

HEARTWIRED TO LOVE THE OCEAN

A MESSAGING GUIDE FOR ADVOCATES



ABOUT



GOODWIN SIMON STRATEGIC RESEARCH

[Goodwin Simon Strategic Research](#) (GSSR) is a national public opinion research firm with special expertise in conducting research on emotionally complex, socially or politically controversial issues. GSSR's cutting-edge approach is built on decades of experience in polling, social and political marketing, policy analysis and communications, and rooted in the latest research on neuroscience, emotion, psychology, cognitive linguistics, and narrative theory. This unique methodology is used to unpack underlying attitudes and emotional reactions that impact behavior and decision-making and to develop effective message frameworks that enable deep attitudinal change. Amy Simon and John Whaley of GSSR contributed their thought leadership and writing to this strategy guide.



WONDER: STRATEGIES FOR GOOD

Do good—and do it as quickly as possible. That is the mantra that drives [Wonder](#). We are a network of experts in messaging, storytelling, psychology, and public opinion research. We use audience insights to develop storytelling and messaging strategies that shape attitudes and influence the behavior of your target audiences. Wonder strategists have partnered with change-makers to make progress on some of the most pressing issues of the day—from advancing the freedom to marry for same-sex couples to making medical aid-in-dying a legal option for terminally ill people. Robert Pérez and Justin Adams of Wonder: Strategies for Good contributed their thought leadership and writing to this strategy guide. Corinne Hoag and Ryan Schwartz contributed to a landscape analysis of how conservation organizations are currently communicating with their audiences.



THE DAVID AND LUCILE PACKARD FOUNDATION

For more than 50 years, the [David and Lucile Packard Foundation](#) has worked with partners around the world to improve the lives of children, families, and communities—and to restore and protect our planet.



WHO SHOULD USE THIS MESSAGING GUIDE?

- Conservation advocates and activists who want to strengthen their communications to reach new and more diverse audiences—diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, age, faith, geography, and politics—who are willing to take action to protect the ocean; and
- Philanthropists and funders who seek a deeper understanding of opportunities to increase public support for ocean protection.

THIS GUIDE IS DESIGNED SO THAT YOU CAN

- Find the information you need quickly while developing new messaging or revising existing messages;
- Better understand the mindsets of diverse audiences who love the ocean and are willing to take action to support it; and
- Understand the research behind our recommendations on how to develop effective messaging to motivate target audiences to take action.

ABOUT

OCEAN MESSAGING PROJECT ADVISORY GROUP

Doing research of this kind requires deep expertise—on both subject matter and policy issues. We established an advisory group to provide this expertise and help to make the research conducted for this project as meaningful and useful to the conservation movement as possible. Eighteen individuals from across 16 organizations served as active and genuine partners, giving input on every step of the research process and providing invaluable insight on messaging needs and opportunities within the ocean conservation community. The organizations represented in the advisory group range in size and include organizations specifically working to engage people of color and people who are often missing from the broader conservation movement. Some of the organizations focus specifically on ocean conservation and some include ocean efforts within larger conservations programs. From 2016 to 2019, the advisory group included:

Advisory Group Co-Chairs

Kymerly Escobar, Director of Communications, The Pew Charitable Trusts

Marce Gutiérrez-Graudiņš, Founder and Executive Director, Azul

Advisory Group Members*

Maite Arce, President/CEO, Hispanic Access Foundation

Mike Conathan, Ocean Director, Center for American Progress

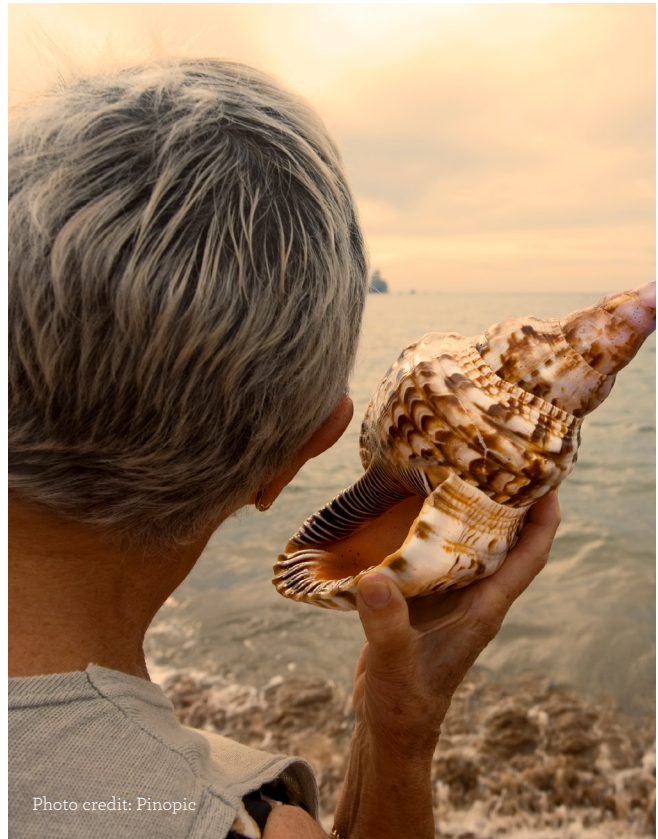
Erica Goldman, Director of Policy Engagement, COMPASS

Sophie Hulme, Communications Lead, Ocean Unite

Amy Kenney, Coordinator, National Ocean Protection Coalition

Betsy Lopez-Wagner, Communications Officer, The David and Lucile Packard Foundation

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Kera Abraham Panni, Conservation & Science Outreach Manager, Monterey Bay Aquarium

Julia Roberson, Vice President, Communications, Ocean Conservancy

Melissa Schwartz, Communications, National Ocean Protection Coalition

Adam Snyder, Conservation Campaigns Manager, The Nature Conservancy

Billy Spitzer, VP Programs, Exhibits, and Planning, New England Aquarium

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Amelia Vorpahl, Communications Manager, Oceana

*Job position and organization while on the Advisory Group

WELCOME

FROM THE ADVISORY GROUP

Welcome! This guide is the product of a broad, multi-year collaboration among many organizations working across ocean-related issue areas. Our goal has been to better understand how to develop new messaging approaches to strengthen public support for ocean conservation and protection, and to build a stronger conservation movement that reflects the values, identities, lived experiences, and needs of all people. Working together has also provided an opportunity for our respective organizations to use the research findings to strengthen our own organizational communications.

The Ocean Messaging Project Advisory Group has included 18 people from 16 organizations. Some of us work at foundations, some at aquariums. Some of us work for organizations seeking to change national policies and some engage people in our local communities to address ocean issues through the power of grassroots advocacy. Some of us talk most with experts and some of us spend every day face-to-face with members of the public. There is one thing that unites us: We all love the ocean, and we know more people must act now to protect it—before it’s too late.

It is our shared love of the ocean and commitment to protecting it that motivates our work. We are excited to share these messaging recommendations developed through this research partnership and believe that this guide, and its supporting research, will be helpful to our peers and colleagues.

As we worked together to guide this research, we gained a broader perspective into how we can more effectively express the value of ocean conservation. It is about more than fish and polar bears—it is also about lives, livelihoods, and protecting our special places. To reach new audiences and continue engaging those already involved, we need a new approach to messaging—one that reflects people’s values, beliefs, identities, emotions, and lived experiences. We know now that many people experience the ocean in a multi-sensory way—they love feeling the sand between their toes, the sound of the waves, the smell of the salty air, and connect to the sights and tastes of being at the ocean. Others think of the ocean as God’s beautiful creation, or a place where they feel at peace. Thanks to this research, we are better positioned to craft messages that will reach these people and touch their hearts just as the ocean touches ours.

Many people across this country care deeply about the ocean. It is the way we are communicating about it that isn’t bridging people’s love for the ocean with a willingness to take action on its behalf. For that to happen, we need to rethink our messages and our methods. We hope you will join us in doing just that—committing to this vital work to strengthen and expand efforts to protect the ocean.

As we apply what we’ve learned to our own communications and messaging approaches, we are excited and hopeful for the future of ocean conservation. Thank you to the David and Lucile Packard Foundation for believing in and supporting this transformative research. We hope other funders and organizations see the value and the promise of this research collaboration. Together, we can move the entire conservation movement forward.



Kymerly Escobar
Advisory Group Co-chair &
Director of Communications,
The Pew Charitable Trusts



Marce Gutiérrez-Graudiņš
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Photo credit: Amanda Phung



WELCOME

FROM THE DAVID AND LUCILE PACKARD FOUNDATION

Dearest Reader,

This guide is the result of a three-year audience research project to better understand how to create communications messaging approaches that can strengthen public support for ocean conservation. We believe the strategies outlined have the potential to help advocates and funders alike foster and support an inclusive conservation field.

Since our first marine-related grant in 1968, the David and Lucile Packard Foundation has supported work to better understand and protect the ocean. Our grantees and partners are at the forefront of solutions to accelerate action to protect it.

The Foundation recognizes that we can do more, particularly in partnership with communities that have been historically underrepresented in the marine conservation movement. Indigenous communities, people of color, young people, and community- and faith-based leaders are some of the many groups that have an important role to play in stewarding the ocean.

Together, it is the time to collectively rejuvenate the ocean conservation movement and ensure it is more active, powerful, and diverse so that together we can all work toward equitable solutions and practices to sustain that which gives us life. It is for these reasons and more that we supported this project. Creating positive, lasting change is not easy—but it is possible.

To our partners and peers: this project is not just about how we talk about the ocean—it is an invitation to revisit our approaches to move ocean lovers from values to action. This guide emphasizes the importance of being mindful about how we connect with the value and belief systems of those we want to reach in ways that are meaningful for them. This is the moment to create avenues for greater action directly connected with people's core values.



Heather Ludemann
Program Officer, Conservation & Science



Betsy Lopez-Wagner
Communications Officer



Photo credit: Johana Vicente

AS YOU NAVIGATE THIS GUIDE

HOW WE TALK ABOUT PEOPLE AND DIVERSITY

This research provides an important opportunity to strengthen the communications of conservation organizations as well as the broader conservation movement and funding institutions by reflecting and engaging the diversity of people who cherish the ocean.

For this reason, Goodwin Simon Strategic Research and Wonder: Strategies for Good conducted our research among diverse populations from across the nation, including Hispanic/Latino, Black/African American, Asian-Pacific Islander, and white men and women of different ages, faiths, and political ideologies. Before you dive into the guide, we want

to share an overview of how we talk about people and diversity in this guide.

When we mention **diversity** in this guide, like the need to feature *diverse messengers*, we're speaking expansively about the opportunity to reflect diverse points of view in the United States. That includes

race, ethnicity, gender, age, faith, geography, and political identities, as well as people from different professions and life experiences like students, marine biologists, veterans, small-town mayors, immigrants, fishermen, sons, daughters, moms, dads, and grandparents.

You might also note that, on occasion, we refer to the importance of including **human actors** in your communications. “Why the clinical language—why not just say, ‘people?’” We use this language to make the point that people have agency and the ability to understand the impact their actions have on the world. In the stories and messages that we tested in our research, people aren’t just visual objects dropped into an ocean-side setting. By positioning people as agents who have the ability to make good or bad decisions that impact the ocean, we are modeling the good behavior that we hope others will follow while elevating important moral lessons to stop humans from doing bad things to the ocean.

In the guide, you’ll also note that there are **different terms used to describe people’s race or ethnicity**.

How people choose to describe their race or ethnicity can vary from individual to individual based on many factors such as geography, age, education, political perspective, country of origin, history, culture, as well as social influences from friends, peers, and family. The terms used to describe people’s race or ethnicity reflect the terms that our focus group and survey respondents themselves use to describe their race and/or ethnicity. For example, in our survey, 10 percent of respondents identify as Hispanic while 4 percent identify as Latino. As such, you’ll see references to both Hispanic and Latino in this guide, reflecting the different ways people describe their ethnicity.

You will also note that we chose to capitalize Black as a racial identity, while not doing so for white. This may conflict with style guides that you are familiar with, which suggest the use of a lowercase alternative. Language, like all living things, evolves. These decisions are reflected in a post from the *Columbia Journalism Review*, “[Black and white: why capitalization matters](#).” In their post, CJR quotes Luke Visconti of DiversityInc: “[M]any Black people describe themselves simply as being ‘Black,’ and this reality is reflected in a body of literature, music and academic study.”

As you develop content that includes people and families, make it a practice to ask those who are featured how they prefer to describe their race or ethnicity, and then reflect that preference in communications. To read and learn more about using inclusive language, check out this helpful resource, “[Writing about Race, Ethnicity, Social Class and Disability](#).” While it may not answer every question, it offers good guidance including this important piece of wisdom: “Language is fluid. As a writer, understand and take responsibility for the language choices you make.” The [Conscious Style Guide](#) also includes a variety of news stories and blog posts with people weighing in with their opinions about how to communicate thoughtfully about racial and ethnic identity. Another resource is the [Diversity Style Guide](#), a project of the Center for Integration and Improvement of Journalism.



Photo credit: Kieron and Alice Slaughter

GUIDE AT A GLANCE

A HEARTWIRED APPROACH



Human decision-making is influenced by how people are heartwired—the mind circuits and connections that tie together their emotions, identity, values, beliefs, and lived experiences. The heartwired research approach investigates the ways that these combine, and often collide, to shape people’s attitudes and behaviors.

HEARTWIRED OCEAN MINDSETS

As we looked at the heartwired factors that shape how people relate to the ocean, six unique mindsets of potential ocean protectors emerged. People with these mindsets are more open to persuasion when our communications are attuned to their mindset, which transports them into a motivational state of mind where they are more open to taking action.

MINDSET

HOW TO REACH THEM

EXAMPLE MESSAGES THAT MOTIVATE



The ‘All Senses’ Mindset

Heartwired Motivation:
I love feeling the sand between my toes, the sound of the waves, the smell of the salt air, and the sights and tastes of being at the ocean.

To activate a motivational state of mind, use vivid, multi-sensory descriptions of the ocean in your talking points, **tell stories of people and families at the beach** or playing in the ocean, and use photography and video to capture the sights and sounds of the ocean.

“I love to feel the ocean breeze and to hear the waves crash onto the shore. The ocean is a special place that we should protect for future generations.”



The ‘God’s Beautiful Creation’ Mindset

Heartwired Motivation:
I feel the ocean is God’s beautiful creation.

To activate a motivational state of mind, consider featuring members of your organization or community stakeholders who feel comfortable **talking about faith in relationship to ocean protection**, or sharing narratives from people who are motivated by their faith to undertake ocean conservation work.

“I believe that the ocean is God’s beautiful creation—and I see it as my responsibility as a person of faith and good steward of God’s earth to protect it.”



The ‘Amazing Wildlife’ Mindset

Heartwired Motivation:
The ocean is filled with the most amazing wildlife on earth.

To activate a motivational state of mind, **use images and videos of wildlife in your messaging**, as well as real-world experiences of people interacting with wildlife. Call-to-action messaging that spotlights the need to protect ocean wildlife will also deeply resonate.

“The ocean is beautiful and mysterious. It’s home to countless wildlife that fly above and swim below the ocean surface. That’s why I want to do my part to protect this wet and wonderful place.”

MINDSET



The ‘Laws and Policies’ Mindset

Heartwired Motivation:
The laws and policies we pass can help protect the ocean for future generations.

HOW TO REACH THEM

To activate a motivational state of mind, your messaging should **spotlight your organizational or programmatic efforts to advance laws and policies to protect the ocean.** It’s particularly helpful to demonstrate the efficacy and success of existing laws (for those that are under attack) or to paint a vivid picture of the future if a proposed law or policy were to be passed.

EXAMPLE MESSAGES THAT MOTIVATE

“The most effective way to ensure the ocean is here for future generations is to pass strong ocean protection laws that hold people accountable. Supporting these laws is a lasting and powerful way to show your love for the ocean.”



The ‘Feeling-At-Peace’ Mindset

Heartwired Motivation:
When I’m at the ocean, I feel at peace.

To activate a motivational state of mind, your messaging and messengers should **communicate about this powerful shared lived experience—that the ocean is one of the most special places on the planet to experience peace.** You could also use photography and video reminding those with this mindset how they feel when they are in or near the ocean.

“I visit the ocean to feel at peace—to escape from the stress and distractions of everyday life. I want to do my part to protect the ocean and allow others to enjoy its soothing powers for years to come.”



The ‘Family Traditions’ Mindset

Heartwired Motivation:
I have fond memories of spending time with my family at the ocean.

