

branding biodiversity

The new nature message





*One touch of nature
makes the whole world kin.*

-William Shakespeare



branding biodiversity

Imagine the incredible complexity that makes up life on earth, bottled up for mass appeal. What if the word 'biodiversity' represented not just a set of scientific concepts, but emotions of awe and wonder? Could biodiversity communications then trigger worldwide action to protect it?

We believe so. We've explored the psychological evidence to find out what actually drives people to conserve nature. We've taken a critical look at today's biodiversity messages to see whether they align with the emotions of the people they are aimed at. And we've combined these with the principles of branding, not simply logos and slogans, but a coherent set of values and promises which will trigger action. The results are both provocative and exciting. They challenge us to deliver a new nature message.

In 1986 the entomologist E.O. Wilson coined a new word, 'biodiversity'.

All the plants, animals, micro-organisms, genes and ecosystems that this new word described weren't new of course. And neither was the idea of talking about them. For decades we've watched gut-wrenching, tragic extinction stories alongside awe-inspiring, slow-mo, nature films. We've been educated about the phenomenal complexity of the natural world, and the interdependent systems and interconnected processes that link species and spaces together. More recently, we've heard figures in billions and trillions of dollars summing up the services nature provides us with, like clean water, air or medicines. This new word, biodiversity, needed to represent all these elements. Perhaps it isn't surprising that communications have been a muddle ever since.

Communicators ranging from conservationists to journalists, documentary-makers to marketers, are tasked with selling biodiversity conservation. And it hasn't been easy. Most people dedicated to protecting the natural world admit they struggle to find a truly persuasive message. We try different cocktails of emotions and economics, fact and fascination, but rarely does a message 'cut through' to the public, or to policy makers, in a way that ignites change. It's often pointed out that people do care about biodiversity, but not enough to actually do something about it. Our honest evaluation must be: if current communications on biodiversity were effective, then we wouldn't be losing so much of it.

But what if we gave biodiversity a new purpose: to represent life on earth without having to explain the detailed technicalities? This idea isn't new. Simplifying complexity is what brands do every day. Brands also start out as empty words, but they are filled with meaning by communicators and their

What if we gave biodiversity a new purpose?

audiences. They act as simple retrieval cues, representing a much larger body of information. They are a shortcut to what inspires their audience. Consumer brands don't just sell products, they sell a set of brand values and promises which resonate powerfully with specific people. And they are incredibly good at it. Biodiversity deserves the same success, so we've applied the same principles. The results are both intriguing and extremely challenging to current communications. After all, what could be more inspiring than a brand that embodies the incredible natural wealth of our entire planet?

This booklet is for biodiversity campaigners, policy makers and media who are open to radically changing our biodiversity message, in order to radically increase action. Skip to page 18 of this booklet for a formula that explains it all. Or read on to understand how we got there.

biodiversity of the brain



If you want to save biodiversity, you need to get inside people's heads. We need to find out what values they hold, and how they perceive their relationship with nature. Understanding the psychological and sociological response to your product is the first step to building a powerful brand.

We found two misconceptions about how people think that are chiefly responsible for undermining the impact of current biodiversity messages. The first is an assumption that people are rational. The second is the belief that people will value biodiversity for its own sake.

The rational versus emotional point has already been exhaustively argued.¹ Across myriad environmental issues, communicators have learnt the hard way that supplying technically-correct, logical information doesn't seem to change behaviours. There are so many messy psychological factors at play that relying on rationality is risky at best.² But with some

honourable exceptions, a vast majority of biodiversity communications abound with facts, figures, percentages and dates.

The second issue that we need to confront is 'intrinsic value', or the idea that nature has value irrespective of its relationship with people. This is a communications guide, not a treatise on environmental philosophy, so we won't ask if intrinsic value is real, but only if people think it is. Rather than philosophers, we need psychologists at this point. They segment us all into two broad groups:³ the 'biocentrics' who believe nature has value beyond, or equal to, human value; and everybody else. 'Everybody else' includes 'humanists' who believe nature has value only in relation to people, and 'egoists' for whom nature only has value in relation to 'me'.

