



Getting Below the Surface

Summary of Recommendations for Communicating Effectively
on the Ocean and Marine Conservation in the United Kingdom

In a new report, *Getting Below the Surface: Mapping the Gaps between Expert and Public Understandings of the Ocean and Marine Conservation in the United Kingdom*, the FrameWorks Institute compares expert and public views of the ocean and marine conservation to identify opportunities and challenges that experts and advocates face in communicating about these issues with the British public.

Understanding the public's existing ways of thinking about the ocean reveals a set of initial recommendations for communicators – strategies for avoiding unproductive ways of thinking and tapping into patterns of reasoning that increase understanding and motivate engagement. These recommendations are included in the conclusion of the full report, and are provided below with examples that illustrate the reframing strategies.

Strategic Framing Recommendations:

- 1. Avoid reliance on crisis language.** Messages that evoke strong senses of crisis are likely to strengthen people's sense of fatalism, leading them to think that little can be done to reverse existing damage or prevent further deterioration. Instead, communicators should establish urgency in their messages but emphasise a sense of efficacy – a sense that solutions are possible – and point to examples of success.

Before: The new Living Blue Planet Report launched today highlights that the population size of marine vertebrates has nearly halved since 1970. The overwhelming conclusion is that our oceans are in crisis. Overfishing, damage to habitats, pollution and climate change are clearly impacting significantly on marine biodiversity. And populations critical to human food security are also suffering serious declines. Reef fish populations alone have reduced in size by 34% between 1979 and 2010, not surprising when you consider that we have already lost 50% of our coral reefs in the last 30 years. With escalating sea temperatures and ocean acidification, we could also potentially see the loss of all of our coral reefs in most areas by 2050.¹

Part of establishing efficacy is including solutions statements that match the scale of the problem.

After: The new Living Blue Planet Report launched today highlights important actions we can take right now to protect the ocean. Increasing marine protected areas, restricting fishing areas and reducing fossil fuel emissions that contribute to climate change will protect and restore fishing populations and limit the warming of the ocean. Action is needed now more than ever, but we know what needs to be done. Overfishing, damage to habitats, pollution and climate change are clearly having significant effects on marine biodiversity. And populations critical to human food security are also suffering declines. By taking policy action now at the local, devolved, national and international levels, we can protect the ocean's biodiversity, slow the warming of the ocean and ensure human food security into the future.

- 2. Avoid talking about the ocean as an economic resource for human consumption.** While it is tempting to try to increase issue salience by arguing that the ocean is valuable because it provides necessary resources for human use, this approach is likely to sabotage conservation goals in the long run. Framing the ocean as a resource for human use sets up a short-term economic perspective that can lead people to conclude that conservation efforts do not yield sufficiently clear economic benefits to be worthwhile. When people think in terms of consumption and through economic frames, the immediate benefits of taking from the ocean may seem to outweigh longer-term harm, which can be difficult to grasp. The costs of conservation, when seen through an economic lens, seem burdensome and perhaps not worth the trouble. It is worth exploring whether resource language can be effectively used – but without clear research findings on how this frame can be used effectively, it is safer to avoid it at this point.
- 3. Cue and expand the idea of the ocean as a sustainer of human wellbeing.** A better strategy to clarify the ocean's importance is to strengthen the idea that the ocean *sustains* human wellbeing. This seemingly subtle reframe allows people to see changes to the ocean as threats to this sustaining function. The idea of sustenance invokes a vision of the ocean in its entirety – rather than

differentiating features or parts that are available for use, extraction or consumption – making it clear that the health of the whole ocean is critical, not just the parts that create economic benefits for humans. Furthermore, communicators should provide people with concrete examples of *how* the ocean sustains life and wellness, as the public’s understanding of this idea is rather vague. Explaining this is critical to help people understand the full consequences of harming the ocean and to motivate action and engagement.

- 4. Build on existing knowledge to expand understanding of marine systems.** The public’s existing recognition that natural systems are interconnected must be expanded. For example, communicators can use people’s knowledge about the water cycle to explain other exchanges between the atmosphere and ocean (carbon and heat), or build on knowledge about how trees provide oxygen to explain how ocean algae serve that same function. As we explain in the full report, specific framing tools are needed to explain specific systems (for example, the climate system) – but generally speaking, the more communicators can do to explain the ocean’s place within the planet’s natural systems, the more the public will recognise the ocean’s importance.
- 5. Emphasise ecosystem disruptions.** The public is attuned to the issue of endangered species, but needs help understanding how the endangerment of specific species disrupts entire ecosystems and has broader consequences. Communicators should highlight these systemic consequences of species endangerment to counter the perception that endangerment is an isolated problem that only specific species face.

