

# Chapter 1

.....

## Defining Environmental Communication: On Trees, Plastics, and Wolves



Pictured are wolves, a species long considered in crisis. Would you say they appear to be caring for each other? Do you think humans are the only species capable of care?

Jean-Louis Klein & Marie-Luce Hubert/Science Source

### Learning Objectives

After studying this chapter, you should be able to

- 1.1 Define key terms, including *environmental communication* and *forest bathing*.
- 1.2 Explain communication as *symbolic action*, considering the example of trees.
- 1.3 Identify how environmental communication may function *pragmatically* and/or *constitutively*, illustrated through the example of plastics and wolves.
- 1.4 Compare how *crisis* and *care* are ethics that guide environmental communication.

- 1.5 Critically assess wolf reintroduction or *rewilding* debates through the lens of communication studies.
- 1.6 Summarize the key *voices* of environmental communication, as well as ways of studying it in person and across media platforms.

We all communicate daily in ways that reflect environmental awareness (or not)—whether or not we are bringing a reusable water bottle to class, wearing secondhand clothes, debating with a peer about the ethics of eating plant-based burgers, checking an app to see if the air quality is healthy enough to bike outside, joining a campus protest about divesting from fossil fuel industries, advocating for waste picker rights, and/or voting for candidates who support climate action. We also are shaped by countless messages of environmental communication—from our peers, family, religious leaders, teachers, journalists, social media influencers, politicians, corporations, celebrities, and more.

This chapter describes environmental communication as a subject of study and a set of practices that matter. As a timely and significant field of study, our understanding of the environment and our actions within it depend not only on the information and technology available but also on the ways in which communication shapes our environmental values, choices, and acts in news, films, social networks, political debates, popular culture, everyday conversations, and more.

It may seem odd to take communication seriously if you care about the environment. After all, the environment exists: Lead in water can cause brain damage, large glaciers in Antarctica are calving into the Southern Ocean due to planetary warming, and we need oxygen to breathe. Some consider “communication” to be the problem—a way some voices in the public sphere manipulate others about the world we live in. Whatever “the environment” may be, however, it is deeply entangled with our ways of interacting with, knowing, and addressing the wider world. Those of you coming from disciplines other than communication may find yourself more knowledgeable than your peers on environmental topics but more challenged in this chapter and the next until you learn foundational communication perspectives.

If we all communicate, why do we have to study communication? Perhaps it would be helpful to consider studying nutrition: We all eat, but once we learn more about nutrition, we can nourish ourselves in ways that may help us better avoid undesirable outcomes and increase our chances to feel energized, alert, and satiated. Likewise, we all communicate, but once we learn more about communication, we can express ourselves in ways that may help us avoid undesirable outcomes and increase our chances to feel efficacious, nuanced, and able to have more meaningful exchanges.

In her study of environmental discourses in Puerto Rico, Catalina M. de Onís (2021) began her interviews by asking “What gives you energy?” Opening up conversations about renewable and fossil fuel energy with that question broadens what we might think “energy” is. Imagining communication as life-giving energy or energy draining likewise is a compelling idea as you consider the communication choices in this book.

## Communication as Symbolic Action: Communicating With and About Trees

Rhetorical theorist Kenneth Burke (1966) stated that even the seemingly most unemotional language is necessarily persuasive or interpretive. This is so because our language and other symbolic acts *do* something, as well as *say* something. Words are not just utilitarian tools but reflect cultural assumptions and desires. Language actively shapes our understanding, creates meaning, and orients us to a wider world. Imagining language as **symbolic action**, Burke (1966) went so far as to claim that “much that we take as observations about ‘reality’ may be but the spinning out of possibilities implicit in our particular choice of terms” (p. 46). From this perspective, communication studies includes what we express (emotions, information, hierarchies, power, etc.), how we express it (in which style, through which medium, when, by whom, and where, etc.), and/or with what *consequences* (cultural norms, political decisions, popular trends, etc.).

The idea of symbolic action is interesting because it enables us to think about **speech acts**, that is, when saying something is doing something, like naming a child (or oneself or one’s pronouns), and when one’s promise is held accountable (for example, “You said you would show up”). Often, in mainstream discourse, people will use rhetoric to refer to falsehoods in contrast to actions, but that distinction often relies on an oversimplification of the relationship between speech and action. Consider, for example, how Aristotle (350 B.C.E.) considered prayers as speech that turned not on whether or not it was true, but on how the expression itself was a meaningful act.