To activate a motivational state of mind, it’s important to **feature messaging, messengers and images of families bonding near or in the ocean.** They should communicate about what the ocean uniquely allows them to do, or protect, as a family, including transmitting family traditions through the generations.

“This is the beach where my parents brought me and where I bring my children. We need to protect the ocean so that my grandchildren and their children have the opportunity to create memories like I did.”

GUIDE AT A GLANCE

RECOMMENDATION: MAKE ISSUES HUMAN AND ACCESSIBLE

Show how problems are being caused by people, not abstract processes. Developing stories that include people who our audiences know or can connect with is a big step toward getting them to see people as part of the solution.

Weave more people from diverse backgrounds into images and as messengers. This includes featuring people from different parts of the

country who come from different racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, political, and faith backgrounds.

Think globally, message locally. Local examples help make the issue more relatable and, by spotlighting local successes, we have the opportunity to model the type of actions that people can take at the local level that have the ability to make a collective impact.

RECOMMENDATION: TAP INTO EMOTIONS, VALUES, BELIEFS, IDENTITY, AND LIVED EXPERIENCES

Leverage people's belief that the ocean and beach are deeply connected. People see the beach as a gateway to the ocean and can be engaged to action and by tapping into their lived experiences by the beach or on the water.

Harness people's strong spiritual and religious connections to the ocean. As you develop your communications, consider including messengers of faith or those who can talk about the spiritual

connection that they—and many like them—feel to the ocean.

Show people's emotional connections to the ocean—especially awe or wonder. Including awe-inspiring images, such as people experiencing awe in the presence of the ocean's wonder, in your communications is a great and effective practice.

RECOMMENDATION: SHOW, DON'T TELL

Use storytelling that showcases people and how their values, beliefs, and identity are tied to the ocean. Model behavior you would like to see in others by developing stories that show your audiences how a peer (e.g., “someone like me”) is making a difference. The most effective stories use a messenger who is personally compelling to your audience.

Use multi-sensory language to transport people. The more you can engage people's senses and transport them to a place, the more success you will have getting them to see why taking a certain action to protect that place is so important—and what is at risk if they fail to act.

Create an aspirational vision for the ocean by putting solutions front and center. Our research participants responded well to a wide range of solutions at both the individual level and the systemic

and policy levels, even step-by-step ones, finding that it reduced anxiety and evoked a sense of “yes, we can.”

Stress a sense of urgency, but also provide clear examples of how audiences can help. Consider offering a spectrum of ways people can take action or become engaged—each subsequent action they take deepens their commitment and leads to more significant actions.

Highlight a variety of solutions, including innovative approaches. It is critical to show audiences the wide range of solutions that are already having an important impact on ocean conservation.

Consider a “Redemption” frame. One of the most effective messaging frames we tested emphasizes that, while people make mistakes, they are also capable of acknowledging and working to successfully overcome those mistakes.



Photo credit: Doug Berry

INTRODUCTION

TAPPING INTO PEOPLE'S DEEP LOVE OF THE OCEAN

“The ocean does something to your spirit,” said a Black woman from Charlotte, North Carolina during a focus group. “You are stressed out when you are driving. You get close to the ocean, you can smell the air. There is something about that. There is probably something really good about breathing that air in too—not just looking at it.”

“It is about the only time that I am at peace, or if I am at church,” added a white man from Kansas City, Missouri.

Much has been written in the last decade about how our brains are hardwired—a set of circuits and connections that govern how we make decisions. However, human decision-making is also influenced by how people are heartwired—the mind circuits and connections that tie together their emotions, identity, values, beliefs, and lived experiences.

The ways we are heartwired shape our attitudes and behaviors on the pressing issues of the day. The good news for ocean protection advocates: not only do people across the United States deeply love the ocean, they want to make sure we protect the ocean for future generations.

Here’s the challenge: Many advocates and change-makers do not communicate in a way that leverages the ways that people are heartwired.

Communicating about ocean conservation can be extremely challenging given the vastness of the ocean and because the problems and solutions facing the ocean often involve complicated scientific processes and policy prescriptions. As a result, communications frequently portray ocean issues as abstract processes, with a passive voice devoid of human actors—people who have agency or an impact on the ocean. In addition, they often fail to elicit a sense of awe or wonder or include emotionally compelling human stories.

Yet, when we sat down with people across the United States who love the ocean, we heard plainspoken recollections of favorite memories, moments of spiritual reflection, jarring experiences with plastic washing up on beaches, and real fears people held about witnessing the ocean change

around them—feelings and experiences all coming from the heart.

“I feel so much more connected to my family when we have time by the beach or spend time in the ocean together,” said Alice (pictured below with her family). “It is really hard as full-time working parents with two kids to often be still and have time to reflect.”

Alice, her husband Kieron, and their children live busy lives in a big coastal city in California, but, like many people across the United States, they love getting away to spend time by the sea. “The wind...it is just the rhythm,” Kieron said with a smile. As part of our research, we asked this family to share their thoughts and experiences related to the ocean. What we heard from them were a set of values, beliefs, and experiences that we have heard



Alice, her husband Kieron, and their children contributed to our research by sharing their thoughts and experiences related to the ocean.

consistently from people interviewed and surveyed as part of this ocean messaging project.

From a sense of connectedness, to a perceived change in the rhythm of life, to feelings of freedom, discovery, and awe, our research found that people have strong, emotional connections to the ocean. In interviews and in focus groups, people didn't speak in abstract terms or use jargon. Our research participants talked about their love for the ocean in deeply personal terms, in ways that sparked passion and enthusiasm in others.

In 2016, with support from the David and Lucile Packard Foundation, Goodwin Simon Strategic Research and Wonder: Strategies for Good embarked on this project to leverage people's passion and enthusiasm on behalf of ocean protection. Working with a group of conservation advocates and organizations, this project sought to better understand people's deep connection to the ocean and how to better use communications to tap into that connection. The project explored the lived experiences of people across the nation and their emotional connections to the ocean. The goal: to encourage a wider audience to care about and take action to protect the ocean.

This research, conducted from 2016 to 2018, has shown that people from diverse racial, ethnic, socio-economic, political, and faith backgrounds don't simply care for the ocean—they are heartwired to love the ocean. For them, being at or near the ocean is a powerful, multi-sensory experience that evokes strong memories of their lived experiences with the ocean and equally strong emotional reactions, including a powerful desire to protect it for future generations. Even among people who have *never* been to the ocean, the vast majority favor strengthening efforts to protect the ocean and the coastal communities who depend on it.

In a country that finds itself deeply divided on many issues, we have before us an invaluable opportunity for conservation advocates to engage.

In this messaging guide, we distill the research findings and insights from this work, provide recommendations for developing heartwired messaging, and suggest ways to put the findings to work in the field—from NGOs growing their fundraising or membership base to strengthening advocacy efforts.



GOALS OF THIS WORK

Strengthening the movement of environmental advocates who work together to advance their respective missions as well as those working on adjacent issues, like nutrition or public health

Developing an understanding of how to effectively communicate with civically engaged people living in the United States about a range of ocean protection issues, including marine resource conservation, fisheries restoration and management, and offshore oil and gas drilling

Mapping mindsets of the types of diverse, civically engaged people living in the United States who are willing to take action to protect the ocean

Developing and testing persuasion messaging strategies that can be shown through qualitative and quantitative research to motivate diverse target audiences to take action to protect the ocean

Field-testing messaging strategies, in partnership with conservation organizations to advance individual, organizational, and movement-wide priorities





Photo credit: Pixelfit

PEOPLE ARE HEARTWIRED TO LOVE THE OCEAN

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE HEARTWIRED?



In 2017, Amy Simon of Goodwin Simon Strategic Research and Robert Pérez of Wonder: Strategies for Good released a strategy guide for change-makers called *Heartwired: Human Behavior, Strategic Opinion Research and the Audacious Pursuit of Social Change*. The guide outlines a new, integrated approach to audience research, storytelling, and persuasion communication. According to Pérez and Simon, when it comes to making emotionally complex decisions, people are heartwired—their emotions, their identity, their values, their beliefs, and their lived experiences combine and also collide to shape how they think about the pressing issues of the day. To understand how they make decisions on an emotionally complex issue, we have to explore these five heartwired factors.

THE FIVE HEARTWIRED FACTORS: A PRIMER ON HOW PEOPLE MAKE EMOTIONALLY COMPLEX DECISIONS

The heartwired research approach investigates these five factors and how they combine, and often collide, to shape people’s attitudes and behaviors. Before you jump into the research insights and recommendations, it may be useful to familiarize yourself with the five heartwired factors—each of which influence people’s thinking and decision-making.

EMOTIONS: The feelings that human beings have in response to the stimuli both within and around us are complex. Our emotions typically drive our behavior and work to prioritize different concerns—especially when we feel threatened and need to make a split-second decision.

LIVED EXPERIENCES: The events and relationships a person experiences in their life combine with the meaning that they assign to those experiences to shape how they think about social issues. The way we interpret and remember events—the narrative we construct around them—is just as important as what actually happened. Exploring and understanding those lived experiences is key to effective messaging strategies.

IDENTITY: Self-identity is how a person sees himself or herself in relation to the world around them. We are all driven to make decisions that align with our sense of self, and when we don’t, we experience uncomfortable cognitive dissonance. While each of us has a single identity, that identity incorporates many facets (e.g., gender, race, faith) and traits (e.g., being hard-working, fair-minded, educated). Internal conflict on social issues is often the result of a moral tug-of-war between different facets of a person’s identity.

VALUES: Values are ideals that individuals hold about what is good or bad, right or wrong, appropriate or inappropriate. Values influence emotional reactions, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors and are often shared broadly within a culture or community. A person’s values help them to make meaning in their lives, and if those values are contradicted, people experience a sense of dissonance and incongruence, which interferes with their capacity to support that issue position.

BELIEFS: Beliefs are ideas that people hold to be true. When we have a lot of experience with something, our beliefs are deeper and more nuanced. When we have little to no experience with something, we tend to fill in the knowledge gaps with (often inaccurate) assumptions. Whether we have deep or scant knowledge, our beliefs are further shaped by our identity, our lived experience, and our values. In other words, facts alone do not shape beliefs.

HEARTWIRED OCEAN MINDSETS

When we looked at the heartwired factors—emotions, values, beliefs, identity, and lived experiences—that shape how people relate to the ocean, six primary mindsets for protecting the ocean emerged.

THE SIX PRIMARY MINDSETS FOR PROTECTING THE OCEAN



The 'All Senses' Mindset



The 'God's Beautiful Creation' Mindset



The 'Amazing Wildlife' Mindset



The 'Laws and Policies' Mindset



The 'Feeling-At-Peace' Mindset



The 'Family Traditions' Mindset

People experience and relate to the ocean in different ways—shaped by both their mindset and their state of mind.

What's the difference? A person's mindset is established over time based on how they are heartwired—their values, their beliefs, their lived experiences, and their identity.

Think for a moment about how you became heartwired to relate to the ocean. Perhaps your early lived experiences near the ocean shaped your love for it. That may have led you to adopt values related to conservation. Eventually, you may have begun to identify as a conservationist. All were established

over time and all combine to make up your mindset.

In contrast, a person's state of mind* is their mood or mental state at a particular time—which is tied to their mindset. This is how you feel when your bare feet touch the sand or how you begin to immediately relax when you hear the sound of the ocean waves or the smell of the ocean. Your body's proximity to the ocean can immediately elicit these sensory experiences because of your mind's ability to recall how you felt in the past.

Once transported into these states of mind, people are more open to persuasion about the importance of protecting the ocean and more motivated to

*Thank you to Wallace J. Nichols, author of *Blue Mind: The Surprising Science that Shows How Being Near, In, On, or Under Water Can Make You Happier, Healthier, More Connected, and Better at What You Do*, for helping us to think about how people experience these states of mind.

take action to do so. Heartwired messaging and storytelling strategies can help flip the “on” switch for these motivational states of mind.

SIX OCEAN MINDSETS

In this section, we describe how each ocean mindset is associated with specific demographic characteristics associated with specific demographic characteristics like race, political ideology, and faith—and people’s willingness to take specific, sometimes different actions to protect the ocean.

Some people think about the ocean in ways that touch on multiple mindsets. For example, some people may view the ocean as God’s beautiful creation, filled with amazing wildlife, and feel that laws and policies are necessary to protect it. Others, however, view the ocean as God’s beautiful creation, a place to feel at peace and to create family traditions. Becoming familiar with these mindsets will help you to determine which may best match your organization’s mission and outreach goals.

People who have one or more of these six pre-existing ocean mindsets are more likely than other survey respondents to: 1) talk about politics or

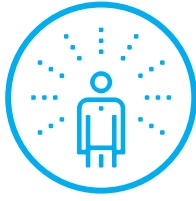
political issues on a regular basis outside of their household; 2) rank protecting the ocean as a high priority; and 3) believe it is possible to solve problems facing the ocean.

Within each mindset below, we list the actions that people with certain mindsets are most likely to take. Note that the top actions we list for each are just that; there are other actions people say they are willing to take as well, albeit to a somewhat lesser degree.

Importantly, any action taken on behalf of ocean protection is an opportunity to help a person nurture an identity as an *ocean protector*. Once that person internalizes that ocean protection facet of their identity, they may be open to taking other actions. Over time, each action would reflect a deeper level of engagement and commitment—from deciding to give up plastic straws, to participating in a beach cleanup, to writing a letter to their member of Congress about legislation to limit single-use plastics. Altogether, we see great opportunities to build a stronger conservation movement that reflects the diverse values, identities, lived experiences, and needs of all people.



Photo credit: Flickr user Matthew Ferrell



The ‘All Senses’ Mindset

Heartwired Motivation: I love feeling the sand between my toes, the sound of the waves, the smell of the salt air, and the sights and tastes of being at the ocean.

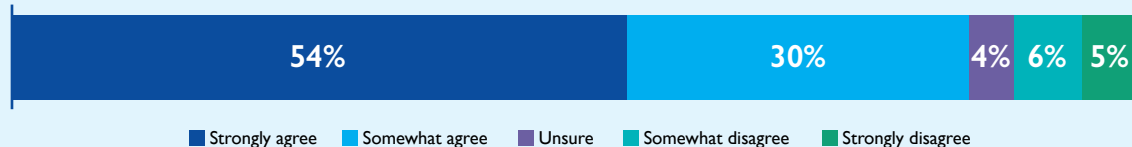
For people with the ‘All Senses’ mindset, being in or near the ocean activates all the senses—their sight, smell, hearing, taste, and touch. The sight of the ocean takes their breath away. The sound of the waves calms them, helping them leave their worries behind. They tug off their shoes to feel their bare feet on the warm (or cool) sand. As they inch closer to the water, they breathe deeply to take in the smells of the ocean air. They may even be drawn to touch their hands to the water to taste the salt against their lips. People with this mindset will be motivated by messaging that vividly activates each of their senses—to remind them how they feel when they are in or near the ocean.

Fifty-four percent strongly agree, and 30 percent somewhat agree, that they, “love feeling the sand between my toes, the sound of the waves, the smell of the salt air, and the sights and tastes of being at the ocean.” In total then, 84 percent of survey respondents possess this type of all-sensory experience with the ocean. That’s a huge proportion of people.

HEARTWIRED MOTIVATION: **MULTI-SENSORY EXPERIENCES**

Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with each of the following statements.*

“I love feeling the sand between my toes, the sound of the waves, the smell of the salt air, and the sights and tastes of being at the ocean.”



Among 3,603 survey respondents across the nation who have previously been to the ocean.

We tested various statements related to people’s heartwired values, beliefs, and lived experiences. This was the strongest statement that we tested among those who had previously visited the ocean. Incorporating this type of multi-sensory language into your messages and stories can help flip the “on” switch for the motivational state of mind for those with the ‘All-Senses’ mindset.

*In a large [national survey](#), we asked people across the United States who had been to the ocean whether they agreed with certain statements describing how they relate to the ocean. Please note that due to rounding, totals may equal a few points more or less than one hundred.



Photo credit: Digitalskillet

Compared to other survey respondents, people with an ‘All Senses’ mindset are more likely than average to be women, including women who are Black, Latina/Hispanic, Native American, and white. Many respondents with this mindset have been to the ocean 11 or more times in their lives—a frequency likely connected to their sensory affinity with the ocean. People with this mindset are more likely than average to have donated to an ocean conservation organization, as well as to a land and water conservation organization. They also indicate that they are willing to take a variety of actions to protect the ocean. Some of their most frequently cited actions include: buying sustainable seafood, educating themselves about ocean and marine life, and signing a petition to support ocean protection efforts.



