

# Making Connections Beyond the Choir

David Johns

---

**Abstract**—Conservationists rely heavily on support from sectors of the population that want wildlife and wild places protected, but for whom it is not a priority. Support for conservation is widespread but not deep and seems to be weakening. This must be changed. Some of the obstacles are material—such as, fewer people have spent any part of their childhood immersed in nature. But many of the obstacles to deepening support among various constituencies rests with conservationists’ prejudices: a belief that if people know the facts they will do the right thing; that truth by itself can overcome propaganda; that people are persuaded to act by argument. The evidence runs contrary to these assumptions. People are motivated by their needs and emotions; most political action is not the result of conscious decision processes; people respond to information encoded in symbols and stories, both religious and secular, to which they have been socialized; ritual and organization are more important than belief in motivating and sustaining political action. Conservationists, by using these findings and becoming more adept at understanding and speaking within the framework of existing mythologies and symbolic systems, can become more effective at mobilizing key constituencies.

---

## Motivating Important Audiences

Some years ago the astronomer Timothy Ferris was asked why Americans were so enthralled with space exploration—especially in light of its expense and the many problems society confronts. His answer: many of us want to know whether we are alone in the universe.

To conservationists Ferris’s explanation seems absurd. We are not alone. We are surrounded by life. How could an astute, thoughtful observer like Ferris miss this fact? I cannot say for sure in Ferris’s case, not having had the opportunity to ask him. But more generally the answer is this. We miss the obvious—that life surrounds us—if we are not emotionally connected to it. It is this connection that generates meaning. It is the lack of this connection that proximately accounts for the timid social reaction to the accelerating loss of wildlife and wild places. Although conservation has made important progress in the last several decades, the overarching trend is one of loss.

Changing this situation will require the mobilization of important sectors of society that have up to now not acted on behalf of conservation. As Bruce Babbitt, U.S. Secretary

of the Interior (1993-2001), admonished conservationists: don’t expect me to do the right thing, make me. We must catalyze the action of millions and forge more effective alliances with other powerful political players. Both of these goals depend on more effective communication. In short, the most pressing questions we face are not ones of biology and ecology, but of politics.

There are many aspects to mobilization—the process by which people come to devote their time, money, skills and other resources to collective political action. These include identifying important audiences, understanding what moves them, developing a strategy, and figuring out what they should do and when in order to achieve policy goals. Here, I focus on one element: how to speak effectively to the audiences in a way that will maximize the likelihood of mobilization. The principles are general; the examples are North American.

A first step is to dump some bad assumptions. Some conservationists think that if we give people information they will do the right thing. Some are only satisfied if people act to protect nature from the purest of motives, rather than for whatever reason moves them. Some fail to grasp just how diverse are the many constituencies that must be reached; conservationists talk to the world as if they were talking to themselves. And too often they offer answers to people who are not yet asking the questions. At root, conservationists tend to confuse the way the world is with the way they want it to be. Good strategy seldom emerges from such confusion. Conservationists need to remember that most of the people we need to mobilize are:

- Not scientists
- Not always well educated
- Often not interested in politics
- Concerned about conservation, but it is not a top priority
- Not readers

Some sobering statistics on the last point, again with a North American emphasis: 80 percent of Americans say they get their “news” from television. (National Public Radio’s audience is a little over 5 percent of the radio audience, up from 1 percent 20 years ago; but radio listening overall is down.) Less than 30 percent read a newspaper daily. Those Americans who do read the press are not reading the *New York Times* or *Washington Post*, let alone the *Guardian* or *Globe and Mail*. They’re reading *USA Today* and local papers that feature headlines about traffic accidents and local violence or scandal. According to recent polls by Gallup and ABC, 61 percent of Americans believe Genesis is literally true and say that religion is very important in their lives. The numbers are 28 percent for Canadians and 17 percent for the British. When D. H. Lawrence said that people want and need magic, mystery, and miracle he apparently had Americans in mind.

---

David Johns, Professor of Politics and Law, Portland State University, School of Government, U.S.A.

In: Watson, Alan; Sproull, Janet; Dean, Liese, comps. 2007. Science and stewardship to protect and sustain wilderness values: eighth World Wilderness Congress symposium: September 30–October 6, 2005; Anchorage, AK. Proceedings RMRS-P-49. Fort Collins, CO: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Rocky Mountain Research Station.

To protect the natural world, to heal the many wounds we as a species have inflicted, we must catalyze mass political action. People must act politically to bring the pressure needed to change policies, and they must act personally in ways that are at least benign toward Nature. Fortunately there is little magic and mystery in understanding what causes people to act. People act based on emotion, need-states, and values linked to the sacred and a sense of efficacy.

Emotion and motivate come from the same root—to move. We need only reflect on ourselves to realize the power of emotion. We feel love for Nature. We fear that we're losing it. We're angry at those destroying it. Our emotions are what connect us to the world, they're our primary means of adapting to it. To be effective we must arouse strong emotion. Information and facts alone can't do that.

Even when we aim at emotion we frequently forget that many of those we need to mobilize are not moved by what moves us. We all have the same emotions (within a range of variation) but they are aroused by different things. We need to understand what arouses the group of people we are talking to and touch that. Some years ago, in an effort to halt the decimation of parrots by smugglers in the Caribbean, conservationists tried a new approach. Instead of appealing for the protection of the birds based on love or respect for nature per se, they appealed to nationalism and patriotism. Arguments that capturing and selling parrots to rich countries was a betrayal of one's national heritage and perpetuated neocolonial relationships achieved results.