Before: Single-use bags and plastic bags in particular are a menace to the amazing marine wildlife found in UK waters. Animals get entangled in them and mistake them for food. This can lead to infections, strangulation, starvation and even death. A charge is a simple, effective way to stop such a pervasive and ubiquitous form of pollution. That’s why we joined forces with The Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE), Keep Britain Tidy and Surfers Against Sewage (SAS) – to form the Break the Bag Habit campaign, calling on Westminster to reduce litter and waste by requiring retailers to introduce a small charge on all single-use bags.²

The suggested rewrite below adds only a sentence, but in so doing it widens understanding of the impacts of pollution beyond individual species.

After: Single-use bags and plastic bags in particular are a menace to the amazing marine wildlife found in UK waters. Animals get entangled in them and mistake them for food. This can lead to infections, strangulation, starvation and even death. When one animal is endangered, this disrupts the entire marine ecosystem and impacts on the ocean and human health. A charge is a simple, effective way to stop such a pervasive and ubiquitous form of pollution. That’s why we joined forces with The Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE), Keep Britain Tidy and Surfers Against Sewage (SAS) – to form the Break the Bag Habit campaign, calling on Westminster to reduce litter and waste by requiring retailers to introduce a small charge on all single-use bags.

- 6. Make sure to specify what government can and should do.** Communicators must help people understand the roles that different actors, including private and public agents and institutions, should play. In particular, communicators must explain what government can and should do at different

levels (local, devolved, national and international). Providing examples of what government can do and showing the effects of these actions is vital to effective communications about the ocean and marine conservation. This helps people understand what government should be responsible for, and combats fatalism by showing that outcomes can change as a result of taking action.

- 7. Introduce, explain and showcase specific systemic solutions.** In light of people's fatalism, lack of understanding about governmental roles and easy default to heroic individual action, communicators must help people understand what kinds of systemic changes are necessary for marine conservation. Explaining the types of solutions needed and how they work to improve outcomes not only clarifies the ask – what people should support – but also helps people see that there *are* concrete steps that can be taken to protect the ocean and address the threats it faces.
- 8. Avoid language that romanticises the vastness or mystery of the ocean.** Talking in this way will cue and strengthen a sense of separation from, rather than connection to, the ocean. Romanticised messaging also has the potential to trigger the idea that the ocean is so large that it is immune to substantive change and cannot be affected by human action. While it is important to invoke the planetary scale of the ocean, attention must simultaneously be paid to specific processes and connections between the ocean and other systems – thus demystifying the ocean, rather than allowing it to be a source of mystical murkiness.

Before: In such a vast expanse of ocean with not a lot happening on the surface, it makes sense that life would swarm to something new and interesting, to the little barnacles and mussels that begin to grow on [fish magnets]. The fish magnets we saw had a whole circus of marine life surrounding them including silky sharks, trigger fish, mahi mahi and rainbow runners. It was an incredible thing to get into the water and see them there, but knowing the purpose of the fish magnet made the experience bittersweet. We knew all the life there had been lured in and was destined to be killed. The only way to make fisheries fair is to ban purse seiners' use of FADS [Fish Aggregating Devices] altogether.³

The suggested rewrite below makes the same point with some minor changes. The romanticising language has been removed to avoid triggering the idea that the sea, in its vastness, is mysterious and unchanging. The paragraph has been lightly adjusted to suggest that fish are attracted to the new objects on the surface not because there is 'not a lot happening' there – a cue for the idea that the ocean is static and unchanging – but because the ocean is humming with life.

After: The ocean is a vibrant, complex ecosystem. Ocean life swarms to things that are new and interesting, including the little barnacles and mussels that begin to grow on fish magnets. The fish magnets we saw had a whole circus of marine life surrounding them including silky sharks, trigger fish, mahi mahi and rainbow runners. It was an incredible thing to get into the water and see them there, but knowing the purpose of the fish magnet made the experience bittersweet. We knew all the life there had been lured in and was destined to be killed. The only way to make fisheries accountable to responsibly manage the marine ecosystem is to ban purse seiners' use of FADS [Fish Aggregating Devices] altogether.

- 9. Discuss pollution other than oil spills and plastics.** To expand people's understanding of the sources of pollution, communicators should use examples of pollution that are less familiar to

members of the public. Bringing attention to other types of pollution is necessary to broaden people's understanding of the problems that need to be addressed.

