not an easy task. When faced with a barrage of negative or concerning information, audiences can easily get overwhelmed and disengage with the issue. Yet, being realistic and not sugar-coating the truth is vital for effective communication. We need to counteract the impact of the constant bombardment of fearmongering headlines, and fake news, that can cloud the judgement of those who want to do better by the environment. As scientific institutions, botanic gardens and arboretums should be using their platforms to provide realistic information on the issues that impact our audiences.

When providing this information, we should also consider the accessibility of our content to ensure that messaging is as widespread as possible. When considering accessibility, it is vital to consider the different demographics we could reach including; the non-scientific community (using plain language), those with visible/invisible disabilities (using sensory tools/physical adaptations), or the use of multimedia options to accommodate those with visual or auditory impairments. Being actively aware of the challenges your audiences face can be the difference between successful or forgettable communications.

This also helps us to be inclusive and to ensure that communications are meeting the needs of different communities. It is important that we make a conscious effort to include various ages, languages, and backgrounds, whilst acknowledging the varying priorities of potential visitors, that may not have been historically considered (Eve & Wilson, 2022).

Research shows individuals tend to respond more positively to environmental issues when they are offered solutions. Overwhelm is a widespread problem to overcome when communicating environmental concerns, but solutions can be the antidote. When given solutions, which actively impact the issues discussed, audiences are more likely to engage, fully understand, and make lifestyle and opinion changes (Shashkevich, 2019). As a rule, the public are more likely to act on issues that directly impact them, and they feel they have control over. Giving information that can be used for the protection of the natural world, and relates to the lives of our audiences, is paramount to influencing behavioural change and environmental understanding. Solutions can also come in the form of having a safe space to air concerns and anxieties surrounding environmental issues. Eco-anxiety is a very real issue in modern times, and being listened to and having concerns acknowledged can be a vital first step towards embracing solutions.

Formal education ends, for most, when they leave school or university during early adulthood. However, education and learning can (and arguably should) be a lifelong endeavour. A problem can only be solved when it is fully understood and, as scientific institutions which can be accessed by the public, botanic gardens have a duty to address adult education needs. This includes overall scientific literacy, encouraging the understanding of local/global issues, and both instigating and supporting conservation conversations (Kueffer & Larson, 2014).

Throughout the recent pandemic, many of us rediscovered a connection with nature, whether that be on daily walks, visiting botanical institutions, or bringing more of nature into our homes. Now, post-COVID, we can use this momentum to strengthen our audience's connection with nature. We now live in a world that demands clear information regarding its own health and wellbeing, the impact of issues on daily lives, and ways to sustain livelihoods and safety. COVID-19 taught us that the language we use when conveying complex matters to the public is paramount to ensure a positive, united outcome, which is understood by the masses. Use of inaccessible analogies, jargon, or overwhelming data can lead to misunderstanding and distrust (Rodrigues, 2023). By maintaining and nurturing the connection of our visitors with nature, that helped us all through a difficult few years, we can reduce the likelihood of misunderstandings regarding environmental issues.

*Language plays a key role in how the public see the world around them and, therefore, how they behave.*



*The environmental battle is going to be hard; the solutions are complex; but audiences don't want to be told the obvious.*

The aim should be to empower audiences by using a variety of communication platforms. Common types of communications that all botanical institutions should consider when undertaking the RAISE approach, include:

- Social media
- Press networks
- In-person tours/talks/events
- Online (multimedia) tours/talks/events
- Accessible websites
- Engaging interpretation
- Workshops/training

Communications need to be multi-faceted to reach the maximum number. It doesn't have to be complicated - communications surrounding environmental issues need to be:

Realistic  
Accessible  
Inclusive  
Solution-based  
Educational

Language is the tool we use to wield the full power of effective communication. Language plays a key role in how the public see the world around them and, therefore, how they behave. It is important to be aware of the language we use in communications. Language that adheres to the **RAISE** approach is likely to empower and engage audiences, whereas, at its worst, language can alienate and cause detrimental impacts that are opposite to the desired outcome (Clawson, 2008). The way that language is used can significantly impact both the short- and long-term environmental goals of your institution and beyond.

Negative words and attitudes lead to a triggering of our flight or fight response, we lose control of the situation and are at the will of our more primal reactions. The environmental battle is going to be hard; the solutions are complex; but audiences don't want to be told the obvious. The public want to be seen, they want to be involved in the solution, they don't want to be told that they are part of the problem. They want hope (Benston, 2019). They want to be included in the conversations and decisions that impact their lives. Empowering language changes the way we feel about the issues that must be tackled, and from emotion grows action – that is what we need to aim for when reaching the audiences that visit our institutions.

An acorn drops to the forest floor, is buried, and eventually germinates. It grows amongst the other species that create the forest ecosystem.

It takes a village.

We need to work together.

The forest is not made of only that single mighty oak, grown from the acorn. It takes various species of trees, plants, fungi, and animals, connected through varying climates, time, and space to make a functioning ecosystem. Similarly, it takes a vast network of empowered individuals to create something much bigger, more significant, and more beautiful, than the sum of its parts.



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