The biocentrics are a small minority of the population, but seem to control a large proportion of biodiversity communications. Which is ironic, because in a world of

biocentrics this booklet wouldn't be necessary. In fact, most conservationists would also be out of a job, because biodiversity would automatically live at the top of the public and policy agendas, above even economic considerations. Communication, persuasion and promotion wouldn't be necessary.

Unfortunately for biodiversity, most of us are humanists or egoists. That means, in real-world everyday decision-making, biodiversity has no intrinsic value. This booklet doesn't argue whether that's right or wrong, many theses have been dedicated to that rather knotty moral question. Instead it deals with the pragmatic reality of developing biodiversity messages that appeal to 'everybody else' – the majority of us.

These are the first building blocks of our biodiversity brand. Our audiences are emotional rather than rational and (to put it bluntly) a little selfish. So if we want our

Our audiences are emotional rather than rational.

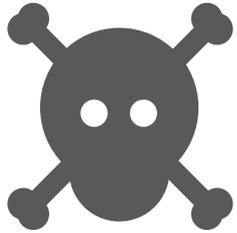
biodiversity brand to generate action, we're better off engaging and inspiring rather than informing. The next step is finding that inspiration.

If you're a biocentric, then you might be finding this all too much. Framing biodiversity as a brand was bad enough, but now we've just dismissed the intrinsic value of the whole natural world.

It's actually going to get worse in the next section before it gets better. Turning biodiversity into a superbrand people want to buy (i.e. act on) demands radical modifications to familiar messages. You will have to make a choice: will you try to change your audience into you, or will you change your message to inspire them? This booklet is for those who choose the second route.

today's message

What messages are people already receiving on biodiversity? We've split today's messages on biodiversity into four clear varieties. The question is: does the biodiversity brand need them all?



loss

Messages based on extinction. 'Biodiversity' and 'extinction' are almost automatically communicated together. From the Red List to the plight of the rainforest, the 'biodiversity loss' message is everywhere. It is rare that any plant, animal or ecosystem is mentioned by campaigners, policy makers or the media without an 'under threat' disclaimer.



love

Messages based on awe and wonder. From nature documentaries to posters of dolphins on teenagers' walls, our abiding fascination, wonder and deep connection with nature is powerful. The Love message is used by advertisers, therapists, artists and campaigners alike, because awe for nature captures our imagination, and our attention.



need

Messages based on economics. A more recent message is the tangible economic value of biodiversity. From indispensable ecosystem services like soil nutrition or tourism revenue, to the trillions of dollars that biodiversity 'gifts' agriculture, pharmaceuticals and other industries every year. Our society and economy needs biodiversity.



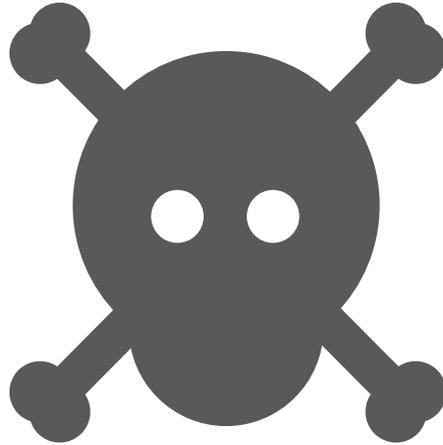
action

Messages asking for action. Biodiversity conservation requires people to do things. Action messages ask people to do something, whether it's to plant a tree, build a bee hive, sign a petition or donate money to a conservation charity.

less loss

“I resent the creation of a world in which beauty is a reminder of what we’re losing, rather than a celebration of what we’ve got.”

-Ben Elton



If people were rational, then the precautionary principle alone would motivate urgent action to stop the mass extinction currently underway in every ecosystem. If nature had intrinsic value, deserving protection irrespective of humans, then the moral imperative of biodiversity extinction would drive outraged change.

But the majority of us ('everybody else') aren't either rational or biocentric.

This is why despite excellent, global and continuous communication of the extinction threat, not enough people act to prevent it. Loss messages ask people to prioritise long-

term and shared risks of species extinction and ecosystem destabilisation over the short-term, personal gain of continuing in our own immediate interest. The way most of the public perceive this situation offers no compelling reason for them to act on extinction, especially if it means sacrificing desirable but biodiversity-unfriendly behaviours in the short term.