10. Stress negative outcomes for *all* human populations, not only coastal communities. While extra attention to the vulnerability of coastal communities can at times be appropriate, it must complement a more pervasive strategy of speaking to shared risks and common fates – regardless of one's proximity to the ocean. The public already recognises that coastal populations face risks, yet there is less appreciation for threats to people who live inland. Communicators should emphasise widely applicable effects to counter the perception that changes to the ocean *only* matter for coastal communities.

11. Highlight compatibility between marine conservation and human prosperity. To counter the assumption that environmental and economic imperatives conflict with one another in a zero-sum game, communicators should offer examples of how marine conservation can *contribute* to economic advancement. For example, communicators can spotlight the kinds of jobs and scientific and technological advancements that accompany efforts to better preserve and protect ocean systems.

12. Avoid focusing solely on individual action. Although marine conservation activists will undoubtedly want to promote individual behaviour that protects the ocean (for example, reducing use of disposable plastic bottles), efforts to build public support for marine conservation policy should avoid appealing *exclusively* to individual action. Focusing too heavily on individual behaviour change is likely to reinforce people's perception of marine conservation as a private issue, rather than a public one. In addition, the difference in scale between the problems that conservationists raise and individual actions means that focusing exclusively on what individuals can do is likely to depress efficacy; any given individual's decision to avoid using disposable plastic bottles will not seem to make a difference. Activists should make sure to pair calls for individual behaviour change with calls for collective action and policy change.

Before: TAKE PERSONAL ACTION. Litterpicks are great but there are plenty of ways that you can do your bit to stop plastic marine litter at its source, by making different consumer choices and inspiring colleagues, friends and families.

- Don't buy bottled water, but get into the habit of taking a reusable bottle out and about.
- Refuse plastic coffee lids where possible. Invest in a reusable cup.
- When you order a drink, Say No to a Straw.
- Choose to refuse bags, especially small ones. Carry a reusable tote bag with you.⁴

The suggested rewrite below provides a more balanced discussion of solutions. Here, people can see the importance of both individual action and community-level solutions that change decision-making contexts.

After: TAKE COMMUNITY ACTION. Stop marine litter at its source by taking the following actions.

- Encourage local governments to make sure drinking water is available in lots of public spaces – and remember to carry water bottles.

- Start conversations in your favourite local coffee shop about ways to reduce the use of plastic coffee lids. Reusable cups are a great option.
- Let cup manufacturers know that straws are harming our ocean and we need alternatives. And say no to straws when you order a drink.
- Start a reusable tote bag bank in your community grocery shop so that no one has to use plastic bags, even when they forget to bring them.

13. Avoid the generic ‘we’ when attributing responsibility for ocean protection. Talking about how ‘we all’ are, or ‘everyone’ is, responsible will reinforce people’s underlying assumption of dispersed, individual responsibility. Communicators should emphasise the public’s collective responsibility in holding accountable governments at all levels as well as corporate and community actors.

Before: What needs to be done? We need to manage our relationship with the sea in ways that allow the wealth of marine wildlife to thrive, now and for future generations. We must use this amazing resource wisely. For some species and some special places, we must take protective measures that may mean closing off areas from harmful use, to allow replenishment and recovery.⁵

The suggested rewrite below names responsible actors and places special emphasis on the role of government regulatory action.

After: All parts of our society – including government, the private sector, communities and citizens – need to manage our relationship with the sea in ways that allow the wealth of marine wildlife to thrive, now and for future generations. Government action is particularly important to preserve the amazing sea. For some species and some special places, we must take protective measures that may mean closing off areas from harmful use to allow replenishment and recovery.

These recommendations provide initial strategies that communicators can use to message more effectively about the ocean and marine conservation. Further research is needed to develop frames and strategies capable of overcoming the deepest gaps and challenges identified in the full report.

¹ Retrieved from: <http://blogs.wwf.org.uk/blog/wildlife/nearly-half-our-marine-vertebrates-since-1970/>

² Retrieved from: http://www.mcsuk.org/what_we_do/Clean+seas+and+beaches/Campaigns+and+policy/Break+the+Bag+Habit

³ Retrieved from: <http://tuna.greenpeace.org/en-AU/stories/7400-miles-later-what-we-found-in-the-deep-blue-sea/#>

⁴ Adapted from: <https://www.citytosea.org.uk/do-your-bit/>

⁵ Retrieved from: https://www.mcsuk.org/conservation_in_action