Freedom to Breathe Easier: A Language Analysis On Conservation

<u>**Introduction**</u>

We all want to believe ourselves creatures of reason, swayed chiefly by the facts before us. But much of the cognitive process we use to formulate judgments is beyond our conscious awareness and thus outside our deliberate control. We can know only what we *think* that we think; evidence shows that a turn of phrase or the ordering of an argument alters what we deem "true" and what we desire in terms of public policy.[1]

So, how should advocates for equitable and just conservation of our environment make our case? How do we move from reacting to the frames and disinformation pushed by our opposition to crafting an enticing narrative that has audiences take action to care for our world and each other so we all can thrive?

To begin to answer these questions, we've explored how people make sense of and come to judgments about CONSERVATION[2] and related notions. These findings emerge from analysis of discourse from advocacy, opposition, social media and news media in the U.S., and from two elicitation calls with advocates. The present data set is made up of over 1,000 tokens — unique constructions attesting to reasoning. Also included in this analysis are previous explorations into persuasion and perception on issues with relevancy to conservation discourse.

We proceed from the assumption that our task is to improve the conceptual terrain from which our audiences will hear arguments about our issue. As such, we're not exploring how to advocate for a specific policy intervention. Instead, this is a look at how our core arguments can be worded to most effectively prime positive associations and tamp down undesirable ones within our target audiences.

We start our exploration diving into a familiar messaging mis-step: shielding the culprits for problems from view. After examining this, and offering correctives where possible, we move onto how advocates hinder their efficacy by arguing from their opposition's frames through simple negation or language that privileges capital over our wellbeing and that of the places we call home. Next, we examine the overall CONSERVATION storyline offered, and what's profiled and eclipsed from view.

This document is admittedly heavy on diagnosis and light on cure – an inherent aspect of analyzing present-day discourse, but one that facilitates what comes next: crafting and empirically testing new approaches.

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[1] Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking Fast and Slow*. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011).
[2] SMALL CAPS signals a concept or frame rather than the word's meaning in commonplace usage.

Methodology

Using a variety of techniques from *cognitive linguistics*, a field dedicated to how people process information and communicate, we've examined how people reason, formulate judgments and come to conclusions about social and economic matters.

Principally, these conclusions emerge from *metaphor analysis*. This involves cataloging common non-literal phrases in discourse. Noting patterns in these expressions reveals how people automatically and unconsciously make sense of complexity.[3] Each metaphor brings with it *entailments*, or a set of notions it highlights as "true" about a concept. Priming people with varying metaphors has been shown to alter not just how they speak but the ways they decide, unconsciously, what "ought" to be done about a given topic. We judge a metaphor's efficacy on how well it advances and amplifies what advocates wish the public would get about an issue.

For example, researchers at Stanford University showed that individuals primed with a metaphor of CRIME AS DISEASE (*plaguing* our communities, *spreading* around) came up with preventative solutions for crime such as after school programs and preschool for all. Conversely, subjects exposed to the frame of CRIME AS OPPONENT (*fight* crime, *beat back* homicide) thought harsher punishments were the answer.[4] For those working for criminal justice reform, these results suggest it best to liken CRIME to a DISEASE and avoid OPPONENT evocations. A three-strikes advocate would want to do the opposite.

Even single words can make a detectable difference in audience responses. In another experiment, ASO, alongside pollsters and other experts, found phrasing a policy demand for "people seeking asylum" yielded an eight-point advantage over one voiced on behalf of "asylum seekers" among a representative sample of 1200 Australians. Further, respondents were inclined toward a harsher stance when we addressed them "as Australians" than when we referred to them "as caring people." The words we use shape what's true for our audiences.

Findings

We turn now to what applying these aforementioned tools to this particular language data tells us. Here, we find some common messaging missteps — visible across issue areas — and explore how these manifest and can be corrected in your particular context. Specifically, we begin with an exploration of over-reliance on passive constructions.

Who does what to whom?

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[3] George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By, 2ⁿᵈ ed.* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

[4] Paul Thibodeau and Lera Boroditsky, "Metaphors We Think With: The Role of Metaphor in Reasoning." *PloS One, February 23, 2011*.

Altering descriptions of events influence how audiences assess culpability and determine what they believe a fair outcome will be. In particular, varying verb forms between agentive and non-agentive can create significant changes to audiences' judgments about real world events. In one experiment, using the infamous "wardrobe malfunction" during the Super Bowl Halftime Show in 2004, researchers found that respondents who read that a named agent (Justin Timberlake) "tore" another's (Janet Jackson's) clothing attributed blame and sought to levy at least 30 percent more in indecency fines than those who read a description that said "the clothing was torn." This is especially telling because all the participants first watched the same video footage, which clearly shows Timberlake ripping Jackson's clothing.[5]

This research and its antecedents bring into focus a major challenge any social justice-seeking organization faces in communication: defining the problem it seeks to solve.

Obscuring the origins of problems

Across the progressive landscape, there's a tendency to describe problems without naming how they came to be. Here are some of the countless examples[6] from the present data on CONSERVATION:

> During the past few years, [name of place] **has experienced** infrastructural and public health failures in regards to their water sourcing and treatment processes.

> The system **was already in decline** prior to the storm given years of lack of maintenance and investment.

> [M]any **are exposed** to harmful pollutants and waterborne diseases in their drinking water for several reasons, including industrial pollution, crumbling infrastructure, leaching from lead pipes, and agricultural runoff.