*Symbolic action* might be clearer if we contrast it with a different theory of communication. After World War II, Warren Weaver attempted to translate the work of Claude Elwood Shannon, a founder of information theory. Shannon imagined communication as a process of decrypting—that is, trying to clarify a complex message. When communication scholars refer to a “Shannon–Weaver model of communication,” they are using the expression to symbolize how communication can be imagined as the transmission of information from a source to a receiver through a specific channel to be decoded (Shannon & Weaver, 1949). Though Shannon and Weaver were interested in the infrastructure of telephone systems, David Berlo (1960) and others drew on their research to promote a “sender-message-channel-receiver” (SMCR) model of communication. There was, however, little effort in this model to account for meaning or reception; instead, the focus was on what information was being shared, with whom, and how. Unlike the SMCR, symbolic action assumes that communication does more than transmit information one way.

Sometimes, we misunderstand what someone is communicating. Sometimes, we reject what we’re told. Sometimes, we reach consensus through dialogue with others. Commonplace arguments and affective reactions are not always linear or logically motivated. Information is important, and learning to discern accurate, meaningful data from inaccurate, misleading is increasingly important; however, information is not the only facet relevant to communication. By understanding communication as symbolic action, therefore, we can offer a more robust approach that better reflects the complicated world in which we live. If you ever played the telephone game (where you whisper a sentence to a person next to you, then they repeat it to the person next to them, going down the line

until the last person shares what they heard), then you know even the acts of listening and repeating speech can lead to amusing—or confusing—translations.

Let's return to environmental communication, which includes the basic elements required for life: water, air, food, clothing, shelter. As an example, consider discourses about trees as *symbolic action*. Basic science lessons remind us that trees absorb carbon dioxide and release oxygen—not only improving air quality but also helping reduce temperature on a warming planet. Spending time surrounded by trees long has been valued in multiple cultures, whether it is a local cultural practice of gathering around one in particular or transnational advertising of outdoor recreation corporations encouraging people to spend time in the woods.

Beyond cultural traditions of spending time among trees, public health scientists affirm that not only dwelling in and hiking through forests but also hugging a tree can improve one's health by improving one's mood, reducing stress, increasing cardiovascular function, and more (Segarra, 2023). Dr. Qing Li (2022) at the Nippon Medical School in Tokyo has been encouraging **forest bathing or shinrin-yoku**, the practice of walking in the woods for two to six hours to improve health; Li's decades-long research has started a movement for doctors to write prescriptions for forest medicine as preventative healthcare. In the United States, Richard Louv's (2008) best-selling book *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children From Nature Deficit Disorder* popularized the idea of "nature-deficit disorder," making a case that in an age of increased technology, we must remember how direct exposure to nature is essential for emotionally and physically healthy human development and our ability to respond to current environmental crises.



It seems as if every culture has one or more trees that hold deep meaning. Pictured are the Avenue of Baobabs in Madagascar, among the oldest trees in the world at approximately 800 years. Do you have a tree that you cherish or that holds deep meaning in your family or culture? Perhaps an olive, maple, or ginkgo tree?

Tuul & Bruno Morandi/Getty Images

Trees also might conjure children's tales like Dr. Seuss's *The Lorax*, in which a fundamental imperative of environmental communication is articulated: "I speak for the trees, for the trees have no tongues" (2012). We will discuss hugging trees as an advocacy tactic when discussing the history of environmental and climate justice. All of these cultural and

scientific discourses about trees illustrate *symbolic action*, as they shape perceptions, policies, and practices.

Like anything else, environmental elements can become isolated, romanticized, co-opted, commodified, and vilified. Trees, for example, can become linked to co-opted climate initiatives, as Indigenous Environmental Network Executive Director Tom Goldtooth admonishes: “Nature based solutions are putting nature into this ‘financialization of nature’ file. It’s a movement around quantifying the sacred-nature, trees, grasslands. It’s a false solution” (Pember, 2022). That is, when tree-planting is encouraged void of awareness of local ecosystems and forest-rooted populations, it can miss or even harm ecological relations in the name of trees. To consider all these materialities, meanings, and feelings, we study *environmental communication*.