QUOTES FROM RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

“The sounds of the waves are calming to me.”

“I love riding the waves, listening to the waves, walking on the sandy beach, looking for sea life—whales, dolphins, eating seafood, reading, watching sunsets, and sunrises.”

“I love to hear waves and smell salt water.”

“To feel the breeze and see the waves going back and forth. And feel the sand and see the people enjoying themselves.”



ALL SENSES

To activate a motivational state of mind, use vivid, multi-sensory descriptions of the ocean in your talking points, tell stories of people and families at the beach or playing in the ocean, and use photography and video to capture the sights and sounds of the ocean.



The ‘God’s Beautiful Creation’ Mindset

Heartwired Motivation: I feel the ocean is God’s beautiful creation.

People with the ‘God’s Beautiful Creation’ mindset experience the ocean through the lens of their faith and their relationship to God. They are heartwired to see the ocean as part of God’s beautiful creation. They are a very large segment of our survey respondents. Fifty-two percent strongly agree with the statement that *“I feel the ocean is God’s beautiful creation”* with another 22 agreeing somewhat. That’s 74 percent of respondents agreeing with this value statement. This mindset represents a vitally important opportunity for conservation advocates to do a better job in reflecting the diversity of the nation in terms of faith, politics, ethnicity, and race.

People with this mindset will respond positively to messaging that is framed around faith. They are more likely than average to be women than men—especially women who are 40 and older.



QUOTES FROM RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

“The ocean is a wonderful place to connect with God.”

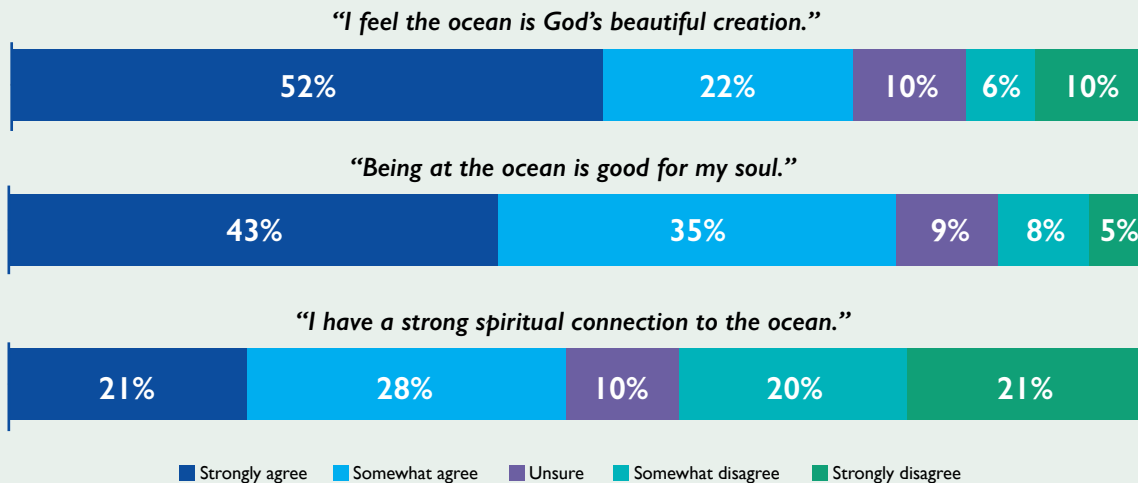
“I like to visit the ocean to see God’s handiwork!”

“It’s beautiful. Powerful. God’s creation.”



COMPARE & CONTRAST: ‘FAITH’ AS A VALUE

Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with each of the following statements.



Among 3,603 survey respondents across the nation who have previously been to the ocean.

To activate this motivational state of mind, consider featuring messengers of faith who talk about the importance of protecting God’s creation—one of the strongest heartwired statements we tested. In addition, a plurality strongly agrees that “being at the ocean is good for my soul.” Finally, note that fewer people agree with the statement that focuses on “spirituality,” in contrast to more direct associations with “God” and “soul.”

The ‘God’s Beautiful Creation’ mindset is more likely than average to include politically conservative people in the U.S., including Republicans.

To be clear, it’s not simply more conservative people who have this mindset. People with this mindset include Democrats and other party voters as well—including many people of color. Some of the most prominent subgroups who hold this ocean mindset include Black women (and to a somewhat lesser extent Black men) and women who identify as Latina, Hispanic, or Native American. Christians who identify as Protestant or Evangelical Christian are also more likely than average to be part of this mindset.

People with the ‘God’s Beautiful Creation’ mindset express a strong willingness to donate to nonprofit organizations working to protect the ocean, to go to restaurants and grocery stores that offer sustainable seafood, and to consider an eco-friendly option for an ocean cruise.

You may ask, “Well, how do we implement this type of messaging? Does it mean that our executive director needs to start evoking faith in her messaging?” Not necessarily. It simply means that organizations may want to diversify their messengers to include people who can genuinely frame their support for ocean conservation efforts as an act of faith.



GOD’S BEAUTIFUL CREATION

To activate a motivational state of mind, consider featuring members of your organization or community stakeholders who feel comfortable talking about faith in relationship to ocean protection, or sharing narratives from people who are motivated by their faith to undertake ocean conservation work.

HEARTWIRED MESSAGING IN PRACTICE: FEATURING PEOPLE OF FAITH

Below is a messaging example that would activate people with the “God’s Beautiful Creation” mindset. To understand how messengers and messages work together, we tested a video interview featuring Kate, who lives near the Chesapeake Bay in Virginia. Her identity as a Christian and her belief in protecting God’s creation resonated strongly with other Christians who share her heartwired values and beliefs.



Photo credit: Airman 1st Class Anthony Nin Leclerc

“I’m Kate. I live off the Lynnhaven River which feeds into the Chesapeake Bay and then the ocean. As a Christian, I feel there’s something special about being in nature, God’s creation, that’s awe-inspiring. Sometimes life just goes by us, but then you sit at the beach and realize, ‘Wow, that’s pretty amazing!’

Like other local people, our family made our livelihood from fish. We ran a seafood restaurant. Growing up, my first job was there—learning to crack crabs. Our specials were always local seafood, because we knew who caught it. We knew it wasn’t overfished. The oysters were also a big source of this area’s livelihood, but they started to die off some years ago. Then, a lot of people around here, along with the Chesapeake Bay Foundation, developed new oyster beds to help oysters come back. We’re really excited to have that part of the economy come back. And because oysters clean our water, our water is getting healthier. We don’t want to end up at a point where we can’t play in the water and we can’t do the things that we love at the beach.

For me, my memories of the beach and the ocean and the bay are family, fun, well-being, work, and God’s beautiful creation—all wrapped up into one. I realize now as an adult how lucky I was to grow up here.”



The ‘Amazing Wildlife’ Mindset

Heartwired Motivation: The ocean is filled with the most amazing wildlife on earth.

Those with the ‘Amazing Wildlife’ mindset feel a deep sense of emotional connection to ocean wildlife. From creatures that are cuddly to curious, people with this mindset experience awe and fascination toward the animals that fly above or swim below the ocean surface. They recognize and appreciate the ocean as a place uniquely suited for the wet and wonderful wildlife of the planet.

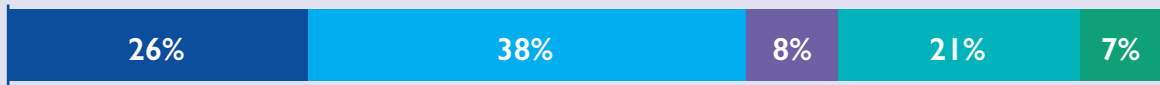
COMPARE & CONTRAST: ‘WONDER’ AS A VALUE

Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with each of the following statements.

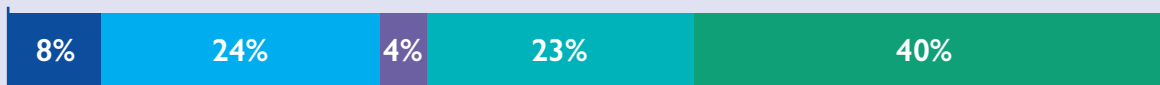
“The ocean is filled with the most amazing wildlife on earth.”



“There is nothing on earth more awesome than the ocean.”



“The ocean scares me.”



“The ocean is no more special than other beautiful places such as mountains, rivers, or lakes.”



■ Strongly agree ■ Somewhat agree ■ Unsure ■ Somewhat disagree ■ Strongly disagree

Among 3,603 survey respondents across the nation who have previously been to the ocean.

The ‘Amazing Wildlife’ mindset includes a more even split between men and women as well as people of different races and ethnicities. People with this mindset are motivated by stories, messages, and images featuring the ocean’s amazing wildlife.



Photo credit: Vidar Nordli-Mathisen



QUOTES FROM RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

“The ocean is an amazing part of the earth that has not been fully explored and provides us with a lot of the things we take for granted in our daily lives, such as a sustainable food source.”

“The ocean has so many amazing features and marine life that I love to see/experience.”

“The ocean is beautiful and mysterious. There is so much we’ve learned but much more to be learned...”



In our survey, 88 percent of respondents agree with the statement that “the ocean is filled with the most amazing wildlife on earth”—with 50 percent strongly agreeing with the statement and 38 percent somewhat agreeing. Those with this mindset will respond positively to messages that talk about the importance of protecting ocean wildlife.

While many of the six mindsets described in this section are more likely than average to tilt toward women, those with this mindset are split more evenly among female and male survey respondents. This mindset is especially present in those who identify as Asian/Pacific Islander, Black, Latino, Hispanic, Native American, and white.

Those who are captivated by the ocean’s amazing wildlife are more likely than average to have donated to an ocean conservation organization, as well as a land and water conservation organization. They are more likely to take a range of actions to protect the ocean, with the most prominent being: educating themselves about ocean and marine life, contacting Congress or another elected official to let them know they support ocean protection efforts, and signing a petition to support ocean protection efforts.



AMAZING WILDLIFE

To activate a motivational state of mind, use images and videos of wildlife in your messaging, as well as real-world experiences of people interacting with wildlife. Call-to-action messaging that spotlights the need to protect ocean wildlife will also deeply resonate.



The ‘Laws and Policies’ Mindset

Heartwired Motivation: The laws and policies we pass can help protect the ocean for future generations.

Those with the ‘Laws and Policies’ mindset are motivated by a strong heartwired belief in the power of laws to protect the ocean for future generations. In contrast to those who believe we could protect the ocean through personal actions or voluntary behavior—and who may even bristle at the idea of passing or enforcing a law—those with this mindset believe that laws and policies are necessary to protect the ocean.

The good news is that 82 percent of respondents agree that *“the laws and policies we pass can help protect the ocean for future generations.”* Forty-seven percent strongly agree with this statement with another 35 percent agreeing with it somewhat.

Like the ‘Amazing Wildlife’ mindset, those with the ‘Laws and Policies’ mindset are more evenly split between female and male survey respondents, with a slight skew toward women, including respondents who identify as Asian/Pacific Islander, Black, Latino, Hispanic, Native American, and white. Democrats and those who identify as liberal and progressive are among those who are more likely than average to have this mindset. People with this mindset are also more likely than average to be college graduates.

They are far more likely than the average person to have given to an ocean conservation organization, as well as a land and water conservation organization.

As one might expect, their most preferred ocean protection actions fall within the political and advocacy realms, including signing a petition, contacting Congress or another elected official, and donating to a non-profit organization focused on efforts to protect the ocean.



LAW AND POLICIES

To activate a motivational state of mind, your messaging should spotlight your organizational or programmatic efforts to advance laws and policies to protect the ocean. It’s particularly helpful to demonstrate the efficacy and success of existing laws (for those that are under attack) or to paint a vivid picture of the future if a proposed law or policy were to be passed.



QUOTES FROM RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

“Mankind is disrespecting the laws and rules about pollution.”

“We need more international laws and regulations in place.”



Photo credit: Satoru Ng

“The biggest problem facing the ocean are policies toward environmental genocide that favor big business and corporations.”



COMPARE & CONTRAST: ‘COLLECTIVE ACTION’ AS A BELIEF

Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with each of the following statements.

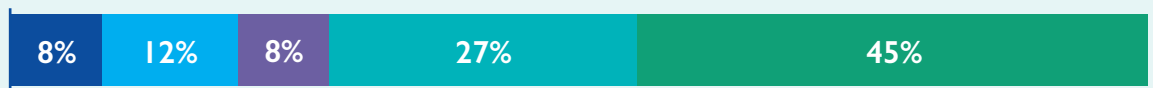
“The laws and policies we pass can help protect the ocean for future generations.”



“Conservation and environmental organizations make a real difference in protecting the ocean.”



“Even if people were to work together to help the ocean, it wouldn’t make much of a difference.”



■ Strongly agree ■ Somewhat agree ■ Unsure ■ Somewhat disagree ■ Strongly disagree

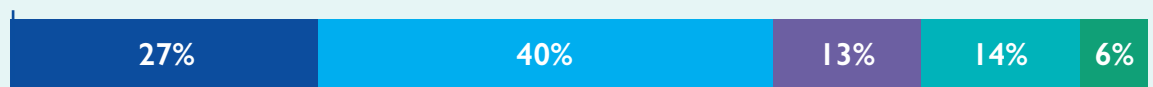
Among 3,603 survey respondents across the nation who have previously been to the ocean.

Compare the first two statements above with the third statement. There is a significant plurality of people who believe that passing laws and policies can make a difference. The key is to spotlight concrete examples while at the same time transporting them to a state of mind that reminds them of why they love they ocean.

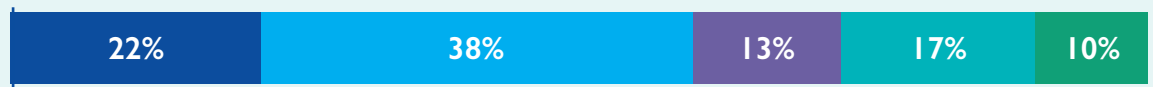
COMPARE & CONTRAST: ‘INDIVIDUAL ACTION’ AS A BELIEF

Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with each of the following statements.

“There are things I can do in my daily life to help conserve the ocean.”



“I feel like I can encourage others to care about the ocean.”



“There is nothing I can personally do to help the ocean.”



■ Strongly agree ■ Somewhat agree ■ Unsure ■ Somewhat disagree ■ Strongly disagree

Among 3,603 survey respondents across the nation who have previously been to the ocean.

Contrast responses to the efficacy of individual action against the response to those above about collective action. People believe far more in the efficacy of collective action than individual action. Still, it’s heartening to note that people reject the idea that there is nothing that individuals can do to protect the ocean.



The ‘Feeling-At-Peace’ Mindset

Heartwired Motivation: When I’m at the ocean, I feel at peace.

QUOTES FROM RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

“The ocean is a very peaceful place to get your thoughts together.”

“I enjoy the water and the peaceful experience of watching the waves come and go on and on.”

“I visit the ocean to have some calm; to break away from the normal daily routine and relax.”

Those with the ‘Feeling-At-Peace’ mindset are motivated by having experienced still and serene moments while at the ocean. Those with this mindset have retained powerful emotional memories where they associate being near or in the ocean with feeling at peace with the world. The ocean is their emotional nirvana. For many, it is the equivalent of a deeply religious or spiritual experience, which is reflected in high levels of agreement among Evangelical Christians.

Eighty-two percent of survey respondents agree that “*when I’m at the ocean, I feel at peace*”—with 46 percent saying they strongly agree and another 36 percent agreeing somewhat.

Like all other mindsets described here, those with the ‘Feeling-At-Peace’ mindset have been to the ocean more than 11 times in their lifetime. They are unique in that they are more likely than those with the other mindsets to say they return to the ocean about once a month.