A major obstacle advocates have in explaining environmental injustice and why people face all of the difficulties they do is **frequent use of non-agentive constructions.** In the examples above, there is never a single culprit or even an actor named – suggesting no obvious means to change conditions. Fortunately, we can remedy this form of non-agentive construction with relative ease:

> During the past few years, **[name of place's] elected leaders and their corporate donors have failed the people** of the [place], **jeopardizing** their health and the infrastructure and water people rely on.

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[5] Caitlin Fausey and Lera Borodtisky, Subtle linguistic cues influence perceived blame and financial liability, *Psychonomic Bulletin and Review, September 2010.*

[6] Throughout this document, sources are deliberately not cited and potentially distinguishing details are omitted. This is to ensure that examples are read as attesting to a wide-spread pattern rather than impugning any author or organization.

> **The [name] corporation neglected the system and failed to provide critical maintenance** for years, causing the power grid to collapse during the storm.

> **Greedy corporations and the politicians they pay for expose** many people to harmful pollutants and waterborne diseases **by polluting** drinking water, **failing to maintain** crumbling infrastructure, **leaving old lead pipes to leach** into water, **and allowing** agricultural runoff.

This non-agentive language is especially prominent – and especially problematic – in descriptions of disparities, where advocates detail how one group suffers more than another because of race, class, or gender:

> Latino/a/e children in the U.S. **are twice as likely** as non-Latino/a/e whites to die from asthma attacks, largely due to the disproportionate pollution burden Latino/a/e communities **are exposed to**.

> One serious consequence of contaminated drinking water **is harm** to reproductive health, a cost **that is borne** disproportionately by women of color and their families.

> Native Americans and Alaska Natives **are especially vulnerable** and **are experiencing** disproportionate negative impacts on their cultures, health, and food systems.

While illuminating race and gender-based harms is critical, these examples (and many more we could have included) merely state that specific communities experience greater harm than their whiter and wealthier counterparts, without ever explaining who is responsible for creating these barriers to wellbeing. This approach not only shields the perpetrators from view, but inadvertently suggests that the people harmed might *themselves* be to blame. Without a villain actively exposing Latino children, women of color, or Native Americans and Alaska Natives to pollution, audiences are left to come up with their own story for why families of color experience greater harm – and too often the story they fill in is one of negligence, laziness, or weakness on the part of those suffering.

In order to avoid reinforcing existing biases about people of color and other targeted groups, we can rewrite the above examples using active phrasing with a named agent:

> **Corporations target Latino neighborhoods when releasing pollutants into the air**, **killing** Latino children in the U.S. through asthma attacks at twice the rate of non-Latino white children.

> **Corporations harm** Americans' reproductive health **by contaminating** our drinking water. **They spew** most of their toxins into communities of color, **hurting** women of color and their families most.

> **Fossil fuel executives pollute** Native American and Alaska Native communities, threatening cultures, health, and food systems.

A 2023 research project conducted by ASO, We Make the Future, Lake Research Partners, and HIT Strategies confirmed the importance of naming a villain and using the active voice when describing environmental injustice.[7] Respondents rated the same disparities as more concerning when rendered through the active voice ("**Corporations dump** pollutants and toxic chemicals in Black communities…") than when expressed through passive voice ("Black communities **are often exposed** to more environmental health risks…").[8] Base participants who heard active descriptions were also more likely to say that holding corporations accountable – as opposed to loosening regulations – was the best way for elected leaders to address climate change.

Even when advocates in our present data endeavor to explain the origin of problems or bring those responsible for harm into view, our continued use of non-agentive constructions undermines our story. In the following examples, advocates assign culpability to broad, abstract forces instead of to human beings or merely state that a bad actor is "linked" to harms as opposed to directly causing them. Below each example, we have demonstrated in italics ways to correct for this tendency:

> **Our world faces** several existential threats **whose roots lie in environmental and social injustice**.
> *Corporations unjustly pollute communities based on race and wealth, damaging the climate and threatening our world's survival.*
>
> The destruction and degradation of tropical rainforests **driven by industrial agriculture is linked to** human rights abuses, displacement of Indigenous Peoples and local communities, and destruction of critical species habitat.
> *Industrial agriculture corporations destroy and degrade tropical forests, violating human rights, displacing Indigenous Peoples and local communities, and destroying critical species habitat.*

We also find an approach where advocates come close but don't quite nail agency. For example: "They profit while we lose our homes." By failing to explicitly state that our antagonists profit *by* destroying our homes – as opposed to passively benefiting while we suffer – the contrast here only communicates corporate leaders' callousness, not their culpability. Naming a villain is important, but insufficient on its own.

Ironically, in the absence of a human actor, often the very land, water, and climate that advocates champion becomes the villain in our language. Most frequently, we personify "climate change" itself as a malevolent actor turning nature against us:

> **Climate change is happening** here and it's happening now. As **temperatures rise**, experiencing **extreme weather in the form of wildfires, droughts, heat waves and storms is becoming** more of a norm.

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[7] https://www.wemakethefuture.us/resources-docs/slides-mobilizing-toward-climate-justice
[8] Emphasis added

Extreme weather patterns caused by climate change, such as hurricanes, have increased around the country, resulting in catastrophic floods in Vermont and unprecedented heat in Arizona.

Disease, severe weather, loss of food sources, altered breeding cues, and other climate effects are unraveling the delicate balance of life in every ecosystem in America.

Food insecurity, extreme weather events, and water scarcity – all of which are made worse by **climate change** – **increase the risk** that women, girls, and gender-diverse individuals will be put in situations where their physical, mental, and emotional health is compromised.