This doesn't mean extinction isn't an important and upsetting issue, it is. It just means it isn't a motivator for change. Doom and gloom messaging that is designed to scare people into action more often switches them into apathy. It's easy to understand why individuals feel powerless in the face of a global mass extinction

crisis. And if you use the negative message too often, people can even withhold their attention as well as their will to act.⁴ As a result communications soon fall on deaf ears. Despite the public and policy makers having heard about serious extinction rates for decades, nearly three-quarters of people still feel poorly informed about biodiversity loss.⁵

It hasn't helped that, in the industrialised world at least, loss hasn't had a visibly serious effect on our way of life. The International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) predicts that current extinction rates are already 100-1000 times higher than they would be without humans, yet public research suggests that

*It's time to kill
off the extinction
message.*

72% of people think it is a problem for the future, not today.⁶ Clearly, for many people, extinction comes across more as an empty threat than a lifestyle threat. For the majority of people, the extinction message induces guilt and head-shaking at the state of the world, but no action.

So we need to strip this element out of the biodiversity brand. It's time to kill off the extinction message.

more love



*“Yeah Darlin’ go make it happen.
Take the world in a love embrace.”*

-Steppenwolf, Born to be wild

Without the Loss message, what are we left with?

The answer is the most powerful message of all for the general public: the Love message.

Powerful Love messages trade on empathy. Their currency is awe, fascination and wonder for the natural world. Love messages are positive, built on adrenalin, not tears. While most people might not think nature has intrinsic value, we do nonetheless value how it makes us feel. This might seem a small distinction, but it makes a big difference. People will protect nature because they want to, not because they have to. Extinction, rationality

and intrinsic value arguments imply an obligation, one which most people have found it easy to ignore. Simply amplifying that obligation message with further evidence of mass, irrecoverable species loss isn't likely to change anything.

So why does love work? Research on adults who care about biodiversity reveals the single most important factor behind taking action is an emotionally-powerful childhood experience of nature, from a visit to a city farm to stroking a wild animal. When people experience a memorable natural encounter as a child, that experience can be reawakened in the adult. People who got outdoors and enjoyed nature as a child tend to be more environmentally

responsible. Even seeing a live animal show in zoos provides an intense experience and provokes a deep emotional response.⁷ Luckily most people still experience a park, a zoo or a school outing to a nearby natural environment. And for those who don't, communicators need to help make sure they do.

Love messages work by reconnecting us with these experiences. They speak to our 'biophilic' side – the part of us that loves nature, whether in the form of a pet, a parakeet or a picturesque panorama. Love and fascination is the reason for the abiding popularity of nature programmes, safari parks and local wildlife reserves. But don't be tempted into thinking that's a step

*You can't get
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and joy.*

towards a biocentric mindset. Remember 'everybody else' values nature because of the pleasurable emotional high it delivers, not for its own sake. And that feeling, used wisely, is the largest untapped motivator for biodiversity action and policy we have.

As brand values go, you can't get more powerful than wonder, awe and joy. Wielded expertly, the love message can, quite literally, conquer all.

target need

*“I don’t care too much for money,
money can’t buy me love.”*
-The Beatles, *Can’t buy me love*



Need messages communicate the tricky economic argument. At face value, the economic case for biodiversity should be a useful aspect of the brand. Losing biodiversity is going to cost us dearly. Even just the pollination service bees provide is estimated to be worth \$8 billion per year, and up to 40% of the global economy is based on biological products and services. But there's a snag. Need messages rely on rationality and most of us just aren't that rational. For the public, Need messages are sometimes interesting, often impressive, but rarely a motivation to actually change behaviours.

The second problem is that Need and Love messages work surprisingly badly together. Combining economics and empathy rarely results in a happy marriage. Assigning a financial value to living things is hard enough (especially if that thing has a cute face), but valuing ones we care deeply about is actually troubling. What is your cat worth? Or your sister?