## Defining Environmental Communication as Pragmatic and Constitutive: Considering Plastics

We define **environmental communication** as *the pragmatic and constitutive modes of expression about our ecological relationships in the world, including those with nonhuman systems, elements, and species*. This encompasses two different understandings about the relationship between communication and the environment, which are both contextual:

1. *Environmental communication is **pragmatic***: It consists of verbal and nonverbal modes of interaction that convey an instrumental purpose related to environmental matters in a particular context. Pragmatic communication greets, informs, demands, promises, requests, educates, alerts, persuades, rejects, and more.
2. *Environmental communication is **constitutive***: It entails verbal and nonverbal modes of interaction that *name, orient, reject, and negotiate* meaning, values, and relationships, which reflect and shape our sense of reality. Constitutive communication recognizes how human expression invites a particular perspective, evokes certain beliefs and feelings (and not others), fosters particular ways of relating to others, and thus creates palpable feelings that may move us—or not. Studying constitutive environmental communication, therefore, involves a deeper appreciation for how human expression and the world beyond are deeply entangled.

Let’s think about these two functions a little further. Consider *plastics*, which long have been identified as an environmental problem: creating waste for limited landfill space, littering our oceans and lands, choking animals, polluting our bodies (blood, lungs, etc.), and contributing to global greenhouse gases, as plastics are a product of petrochemicals. Recent bans focusing on single-use plastics—such as plastic bags, bottles, and packaging—aim to reduce these negative impacts by focusing on the plastics designed for disposal after brief use, often nonessential. In 2002, Bangladesh was the first country to ban single-use plastic bags, and the trend is growing, particularly in the Global South where plastics are wreaking havoc on human health and ecosystems. From this perspective, the bans are pragmatic communication acts that attempt to reduce our growing dependency on plastics. During these campaigns, #SkipTheBag trends on social media to encourage people not to use them and to emotionally feel bags are not always necessary. A dozen years after Bangladesh, the first U.S. statewide plastic-bag



ban was passed in California in 2014 and strengthened yet another decade later in 2024 (Winters, 2024) and more have followed.

Yet, when plastic-straw bans started gaining traction on the U.S. scene in the past decade, a range of cultural reactions occurred that might help us realize the significance of *constitutive communication* as a related but different way to appreciate the importance of communication. While some imagined plastic-straw bans as inroads to reducing pollution and related harms, some claimed plastic-straw bans constituted ableism by ignoring people with disabilities and scapegoating larger systemic changes on individual consumer choices—while some others believed the straw bans were an attack on freedom itself and defended single-use plastic straws during U.S. President Trump’s first presidential campaign in 2016 with the slogan “Make Straws Great Again.” How people react to a plastic straw in public in the United States (and globally) reflects how plastics have been *constituted* culturally, that is, how people imagine the *meaning* of plastic-straw use, not just whether or not they are used. Plastic straws have existed for decades; it is our attitudes about them that have changed over time. (If you want to learn more about these debates, Phaedra’s podcast and book on this topic is listed at the end of the chapter.)

*Constitutive communication*, as these different perspectives on single-use *plastics* illustrate, can have profound effects on when we do or do not define certain elements as “problems” or “solutions.” We will turn to wolves to clarify this distinction, as it can be tricky but remains important to understand.

## Act Locally!

### Trees as Pragmatic and Constitutive

Although the two functions of environmental communication—*pragmatic* and *constitutive*—are important, they can be difficult to distinguish sometimes. We invite you to think about trees once again. Find a map of where you live and look for the closest forest: Is it used for timber and/or protected? Is it revered by some and destroyed by others? Are there forest rangers that use the trees but also care deeply for them? Do you know any pragmatic messages about those trees? Constitutively, does that forest mean something else to you?

Now, consider your own daily life, comparing the pragmatic and constitutive ways trees matter: Which commodities do you use made from trees? What other ways do you use trees as tools or resources, such as tourist attractions or as shade? Why are urban trees important on a warming planet? Do you live near trees that buffer winds and improve ecosystem health (soils, wildlife, streams)? Then, consider if you know any cultural stories about the value of a particular tree or forest. Can you think of any tree or forest that has held meaning for you culturally or spiritually? A children’s story about a tree? Would you ever defend a forest—and, if so, would it be for pragmatic and/or constitutive reasons?