Hawaiʻi **is experiencing the worst consequences of climate change,** with our communities on the frontlines of **fires, floods, extreme weather and coastal erosion**.

Our description of the problem must cue the solutions we desire. While some people still deny the reality of climate change, a far bigger challenge for advocates than convincing audiences that climate change is real is convincing them that we have solutions and the power to implement them. Taking the first example, here again is a demonstration of how we can insert human actors:

Corporations, from fossil fuels to industrial agriculture, are changing our climate. As **they continue to raise** temperatures, **these corporations force us to bear the consequences** in the form of wildfires, droughts, heat waves and storms.

By telling communities that they are under constant threat from the environment where an unseen force is spreading destruction, advocates reinforce the sense that this is something beyond our control – instilling powerlessness, fear, and possibly even distrust of the planet portrayed as attacking us. It is critical that we render our problem as one that can be resolved through human means, rather than beyond the reach of our collective power.

Approaching agency

To be sure, we *do* see examples of sentences that either conform or get admirably close to what we shorthand as the *people do things* rule:

[Trump] is only concerned with helping out his billionaire buddies in the fossil fuel industry. In exchange for their loyalty and political dollars, he will **lie** to the American people and **sacrifice** their lives.

On Day 1, Trump is enacting executive orders that **hand billions** to fossil fuel billionaires, **dismantle** green energy initiatives, and scapegoat marginalized communities.

Big Oil **knew**. For decades, **they lied** to protect their profits.

> Corporate polluters can **dump sewage** in your water, **spew toxic gas** into your air, and **double down on burning** the fossil fuels driving us into climate apocalypse.

> Together we speak truth to power and **expose those who endanger** the health of people and the planet for corporate profit.

We're heartened to see these examples of active language, many of which not only name how the opposition harms us but go a step further to expose their motivations. As the last example hints, this is critical in empowering people to demand a solution. Once we tell a clear story of how specific groups of people created our problems for their own benefit, the path towards redress becomes clearer.

However, advocates employ the kinds of constructions above infrequently. These rare examples are thus insufficient rejoinder to the prevailing sense that climate disasters are inevitable and we are powerless to stop them.

Fighting on our opposition's turf

In addition to making current problems seem natural or to emerge from the ether, we find another common messaging misstep in this discourse: reinforcing our opposition's arguments while trying to make the case for our own. At times, we unintentionally hamper our efficacy by walking onto the other side's field and trying to fight for hearts and minds from there.

Giving our opposition more air time

In this data, we find a familiar tendency to hand our opponents precious airtime. In its simplest form, this occurs through negation. Here is a sampling, followed by revisions for each example. Note, corrections go beyond addressing simple negation to also contend with other messaging issues:

> This is **not** government efficiency.
> *This is a hostile takeover of our government by the MAGA regime.*

> **No one creates or steers hurricanes**; the technology does not exist.
> *Wealthy corporations spread lies about the climate disasters their greed fuels.*

> There is **no "deep state"** — only park rangers, biologists, historians, maintenance workers, and other dedicated professionals committed to preserving our nation's most cherished natural and cultural heritage."
> *The MAGA regime is attacking the public servants most committed to keeping our nation healthy, including park rangers, biologists and maintenance workers.*

When we repeat our opponents, in a laudable effort to discredit them, we risk cementing their false claims. Indeed, research demonstrates that people have difficulty

processing negation[9] and, after hearing such assertions, people recall the claim and have trouble remembering whether it was true or false.[10]

In the rewrites above, we asserted what *is* true instead of refuting what is not. Additionally – in order to acknowledge the existence of the falsehood without repeating it – we named that the people causing harm are also spreading lies about the source of our problems. We explain why people might have heard a different story from our opposition without reinforcing our opposition's frame.

Feeding what we fight

Textbook negation as seen above is relatively easy to correct. But we also find another, subtler, form of negation that requires more profound rethinking: a common tendency to speak about what we're against rather than lift up what we endorse. Here is a small sampling from advocate rhetoric:

Ban private jets

End the extraction and burning of fossil fuels

Stop burning our future

STOP THE PUBLIC LAND SELL-OFF!

The tendency to make negative demands – calls that proclaim "don't" or "stop" or "end" – unfortunately amplifies the bad thing we are attempting to thwart and obscures any positive vision for the future we are trying to achieve. In lieu of this, we must keep front and center what we are *for*.

Back to the future

Compare a negative demand like "stop burning our future" to the following statements:

Working for a clean energy future.

Our goal is to ensure that we use our resources wisely so we can provide for our families today while leaving our land in even better shape for future generations of Americans.

[W]orking together to build a sustainable future of safe and abundant food, fiber and renewable fuel for our nation and the world.

[W]e're building a smarter, cleaner, more reliable energy future.

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https://www.drugtodayonline.com/medical-news/news-topic/18885-study-shows-how-the-brain-understands-negative-words
[10] https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0022103103001367

All of these examples are forward-looking, confident, and positive, instilling a sense that we *can* tackle the challenges that face us and create a better world.

And all of these examples – plus many more like them – come from fossil fuel corporations.

Advocates' heavy use of negative demands is a symptom of a larger problem: a tendency to cede our very future to the opposition. A handful of advocates do refer to the future, describing it as something we can construct, exhorting audiences to "build the world we want to see together," or reminding us that we all "play a role in the creation of our future." Yet the imbalance between advocate and opposition rhetoric on this is stark. While the opposition speaks optimistically and proactively about tomorrow (Exxon Mobil cheerfully boasts their commitment to "Protect Tomorrow. Today."), advocates focus primarily on stopping present harms and, when looking forward, preventing bad outcomes or restoring a past ideal.