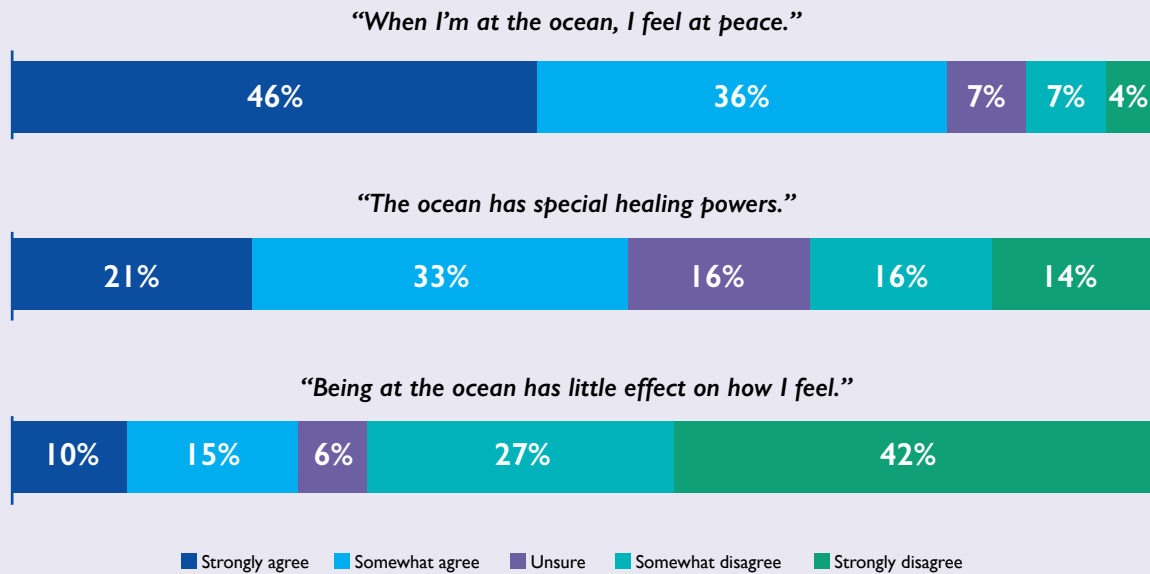
Those with this mindset are more likely than average to include women, especially women who are between the ages of 40 and 54. This also includes women of all political stripes and ethnicities, especially women who are Black, Hispanic, Latina, Native American, or white.



Photo credit: Recep-bg

COMPARE & CONTRAST: ‘WELLNESS’ AS A VALUE

Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with each of the following statements.



Among 3,603 survey respondents across the nation who have previously been to the ocean.

Contrast the significant difference between people who feel at peace while at the ocean versus those who believe that the ocean has special healing powers. Messages that communicate about “feeling at peace” appeal to more people—including a mix of moderate to conservative people, like Evangelical Christians.

Demonstrating the power that emotional experiences have on our behavior, those with this mindset have the strongest history of all six mindsets of donating to an ocean protection organization. In addition, they are more likely than average to educate themselves about the ocean and marine life, sign a petition to support ocean protection efforts, and to contact Congress or another elected official to let them know they support an ocean protection effort.



FEELING-AT-PEACE

To activate a motivational state of mind, your messaging and messengers should communicate about this powerful shared lived experience—that the ocean is one of the most special places on the planet to experience peace. Your messengers could share their experiences of feeling serenity at or near the ocean. You could also use photography and video to elicit this emotional experience by reminding those with this mindset how they feel when they are in or near the ocean.



The ‘Family Traditions’ Mindset

Heartwired Motivation: I have fond memories of spending time with my family at the ocean.

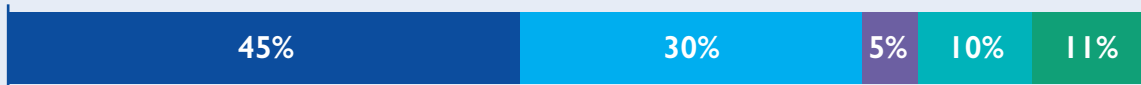
For those with the ‘Family Traditions’ mindset, the ocean isn’t just a place—it’s an emotional experience that is uniquely suited for family time and to forge lasting family traditions. We heard from those with

this mindset that the ocean allows members of their family, who are otherwise tethered to gadgets, to disconnect from over-wired modern life.

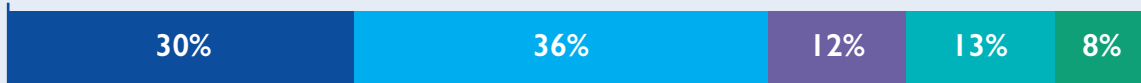
COMPARE & CONTRAST: ‘FAMILY’ AS A VALUE

Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with each of the following statements.

“I have fond memories of spending time with my family at the ocean.”



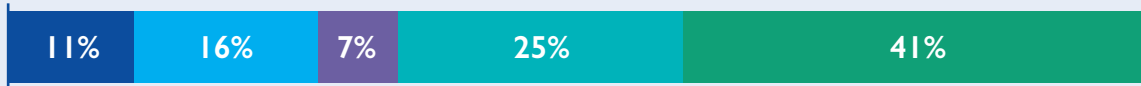
“The ocean is a special place to share important life lessons with family.”



“Being at the ocean is an important tradition in my family.”



“The ocean has no special meaning in my family.”



■ Strongly agree ■ Somewhat agree ■ Unsure ■ Somewhat disagree ■ Strongly disagree

Among 3,603 survey respondents across the nation who have previously been to the ocean.

Contrast the different statements we tested. To reach people who are more moderate to conservative, consider messages that remind people of their family traditions at the ocean as a reason to protect it.



QUOTES FROM RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

“I remember times of going with my family and want to go back to visit with my husband.”

“The ocean is a place for family vacation and fun.”



“We need to keep the ocean clean and safe for all the wildlife there now and in the future generations so they will have it to swim, fish, play on the beaches, and create memories.”

“We need to protect the ocean so that my future grandchildren have the opportunity to create memories and enjoy the beach like I did.”



The ocean seems to have something for every member of the family—from a chance to escape the grind of everyday family and work life to infinite recreational opportunities for those of different ages, skillsets, and adventure thresholds. The ocean also provides opportunities to transmit important family values and traditions from one generation to another. Many parents vividly remember the first time they brought their young child’s feet up to the ocean’s edge. Some families have spent multiple generations working on the ocean.

Seventy-five percent of respondents say they “*have fond memories of spending time with my family at the ocean,*”—with 45 percent saying they strongly agree with that statement and another 30 percent agreeing somewhat. Family time in or near the ocean is such a powerful emotional and lived experience for those with this mindset, they report having been to the ocean more so in the past and are more likely to return to it at least once a month.

Compared to survey respondents generally, those with this mindset skew toward women, especially those ages 40 to 54. While those with this mindset tilt somewhat toward those who identify as liberal, it also includes Republicans (especially Republican women), as well as conservatives and those who identify as “Trump supporters.” Included in this mindset are women who identify as Asian/Pacific Islander, Black, Latina, Hispanic, Native American, and white, as well as Protestants and Evangelical Christians. Survey respondents with this mindset report a strong history of donating to an ocean protection organization and to land and water conservation organizations.

Looking to the future, respondents with this mindset are more likely than average to say they are willing to take the following actions to protect the ocean: sign a petition to support ocean protection efforts, participate in a local beach clean-up, and contact Congress or another elected official to let them know they support ocean protection efforts.



FAMILY TRADITIONS

To activate a motivational state of mind, it’s important to feature messaging, messengers, and images of families bonding near or in the ocean. They should communicate about what the ocean uniquely allows them to do, or protect, as a family, including transmitting family values through the generations.

OVERVIEW

OF THE LANDSCAPE AND RESEARCH-BASED RECOMMENDATIONS

Below is a top-level overview of what we found when auditing the landscape of current advocacy communications along with our research-based recommendations. In the sections that follow, we'll go into greater depth about both the findings and the recommendations.

LANDSCAPE

When analyzing current advocacy communications about ocean issues, we found that:

- Humanity is often missing—especially the lived experiences and images of people of color
- Stories of people and how their values, beliefs, and identity are tied to the ocean are often absent
- A sense of urgency is often lacking
- Problems are overemphasized with little on solutions or a vision for the ocean
- Small successes are rarely celebrated
- Awe and inspiration are underutilized
- Messages emphasize data, facts, and complexity—they can suffer from the [‘Curse of Knowledge’](#)
- People’s multi-sensory, lived experiences with the ocean are not adequately leveraged
- Emotional connections and family traditions involving the ocean are lost opportunities
- Broad cross-sections of ocean lovers beyond current donors and members of ocean advocacy organizations are not being reached

RECOMMENDATIONS

Make Issues Human and Accessible

- Show how problems are being caused by people, not abstract processes
- Weave in more people from diverse backgrounds—race, ethnicity, gender, age, faith, geography, politics—in images and as messengers
- Think globally, message locally

Tap into Emotions, Values, Beliefs, Identity, and Lived Experiences

- Leverage people’s belief that the ocean and beach are deeply connected

- Harness people’s strong spiritual and religious connections to the ocean
- Show people’s emotional connections to the ocean—especially more awe or wonder

Show, Don’t Tell

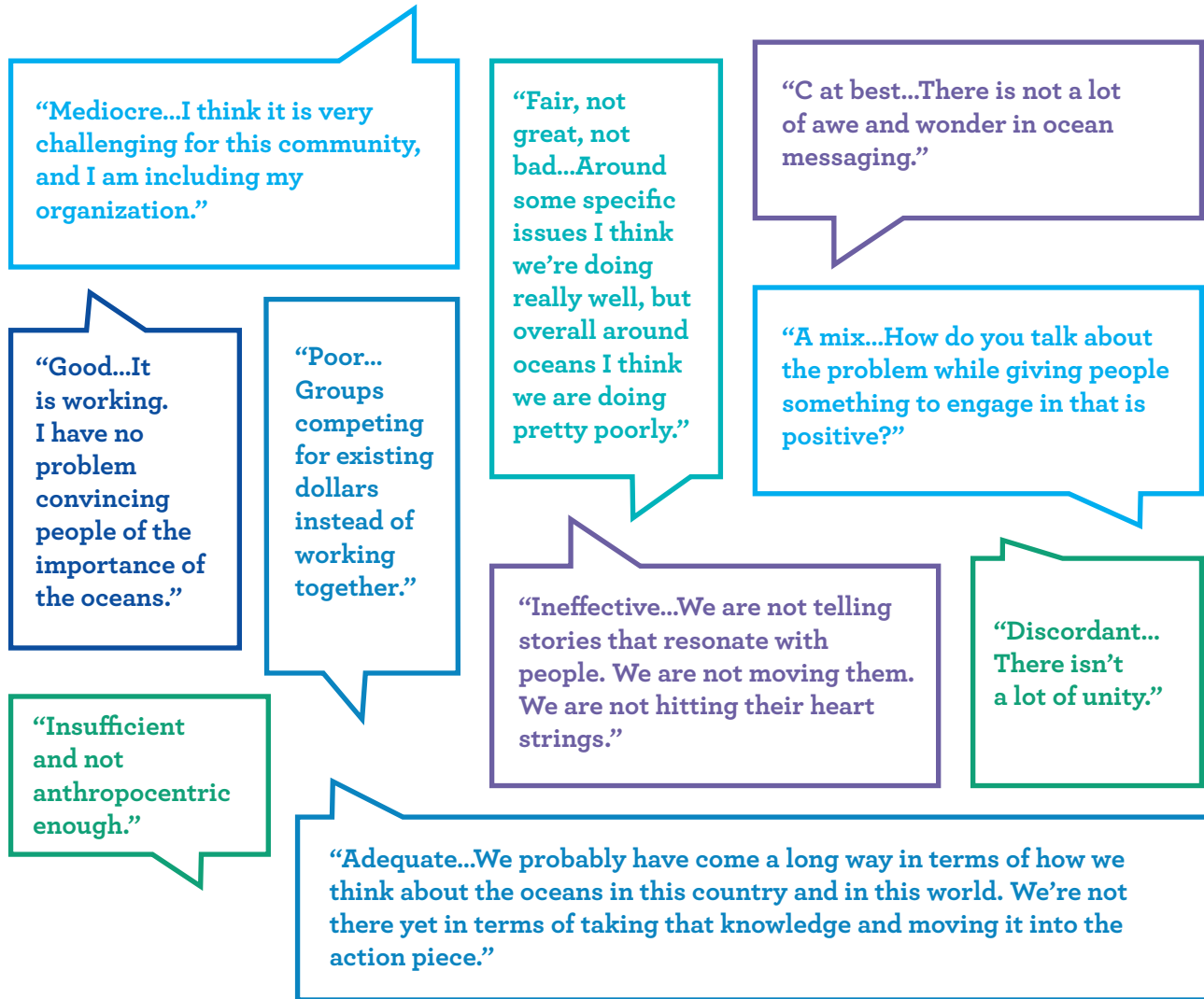
- Use storytelling that showcases people and how their values, beliefs, and identity are tied to the ocean
- Use multi-sensory language to transport people
- Create an aspirational vision for the ocean by putting solutions front and center
- Stress a sense of urgency, but also provide clear examples of how audiences can help
- Highlight a variety of solutions, including innovative approaches
- Consider a “Redemption” frame



Photo credit: Mark A. Johnson

LANDSCAPE

When we first began this research project, we conducted in-depth interviews where we asked 10 conservation advocates to talk about the state of current ocean conservation communications. The quotes below summarize their observations:



From “good” to “mediocre” to “ineffective” to “discordant,” how advocates perceived the state of ocean communications differed greatly. However, a consensus view emerged from these interviews that could be summarized as: “we have to do better.” As one advocate said,

“We are not hitting their heart strings.”

Indeed, during those interviews we heard conservation advocates talk about their work—the opportunities and challenges facing the ocean—in

fairly abstract and technical terms. When we then asked them why they themselves had become an ocean conservation advocate, we noticed something very interesting. Their tone shifted. Gone were the abstract concepts and jargon. They told personal stories of early childhood experiences near the ocean. They talked about family memories. They talked about falling in love with the ocean.

The recommendations in this guide are about infusing that spirit into the way that conservation organizations communicate about protecting the ocean.

RECOMMENDATION: MAKE ISSUES HUMAN AND ACCESSIBLE

You click on the pilot series of a new sci-fi TV show. The camera closes in on the scene. First you see an empty town and lifeless streets—not a human in sight. Where have all the humans gone? A dramatic beginning to a new series. But imagine if the humans never showed up for the rest of the show—or for the entire series. Not a single person. That sums up a challenge facing a significant portion of the communications coming from ocean advocates.

Early in our research, we conducted an audit of the public-facing materials and messaging on the websites of ten prominent ocean-focused organizations. One of the most striking takeaways: humanity was often missing. In fact, only about one in 10 messages included a human actor (11 percent). Of those messages that did include human actors, nearly a quarter were mentions of fishermen/fishers (23 percent), and others were either simple mentions of “we” or “you” (17 percent) or included a broad set of categories such as “consumers,” “decision-makers,” and “citizens.” In addition, few messages included the specific places people live and love, instead focusing on the general, like the “beach” or “ocean.”

As our research progressed, we found that the lack of humans and the places they love in messages were lost opportunities to tap people’s identities, traditions, and emotional connections to the ocean. Furthermore, by not showing humans as actors that create the problems, it was preventing our audiences from seeing people as a part of the solution. For example, if we say the ocean is suffering, but we don’t say who or what is causing this suffering, then it’s hard for audiences to connect the dots that human actions are causing problems and that therefore human actions are required to help solve them.

These lost opportunities to create connections with audiences became even clearer after our online nationwide surveys and in-person focus group testing. That research showed that people across the country from diverse racial, ethnic, socio-economic, political, and faith backgrounds deeply love the ocean and are willing to take action to



POWERFUL PICTURES



Images like this grandfather walking with his grandson to their favorite ocean fishing spot communicate the transmission of values and important life lessons. This is an especially effective image to reach those with the “Family Traditions” mindset.

protect it. However, current ocean communications often fell flat with these audiences.

Our findings demonstrate there is an immense opportunity to connect with more audiences by including human actors or agents (i.e., people taking action) and broadening the conversation around ocean and climate issues to include more diverse voices. Below are a set of recommendations on how you may develop or revise your messaging to do this.

SHOW HOW PROBLEMS ARE BEING CAUSED BY PEOPLE, NOT ABSTRACT PROCESSES

“Fisheries are collapsing because of overfishing.” If you are engaged in ocean work, this is likely something you have heard or maybe even said. As an ocean advocate, you know what the sentence means—you understand the many layers of science, policies, actions, and efforts underway, all folded into those six words.

However, it’s important to recognize: you are not most people. And you are definitely not typical of your target audiences. The knowledge you hold is critical for the work you do, but it can also be a curse when it comes to communicating about it.

Consider these messages that we came across while reviewing conservation websites:

“Fisheries are collapsing because of overfishing and ocean acidification.”

“...for 40 years, the use of pelagic longlines, an indiscriminate fishing gear, has been off-limits in ocean waters off California, Oregon and Washington.”

“This is a perfect time and place to implement managed retreat, the only real long-term solution.”

While perfectly clear to advocates, your average lover of the ocean—who is willing to take action to protect the ocean—would be unable to decipher these messages.