## Communication Matters: Reintroducing Wolves

Both pragmatic and constitutive communication may have consequences. The extinction of wolves has not always been a concern of many living in the United States. Wolves, for example, had been extirpated from the Northern Rocky Mountains by the mid-20th century through

intensive “predator control” (trapping, poisoning, or shooting). It was not until the mid-1990s that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service initiated a restoration plan for the American gray wolf. In 2022, gray wolves in the contiguous 48 states and Mexico became protected under the Endangered Species Act (ESA), yet these measures have been consistently challenged.

While today there remain many wolf reintroduction debates in the United States and Europe, we want to focus on one scene as an example. In 1995, U.S. Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt celebrated the return of the first American gray wolf to Yellowstone National Park in a speech marking the event. Earlier that year, he had helped carry and release the wolf into the transition area in the park where she would mate with other wolves also being returned. After setting down the wolf, Babbitt (1995) recalled, “I looked . . . into the green eyes of this magnificent creature, within this spectacular landscape, and was profoundly moved by the elevating nature of America’s conservation laws: laws with the power to make creation whole” (para. 3).

Babbitt’s purpose in speaking that day was to support the beleaguered ESA, which was under attack in the U.S. Congress at the time (as it is once again, over 50 years since its passage). In recalling a Judeo-Christian biblical story of a flood, Babbitt evoked a powerful cultural narrative for revaluing wolves and other endangered species for his audience. In retelling this ancient story, he invited them to embrace a similar ethic in the present day:

In the words of the covenant with Noah, “when the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between me and all living things on earth. . . . Thus we are instructed that this everlasting covenant was made to protect the whole of creation. We are living between the flood and the rainbow: between the threats to creation on the one side and God’s covenant to protect life on the other.” (Babbitt, 1995, para. 56)

While you may or may not share Babbitt’s faith, we share this excerpt to appreciate how environmental communication is constituted through deeply held values. Secretary Babbitt invoked an ancient story of survival to invite the American public to appreciate anew the Endangered Species Act, which at the time had not revived as many species as it has by today (including the national symbol of the bald eagle, which was delisted from the ESA in 2007 after success, and over 100 more species).

Communication orients us toward (or away from) events, people, and, yes, wildlife. And because different individuals may value the environment (or parts of it) in diverse ways, we find our voices in conversation with others. So, too, our own contemporary communication helps us make sense of our own relationships with the environment, including what we value and how we act in the public sphere. We bring up this environmental topic of wolves to help illustrate key terms in environmental communication.

How people debate the reintroduction of wolves, for example, reflects different functions of symbolic action we highlighted earlier. Wolf policy might be a *pragmatic* debate with a clear decision (will we, or won’t we?); yet the discourse creating the grounds for those judgments is also *constitutive*: What does a wolf or wolf pack symbolize? Are wolves a key-stone species in an ecosystem? Are they a predator of livestock and, therefore, livelihoods? Does “the fierce green fire” in their eyes hold intrinsic value and insight beyond human comprehension (Leopold, 1949, p. 138)? Almost every Indigenous North American tribe integrates the wolf in their foundational cultural stories: as ancestors, gods, guardians, healers, and more—do wolves hold spiritual knowledge? The reintroduction of wolves moves beyond timing, numbers, and locations in these debates to consider how their existence *constitutes* entire worldviews about life and death, wild and managed, freedom and

property rights, and so on. Your responses to these questions constitute what a wolf means to you and shapes whether you might support wolf reintroduction.

While wolf reintroduction policies continue to be negotiated in the United States and Europe, perhaps you know of related debates over **rewilding**, which promotes restoring biodiversity (making “wild” again) through reducing human influence and often reintroducing megafauna (large wildlife like wolves) to heal ecological relations. Globally, towns, nations, and various communities are having *rewilding* debates about wild pigs, wildebeests, or Arctic muskoxen—or even just recreating wildlife corridors for safer migration on an increasingly paved planet. What is the role of the study of environmental communication in such public controversies?



U.S. Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt, releasing the first American gray wolf back into Yellowstone National Park in 1995. States and various organizations continue to debate wolf reintroduction as a result of the pragmatic and constitutive communication associated with the species.