This is despite heavy use of a JOURNEY metaphor for CONSERVATION. Advocates position ourselves as "leading **the way**," declare "public lands are at a **crossroads**," and assert that "the clean energy transition is already happening, and some **bumps in the road** will not stop it." Yet, while insisting "we won't **go backward** on clean energy," advocates rarely name where we *will* go. Instead of detailing a destination, we more often focus on what we need to "transition away from," offering weakly that "while we cannot reverse what's already been done to our planet, we can prevent it from getting worse."

In the absence of a clear, forward-looking progressive vision, our opposition has claimed for themselves the role of "build[ing] a more sustainable future for the planet, our customers, our team and our industry." Thus, this gap in our messaging, combined with our use of passive language that obscures the origins of problems, enables fossil fuel corporations to sell themselves as the solution while refusing to even admit to the crisis they created.

That said, there *are* a few examples of affirmative demands from advocates within the data:

> Vote for clean water.

> Protect Our Home.

> Secure clean air and water as rights for all.

> Call Congress right now and demand they protect your families, protect clean water, protect clean air and stand up to Trump.

Protect 30×30 to avoid massive species loss, secure equitable access to nature's benefits, and prevent and repair the impacts of the climate crisis for all communities.

Yet even these sparse examples are often still grounded in loss aversion and amelioration – *protect*, *secure*, *repair* – rather than the creation of good. This is in part due to the nature of CONSERVATION itself. As we'll address later, CONSERVATION as a term is inherently status-quo preserving, making it a challenging foundation from which to claim the future.

When advocates *do* paint a positive vision of the future, it is quite powerful. Take, for instance: "We believe in a world where every child grows up healthy and safe, breathing clean air, drinking pure water, and thriving in nurturing spaces." This Facebook post, which accompanied an adorable drawing by a six-year-old child, uses visceral, personal, evocative language that allows the audience to picture the future we desire. When paired with a demand, forward-looking language like this can empower and mobilize our audiences.

Unfortunately, most advocate examples along these lines are currently siloed as standalone vision or values statements, relegated to an "About Us" page, but absent from everyday calls to action or discussions of the problem. Additionally, many use overly complicated language that makes it difficult to see the "beautiful tomorrow" in everyday lived-experience terms for which people hunger:

A world in which a dynamic and inclusive conservation movement, effective and equitable natural resource governance, and the environmental rule of law and obligations protect and sustain healthy biodiversity while contributing to the realisation of human rights, social equity, gender equality, good health and well-being, prosperity, respect for the rights of nature, resilience to climate change, and a just transition to sustainability.

We envision a healthy and equitable society where communities of color are liberated from disproportionate environmental burdens, free to breathe fresh air, drink pure water, access clean transportation and enjoy our majestic public lands, ocean, and waters.

Here, academic and legal jargon gets in the way of an inspiring vision and some beautiful and evocative phrases.

ROI Nature-edition

Another complex way advocates inadvertently feed our opposition's worldview is by basing our argument in the right-wing frame of what is "good for the economy" rather than what is good for people and our planet. Here, advocates promote conservation as an "investment," quantify nature by assigning it a dollar value, and describe harms that span incalculable deaths and destruction using monetary figures:

Hawaiʻi's ecosystems and biocultural resources provide **over $6 billion in value to our economy** each year.

Many countries face a future without enough water to meet their needs, **limiting economic growth** and contributing to migration and regional instability.

Renewables are booming, and that's good news for public health and **people's pocketbooks**.

The Public Lands Rule builds on **historic investments** in public lands, waters and clean energy deployment provided by President Biden's Investing in America agenda, which recognizes the critical value of our public lands to all Americans.

Early estimates suggest the **economic losses** of Helene could surpass **$50 billion dollars**, putting the storm costs on the same scale as Hurricanes Katrina, Sandy, and Harvey.

Federally managed rural development programs should recognize and prioritize the **economic value of natural areas**, particularly for their role in supporting **outdoor recreation economies**.

The new administration, Congress, and Secretary of the Interior have set a course to sell and shut down these cherished outdoor spaces, threatening the **$640-billion recreation economy**.

In these examples and many others, advocates cede the moral high ground by emphasizing right-wing fixation on financial gain and fiscal responsibility over human lives. We do not seek to preserve our communities and our planet because it's cost effective. Moreover, true justice, stewardship and equity would require massive outlays. Further, regardless of the actual facts, our opposition has the brand advantage when it comes to "economic growth" and lowering costs. Indeed, using the language of investment and cost efficiency can easily backfire, bringing to the fore public spending on prominent environmental projects. Take this opposition tweet: "[Person] mentions the 'clean school bus program' as an example of #environmentaljustice, but is spending $292,302 per electric bus a good return on investment when it's a 84% difference over a diesel bus?" By locating our case in what is good for the economy and "people's pocketbooks," we are agreeing to have our opposition's debate – at which point we have already lost.

To be clear, we can and should highlight how conservation improves human lives and livelihoods, including our ability to put food on the table, provide for our families, and contribute to our communities. We must take care, though, to express this through lived benefits and the *experience* of economic well-being – not through dollar figures or veneration of an abstract entity called the economy.

Clean and clear and under (authoritarian) control

Perhaps the trickiest challenge in this data is the concept of PURITY and the use of "clean" and "dirty" to describe environmental impacts.[11] Applied to CONSERVATION, it operates simultaneously on both a literal and a metaphorical level. "Clean air," "clean water," and "clean/dirty energy" are all long-standing terms in movements for environmental justice. Most people have experience with waste that physically pollutes our surroundings in ways that we can see, touch, taste, and smell. We can immediately visualize the difference between clear or smog-choked sky, clean or lead-contaminated water, a pristine field or one littered with trash.