We found that for communication to be effective, it is critical to avoid overemphasizing data, facts, and complexity. There are major gaps in people’s knowledge about ocean issues, which interferes with people’s reasoning chains—the way in which associations and connections lead people to develop premises and assumptions that then lead them to a particular conclusion. When people lack the information they need, they are forced to connect the dots themselves, often making flawed leaps of logic, in order to complete a faulty reasoning chain and reach a conclusion. We need to understand these gaps and help our audiences connect the dots.

Developing stories that include human actors whom our audiences know or can connect with is a big step in the right direction. For example, rather than saying, “Fisheries are collapsing because of overfishing,” consider the statement: “Corporate lobbyists are trying to change the law and kill the very protections that have brought our country’s vital fishing grounds back to health.”

What does this evoke and how is it different? First, it provides a much clearer picture of *who* is causing the problem (in this case, “corporate lobbyists”), *how* they are causing the problem (“trying to change the law”), and *what* the outcome will be if they are successful (“kill the very protections that have brought our country’s vital fishing grounds back to health”). Now, if you ask someone to take an action, that person has a clearer picture in their mind of what they are trying to do and why.

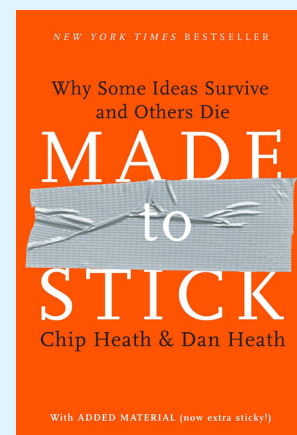
IMPORTANT CONCEPTS TO KNOW: THE CURSE OF KNOWLEDGE

In their book, *Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Stick and Others Die*, authors Chip and Dan Heath introduce a concept that is very relevant to our work: “The Curse of Knowledge.”

“Lots of research in economics and psychology shows that when we know something, it becomes hard for us to imagine not knowing it. As a result, we become lousy communicators. Think of a lawyer who can’t give you a straight, comprehensible answer to a legal question. His vast knowledge and experience render unable him to fathom how little you know. So, when he talks to you, he talks in abstractions that you can’t follow. And we’re all like the lawyer in our own domain of expertise.

Here’s the great cruelty of the Curse of Knowledge: The better we get at generating great ideas—new insights and novel solutions—in our field of expertise, the more unnatural it becomes for us to communicate those ideas clearly. That’s why knowledge is a curse.”

In order to make progress—to connect with, engage, and move our audiences to take action on ocean issues—it is critical to recognize when we are suffering from The Curse of Knowledge.



WEAVE IN MORE PEOPLE FROM DIVERSE BACKGROUNDS—RACE, ETHNICITY, GENDER, AGE, FAITH, GEOGRAPHY, POLITICS—IN IMAGES AND AS MESSENGERS

This research has confirmed the old communications maxim that the messenger is as important as the message. People judge messages based on whether it aligns with their values, beliefs, lived experiences, and their identity—and whether they can relate to or trust the messenger delivering the message.

As you work to increase the number of people who appear in stories about your work or issues, be sure that they represent the full diversity of those who care about the ocean and your work. This includes featuring people from different parts of the country who come from different racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, political, and faith backgrounds. It is human nature to trust and relate to people with whom you share something in common. For that reason, it's also important to have messengers talk about the values, beliefs, and lived experiences that ground their deep connection to the ocean and the coasts—like the chance to be connected to family, to rely on the ocean as a source of food, and to protect their coastal communities and homes. Doing so facilitates affinity for messengers.

Your messengers should also reflect different identities, ages, occupations, and types of expertise. Our audiences related to and trusted a wide variety of different messengers. We tested messengers including parents, children, a marine biologist, a devout Christian, a coast guard officer, a World War II veteran, a commercial fisherman, a chef at a seafood

restaurant, an innkeeper, a former oil rig worker, a small-town mayor, people of color, Republicans and Democrats, and many others. They were all relatable and trustworthy for different reasons, and for different kinds of audiences. Audiences appreciated and trusted the different insights and expertise provided by these messengers—perspectives that our audiences often lacked or hadn't had the opportunity to reflect on before.

Some messengers are able to bring the challenges facing the ocean closer to home—like the chef at a seafood restaurant who couldn't serve people's favorite seafood because of overfishing, or an innkeeper who almost had to shutter her business because of the negative impact on tourism from the Deepwater Horizon oil spill. Other messengers—like Christians, people from varying political parties, people of color, or parents—allow people to see and hear from people who are like them.

Also, consider using unexpected messengers that can help to reinforce the point you're making or actions you're asking people to take. For example, if you're looking for someone to talk about current laws that protect special marine places, consider a messenger such as a U.S. Coast Guard officer that patrols ocean sanctuaries instead of someone from an environmental organization. If you're telling the story of the dangers of offshore drilling, perhaps feature a story of a former oil rig worker talking about her journey from being a supporter of offshore drilling to becoming an opponent. These messengers can help to transmit the same kinds of messages that your organization wants to communicate, while at the same time serving as trusted third-party validators for your organization.



Photo credit: KirsanovV

Your messengers should also reflect different identities, ages, occupations, and types of expertise.



Photo credit: Flickr user Petty Officer 1st Class Tasha Tully

THINK GLOBALLY, MESSAGE LOCALLY

The old conservation adage—*think globally, act locally*—applies to messaging too. Global issues like climate change and ocean protection can overwhelm our audiences into inaction. First, the issue may seem too abstract to wrap their head around. Second, a person’s sense of agency and power may feel inconsequential in contrast to the global nature of the challenges facing the ocean. Local examples are one important antidote to both.



“After the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, I could see thick black sludge on the beach and smell the burning for months.”

“All my guests left town so I decided to help. I used the Inn’s kitchen to make meals for the fishing families who were going hungry and the people coming to clean up the beach. There were a few families who lost their homes — they’re staying with me now until they get back on their feet. In Apalachicola, we rely on our beaches. It breaks my heart to see the vacancy signs, the fishing boats covered in oil and the dead sea life. It was almost the end of my little inn.”

—Elsa Harrington, owner of The Harrington Inn, Apalachicola

**Protect coastal communities.
Call Congress.**



SaveCoastalJobs.org
(for test purposes only)

Local examples help make the issue more relatable to our audiences. By spotlighting local successes, we have the opportunity to model the type of actions that people can take at the local level that have the ability to make a collective impact. Below is one effective example developed and tested in our research, which is inspired by [a real account featured by Oceana](#):



People often forget that it was thanks to small towns across the U.S. that the offshore drilling ban came to be. For example, Kure Beach in North Carolina helped launch the successful movement against offshore drilling that is now protecting 96% of our oceans. What started with just 300 people attending a Kure Beach town meeting hosted by now Mayor Emile Swearingen is now being supported by more than 130 municipalities, six governors (both Republican and Democrat), 42,000 businesses, and 500,000 fishing families—all united in opposition to offshore drilling.

Huge oil companies are spending billions on corporate lobbyists to buy influence in Washington—that’s what this proposal is about. For us, the fight is just getting started. “Those of us who live here didn’t see this coming at all,” Kure Beach’s Mayor Emilie Swearingen said. “Citizens must let their members of Congress know that they oppose offshore drilling—the same way Kure Beach residents did. The only people in this country who can stop the president is our Congress,” she said. “We need to let the people in D.C. know that the average citizen doesn’t want this—especially people like us in coastal communities where our very livelihoods depend on keeping our oceans beautiful and healthy.”



This icon appears throughout the guide on content that we tested in surveys and in focus groups as part of our research. Unless otherwise noted, tested content featured fictitious characters that were inspired by real people and events.

RECOMMENDATION: TAP INTO EMOTIONS, VALUES, BELIEFS, IDENTITY, AND LIVED EXPERIENCES

As human beings, we love to think of ourselves as the rational animals on the planet—that our evolved brains learned to make decisions based entirely on facts and information. Yet, as we discussed earlier, human decision-making is influenced by how people are heartwired—how people’s emotions, values, beliefs, lived experiences, and identity combine to shape attitudes and behaviors.

For example, think about choosing your next vacation destination. Your mind begins to consciously or subconsciously consider how you want to feel during that vacation. You may want to sit on a beach with a cocktail if disconnecting from the daily grind of work feels particularly important. At the same time, you identify as a conservationist and deeply value efforts to protect endangered wildlife, so you want to find a beach where you can help in some way, maybe with sea turtles during nesting season.

This is an example of your emotions (how you are feeling now and how you want to feel in the future), combining with your lived experiences (your daily grind at work and home), your identity (as a conservationist), and values (your appreciation for conservation efforts) to drive your decision-making.

Facts and data, of course, also factor into your decision-making. Can you afford the vacation that your emotions are pulling you toward? Is the turtle

nesting season during your kids’ school vacation? How long will it take you to get there compared to how much vacation time you have?

What we’ve seen in this research and other work that we’ve done is that there is usually a sequence to when our mind is ready to absorb the facts. Humans normally begin with heartwired sorting—consciously and subconsciously sifting through data based on their emotions, values, beliefs, identity, and lived experiences. Then they apply a rational filter to their considerations. Then the emotions work their way back in to check on the “rational” decisions being made. The emotional reactions may drive you to reconsider your reasoning. Conservation communication efforts need to reflect the same sequencing to match how our mind naturally moves toward a decision.

When we tested messages and stories that were heartwired—tapping into people’s emotions, identity, beliefs, values, and lived experiences—people not only felt more connected and engaged (no matter the issue being discussed), they demonstrated that they were more likely to take action. They were also more likely to believe and remember the few important facts that we did share with them.

Here are suggestions on how you can develop or revise your messaging to tap into your audiences’ emotions and beliefs:



POWERFUL PICTURES



Families playing on the beach make protecting the ocean relatable to a broad cross section of people in the United States—especially those with the “Family Traditions” mindset.



POWERFUL PICTURES

Featuring extraordinary ocean wildlife, including people's emotional reactions to the wildlife, can be especially effective at motivating audiences—especially those with the “Amazing Wildlife” mindset.



LEVERAGE PEOPLE'S BELIEF THAT THE OCEAN AND BEACH ARE DEEPLY CONNECTED

People participating in our research saw the beach as a gateway to the ocean, and the beach and the ocean as being in a reciprocal relationship with one another. For example, you can be relaxed and at peace at the beach, but you would not have that without the ocean. So, if there are toxins or pollution threatening the ocean, it then effects their enjoyment of the beach. As reciprocal partners, people also saw the beach as a barometer for ocean health, and vice-versa. When a beach is covered in plastic or dead fish wash up on shore, it's a warning sign that something is very wrong beneath the surface.

Though many of the marine-related issues that organizations focus on are things occurring offshore—sometimes a long, long way offshore—you can still engage people on those issues by leveraging their belief that the ocean and beach are deeply connected, and by tapping into their lived experiences by the beach or on the water.

HARNESS PEOPLE'S STRONG SPIRITUAL AND RELIGIOUS CONNECTIONS TO THE OCEAN

It can be easy to forget that the United States is a very religious country—especially if you're an advocate who lives in a progressive, urban community. According to the Pew Research Center,

77 percent of adults living in the United States say religion is important in their lives, with a majority (53 percent) saying religion is *very* important to them. As such, it should not be surprising that many of our research participants responded very positively when we tested language evoking the ocean as “God's beautiful creation.” Describing the ocean as imbued with strong healing powers—for the mind, body, and soul—was also a concept and language that resonated with those who felt spiritual, if not explicitly religious. As you develop your communications, consider including messengers of faith or those that can talk about the spiritual connection that they—and many like them—feel to the ocean.

SHOW PEOPLE'S EMOTIONAL CONNECTIONS TO THE OCEAN—ESPECIALLY MORE AWE OR WONDER

Life in and around the ocean provides some of the most awe-inspiring imagery on earth. Whether it's taking a cruise where you get to witness a whale, the largest mammal on earth, swim with her calf, or visiting a deep-sea exhibit at your local aquarium to see, first hand, the wonders that exist far below surface—the ocean is place of mystery and magic. Including awe-inspiring images in your communications is a great practice. Our research showed that it is even more effective to include images of people experiencing awe in the presence of the ocean's wonder.

RECOMMENDATION: SHOW, DON'T TELL

While humans have an amazing ability to consider abstract concepts, when it comes to learning and behavior change, it's easier to grasp new ideas when they are visual and concrete. Consider how the Internet, especially sites like YouTube and Pinterest, have successfully harnessed the power of being visual and concrete. Sites like these have caused a boom in the Do-It-Yourself culture, with amateurs now learning how to do all sorts of things for themselves.

Yet, conservation advocates tend to communicate about the urgent challenges facing our ocean without providing concrete, hands-on examples of how people and communities are solving these challenges. Many advocates and organizations tend to simply tell people about it—to give people science, facts, and figures (e.g., a spreadsheet)—rather than taking them on a narrative journey and showing them. In addition, communications we audited from organizations often lacked a sense of urgency—“Why act now— and how?”—and rarely celebrated or described the small successes that show people that progress is possible.

Since there is also such an overemphasis in communications on the multitude of problems

facing the ocean, little room seems left for solutions—what is working. Showing what is working helps to provide people hope that your vision for the ocean (something also missing in most communications) can be achieved, with their support. Vision messages are as simple as showing how the world is a better place because of the policies you are advocating for.

For example, in a story that we tested, a WWII veteran explained how the Northwest Hawaiian Islands Monument (Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument) protects the remains of the USS Yorktown, the aircraft carrier he served on. His message: “These ocean sanctuaries not only protect fish, but also protect important moments in American history.”

Here is how you can work to develop or revise messaging that shows, instead of tells:

USE STORYTELLING THAT SHOWCASES PEOPLE AND HOW THEIR VALUES, BELIEFS, AND IDENTITY ARE TIED TO THE OCEAN

It is important to develop stories and use messengers that will be personally compelling to your audiences. In our research, we found these kinds of stories are often absent in advocates' communications. For example, sharing stories about how being on or near the ocean provides unique opportunities for families to share and learn about important traditions and values. Show in these stories how the ocean provides a place for bonding and reverence in a way that may not be possible during a person's day-to-day life—that being there fosters an environment of quiet, listening, and patience.

In addition, real-life stories like the video we tested featuring Tom, Maria and their child, Magdalena, can leverage these important family moments to create calls for action. In the video, Tom and Maria discuss how they chose to baptize their daughter, who is named after Maria's late mother, at the beach in Brewster, Massachusetts.

Maria: *I guess we just thought about water and the place that would be most meaningful to baptize her.*



POWERFUL PICTURES



Photo credit: Marlon J. Martin

Messengers are an effective way to “show” instead of “tell”—especially when you feature an unexpected messenger like a WWII veteran who talks about the role that a marine monument can play in protecting history.

In the waters of Brewster seemed to be the best place to do it because that is where my mom is alive. Will my children for their lifetime be able to enjoy Brewster?

Tom: *There is some natural erosion that happens that over time this peninsula is going to likely go away because that is just the way erosion happens. Due to global warming, sea levels rise, then this could happen a lot more quickly. The Cape could disappear.*

Magdalena: *I don't want it to be gone because I have been going there for so long.*

Tom: *I think you are always thinking about how can we be better to the environment for the long run.*

Magdalena: *We use metal straws and silicone straws that we bring with us, so that we don't end up using plastic straws because they are likely going to end up in the ocean. Sometimes they end up being stuck in turtles' noses, so the turtles can't breathe well enough and then they die.*

Maria: *It can be so overwhelming to think of all of these things that you can do and how can you possibly just overnight make all of these changes to your life? One simple change is great. It is not all or nothing. We don't need to strive for perfection.*

Also, consider making your audience (e.g., supporters/donors) the hero of a story. Just as Magdalena is a hero for bringing reusable straws, Maria is also a hero for thinking about ways to protect the environment in how their family lives their own lives. Showing your audience how a peer (e.g., “someone like me”) is making a difference can create an opportunity to model behavior you would like to see in others.

USE MULTI-SENSORY LANGUAGE TO TRANSPORT PEOPLE

Be sure to use language and cues that reflect how being at or near the ocean is a multi-sensory experience. Don't shy away from messaging that describes hearing the roaring waves repeatedly and rhythmically crash on the shore, slowly lulling you to a state of serenity. Of smelling the air that blows through your car windows as it changes and becomes saltier—something you can almost taste—as you leave the heavy city air behind and get closer

to the shoreline. Of feeling the stark difference between the warm sun on your face and the cold water on your feet as you slowly walk along the sea's edge. The more you can transport people to a place, the more success you will have getting people to see why taking a certain action to protect that place is so important—and what is at risk if they fail to act.