Despite this, Need messages and Love messages are often arbitrarily combined. We are asked to wonder at the beauty and majesty of a tree, and then how much it's worth in terms of hard cash. The message feels both incongruent, and to some, offensive. For most people who have an emotional connection to nature,

*Need is essential
for policy makers
and business.*

the economic argument doesn't make it stronger. More often, it actively undermines it.

But this doesn't mean Need messages can't work. Need is essential for policy makers and business. For these audiences, the Love message is too soft, and the economic rationale is a far stronger incentive for change. The Need message is being communicated more often and more effectively to a business and policy audience. However, too often these audiences are passing the same message on to the public, as part of their political argument or marketing. And that doesn't work. Policy audiences need to learn to use the Love message too.

The Love message can generate political space and reputational rationale, which the Need message then adds weight too. Love for the public and Need for the policy maker is a powerful combination.

add action

*“Today is your day!
Your mountain is waiting.
So... get on your way.”*
-Dr. Seuss



So Love and Need messages work to engage the public and policy makers respectively. But on their own, they're still not enough to get either group to take action. You also need to ask the audience to do something. It seems obvious, but Action messages are both relatively rare and surprisingly one-dimensional in most existing communications. Our biodiversity brand needs a call to action.

By far the most popular Action messages involve donating money to a wildlife charity, or writing a strongly worded letter to the government. While these are both undoubtedly helpful things to do, they have serious limitations for changing behaviours.

At best, they remove people from having a direct effect on biodiversity, because they don't relate to daily lifestyles. At worst, they fall into an 'offset' category that allows people to absolve their guilt by donating money and not changing the way they act. In doing so, they deliver short-term personal benefits but don't actually change the behaviours that drive biodiversity loss.

So we need to widen the net with the Action message.

You can categorise conservation actions into five main varieties:

Type of action

Activist

Make yourself heard.

Supporter

Be part of a movement.

Doer

Help nature directly.

Employer

Multiply your impact.

Consumer

Make decisions in your daily life.

Example

Write to MP, go on a demo, run an event because it's vital to demonstrate political will for change.

Join a group, sign a petition, give money, wear a badge. Visible support builds social proof for change.

Put up a bird or bee box, grow wildflowers, adopt an animal. You can make a difference in your own back yard.

Raise money, join a business group, develop a strategy. Your business impact can be huge.

Buy 'biodiversity friendly' goods and services, avoid buying and wasting more than you need. Your credit card is powerful.

Activist and Supporter calls to action are familiar. But in Doer, Employer and Consumer messages, there is the opportunity to sell action in a way that puts biodiversity back into people's daily lives, and makes it relevant and rewarding for everybody else as well as biocentrics.

As with all 'worthy' calls to action, the danger is that your message comes across as nagging or patronising. But priming your audience with the Love message first will position action as a personal benefit, rather than a common favour.

the formula

 + **A** = **public change**
love *action*

 + **A** = **policy change**
need *action*

what to say


less loss
Kill the extinction message. Loss generates apathy, not action.


more love
Celebrate our love of nature. It is the most powerful driver of public behaviour.


target need
Use the Need message wisely. It's often not right for public consumption, but it's the cornerstone of policy and business decisions.

A
add action
Always partner Love and Need messages with Action. Once your audience is inspired, they will want to know what to do.

building the brand

The formula provides the building blocks for your brand, but the success of the communications depend on how you bring that brand to life. We're not suggesting the biodiversity brand is a logo or strapline, but rather a promise and values that will appeal to your audience. Using the Love and Action formula provides the context, this section explains how to get the content right.

the brand promise

All brands are based on a brand promise. It's the commitment the brand makes to the audience that builds and keeps their trust. For the public, the biodiversity brand promise must frame the Love and Action messages. The promise is the formula: you can help the biodiversity that you love.

the brand values

Have you ever been left speechless by a stunning view? Found yourself avidly watching an ant going about its business? Heard a lion roar up close? These 'peak experiences' of wonder and awe are what drive the Love message. Wonder and awe are the values that your Love message must convey.

making it happen

The promise and values are powerful on their own, but you can supercharge them with three further attributes of your messages:

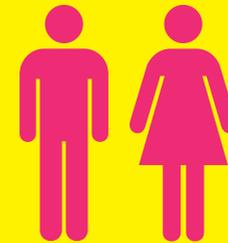
personalise

Keep your message personal. Use affinity to pets, familiar local species and local pride, and link action to daily lifestyles.