Evocations of purity applied to SOCIETY, however, have long been employed by fascists to trigger disgust with a contaminating "other" and fuel reactionary, racist, and nativist sentiment.[12] Given how integral this framework of purity and contamination, cleanliness and disgust is to how we conceptualize CONSERVATION, it might be neither desirable nor even possible for advocates to shift away from it. Indeed, from visitors posting their impressions of national parks to local anglers organizing club outings, much of the layperson speech in this data paints conservation through a clean and clear frame:

> That water is **so clear** wow

> We're always happy to do our part in **keeping our trails clean** and open for everyone to enjoy.

> What a great turnout for last weekend's Boise **River cleanup**! [...] River flows should increase by the end of the month -- we're grateful there will be **that much less garbage** in our river!

Still, it is worth considering how the opposition uses PURITY for their own ends. Just as fossil fuel corporations claim to be leading the "clean energy future," Trump supporters hail his obsession with cleanliness as the "embrace of a true conservation ethic." In a confirmation hearing, a key appointee touted how "President Trump's energy dominance vision" will not only end wars and reduce inflation, but "will achieve those goals while **championing clean air, clean water, and protecting our beautiful lands**." Trump himself regularly fixates on cleanliness when speaking about the environment:

> I am authorizing my Administration to immediately begin producing Energy with **BEAUTIFUL, CLEAN COAL**.

> During our four years, we had **the cleanest air and the cleanest water**.

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[11] Thanks to Eliot M. Cohen for his thinking and observations on the use of the purity frame in environmental discourse.
[12] https://kpu.pressbooks.pub/politicalideologies2e/chapter/10-1-3-purity/

In his first term, Trump suggested California should be **"raking" their forests to clean up** dead brush and trees.

We want **crystal-clear water, beautiful water**.

I see again the forest fires are starting. They're starting again in California. I said, **you gotta clean your floors, you gotta clean your forests** — there are many, many years of leaves and broken trees and they're like, like, so flammable, you touch them and it goes up.

That gorgeous, beautiful Pennsylvania countryside they got these **big ugly suckers** [windmills] hanging down. They're **rusting and rotting** [...] **rusting and disgusting-looking**.

Under Trump, coal is beautiful and clean, while "ugly windmills" are a form of dirty energy that "ruin your neighborhood." The right invokes PURITY – and particularly the aesthetics of cleanliness, pairing clean with "beautiful" and dirty with "ugly" – to impugn advocates and establish themselves as the trusted authority on conservation. Energy corporations and right-wing media, for example, gleefully shared the headline: "'Landman' clip goes viral slamming renewable energy: 'There is nothing clean about this.'" A new opposition outfit, meanwhile, has launched a campaign to "Make America Beautiful Again" through "cutting-edge technology," "private-public partnerships" and "tools like AI."

Moreover, particularly in the right-wing rendering, purity and cleanliness is often understood as an all-or-nothing framework. It's a binary: something is *either* clean or dirty, pure or impure. Even when Trump speaks of "the cleanest air and the cleanest water," which suggests a spectrum of cleanliness, he uses it much the same way he might use "manliest man" – impugning anything that does not meet that standard as not truly being a man, not truly being clean. This stark either/or framework makes for challenging advocacy terrain, undermining nuanced approaches, harm reduction solutions, and a commitment to making things better even if perfect is never within reach.

Most insidiously of all, right wing actors are fusing the cleanliness framework on conservation with their fascist conception of a pure society. In the examples below, the opposition frames immigrants as both a source of *and* form of contamination:

The Democrats' **border invasion** under Joe Biden led to **significant environmental damage** on federal borderlands, including millions of pounds of **trash, illegal campfires, and human waste**.

Biden uses those lands for purposes never intended, such as the **warehousing of the illegal aliens pouring into the country**.

> Representative Ciscomani's legislation prevents further **environmental harm from illegal immigration**, increases penalties for **those who pollute these areas**, and expands Border Patrol's accessibility in wilderness areas.

There are only a handful of statements connecting pollution to immigration in the data, but these examples are extremely disturbing. Combined with the opposition's frequent use of "clean" and Trump's aesthetics of environmental purity, this is a concerning trend – and suggests advocates should exercise caution in using the language of cleanliness. Now as authoritarian leaders increasingly try to control public life, criminalize homelessness, and flood discourse with xenophobic ideas of sterility, we must be careful not to feed into their narrative about eliminating the people they deem to be impure. Our end goal is a safe and healthy nation for all, not just the wealthy White few.

While also susceptible to right-wing cooptation, words like "healthy" and "safe" (e.g., "healthy air to breathe," "safe water to drink") are possible alternatives to "clean" and "clear."

Conservation as limiting

A fundamental challenge with the present advocacy discourse is the limitation inherent to the term and concept of *conservation*. While advocates use CONSERVATION to cover a broad range of organizing and demands, from environmental protection to land rematriation to green city planning, the word itself means to preserve the status quo. This is in direct conflict with advocates' true goal of building an environmentally just future that is decidedly different from the present or the past. "Conserve" also exists within a frame in which the element described is assumed to "serve." When we, for example, "conserve water," we are shutting off the tap while we brush only to open it when we rinse our mouth. While it means to use wisely and sparingly, it still suggests that the earth exists for us to consume. Again, this contradicts the goals advocates have articulated.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, the word "conserve" appears only five times in our data of over 1,000 tokens – and of those, two examples come from the opposition. "Conservation" is more common, but even then advocates use it almost exclusively as a label – a *conservation policy*, a *conservation organization*, the *conservation movement*. Indeed, advocates who do use this label frequently cite it to redefine it; for example: "For a lot of us, conservation is a reconnection to land."