U.S. National Park Service, U.S. Public Domain

## A Crisis and Care Discipline

Environmentalists often are associated with crisis and much of the work of environmental communication is trying to convince more people that a particular issue is a crisis. It perhaps is not surprising then that, in the inaugural issue of the journal *Environmental Communication: A Journal of Nature and Culture*, Cox (2007) proposed environmental communication as a **crisis discipline**. This argument drew on the Society for Conservation Biology’s stance that, like cancer biology, conservation biology has an ethical norm as a “crisis-oriented” discipline in addressing the threat of species extinction. Similarly, we embrace a *crisis discipline* frame for environmental communication as a field—and practice—dedicated to addressing some of the greatest challenges of our times, but a frame that also foregrounds the *ethical* implications of this orientation. As Cox (2007) observed,

scholars, teachers, and practitioners have a duty to educate, question, critically evaluate, or otherwise speak in appropriate forums when social/symbolic representations of



“environment,” knowledge claims, or other communication practices are constrained or suborned for harmful or unsustainable policies toward human communities and the natural world. Relatedly, we have a responsibility through our work to identify and recommend practices that fulfill the first normative tenet: *to enhance the ability of society to respond appropriately to environmental signals relevant to the well-being of both human civilization and natural biological systems*. (p. 16, emphasis in original)

This perspective recognizes value in interrelated humans and nonhuman systems, as well as to our communication both inside and outside the academy. Perhaps most importantly, Cox’s argument provides grounds not merely to observe environmental communication, but to intervene. We have a goal, then, to attempt to improve communication and the environment.

While work in environmental communication studies cancer, climate chaos, disappearance of wildlife habitat, toxic pollution, and more *as crises*, we also believe the stakes of such crises invite a dialogue or dynamic relationship with an ethic of *care*. We, therefore, have embraced environmental communication as a “care discipline” (Pezzullo, 2017a). As a **care discipline**, environmental communication involves research devoted to unearthing human and nonhuman interconnections, interdependence, biodiversity, and system limits. This means that we have not only a duty to *prevent* harm but also a duty to *honor* the people, places, and nonhuman species with which we share our world. This ethic may be witnessed in Indigenous and feminist thought (Whyte & Cuomo, 2015), documentaries, and stage performances that express, for example, a love of place, the cultural centrality of a particular food, affection between species, and intergenerational rights policy in international law. Hi’ilei Julia Kawehipuaakahaopulani Hobart and Tamara Kneese (2020: 2) define “radical care” as “a critical survival strategy,” emphasizing: “Questions of who or what one might care for, and how, can be numerous.”

As a care discipline, there are phrases circulating in environmental discourse that capture this sentiment, including the goal of *not just surviving but thriving* and of *not just bouncing back from a disaster (or many) but bouncing forward as well*. These discourses aim to foster a world that exceeds reactionary practices and includes hope for generative community building in which our dreams and ideals may help shape our plans and platforms. Although dialogue that allows *only* space for happiness and optimism can feel oppressive, the opposite also rings true: Creating spaces that enable only sadness and cynicism can feel oppressive as well. As Pezzullo (2024) has written elsewhere:

Care can manifest as sharing an online resource for masks with a friend to protect their health or protesting unjust climate policies in a dramatic way to gain media attention or planting seeds for tomorrow. Caring should not be confused with perfection or purity. Even if we care, we can cause harm. Caring implies, however, that we will strive to do better.

Care also emphasizes environmental matters as relational, one requiring we reconsider our relations within, as, and with the environment.

For example, in 2024, at a round of United Nations negotiations for a Global Plastics Treaty, Special Representative for Climate Change and National Climate Change Director of the Ministry of Environment of Panama, Juan Carlos Monterrey, made the following statement:

We are not just negotiating a treaty. *We’re deciding whether we care enough to save ourselves*. Plastics for Panama are a weapon of mass destruction. Plastics

are not convenience. Plastics are poison. Every piece that we allow to produce without limits is a direct assault on our health, on our nature, and our children. (Emphasis added)

As this edition of the textbook goes to press, the global treaty remains under negotiation—including what and who we care about, as well as what is considered a “crisis” or not. When passed, a global plastics treaty will likely continue to be debated globally and locally as a matter of care and crisis.

Crisis remains a vital motivation and embodied practice for environmental communication, but other drives are important as well, including those spaces (environments) and conversations that are inspirational, healing, spiritual, profitable, and/or transformative. By coupling crisis and care as a dynamic and intertwined dialectic, we arguably might enable recognition of existing and emergent environmental communication on the wider range of emotional, physical, and political responses that warrant our attention.

## Public Spheres as Democratic Spaces: From Ideals to Scapegoats

A third principle central to this book is the idea of the public sphere—or, more accurately, public spheres. Earlier, we defined a *public sphere* as the forums and interactions in which different individuals engage each other about subjects of shared concern or that affect a wider community, from neighborhoods to international relations.