Also, be sure to use a multi-sensory approach when describing ocean problems. For example, when we interviewed Alice and Kieron (see [introduction on page 14](#)), here is how they communicated to us the problems they experienced during their vacation:

Alice: *We tend to go to the same location pretty much yearly for our beach vacation. A few years ago, I was struck by how something had changed. The ocean was over-producing the seaweed and they thought it was for environmental reasons. The seaweed was covering the ocean and the shoreline so you couldn't see the beach. It wasn't white sand anymore. It was this layer of seaweed.*

Kieron: *A thick layer too.*

Alice: *When you got in the water, your lower body was just covered. You had to swim pretty far out just to get into the blue turquoise water.*

As you develop your stories and other communications, consider how and where you can insert these kinds of vivid, concrete details.

CREATE AN ASPIRATIONAL VISION FOR THE OCEAN BY PUTTING SOLUTIONS FRONT AND CENTER

Our research found that current ocean messaging often overemphasizes the problems faced by the ocean—even to the exclusion of solutions. For many, this reinforced that the problems are so big as to be insurmountable—dulling their desire to act.

Small successes made while pursuing larger goals are rarely celebrated in communications from advocates. However, research participants in focus groups and surveys responded well to solutions, even step-by-step ones. In fact, we found that including solutions reduced the anxiety people felt and evoked a sense of “yes, we can.” People reacted well to a wide range of solutions at both the individual level and the systemic/policy levels.

However, when describing technology solutions, we found it important not to include too much complexity, and to be very clear about *how* the technology helps, rather than asserting technology as a solution without explaining how. Notably, we found that seemingly small, individual-level actions can serve as gateways to positive identity creation (i.e., people viewing themselves as someone who protects the ocean).

A specific example of a gateway action is the [Marine Debris Tracker App](#) operated by NOAA and the University of Georgia, which members of our Advisory Group suggested we test with focus groups as part of our research. Shown to a diverse collection of research participants, these people were very intrigued with the tracker, describing it as “helpful,” “encouraging,” and “unique.” They liked that it gets more people involved, especially younger generations, and that it is something ordinary people can do.

Many participants said that they or someone in their family would use it—that it made them feel like they would be taking direct action to address the pollution problem and make the environment cleaner in long term. It would encourage them to engage in cleanups and to see the results of their collective efforts. They also liked that it could help people feel more connected, knowing that others around the world are also participating.



Interestingly, they also liked that they could contribute to protecting the ocean anonymously, without fear of judgment or embarrassment.

STRESS A SENSE OF URGENCY, BUT ALSO PROVIDE CLEAR EXAMPLES OF HOW AUDIENCES CAN HELP

In your communication, consider offering a spectrum of ways people can take action or become engaged—from easier actions, such as going to a website to learn more about how to protect the ocean, to speaking with a member of Congress or joining a rally or march for the ocean. Small actions help people to see themselves as ocean protectors. The more they invest their time and offer their support, the more likely it is they will continue up this ladder of engagement. Each subsequent action they take deepens their commitment and leads to more significant actions.

HIGHLIGHT A VARIETY OF SOLUTIONS, INCLUDING INNOVATIVE APPROACHES

Given all the challenges facing the ocean, it can be easy for people to tip into despair. As such, it is critical to show audiences the wide range of solutions that are already having an important impact on ocean conservation. In our research, we tested many such examples. One example focused on how massive shrimp trawl nets dragged behind fishing boats trap and kill thousands of sea turtles each year. Yet, we pivoted quickly to an ingenious and surprisingly simple solution to avoid this needless killing: Turtle Excluder Devices (TEDs). TEDs are metal grates inserted into shrimp nets that allow sea turtles and other ocean wildlife to escape the nets when they're scooped up along with shrimp. When placed in shrimp nets, TEDs are 97 percent effective at allowing sea turtles to swim free.

Importantly, this example used multiple diagrams to show how TEDs work, rather than just assuming people could understand the mechanism on their own.

CONSIDER A “REDEMPTION” FRAME

One of the most effective messaging frames we tested in our research was a “redemption” frame. This frame emphasizes how people can make mistakes, but that they are also capable of acknowledging and working to successfully overcome those mistakes. In many of our examples,

Avoiding a catch

How Turtle Excluder Devices (TEDs) enable sea turtles to escape trawl nets.

1. Shrimp and turtles are scooped-up by the net.

2. The TED is a grate with holes large enough for shrimps to pass through, but too small for turtles.

3. An opening in the mesh allows the turtles to escape.

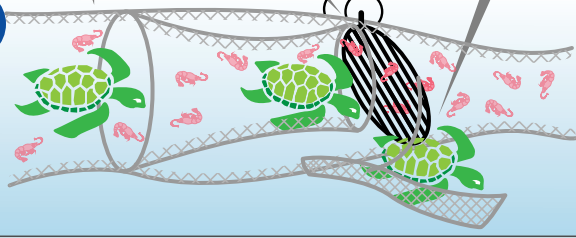


Diagram of Turtle Excluder Devices show how the mechanisms work.

we describe how people came together (including policymakers in a bipartisan manner) to forge effective solutions to ocean problems that humans had created—and how efforts by politicians, corporations, and others to undermine those solutions threaten the important progress that has been made.

As you think about developing stories that include a redemption frame, consider citing non-ocean environmental successes as well, such as overcoming acid rain or the hole in the ozone layer. For example, referencing acid rain not only taps people's existing template of how human activities impact the environment, it also illustrates an environmental problem that was addressed through a combination of effective policies and technology—in the face of considerable resistance from industry and oppositional policymakers.

REDEMPTION EXAMPLE: WHALES RETURN TO NEW YORK HARBOR

A useful example of the redemption frame can be found in [a local news story](#) about humpback whales returning to New York harbor. Importantly, this story highlights how polluted these waters became in the 1960s and 1970s, and the critical importance of the Clean Water Act to clean up those waters and bring back a fish called menhaden, which humpback whales feed on.



5

Climate change and the ocean: Five pressure-tested tips to communicate effectively

We know that communicating about climate change requires navigating a minefield of partisan thinking and arguments. Unfortunately, rejection of climate change as a human-caused phenomenon has become inextricably linked with conservative political identities and ideologies. Here are five pressure-tested messaging tips that, when used together, proved effective at persuading audiences to care about how climate change is impacting the ocean.


1 Think globally, message locally.

As we've already mentioned in this guide, it's helpful to update the old conservation mantra, *Think globally, act locally*, to, *Think globally, message locally*. When it comes to climate change and the ocean, audiences can be overwhelmed by the massive nature of the problem and how to solve a global problem. We tested a short, true story of husband and wife owners of an oyster farm in Washington State. Localizing the problem helps to translate an abstract problem like climate change into something specific, concrete, and emotional—making it more likely that people will understand and care about the issue.



2 Connect to people's heartwired values.

The story of the dying baby oysters was heartwired because it focused on moderate to conservative audiences' heartwired values—like the impact that climate change has on jobs and the economy. Here's an excerpt from the story we tested:

 *Rising acidity threatened Washington State's entire shellfish industry, which was no small matter. Washington leads the country with nearly 200 aquaculture farms that raise clams, mussels, and oysters. For people living along the coast and Puget Sound, the shellfish industry is an economic lifeblood.*

"If we don't produce shellfish larvae, then shellfish farms go out of business and thousands of people lose their jobs in those communities," Rick said.



3 Help audiences form complete reasoning chains.

In this and other research we have led on climate change, we have come to learn that people have broken reasoning chains when it comes to climate change. A reasoning chain is the way people’s associations and connections lead them to develop premises and assumptions that take them to a particular conclusion. Because conservation advocates (and all subject-matter experts) often suffer from the [Curse of Knowledge](#)—forgetting what it’s like to not know what you currently know—we often leave out key details that help people fully understand an issue or problem. Here are elements of the story we told that helped people to form complete reasoning chains:



- Sue and Mark Wiegard couldn’t figure out why their baby oysters were dying.
- Fifty miles away, ocean scientist Rick Feely had just discovered the answer. A senior researcher at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), Rick was measuring carbon dioxide in the ocean waters off the Pacific Coast.
- Increasing carbon pollution in the atmosphere, caused primarily by human beings burning fossil fuels such as oil, coal, and natural gas, was making the ocean water more acidic. Acidic water can wreak havoc on shellfish.
- “A lot of things we like to eat have shells that are very sensitive to acidification,” says Rick. “Just a small increase in acid can dissolve their shells and kill them, especially the larvae that are much more vulnerable than the adults.”

4 Spotlight workable solutions.

When the problem is global, it seems impossible to come up with workable solutions. Without solutions, our audiences tend to shut down emotionally. Solutions help to harness the psychology of hope to keep audiences open to continue listening. Here’s an example of a solution featured in this story:



Fortunately, Rick was able to help Sue and Mark measure the chemistry of their water, so they could pull seawater into their hatchery only when the water was healthy for shell growth. It wasn’t a perfect strategy, but it worked. For the first time in years, their oyster production started to improve.

5 Feature trusted, unlikely messengers.



Finally, to address the tribal, hyper-partisan reaction that some have to climate change, it’s important to feature diverse, trusted, unlikely messengers. The story of the baby oyster farm featured business owners (messengers more likely to appeal to politically conservative audiences) as well as a scientist who can help to validate the legitimacy of the science of climate change.



Eight years later, Rick Feely stands with Sue and Mark looking out across their thriving oyster hatchery. “It’s a beautiful story of how science, government, and industry can work together,” Rick said.

HEARTWIRED MESSAGING IN PRACTICE

We tested the following print narrative in focus groups across the country. The results help to showcase many of the recommendations that we have highlighted in this guide. Below, we have highlighted the elements that resonated in this test content.

Once every summer, Charles and his 14-year-old grandson, Jason, drive to the ocean where they spend the day fishing off on ocean pier.

“This is the life,” Charles said to himself while looking out at the cloudless horizon and smelling the ocean air. He didn’t say the words out loud, for fear of spoiling the moment. Charles worried that as Jason gets older, he will want to spend more time with his friends and less time with his grandfather—ending their summer fishing tradition. His fear subsided as he noticed Jason was also looking out at the horizon, both hands wrapped around his fishing rod—in anticipation. Charles knew this time together was special for Jason too.

In our stories and messaging, we have the opportunity to show how the ocean provides unique opportunities for precious moments with families.

Being near the ocean is unlike other places—it has a magical quality that allows people and families the opportunity to create unforgettable memories.

Charles still remembered the first time he brought Jason fishing, when Jason was just 10. “Grandpa, why haven’t I caught a fish yet?” Jason asked no more than five minutes into casting his line as he shifted impatiently on his feet. “If only it were that easy,” Charles responded to his grandson. “When we come to fish, we learn who has greater patience—humans or fish.”

Charles chuckled to himself remembering how it had been the same for him. When he and his grandfather fished back in the day, he couldn’t sit still either. But it was on those fishing trips where he learned to be quiet, to listen, to be patient. “You can’t fish if you’re not patient,” his grandfather would always tell him.

For many, visiting the ocean is a multi-generational experience passed down from one generation to another.

Charles liked sharing these life lessons with Jason, especially in today’s world when there are so many distractions. Kids are so glued to their screens these days, and on some days, Jason’s no different. “When Jason visits his grandmother and me at home, he spends most of the time on his phone texting his friends and watching videos,” Charles shared. But not when they’re fishing. Charles took pride in how Jason was able to overcome his impatience and settle into the moment.

We heard from many research participants that the ocean allows people to disconnect from the distractions of modern life.

Another thing they liked to do was clean their fish together. “My friends think it’s disgusting,” said Jason, “but I like it.” Charles did too. He liked the cold feeling of the fish in one hand and his knife in the other. And preparing the fish for the meal they would proudly serve to the whole family. It made the experience more real somehow, and Charles enjoyed sharing the finer points of fish cleaning with Jason.

Being near the ocean also gives families a chance to bond over shared experiences.

But lately both of them had started to worry about the fish they were catching. “This one’s got pieces of plastic in its belly,” said Jason one day. “And so does this one.” They tried to decide which ones were OK to cook for dinner, and ended up throwing some out.

Charles had definitely noticed that there is more plastic in the water these days—certainly a lot more than in decades past. But it was Jason who really took it upon himself to learn more about what was happening to the ocean, both in science class and on his own.

“Did you know, Grandpa, that soon there will be more plastic than fish in the ocean?” Charles thought that seemed pretty far-fetched at first, but it was hard to argue when Jason showed him the article about it on his iPad.

Charles wasn’t much of an environmentalist himself. Still, he felt proud that Jason had really taken an interest in the ocean beyond fishing. Jason had even learned about becoming a “citizen scientist,” where regular people collect information about the ocean and pass it along to researchers trying to answer real-world questions. In one project, Jason and his classmates tracked beach litter to see if recent beach cleanups were having an impact. “They even have this cool app to make it easy to track all the litter,” said Jason.

Charles didn’t understand how that all worked, but he appreciated that he and Jason both shared a love for the ocean and a desire to clean it up. Because one day, Charles was sure that Jason would go fishing on that pier with a grandchild of his own, and he hoped that experience was as special for Jason as it had been for him.

Problems facing the ocean can feel abstract and far removed from the day-to-day concerns of people. Messaging should help to make the issues concrete and bring them a little closer to home.

To create a sense of urgency, demonstrate how the problem is getting worse.

Both Jason and his grandfather, Charles, were powerful moral messengers. Jason resonated because he was speaking on behalf of future generations — while many saw the story through the eyes of the grandfather to whom they related.

Use social math—an easy-to-grasp anchor (like the number of fish in the ocean)—to communicate the enormity of a challenge (the amount of plastic in the ocean).

Use journey stories to show how people’s perspectives, attitudes, and behaviors change.

While this story is about conservation, it’s also important to help people to connect it to something fundamentally human—like the chance for Jason to do this with his own grandchild. Moral lessons like this also allow you to end on a hopeful note.



Once every summer, Charles and his 14-year-old grandson, Jason, drive to the ocean where they spend the day fishing off on ocean pier.



Photo credit: Diego Cervo



Photo credit: Conner Flecks

CASE STUDIES

In addition to developing messaging approaches to encourage ocean protection generally, our research sought to develop specific messaging strategies in three key policy challenges that the conservation community was confronting in 2017 and 2018.

These included policies to:

- Weaken protections for Marine Protected Areas;
- Allow for overfishing by ignoring scientific advice on catch limits; and
- Expand offshore drilling in U.S. coastal waters.

In the pages that follow, we have spotlighted what worked to persuade audiences to take action against these efforts and in support of ocean conservation.

CASE STUDY: PROTECTING OCEAN SANCTUARIES

OVERALL TAKEAWAYS

In testing materials, we found that people don't know what marine protected areas are, how they work, what the benefits of them are, or how they are chosen. Our audiences did, however, understand

the concept of a sanctuary and the importance of protecting special places. There were a variety of ways to connect the dots and to make a persuasive case for why they matter, including making a very explicit comparison or analogy to national parks.

Marine monuments are one type of marine protected area. However, the term “ocean sanctuary” is emotionally stronger than either “marine protected area” or “marine monument.” It cleared up the confusion that “marine monument” created for some. For instance, a research participant in Orlando, Florida said, “When you say sanctuary, you think of helping and like you said monuments you think of statues. When I saw monuments, I’m like, ‘What are they talking about? What did they build in the ocean?’”

The biggest challenge is that since these ocean sanctuaries are often so far offshore, they aren’t places people would typically interact with or visit. There is a need to help people understand the value of protecting something this far away.

SPOTLIGHT MESSENGERS

To address the challenges described above, we tested several pieces of content featuring a variety of messengers that met the different heartwired needs of our target audiences. We cannot emphasize this point enough: Different messengers meet different needs of our target audiences. Diversity means racial, ethnic, age, and gender diversity and it also means messengers with different types of expertise or perspectives. In a hypothetical interview we tested, we featured several messengers, all of whom were able to play unique roles in persuading audiences about the importance of maintaining ocean sanctuaries.

MARINE BIOLOGIST | PATRICIA BAÉZ

Scientists, when plainspoken, can play an important role in helping our audiences to connect the dots on complexity and the need for ocean monuments. Consider the following excerpts featuring Patricia Baéz, a marine biologist:



The underwater world of these ocean monuments rivals the beauty and diversity of our most cherished national parks, such as Yellowstone, the Everglades, and the Grand Canyon.

People who have a stake in protecting these special places—like fishermen, scientists, tour guides, and historians—work together with elected officials and ocean conservationists to get these areas established as ocean monuments.