It seems clear, then, that the label of *conservation* does not serve the movement. To determine an alternate way to speak about this work, we must examine what, precisely, advocates *are* championing under the banner of CONSERVATION.

What – or who – is nature?

To understand what advocates mean by CONSERVATION, we need to begin closer to the ground, looking at conceptions of nature and the earth. Advocates, opposition, media, and everyday people employ a range of metaphorical models for NATURE.

Object to protect

Presenting IDEAS AS OBJECTS is incredibly common, and NATURE is no exception. Public lands are something that can be "[put…] back in Indigenous hands" or kept from the mining industry's "grasp." Frequently, it is an object that is dwindling or disappearing:

> Americans must be prepared to stand up for our wildlands **if we want to save some for future generations**.

> **Once all of this is gone**, we will never get it back.

While this metaphor is so common as to likely be unavoidable at times, the way that advocates use it matters. Presenting NATURE as an OBJECT that can be possessed, as in the examples above, sets it apart from us as human beings and establishes it as something static that can be acted upon or used, as opposed to a living being in its own right. This facilitates our primary relationship to nature as one of ownership.

Consider the difference between "putting nature back in Indigenous hands" and an alternative we might propose: "ensuring nature thrives under Indigenous stewardship." *Stewardship* appears repeatedly in the data: for example, "steward our public lands" or "being good stewards of the planet." Stewardship is a helpful way to shift towards an understanding of NATURE as a PROCESS we guide as opposed to an OBJECT we own.

This relates to the pervasive articulation in this data of nature not just as an object, but specifically as a vulnerable one that requires our *protection*:

> [W]orking tirelessly **to protect** wildlife and wild places

> Over four years, the Biden administration **protected more lands and waters**—674 million acres—than any other president in history.

> **Protect** Oceans. Protect Workers.

> Our parks **need you**.

> We owe it to our neighbors, our communities, and our future generations to **protect our state's resources** and local voices.

> We're fighting to **protect the public lands** and parks you care about.

Before the transfer of presidential power on January 20, 2025, President Biden and his administration acted to **protect the environment**.

Protect the mountains and rivers in our area, to conserve resources and be more climate-resilient.

The Supreme Court has once again undermined the Environmental Protection Agency's ability to do its job, stripping regulators of the power to **protect our nation's waters** from dangerous pollution.

If someone wanted to distill conservation rhetoric into a single word, they would have a strong case for it to be "protect." Notably, the use of "protect" is not applied exclusively to nature, as shown in the examples above that pair "oceans" with "workers" and "resources" with "voices." At various points, advocates characterize CONSERVATION as including the protection of everything from children to communities to cultures. Sometimes advocates even explicitly broaden what constitutes the "object" that is nature, defining the entity they seek to protect as not just the physical land, water, or climate but *also* the intangible human connection to or experience of these phenomena: "The [trail] is **protected** and maintained **not only for the physical trail** itself, but more importantly, **for the experiences** it provides."

Advocates thus use the *protection* frame in a flexible way, encompassing multiple definitions of conservation and frequently shifting the bounds of what, precisely, conservationists protect. But the opposition deploys *protection* as a cudgel; in their usage the border between environment and human is strictly enforced. For them, protection is zero-sum, requiring a tradeoff: protecting nature requires we neglect people. There are times they deem it appropriate to protect nature, but with the caveat that the more we protect nature, the less we protect ourselves.

In his directive, Trump framed his policy as a fight against "radical environmentalism," stating that California's current approach prioritizes the **protection of the Delta smelt and other fish over the well-being of its residents**.

Not every acre of federal land is a national park or a wilderness area. **Some of those areas we have to absolutely protect for their precious stuff. But the rest of it, this is America's balance sheet.**

The environmental movement is actively working to **turn half our nation into a nature preserve, off-limits to everyone** from back-packers to farmers.

The opposition portrays protecting nature as inherently at odds with the interests of human beings. The last example goes further, asserting that protecting the environment by definition requires severing people from the land. A protected land is a land without humans – necessary here and there for a small patch of the earth, perhaps, but entirely unfeasible, even suicidal for humanity, at scale. Much like the binary of clean/dirty or pure/impure, protection for the opposition is all or nothing.

Popular use of phrases like "leave no trace" suggests that this understanding resonates beyond our opposition. Take this account from a hiker: "The sun was shining, the birds were singing, and the fresh scent of pine filled the air. But as we rounded a bend, the scene changed -- trampled vegetation, scattered trash, a fire pit still smoldering." Presumably the sight of trampled vegetation, scattered trash, and smoldering fire pit did not literally stop the sun from shining or the birds from singing. But this evidence of human presence jolted the hiker out of nature, even as they stood on the same path they had moments before. Rounding the bend, they crossed over from protected wilderness to contaminated land.

Here we see the challenge with trying to use a policy goal like Protect 30x30 as a public-facing message. Even though advocates at times define protecting nature as protecting people, the dominant usage and understanding of a "protected" place is of wilderness untouched by humans. Despite advocacy materials emphasizing the initiative's benefits for humanity, the shorthand Protect 30x30 can all too easily be heard as putting a large chunk of the world "off-limits" to people – taking land, resources, and water away from humans at a time when 'natural' disasters are displacing millions of families.