German philosopher Jürgen Habermas (1974) offered a similar definition of the ideal of the public sphere when he observed that “a portion of the public sphere comes into being in every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body” (p. 49). As we engage with others, we translate our private or specialized topics into public ones and, thus, create circles of influence that affect how we imagine the environment and our relationships within it. Such translations of private concerns into public matters occur in a range of forums and practices that give rise to something akin to an environmental public sphere—from a talk at a campus environmental forum to a scientist’s testimony before a congressional committee. In public hearings, newspaper editorials, blog posts, speeches at rallies, street festivals, and countless other occasions in which we engage others in conversation or debate, the public sphere emerges as a potential sphere of influence.

But private concerns are not always translated into public action, and technical information about the environment may remain in scientific journals or proprietary files of corporations. Therefore, it is important to note that other spheres of deliberation exist in addition to the ideal of a public sphere. Thomas Goodnight (1982), for example, named two others: the *personal* and *technical* spheres; he argues it is useful to imagine the **personal sphere** as conversation often in a private setting not intended for public circulation, such as at the dinner table in one’s home, and the **technical sphere** as discourse engaging scientific, specialized knowledge. The public sphere, the primary focus of this book, is collective opinion, knowledge, and action. All spheres shape the world we live in, but all do not carry the same values, particularly when considering democratic governance. We will revisit these distinctions throughout the book, including how their boundaries are porous and overlapping, such as privacy laws and climate debates informed by science.

For now, we wish to clarify: Personal and public actions are not an either/or choice. Perhaps the most frequent types of questions we have been asked over the years have not

been about the environment but rather about our personal choices: Do we eat meat? How many children do we (want to) have, if any? How often do we fly? Do we bike or take public transportation to work? Do we vote? These are important questions, especially for people who live in the heavy consumption landscape of the United States; however, as we witnessed with the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, individuals needed to change their behaviors—and governments and private institutions needed to create public and corporate policies to help society respond to crisis. Without both personal *and* public action, we risk losing more lives.

Likewise, technical and public spheres overlap. In fact, part of the challenge of environmental issues is when the general public does not understand or know the latest science. And yet, we also know that logic is not the only way we make decisions; so, we cannot reduce the public sphere to technical deliberation or else we miss, for example, the value of culture and the significance of uneven power relations.

With this in mind, we do want to consider how some use *scapegoating* to deflect accountability. **Scapegoating** is the unmerited blaming of a particular person or action instead of addressing systemic or structural changes, as well as those most responsible. In studying a range of scapegoating discourses related to environmental communication, communication scholar Casey R. Schmitt (2019) argues these discourses not only deflect but also distract by taking “potential attention from the more aggravating, complex, or unsolvable environmental challenges by instead offering an immediately satisfying morality tale” (p. 160).

Through reading this book we hope you will, in part, develop a perception of distinction between when ecological blame holds merit and when it is *scapegoating*. Should we hold our parent or guardian who doesn’t recycle to the same level of accountability as BP or ExxonMobil for climate chaos? Should we ban plastic bags or straws to address ocean pollution? Do children have more asthma in places with greater air pollution? All of these questions involve making a judgment based on what we have learned through our personal experiences and debate in public spheres.

The idea of the public sphere itself, however, can be misunderstood. We want to dispel a few misconceptions early on. First, the public sphere is not only, or even primarily, an official space. Although there are officially sponsored spaces such as public hearings that invite citizens to communicate about the environment, these forums do not exhaust the public sphere. In fact, discussion and debate about environmental concerns often occur outside of government meeting rooms and courts. The early 5th-century B.C.E. Greeks called these meeting spaces of everyday life *agoras*, the public squares or marketplaces where citizens gathered to exchange ideas about the life of their community. Similarly, we find everyday spaces and opportunities today, publicly, to voice our concerns and influence the judgment of others about environmental concerns, from social media trends to marches in the streets. More recently, it has become popular among some to start calling these spaces “third spaces”—not work or home, but another gathering space—as more and more of us find we cannot take such spheres for granted. As the global oligarchy tends to be funded by fossil fuels and new media platforms, there is a growing need to plan for and nurture spheres beyond where unsustainable pressures fester and dominate.