They are a refuge for certain types of fish, like lobster and tuna, which are often threatened by overfishing.

Fish of all kinds thrive in these protected areas, then move out into other parts of the ocean and replenish ocean areas where fish populations are weaker. This not only helps the fish, but it helps the people and wildlife that depend on healthy fish for their survival. In addition, studies show that these underwater parks are stronger and more resistant in the face of threats.



Research participants appreciated how Patricia answered key questions they had using easy-to-grasp language, which is critical whenever your messengers might overly rely on jargon and complex abstractions to explain an idea. For instance, Patricia used an analogy to describe an ocean monument by comparing them to the national parks, which are more familiar for most audiences. She described how ocean monuments are created, helping the audience to see that they are developed with the support of diverse stakeholders. She also articulated the functions of an ocean monument—for example, no commercial fishing, no drilling or mining. She painted a vivid picture of the benefits, such as giving the ocean the chance to recover, and how the benefits can spread and spill out beyond the



Photo credit: Rainer von Brandis

boundaries of the sanctuary. This helped to make the case for protecting places far away from most audiences. Also, as a scientist and an expert in her field, she was viewed by our research participants as a credible messenger.

COAST GUARD OFFICER | LIEUTENANT COMMANDER TOM MICHAELIS

Law enforcement officials, like Coast Guard Officer Tom Michaelis (whose fictitious story below was part of the interview we tested), can be powerful messengers on the enforcement of conservation laws and policies:



Just like other national parks and monuments, our laws protect these areas because we want to make sure they are around for future generations. To protect these places and the animals in them, mining, drilling, and some types of commercial fishing are typically restricted or prohibited. Our job is to enforce the laws of the United States of America. The Coast Guard is one of many law enforcement agencies meant to prevent illegal activities in these waters, including illegal fishing of protected species.

I was patrolling these waters long before it became an ocean monument. In recent years, I've seen more whales and other marine life in and around the monument. In fact, recently on helicopter patrol, I caught this great photo of a mother alongside her calf.



As you read earlier in the guide, those with the 'Law and Policies' mindset strongly support laws to protect the ocean for future generations. However, not all ocean supporters are as strongly inclined toward environmental laws and policies. These more moderate to conservative audiences were more open to hearing about these laws from a respected law enforcement messenger. The short story he told about the awe he felt when witnessing a mother whale and her calf from a helicopter also resonated among those with the 'Amazing Wildlife' mindset and helped to make the case for protecting areas of the ocean that most audiences would never have a chance to visit.

WORLD WAR II VETERAN | ANDY MILLS

Messengers like Andy Mills, a World War II veteran, communicate that protecting special places isn't always just about fish. It can also be about the historical or cultural element of sanctuary status as Andy describes below:



These ocean sanctuaries not only protect fish, they protect important moments in American history. I served on the aircraft carrier USS Yorktown, which we tragically lost during the battle. For the past few years, I've been working with other vets to extend the current boundaries of the Northwest Hawaiian Islands Monument to protect the remains of my old ship, and the remains of my friends and fellow sailors who I lost that day.

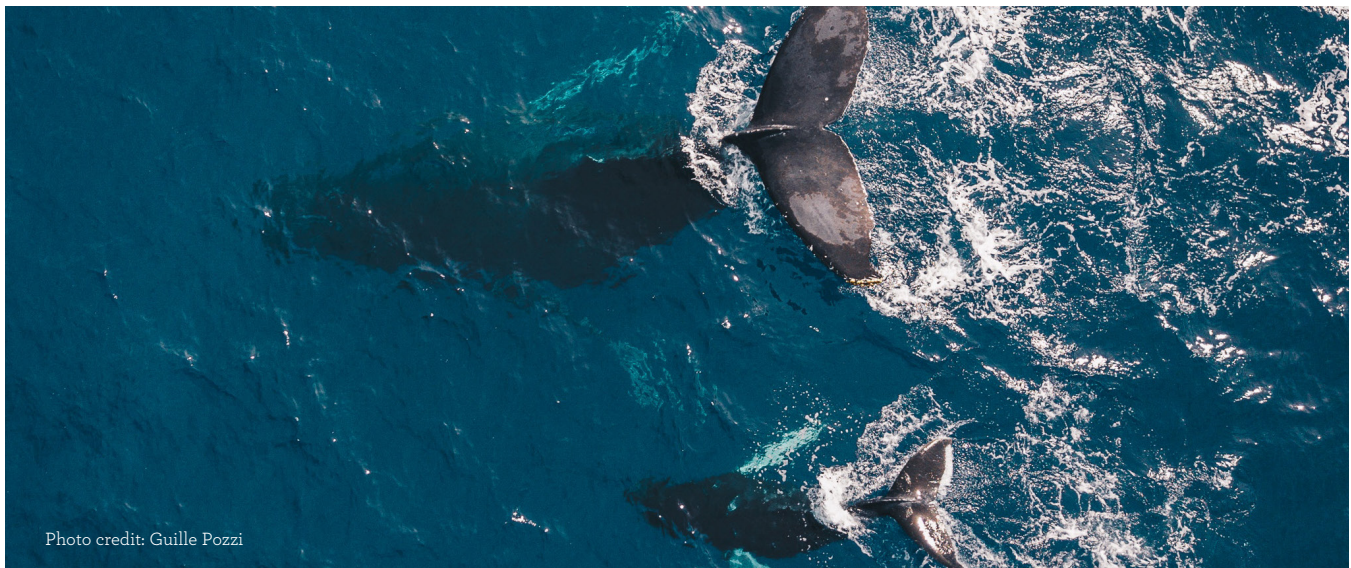


Photo credit: Guille Pozzi



Photo credit: Flickr user John Burns/NOAA

*Hawaiian dascyllus (*Dascyllus albisella*), banded angelfish (*Apolemichthys arcuatus*), and other reef fish swim above the coral on the reef in Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument.*

He spoke about working with other vets to extend a sanctuary “to protect the remains of my old ship” and the remains of his friends and fellow sailors who were lost the day it sank. Audiences viewed him as someone who has a personal connection to a monument and they in turn connected to the sacrifice he made as a soldier in WWII, and his personal loss of comrades.

CRAFT COMPELLING STORIES AND MICRO-STORIES

You’ll note that the messengers above followed our recommendation to show—rather than tell—the importance of protecting the ocean. Rather than communicating difficult-to-grasp abstract concepts, they told stories and micro-stories about their personal experiences—from Andy Mills describing what the Northwest Hawaiian Island Monument (Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument) means to him as a World War II vet, to Coast Guard Officer Michaelis describing what it was like to see a sperm whale mother with her calf.

SHOW SOLUTIONS THAT WORK

To demonstrate the importance of laws and policies, messaging must show solutions that are working. As noted above, the following section helped audiences to understand the importance of marine protected areas for the ocean at large, and the need for laws and policies to establish and enforce them.

“Fish of all kinds thrive in these protected areas, then move out into other parts of the ocean and replenish ocean areas where fish populations are weaker. This not only helps the fish, but it also helps the people and wildlife that depend on healthy fish for their survival. In addition, studies show that these underwater parks are stronger and more resistant in the face of threats.”

The messaging worked for several reasons. First, we used causal reasoning chains—how one thing leads to another—to help audiences connect the dots in their minds. Second, we used plainspoken language.

Rather than using shorthand like “rebuilding fisheries,” we described what that means.

DESCRIBE WHAT’S AT STAKE, WHO’S TO BLAME, AND WHAT TO DO

Be certain to include messages that make it clear to your audiences what’s at stake, who’s to blame, and what they can do to make a difference. Patricia Baéz, the marine biologist, ended her interview by saying this:

“Despite the success of marine protected areas, some politicians and their corporate allies want to remove critical protections to allow drilling and increased commercial fishing in these areas. People who want to protect these special places can learn how to protect America’s underwater parks at www.protectoceansanctuaries.org.^{} They can contact their member of Congress and encourage them to reject attempts to weaken protections for marine protected areas. They can also support organizations like the Ocean Park Conservation Association^{*} that are working to protect these ocean sanctuaries.”*

Note that her message communicates the responsible parties (some politicians and their corporate allies), as well as the people with the power to make a difference (Congress), while also giving audiences several ways to take action.

^{*}Website and organization name for test purposes only.

HEARTWIRED MESSAGING IN PRACTICE

A pilot project has shown us the power and efficacy of heartwired messaging.

In 2018, The Ocean Project in collaboration with Mystic Aquarium, Seattle Aquarium, and the Texas State Aquarium, as part of an initiative supported by the Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation, wanted to engage those visiting aquariums about overfishing. The research team wanted to see if aquarium visitors would be willing to communicate with members of Congress about national fisheries policy, which Congress would soon be considering.

According to project leader Douglas Meyer, Strategic Advisor to The Ocean Project, their research showed that “visitors expect, trust, and appreciate information about how they can help advance conservation efforts, even when, in this case, we were engaging them directly on a policy issue, as opposed to a personal behavior.”

As part of the collaboration, the aquariums developed common messaging but tried different approaches. For their part, Mystic Aquarium created and showed [a short video PSA](#) before each sea lion show.

Twelve percent of those who watched the PSA completed a comment card asking Congress to maintain a strong national fisheries policy.

What made the video effective? It included many of the heartwired recommendations outlined in this guide.



According to Meyer, prior research “had shown that visitors struggle to relate to the idea of the ocean being in trouble.” To solve for this, they used the [“redemption” frame](#) and plainspoken, easy-to-follow messages that helped audiences connect the dots between fisheries that had collapsed and then rebounded as a result of sustainability practices. They used a trusted messenger from the aquarium to validate the messages being communicated.

Other effective elements included emotionally powerful video content of beloved wildlife, like sea turtles and dolphins, as well as video background footage of a barefoot youngster touching his feet to the ocean’s incoming waves. Altogether, the one and a half minute PSA connected with many of the mindsets we have featured in this guide, including the ‘Amazing Wildlife,’ the ‘Family Traditions,’ the ‘All Senses,’ and the ‘Laws and Policies’ mindsets.

To learn more about this pilot project, and to watch the Mystic Aquarium video, [read the blog post](#) from The Ocean Project.



Photo credit: imageBROKER



Photo credit: Senior Airman Tony R. Ritter

Two diverse messengers—Tony Vu and Chef Leah Charles (fictional characters inspired by real accounts)—helped to make the issue of overfishing more relatable and concrete.

CASE STUDY: PREVENTING OVERFISHING

OVERALL TAKEAWAYS

In testing messages to prevent overfishing, we had the chance to test and compare two messengers—someone who catches fish and someone who cooks them. These two messengers allowed us to remove abstractions and show the real-life impact that overfishing has not only on fisherman and restaurant owners, but also the everyday people who eat seafood. By including a diverse set of messengers, we found that organizations can lessen the possibility that your communications will trigger polarization—by pitting conservationists against potentially sympathetic audiences such as fishermen, people who eat seafood, and those who enjoy the ocean’s natural resources. That doesn’t mean you should not include an antagonist—and in many cases, it’s helpful to do so.

We learned how effective different messengers can be in delivering different points about the same issue. We also learned how having the right messenger—or protagonist—is critical. For example, audiences showed considerable empathy toward a commercial fisherman, who they saw as depending on fish for their livelihood. Also, unlikely messengers were powerful. We saw that including a mixture of bipartisan voices helped people see the issue as something that rose above party politics.

DEPLOY DIVERSE MESSENGERS

It’s important to feature diverse messengers—diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, age, and gender as well as occupation and perspective. These messengers help to meet the unique needs of our audiences and to resolve different conflicts that they may have. We tested both a fisherman and a restaurant owner/chef in our materials on overfishing. Both helped to make the issue more relatable and concrete—especially when you take the time to help introduce the messenger to your audience as we did with Tony Vu (a fictitious character inspired by real accounts), a middle-aged commercial fisherman from Houston, who is Vietnamese:



You can say that fishing is in my blood. For generations, my family has been fishing to make a living. My grandfather was a fisherman. So was my father. Fishing allows me to make a living and is also deeply rooted in my family tree.



Similarly, audiences related to Leah Charles, a fictional chef from New Orleans who is an older Black woman, in the way she described herself and her relationship to the issue of overfishing:

“

I want to keep putting smiles on people’s faces with my seafood dishes. Congress might make it harder. I’m a chef, not a political activist. But sometimes you have to be willing to do something new to keep doing what you love.

”

Both messengers helped to disrupt our audience’s stereotypes about the stakeholders who care about ocean conservation.

Finally, even a simple mention of Democrats and Republicans working together can lend bipartisan credibility, as in this op-ed written by Tony Vu, the commercial fisherman:

In 1976, two Congressmen from opposite coasts—one Republican and one Democrat—were united by a shared cause: casting a safety net for U.S. fishermen overrun by Russian and Japanese fishing vessels harvesting massive amounts of fish off our shores.

The result? A new law that asserted U.S. ownership and management over the fishery resources within 200 miles of our coastline.

[...]

This law was not enough, however. Overfishing continued, and many of the fish we relied on to make ends meet started to disappear altogether. In response, a Republican U.S. Senator in 2006 led a bipartisan congressional effort to further strengthen the law and to make sure all fishermen—whether commercial, recreational, or charter—were held accountable to those catch limits. They understood that the future of the industry rested on healthy fishing grounds.

DESCRIBE THE NATURE OF THE PROBLEM

Sometimes our communications can suffer from the [Curse of Knowledge](#)—forgetting what it’s like not to know what we currently know. That’s especially true when we’re communicating about abstract concepts that include science and conservation theories. Micro-stories like the following helped to vividly



Photo credit: Design Pics

describe the nature of the problem and to show the impact on real people.

For many decades, fishing in the coastal waters of the United States was becoming more and more difficult. Even though I was young, I remember the big catches my grandfather would bring in. That became increasingly difficult for my father—often making it harder to make ends meet. He would spend more and more hours on the water and bring in fewer and fewer fish.

SHINE THE SPOTLIGHT ON AN ANTAGONIST

A well-placed antagonist helps our audience to position themselves in opposition to someone or something. They are already likely to feel antipathy toward this antagonist. Ideally, the antagonist is human (or human-led, in the case of a corporation), rather than a universal force like *overfishing*. We tested messaging inspired by Mighty Earth that named a real company working to undermine fishing protections. (Note: The company name has been omitted from the tested excerpt below.)

...our successful and sustainable model is now under threat. Corporations like [____] that want to drive profits by selling even more boat motors and other fishing equipment, are using their political power and lobbyists to change the law and kill the very protections that have brought America's vital fishing grounds back to health.

Making a specific corporation the antagonist worked because many people are predisposed to side against or judge those perceived as “greedy corporations.” It played off of their preconceived notions that corporations will do anything to maximize their profits.

DEMONSTRATE HOW LAWS ARE CRITICAL SOLUTIONS

Some audiences wonder whether laws are necessary to protect the ocean. To persuade those on the fence about laws over to our side, our communications needs to show—not tell—why laws are critical. Tony Vu’s op-ed opened with the following headline:

This law keeps me and other fishermen working. Will corporations kill the law—and our jobs?

This framing will help to reach those who, unlike those with the ‘Laws and Policies’ mindset, are not

inclined to support an environmental law or policy as a solution to the challenges facing the ocean.

Later in his op-ed, Tony went on to say:

Since the law was passed—on the heels of that horrible fishing season—our catches have slowly, but steadily, grown each and every year. And what we’ve done here in the U.S. has become a sustainable fishing model that is envied around the world.

This message helped to connect the dots for the audiences that laws can and do make a difference when it comes to the pressing challenges facing the ocean.

DEVELOP ANALOGIES TO HELP DESCRIBE ABSTRACT IDEAS

As we described in the previous case study, analogies can be powerful ways to communicate about abstract ideas. Tony Vu’s analogy to crop rotation worked to help explain the importance of catch limits to prevent overfishing:

To me, this approach is not much different than a farmer who understands that he cannot harvest the same crop on the same plot of land year after year. By simply rotating crops which rely on different nutrients, farmers are not only able to farm generation after generation, they are able to bring in bigger crops.

The analogy worked because it helped to introduce catch limits to the audience by anchoring it around an idea with which they were already familiar.

TELL JOURNEY STORIES

For issues that have the potential to be more contentious—for example, when corporate lobbyists might pit fishermen against conservationists—it can be helpful to tell a journey story. A journey story features a protagonist who had a change of heart on an issue. For instance, fisherman Tony Vu’s op-ed was built around his journey story:

I wish I could say I supported this new proposed law from the outset. The truth is, back in 2006, the idea of setting catch limits worried me. Two things changed my mind. First, I went to a community meeting to listen to how the law would work. Some of the people



Photo credit: Photoneye

speaking up in support of the law were like me—fishermen whose families had spent generations making a living on the sea. Second, the year before the law was passed was the single worst fishing season I had since taking over the business from my father. I knew something needed to change.