When protection is understood as a choice between people and the environment, the environment will always lose. We thus must take care not to reinforce that nature is a separate and separable entity from humans in our use of the word *protect*.

Nature as battlesite or spoils of war

Frequently, advocates complement the language of protection with the rhetoric of war:

> Trump is **taking aim** at Alaska's public lands and we need to act NOW to **protect them**.

> [A] myriad of supporters and collaborators stood up all year **to battle to protect** the Gullah/Geechee Nation's epicenter, historic St. Helena Island from destructionment as we had done to Save Bay Point.

> The Western Arctic, the Arctic Wildlife Refuge, and the Tongass National Forest are a few of the public lands **under attack**.

> [E]ducate and **enlist humanity to protect** and restore the quality of the natural and human environment

> Our Environment is **Under Siege**

> It's time to **rise up** like never before and **fight for our climate** and communities.

Even more than *protection* on its own, this BATTLE language reinforces that our environment is wholly separate from us. *We* are not under siege – our environment is.

Nature is an object that two sides are fighting to control, and it's possible for a neutral party to decide to sit this war out. Simply by saying it's critical to "**enlist** humanity to protect and restore" the environment, for example, we accept the troubling premise that there is such a thing as humanity without nature.

In the BATTLE metaphor, the environment is often a treasure to be won or defended. A related conceptualization is of NATURE AS GIFT:

> Donald Trump is once again **attempting to gift-wrap America's protected special and sacred spaces** for corporate polluters to destroy them.

> The times we live in show that we are not relating to the **Earth as a gift** from our Creator, but rather as a resource to be used.

> [W]e can work towards a future where everyone has the opportunity to enjoy and benefit from **nature's plentiful gifts**.

Here, nature is once again something that exists apart from us. It's a good thing, yes, but it is a bonus – while a gift is usually appreciated, it is not essential to our survival or even something we should expect to receive. Moreover, it is ours by right and its only function is to serve us. A gift's value lies in the benefits it provides to its recipient.

Both the BATTLE and GIFT metaphors evince counter-productive ways of thinking about the environment, triggering a framework in which nature is something disconnected from us that we might want, but do not need.

Nature as Home

A more promising metaphor that occurs in the data is of nature, planet, and environment as our HOME:

> On the **beautiful planet we call home**, every culture that can be traced back to pre-colonial times and further once lived closely with the land.

> **Our house** is falling apart and our leaders need to start acting accordingly, because at the moment they are not.

> **Protect Our Home.** From city parks to redwood forests, from the air we breathe to the water we drink, everyone depends on a healthy and sustainable world.

> During the Season of Creation, we join our sisters and brothers in the ecumenical family in prayer and action for **our common home**.

> [A] call to **protect our common home** for the well-being of all as we equitably address the climate crisis, biodiversity loss, and ecological sustainability

Pope Francis calls on all Catholics & all people on Earth to begin caring for **our common home** & living more in harmony with our planet with & each other.

While home is still an object, it is one that's inseparable from human experience and our everyday lives. The word *home* evokes two fundamental human needs: shelter and belonging. It goes beyond simple utility to resonate with us on an emotional and corporeal level, conjuring the warmth of being surrounded by family and the physical comforts and protection of refuge. Home positions nature as an integral part of our daily lives, as opposed to something that exists outside and separate from human society. Claiming the planet itself, including its climate, lands, and water, as our home disrupts the common opposition framing of the environment as a resource we must "unleash" or an adversary that we must subdue and control lest it overpower us. The expression "our common home" also interrupts the opposition's nationalist call for "American energy dominance" and fear-mongering about foreign nations harnessing the planet's power to use against us.

Our homes are something we are conditioned to care for. Most people would not sit back and allow someone to trash their home without trying to intervene and stop them. Indeed, our homes are often an extension of ourselves or even an expression of our identities, and an attack on our home is an attack on *us*.

Finally, from the L.A. fires to the North Carolina floods, people increasingly understand what it means for greedy fossil fuel CEOs and negligent leaders to destroy their literal houses. Someone whose house has burned down – or who has watched their neighbors' house go up in smoke – can intuitively understand our opposition as attacking and destroying our common home.

Nature as Parent

The data also contain examples of NATURE AS PERSON. We must act in order to "leave this planet healthy." Pilings are "stakes hammered into the heart." The earth has a "voice," it can "cry" out to us, and we have an obligation to "listen to the earth."

In many examples that personify the planet, the Earth is not just any regular person – it is "Mother Earth:"

It is acknowledging that only when **Mother Earth** is well, can we, her children, be well.

[T]he **land is our family** and the water is our bloodline.

Adelante por comunidades vibrantes y una **Madre Tierra** sana.

Human beings, of course, have conceptualized the planet as a mother for many thousands of years, and the reverential and affectionate title "Mother Earth" is

long-used and well-known. In addition to explicitly asserting our familial relationship, advocates attribute to the planet the responsibilities and roles of a parent:

> We treasure the **life-sustaining force** of the ocean, as well as the **physical and spiritual nourishment it provides us**.

> Nature **protects us**.

> [We] **nourish our souls and our bodies** via the waterways and estuaries that are our salt marsh areas.

In an interesting flip on advocates' dominant metaphorical relationship with the planet, nature here is *our* protector. The land nourishes and provides for us. This seems a helpful framework as it positions the earth as critical to our survival and to our sense of self. There is arguably no relationship more definitive or intimate to human beings than that between child and mother.