Need-states are also powerful motivators. We need healthy food, clean water and air. We need to belong, to be valued, to love and be loved, to be creative, to believe in something bigger than ourselves. We need the wild. One of the problems with need-states is that they are easily co-opted, deformed, or we are distracted from them and settle instead for socially approved compensations. We don't belong, so we shop. We lack love, so we seek power and control. Conservationists must become better at penetrating these deformations and compensatory distractions and tap into genuine needs. When we do, we will unlock tremendous energy, as other social movements have demonstrated in the past. It's not easy. People are often afraid of the needs they have buried or ignored. They are afraid of change. As Jefferson wrote in the Declaration, we often tolerate the oppressive because it is familiar. But toleration has its limits.

Values are also powerful motivators, notwithstanding the findings of neurobiologists who say that about 95 percent of our emotional and cognitive processing is non-conscious. Not unconscious in the sense of that which is repressed, but non-conscious as when excessive heat causes us to sweat, or eating causes us to generate insulin. Notwithstanding this we all have a need to explain the world to ourselves and to believe our explanation is correct and proper. That's morality. We invest much emotion in our values and understanding. At the root of our sense of propriety and values are basic, unquestioned (and usually untestable) assumptions. These constitute our sense of the sacred, which can be religious or secular.

Thus, if some people hold Genesis to be literally true it does little good to argue to them that they should protect Nature in order to protect the theater of evolution. (In any event, convincing people to accept scientific findings that do not fit preconceptions can take more time than we have—

think of Galileo.) We must speak in a language that people understand, e.g. creation is good according to the creator. We must remember that what's important is to protect Nature; the reasons why people protect Nature are secondary at best. I must add something very important here: in speaking to others we cannot misrepresent our beliefs or pretend to share their beliefs. We find common ground in our goal of protecting nature.

Tapping into a sense of the sacred is not enough. To act, people also require a sense of efficacy, that they can make a difference. We cannot create this sense, but we can reinforce it by what we say and do in an effort to involve people in action.

## Using Stories, Ritual, and Organization

---

How do we touch people at the level of emotion, need-states and values? There are long-term strategies like making sure kids get into the woods, but I want to focus on the nearer term. We have three primary tools to evoke the link between conservation and emotion, needs and values: story, ritual, and organization. Not all scientists or advocates will be comfortable with using all of these tools, but it is important to understand them.

We are storytellers in our very souls. We understand the world through story. We place our lives in the context of story. We enjoy stories. Many conservationists are master storytellers. But we need to do more of it. And we need to develop stories that resonate with the audiences we are trying to reach. Talking to ourselves is important in maintaining our own sense of identity, but we need to talk to all those others whose support is vital to conservation success.

Our stories need to find their way into film and music and other performance media. Most people do not read and few attend talks. Almost everyone listens to the radio and watches television or rents videos. Millions still go to the movies and attend concerts.

We must become much better at using ritual and inventing new rituals. Amongst ourselves we engage in ritual, but probably not enough. We have dinners and give awards. Many aspects of the conferences we hold are ritualistic: the pep-talk keynotes, the obligatory slides accompanying talks, poster sessions, the breaks for networking. The Yellowstone to Yukon listserv is called "waterpolo," named after the ritual late night games held in the swimming pools at forgotten motels that hosted coordinating committee meetings. Many of these activities are quite substantive, but all have elements that are constituted by patterned behavior that codifies invariant meaning, helping establish our collective identity and promoting bonding. It's true we rarely dance ourselves into a trance-state, but we frequently approach that during late night drinking sessions.

We come up short in utilizing existing rituals or in fashioning new, mass-based rituals that will attract others to the conservation movement. Ritual is important for two reasons. First, ritual involves a public performance. What people proclaim publicly obligates them more strongly than a private pledge. Second, ritual is collective. When people act together to proclaim a belief or in support of a cause it creates a bond and people are more likely to act again

together. Collective action can generate tremendous energy. When the U.S. Declaration of Independence was published in newspapers the general response was tepid. When the Declaration was read publicly and followed by burning King George in effigy the crowds were moved to action.

Finally, we need to utilize and create organizational structures that provide a home for people's ongoing involvement with conservation. Too often we excite people without giving them anything to do. Following an inspiring talk, those in the audience invariably ask: What can we do? Our answers are too frequently vague and uninspiring. Soon people lose interest in our vision. To ensure that people will act when we truly need them, we need to keep them involved continuously in work and play. Involvement need not always result in some accomplishment. It may simply help people bond with each other and with the organization. These bonds

sustain involvement. Mutual support is critical to action. In short, organization fixes the level of mobilization.

Understanding ecosystems and other species is not enough. We need to better understand our own species, what moves us, and how to harness what moves us in the service of conservation. Such understanding will not work magic, but it is indispensable to success. We are up against institutions with enormous resources and the will to use force. We can't match their resources nor do we wish to match their violence. So we must be smarter and not just in a disconnected cerebral way. We possess a love of nature and an empathy with life that is the source of a profound intelligence and understanding. If we combine that with a good understanding of the political tools available, we can achieve our goals. We must remember that the battle we fight is not just to realize the dreams of conservationists—the lives of countless creatures are at stake.