This messaging models the kind of attitude and behavior change we hope other conflicted audiences will follow. It's important also to show that the change of heart was not abrupt—otherwise, it won't read as authentic to audiences. For instance, even after Tony's opinion started to change, he said:

I counted myself as a reluctant supporter at first. But I'm glad the law passed because it worked. These protections have made fishing in America far more sustainable and profitable. It has improved my family's life and those of other fishermen like me who are trying to support their families.

Just the use of one word—reluctant—showed that his shift was gradual. It's also important to show the full arc of the messenger's journey by showing the full shift in perspective, as he does in the final two sentences above.

SHOWCASE REDEMPTION EXAMPLES

Our audiences loved redemption as a theme— anecdotes and examples of how it was possible to take collective action to reverse environmental degradation. For instance, audiences responded positively to this redemption example:

Fish like porgy (or “scup”), which my family has been fishing for generations, hit an all-time low in 1995 at just four percent of a healthy level. Since the law was passed, the porgy population has largely come back. In 2015, commercial fishermen in the mid-Atlantic caught 17 million pounds of porgy compared with only 3 million pounds in 1995.

The example helped people to understand the role that the law played in helping this and other fisheries to rebound.

USE FACTS WITH IMPACT— JUDICIOUSLY

While facts alone do not persuade—and in some cases overwhelm our audiences—a few impactful facts and numbers can be the final persuasion ingredient that your messaging needs. For instance, this message was quite effective:

... overall seafood landings are trending up. In 2015, U.S. commercial fishermen landed 9.7 billion pounds of fish valued at \$5.2 billion. This is a 17% increase in value from 2006.

Two messaging strategy elements helped make it effective:

1. Using just a few numbers—rather than pages full of numbers;
2. Use of proper sequencing—placing it near the end of a story as an important proof point after the audience had already become emotionally invested in Tony Vu as a messenger.

CASE STUDY: BLOCKING EXPANDED OFFSHORE OIL AND GAS DRILLING

OVERALL TAKEAWAYS

To increase opposition to efforts to expand offshore oil drilling, we learned that it is important to show the breadth of impact, while also showing how people in specific communities are being impacted. We also learned that sequencing our impact messaging—beginning first with the impact on humans, followed next by the environmental impact—helped to make the messaging more relatable.

FOCUS ON HUMAN IMPACTS FIRST, ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS SECOND

It's human nature to place the concerns and priorities of *homo sapiens* above those of other animals and wildlife on the planet, despite how selfish this might seem. To address this, we sequenced impacts to humans first and environmental impact second. Consider the following micro-story that we tested:

*Florida residents, fishermen, and small hotel owners know what is at stake. They still live with the results of the Deepwater Horizon spill in 2010 that **killed 11 people** and coated the Florida coast in oil for the next four years. With the smell of burning oil and the trails of sludge, tourists stopped coming. Instead of being booked solid, hotels stayed vacant during the high seasons and many closed for good. Multi-generational fishing families like Joe Wheeler & Sons lost their livelihood overnight, unable to pay the bank loans and losing both their business and their home. The environmental impact is huge: 82,000 **birds**, 6,165 **sea turtles**, and 25,900 marine mammals like **bottlenose dolphins** and **sperm whales** were injured or killed.*

This sequencing sent a subtle cue to our target audiences that conservation doesn't prioritize animals over humans.

DEPLOY DIVERSE MESSENGERS

At this point in the guide, you are probably sensing a theme—the critical importance that a diverse set of trusted messengers play in persuading our target audiences. We had the chance to test a range of messengers against offshore oil drilling, with each being effective for different reasons.



Photo credit: Peg Howell

Peg Howell started working on oil rigs in the 1970s.

In this true account offered by [Oceana](#), Peg Howell, a former oil rig worker, talked about her initial passion for the field and the importance of her work:

“

I got a job as the first female drilling rig supervisor in the Gulf of Mexico. I took jobs working for Chevron, Mobil, and Marathon oil companies and when I would drive by the gas station full of people waiting to fuel their cars, I felt like my work was an important contribution.

”

Four years later, Peg began to have a change of heart:

“

I've seen up close how much corporate irresponsibility of major energy companies had led to catastrophic spills. Every coast where offshore oil and gas is produced suffers multiple massive spills and billions of dollars in damages.

”

Audiences responded positively to Peg because she was an unexpected messenger. As an engineer, she was viewed as an expert who was able to call out oil companies when they lied. Her journey story, from rig worker to anti-drilling advocate, made her an unexpected, and therefore credible, messenger.



We also tested a [postcard](#) featuring an innkeeper affected by the Deepwater Horizon spill. The innkeeper, Elsa Harrington,

allowed us to show how an offshore drilling disaster impacted members of a coastal community and their livelihoods, while also hurting sea life:



All my guests left town, so I decided to help. I used the Inn's kitchen to make meals for fishing families who were going hungry and the people coming to clean up the beach. There were a few families who lost their homes—they're staying with me now until they get back on their feet.



Elsa is a relatable messenger because she is a likeable messenger. Our audience thought of her as not just an innkeeper, but a *heroic innkeeper*—because she went out of her way to help people in her community.

The message she communicated was not an “either/or”—caring just for fish or just for people—but rather a “yes, and...” This showed how the health of the ocean is connected to the health and well-being of people and communities, and the impact that oil drilling can have on people and communities:



It breaks my heart to see the vacancy signs, the fishing boats covered in oil, and the dead sea life.



We also were able to test a local elected official as a messenger—Mayor Emilie Swearingen of Kure Beach. In the blog post that we tested, Mayor Swearingen said:

Citizens must let their members of Congress know that they oppose offshore drilling...We need to let the people in D.C. know that the average citizen

doesn't want this—especially people like us in coastal communities where our very livelihoods depend on keeping our oceans beautiful and healthy.

Mayor Swearingen was effective, in part, because a small-town mayor doesn't feel political in the same way an environmentalist would.

USE GEOGRAPHY EFFECTIVELY

Geography played an important role in our messaging against offshore oil drilling. It was important to show the breadth of impact while also getting specific by citing local examples. For example, in one print piece we tested, we wrote:

Earlier this year, politicians in D.C. released a new proposal that will allow new offshore oil and gas drilling in nearly all United States coastal waters.

This helped all those living in coastal states—as well as those who live inland and love the ocean—understand that this new proposal would impact them.

As you work to develop supporters for your work, it's also helpful to bring the issue a little closer to home as we did with this passage:

Kure Beach in North Carolina helped launch the successful movement against offshore drilling that is now protecting 96% of our oceans.

DEMONSTRATE DEEP, BIPARTISAN SUPPORT AMONG A DIVERSE SET OF AUDIENCES

As you have seen in other examples, it's helpful to demonstrate bipartisan support. The following message tested well because it showed a breadth of opposition to offshore drilling across geography, constituencies, and political parties:

*What started with just 300 people attending a Kure Beach town meeting hosted by now Mayor Emilie Swearingen is now being supported by **more than 130 municipalities, six governors (both Republican and Democrat), 42,000 businesses and 500,000 fishing families—all united in opposition to offshore drilling.***

Given the hyper-partisan era we currently find ourselves in, demonstrations of bipartisan support can be especially powerful.



SHOW SPECIFIC HUMAN ANTAGONISTS

As we described in the previous case study, a well-placed antagonist can rally opposition among target audiences. Given that it's human nature to judge someone when considering a contentious issue, it also prevents audiences from deciding that conservationists deserve the blame. The more specific the antagonist, the better. Consider the following message we tested:

Huge oil companies are spending billions on corporate lobbyists to buy influence in Washington—that's what this proposal is about.

It was easy for our audience to conjure an image of a well-heeled corporate lobbyist and just as easy for them to direct their antipathy in their direction. "Huge oil companies," without the corporate lobbyist as a human antagonist, are too abstract

CREATE URGENCY

Our messages need to create a sense of urgency among target audiences—and there's nothing like a ticking clock to create that urgency. This message tested well for that reason:

*The clock is ticking. With just 18 months left to stop this proposal in its tracks, our beaches, our coastal communities and our livelihoods are depending on us. Sign the petition: bit.ly/stophedrillingpetition**

In our online focus groups, 30 of 32 participants said they would sign the petition.

PROVIDE A RANGE OF ACTIONS—FROM EASY TO MORE CHALLENGING

In our research, we have seen that people are at different stages of activism. Some are simply willing to do more than others. That's why it's important to include a range of actions that audiences can take, like this example we tested:

HERE'S WHAT YOU CAN DO:

- Sign the petition: bit.ly/stophedrillingpetition*
- Call your member of Congress.
- Visit your local congressman when they are in your hometown.
- Join us in D.C. on October 9th for a nationwide day of action in a march from the Capitol to the EPA and say "YES" to people who rely on thriving coastal communities and the jobs that support them.



The list included opportunities to do something—from the comfort for their home computer to traveling to Washington, D.C. for a rally. Notice that the ladder of engagement starts with the easiest action before getting more challenging, allowing audiences to find the option that matches their time and motivation.

*For test purposes only.

CONCLUSION

LOOKING FORWARD

We found our spirits lifted by the passion that people have for the ocean and their genuine willingness to take action—even actions that require substantial effort—to protect it for future generations.

During our research, we came to learn that people across the country from all walks of life—diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, age, faith, geography, and politics—care deeply about the ocean.

For them, the ocean is a cherished place—in ways both nostalgic and aspirational—that provides opportunities for creating treasured memories and passing down family traditions and values as well as supporting communities, and their livelihoods. The ocean brings personal and psychological healing to many, as well as a chance for self-reflection and connecting spiritually to God and/or nature.

Not only do people love the ocean, they want to make sure policies protect the ocean, coastal communities and the sea life that depend on it. We were excited to see how communicating with heartwired messaging helped to deepen their support—and we eagerly anticipate hearing how it helps you to advance your efforts.

The challenges facing the ocean are immense, and many of the problems are complicated both scientifically and politically. Yet, we are hopeful because of what we learned by listening to people from across this country. As a focus group participant from Charlotte, North Carolina, reminded us, “The ocean does something to your spirit.”

The ocean has given people something special and people are willing to give back. Every person’s actions will be different. Some will sign their first petition, while others will take the next step and pick up a phone to call a member of Congress, while others will organize with their communities for collective action. Many are willing to do something to protect that the ocean because they are heartwired to love it. We see opportunities to build a stronger conservation

movement that reflects the values, identities, lived experiences, and needs of *all* people.

We look forward to working with advocates and organizations in the months and years ahead to put these recommendations into action.

Thank you for taking the time to read through this messaging guide. If you have any questions about our recommendations or want to learn even more about our findings, please do not hesitate to reach out by emailing us at info@heartwiredforchange.com.

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METHODOLOGY

The content found in this messaging guide is based on a multi-year research effort. From 2016 to 2018, we conducted the following research.

- **Web-Based Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) Message & Frame Audit.** An analysis of the messages and frames used by conservation organizations working on ocean conservation issues from diverse perspectives. This research approach allowed us to develop an understanding of how stakeholder organizations are publicly framing their work and where there is overlap and divergence.
- **Stakeholder Convenings.** Three half-day convenings with stakeholders from environmental organizations and foundations doing ocean conservation work. These sessions have helped us to understand the parameters of change that conservation advocates are working to create.
- **Individual In-Depth Interviews.** Ten in-depth interviews were conducted in 2016 with stakeholders from NGOs doing ocean conservation work. These interviews allowed us to develop a more in-depth understanding of the nature of how people think and talk about their work, how they describe their goals, the proposed solutions, the nature of the challenges they face in advancing their work, and the audiences whose support they need to create change.
- **Polling Review & Assessment.** A review of publicly available and privately shared qualitative and quantitative data on ocean messaging and attitudes related to the ocean, ocean conservation, and ocean management. This analysis has helped us build a shared understanding of what we know, where there are conflicting or unclear findings that merit more work, and what we don't know.
- **Media Audit & Social Listening Research.** A national, English-language media audit and analysis conducted in early 2017 that focused on nine news outlets (mainstream and environmental publications with geographic diversity) to determine what ocean conservation news is being covered, who is being quoted and what frames and messages are being communicated. The media audit and social listening research gave us a baseline understanding of how advocates and opponents of ocean conservation are talking about the issue in the news media, how and what is being covered by news outlets, and how civically engaged Americans think and talk about ocean conservation issues, including the stickiness of organizational messages and frames.
- **Organizational Landscape Mapping.** A landscape mapping of U.S. organizations and programs doing ocean conservation work. This helped to chart the engagement approach (grassroots, policymakers, etc.), programmatic approach (science, advocacy, activism, etc.), and organizational budget size, and provide a comprehensive summary of how ocean advocates currently describe problems facing the ocean.
- **Audience Engagement Audit.** An audience engagement audit conducted among ten ocean conservation NGOs and programs in the spring of 2017. This audit helped us understand how ocean conservation NGOs and programs are currently engaging with and communicating directly to their most important constituents and provided us with message and storytelling content that we then tested in our exploratory focus groups described below.
- **Mindset Exploration Focus Groups.** Eight in-person focus groups conducted in June 2017, among key populations, including Latino, Black, Asian-Pacific Islander, and white men and women. These sessions allowed us to understand how our audiences personally experience the ocean and their understanding of ocean problems and potential solutions. They also provided a crucial platform for our initial development of values-

based frames, themes, messages, and messengers to help build and solidify support for the ocean. The findings allowed us to refine these approaches in subsequent research phases.

- **Two-Week Mindset Online Diary.** In December 2017, an in-depth, 14-day online diary was conducted to explore the mindset of our target audiences and deepen our understanding of key factors identified in the in-person focus groups. We also continued our exploration of messages and factors that can inspire protection of the ocean, including testing additional stories about ocean protection that built upon learnings from the in-person focus groups.
- **Online Segmentation Survey.** A large, national online survey conducted in April 2017, to identify audience segments currently receptive to ocean advocacy and which ones may require longer-term work to genuinely engage them. We also used this survey to develop psychographic profiles of key audience segments that are most fruitful for targeted communications. The survey included 4,067 adults ages 18 and older across the United States. The survey was conducted from April 17 to April 23, 2018 and has an overall margin of error of +/-1.5 percentage points. The margin of error is larger for subgroups and varies depending on the size of that subgroup.
- **Message/Messenger Online Bulletin Board.** A multi-day online bulletin board (also called an online focus group) conducted in July 2018 with a focus on message and video-messenger testing and refinement. Using video as a message-testing medium allows us to test messages in a way that combines content, context, messenger credibility, and emotional tone all in one platform—just as typically happens in a real-world communications environment. We included participants from our key Black, Latino, Asian-Pacific Islander, and white audience segments to test refined and strengthened messaging about ocean problems and solutions to explore which messages and messengers are most effective.
- **Message/Messenger Videos.** Working closely with the Advisory Group, we identified six sets of messengers to film in locations around the country. These messengers included Black, Latino, white, Asian-Pacific Islander, and mixed-race individuals, and families representing diverse backgrounds. We then created a customized interview guide for each interview, filmed each session using specialized production teams, and refined the messenger videos over three phases. The first versions were tested in the online bulletin board described above. This qualitative research method revealed what was most effective about these initial versions, as well as problematic elements or gaps that required an additional round of editing. A revised set of videos were then tested in the in-person focus groups, then revised once more for the quantitative dial-testing survey described below.
- **In-Person Messenger Video Testing Focus Groups.** Based on the learnings from our online bulletin board, we conducted additional message and video testing using eight in-person focus groups in different parts of the country over the course of four different nights in August and September 2018. After each night's groups, we further refined the message materials based on what we learned. We also tested print materials that matched messenger with message in these focus groups. The composition of these groups mirrored those conducted in the earlier Mindset phase.
- **Online Message Dial-Testing Survey.** Based on the online and in-person focus group findings, we further refined the videos and conducted an extensive online survey in October and November 2018 that integrated and expanded upon our initial qualitative findings. This survey helped to quantify the qualitative results and allowed us to further refine and test which messages are most effective among our target audiences. As with the focus groups, the dial-testing was conducted among each of our eight messaging audiences.
- **Message Research Advisory Group.** Throughout the multi-year research process, we continued to work with our advisory group made up of NGO and funder stakeholders. Through regular phone calls and email collaboration, the group helped guide the research process and messaging.



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