Yet references to the earth as a parent are surprisingly sparse in the data, mostly limited to the discourse of Indigenous and Christian advocates. It's possible that "Mother Earth" has become a frozen phrase, which people associate so heavily with specific cultures and religions that it is less resonant or even jarring to people outside of those contexts.

Nature as Partner

Another way the earth is personified is not as a parental figure, but as an equal partner we must treat with respect in order to be respected in turn:

> **Take care of the place that takes care of you.**

> It's a give and receive, **mutually beneficial relationship**.

> [W]e know that that will be in **reciprocity, in right relationship** with the Land and each other

> It's a time to reflect on our **relationship with the environment** — not just "distant" nature, but, crucially, the place where we live

> Make sure **the land continues to be healthy so that we can in turn be healthy** as we eat the fruits of the earth.

Many of the examples along these lines again come from Indigenous and Christian advocacy organizations and leaders, but, unlike "Mother Earth," many also come from the elicitation call with advocates. When pushed to simplify conservation and distill the core of their task, advocates repeatedly returned to fulfilling, mutually beneficial relationships. Yet in most public advocacy materials, the closest we tend to get to being

"in right relationship" is a call for or appreciation of balance, where the earth is not necessarily playing an active role as partner:

> Plants, community, and reciprocity are all we need to keep the **beautiful balance of life** in its harmony

> Today's final rule helps **restore balance** to our public lands

Balance presented on its own misses a key part of what advocates expressed in the elicitation call. There, advocates noted that maintaining balance with and in nature facilitates humans' balance with each other:

> [C]ommunities are built for cars and commerce, not cafecitos and comrades

> [In an ideal world, there are] more bikes, fewer cars. People talk to each other -- right now, people look at their phones and even though the neighborhood's packed, it's silent.

> [In an ideal world, there are] multiple generations being able to be out and about safely, kids and older folks.

> The more trees you have in a neighborhood, the less crime you're going to have. Cooler temperatures, safer communities.

> [In an ideal world] you don't get whiffs of chemicals that burn your throat, you don't get a tightening in your chest when you see certain people. You hear birds chirping.

Throughout these examples, how we relate to the land actively shapes how we relate to each other – and vice versa. Connecting with the land is a way to connect with each other, and disconnecting from the land severs relationships between human beings. Shifting from cars to bikes and from roads to parks is not just about the abstract environmental or long-term health benefits; it's about being able to wave at your neighbor, smell the flowers, and be part of a community. At a time when Americans report significant feelings of isolation and loneliness,[13] this articulation of conservationists' work as repairing and facilitating connection holds great promise.

This suggests a new framework for conservation grounded more in the quality of our lives and our relationships than in merely protecting the land, ocean, or air. In the last example above, the advocate connects our difficulty breathing when there are burning chemicals in the air to our difficulty breathing – our chest tightening – when we live in communities divided by racial stereotyping and scapegoating, where we don't trust one another or feel safe. ASO developed a frame for environmental justice in the past that could work quite well here: the freedom to breathe easy, or the freedom to breathe easier. This allows advocates to connect community safety to environmental protection, racial justice to nourishing the earth that nourishes us.

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[13] https://news.gallup.com/poll/651881/daily-loneliness-afflicts-one-five.aspx

This, of course, is just one of many ways we can make those connections. Another approach seen in the data is to use the language of the natural world to express human activity, aspirations, and emotions. Rather than assigning nature a human-like role – that of mother or protector – we honor our relationship to earth by recognizing the natural in us:

> [W]e **root ourselves** in life—in the form of water, community, abundance, and joy.

> We believe that **joy and hope for our planet flows through our rivers**.

Telling a story that weaves together the natural world and human society seems critical to conservationists' project. Rather than reinforcing a sense of distance and disconnection between humans and nature through rhetoric that portrays earth as an object separate from us, advocates can lean into relationship, defining both nature and ourselves through the connections between us. Ecosystems, societies, communities – the ways we relate to each other are what make us who we are.

Concluding Thoughts

In order to capture the hearts and minds of our audiences, we need to articulate what we're fighting **for**. We need to show what a world where we truly care for each other and our environment can look like. And it's here that we find CONSERVATION rhetoric fails us.

The aforementioned emphasis on ending or averting bad things leaves out of view how people's lives should and can be. While revising our negations into affirmations is a critical first step, truly contending with our tendency to present our position as denial and rejection requires having an articulation of our vision. Until we have a clear, shared, sense of the way we'd like things to operate, we will be left - at best - improving how we word our critiques.

Sustained participation in mass movements requires an opportunity to create something good, not merely diminish something harmful. Or, in pithier terms, there must be a *dream* not merely a series of (absolutely justified) complaints. For this, moving away from the limiting, backwards-looking term CONSERVATION seems a priority.

We've seen, for example, in previous work that a shift from "ending poverty" to *creating shared prosperity* or *ensuring people's welfare* has measurable impacts on audiences' desire to get involved. Similarly, "prevent all forms of violence" proves more effective when rendered *ensure all people live in peace*. Even seemingly small tweaks from, for example "reform our broken immigration system" to *create a fair immigration process* have measurable impacts on public perception.

This language analysis represents a kind of "you are here" dot. This is the range of ways people currently reason. The work of advocacy is, of course, to act as a thermostat not a thermometer. We are here to *change* the temperature, not to take it.

Thus, we can't be satisfied with where people are. We must explore where they're capable of going. And how, supported by our messaging and advocacy, we move them to this better mental and emotional place. This is the objective of subsequent steps of a research process.