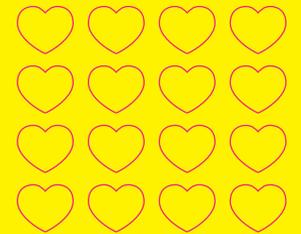
humanise

People matter most to the majority of your audience. Don't be afraid of anthropomorphising biodiversity, or accepting that people want to conserve nature because it makes them feel good.

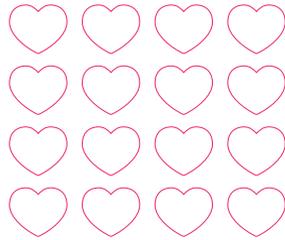
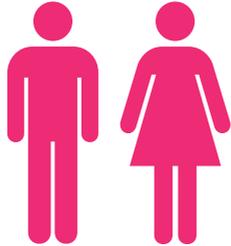


publicise

Promote what we've got, not what we've lost. Make conservation actions and their results visible and high status. Have more fun conserving nature, and tell everyone you're doing it.



personalise, humanise, publicise



personalise

Biodiversity is a global issue but local messages are far more likely to resonate with people. Local plants and animals provide a more familiar, relevant and visceral connection for your audience, and local biodiversity provides a platform from which to connect to global issues.

- Integrate pride in local places, plants and wildlife into your messages.
- Use pets as a starting point to remind people that they already care about nature.
- Remember that locals don't look at their environment like tourists do, and the touristy depiction can actively turn them off. Learn why they love their natural surroundings and start there.
- Sell actions that relate to your audience's lifestyle, and highlight the personal benefits of doing something for nature, like guerrilla gardening.

humanise

Most of your audience value nature as it relates to people. People are what they know and understand, so don't be afraid to anthropomorphise the species you are communicating about. Make sure you don't slip back into selling conservation for nature's sake; acknowledging the feel-good factor is essential for inspiring action.

- Turn your studies into soap operas, and give individual species a lead role.
- Talk about the people behind conservation success stories, as well as the plants and animals. Use testimonies and case stories to reinforce your Love message.
- Talk in human timescales. If you're communicating conservation plans, tell us what you'll do in 5, not 25, years.

publicise

Conservation actions need great publicity. As well as picking the right actions for your audience, you need to make the actors and their successes visible. This will shift the focus of biodiversity action from avoiding Loss to celebrating Love, and it will help move all conservation actions into the mainstream.

- Use everyday role models, the people who are taking action in their daily lives.
- Showcase success, what we've managed to save rather than what we've lost.
- Show people what a difference they have made, and say thank you. This will reinforce the feel-good factor and help turn one-off conservation actions into lifestyle habits.

welcome to brand biodiversity

Thinking about biodiversity as a brand is hard. Toning down or eliminating the extinction message is hard. Targeting the public and decision-makers with different messages is hard.

But not as hard as continuing to lose biodiversity. This is an irreversible and tragically avoidable process that impoverishes each and every one of us. In all of Futerra's experience in communicating environmental and sustainability issues, we've faced compromises between what we want to say, and what we know will work. Some may be uncomfortable with getting people to do the 'right thing' for the 'wrong reasons'. We passionately believe that the result is what counts, not the debate about the motivations for it.

We were shocked by the evidence that the most common message on biodiversity, that of extinction, inspires guilt but not action. On reflection, of course it's obvious. As obvious as the fact that biodiversity is life; we are an inextricable part of it and cannot live apart from it.

We will endeavour over the coming years to inspire love and action for our natural world. Others have already started, and many are doing an excellent job. We look forward to seeing your new nature message.

Good luck.

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*People will protect
nature because they
want to, not because
they have to.*

about futerra

Futerra is a communications agency. We do the things great agencies do; have bright ideas, captivate consumers, build energetic websites one day and grab opinion formers' attention the next. We're very good at it. But the real difference is that since our foundation in 2001, we've only ever worked on green issues, corporate responsibility and sustainability.

For more information on our services, or to see if we could help you, visit

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