Second, the public sphere is neither monolithic nor a uniform, risk-free assembly of all residents. As realms of influence are created when individuals engage others, public spheres may assume concrete and local forms, including calls to talk radio programs, podcasts, blogs, letters to the editors of newspapers, or local meetings where citizens question public officials. Not every person or agent in the public sphere participates equally. When we address environmental racism in this textbook, for example, we will consider

how white supremacy in the United States has marginalized and done violence to Black, Indigenous, and people of color. While it is risky for anyone to speak for the environment, it is not equally risky for all. The public sphere and democracy are ideals; this does not mean they are how we live our actual lives daily. For now, suffice it to say that globally, environmentalists continue to struggle to be heard, and they face violence or undue influence. (See also “FYI: Global Perspective: Killing Environmental Advocates.”)

Third, as we alluded already in contrast to technical spheres of deliberation, far from elite conversation or “rational” forms of communication based on norms of which cultures and bodies are imaged as “reasonable” or not, public spheres are most often the arenas in which popular and passionate communication occurs. Recognizing how public spheres operate in practice beyond ideals acknowledges the *diverse* voices and styles that characterize a robust, participatory democracy. In fact, in this book, we introduce the voices of everyday people and the special challenges they face in gaining a hearing about matters of environmental and personal survival in their communities or reporting on environmental matters as journalists. Before identifying some of the key voices of environmental communication, let us consider how behaviors and values matter to the ways we express our environmental perspectives.

## Purpose: What Motivates Environmental Communication in the Public Sphere?

Rhetoric long has been interested in motivation: why do we do what we do? A former student of Robbie’s, environmental psychologist Renée Lertzman, summarizes one way to answer this question in her model “[The Quadrants of Engagement](https://projectinsideout.net/the-quadrant-of-engagement/),” which features: behaviors, systems, experience, and messaging (<https://projectinsideout.net/the-quadrant-of-engagement/>). Each of these approaches provide insights into purpose, as well as have limitations.

Psychology tends to approach environmental communication through behavior: overt versus covert, conscious versus unconscious, rational versus irrational, and so forth. For example, there is a great deal of evidence that pro-environmental behaviors are related to certain values (Bolstad, 2017; Crompton, 2008; Schultz & Zelezny 2003). Observing that more reports about global warming were “probably not going to make the difference in [getting] people to take adaptive action,” lead scientist Brian Bulla concluded, “We don’t make rational decisions, we make value-based decisions. . . . [So] we’ve got to think about things a little differently” (quoted in Bolstad, 2017, para. 3). In an earlier, classic study of the environmental movement, Stern, Dietz, Abel, Guagnano, and Kalof (1999) found that “individuals who accept a movement’s basic values, believe that valued objects are threatened, and believe that their actions can help restore those values” are more likely to feel an obligation to act or provide support for the movement (p. 81).

Some research suggests there are three broad categories of values associated with environmental behaviors (Farrior, 2005, p. 11):

1. *Egoistic concerns* focusing on the self (health, quality of life, prosperity, convenience)
2. *Social–altruistic concerns* focusing on other people (children, family, community, humanity)
3. *Biospheric concerns* focusing on the well-being of life beyond humans (plants, animals)

Some people, therefore, may be concerned about water pollution because of **egoistic concerns**, that is, values that center around oneself (such as, “I want to protect this forest because it is where I like to hike or it improves my health”). Others may be motivated by **social–altruistic concerns**, that is, values that are motivated by the care of others (such as, “I want to protect this forest because it has cultural significance for my community”). Finally, others may be concerned due to **biospheric concerns** (or what some call “ecocentric”), that is, values that are motivated by care of a sentient being or ecosystem (such as, “I want to protect this forest because the trees have intrinsic value” or “I want to protect this forest because it is the home to other species”).

Given this framework, the ability to identify the concerns of one’s ideal audience may shape the environmental communication one uses—or one may decide to make appeals based on one’s own concerns. One can hear *social-altruistic concerns* and *biospheric concerns*, for example, in the struggle to Defend the Atlanta Forest and Stop Cop City, as they link their resolve to try to protect the South River Forest to climate justice, abolition, and anti-imperialist struggles (Gordon, 2024).

Of course, beyond these three concerns, there are other motivations at play globally. Manuschevich et al. (2019), for example, make a compelling argument that discussions of the Native Forest Law in Chile were articulated or linked to religious concerns (Catholic, in this case) to protect God’s creation and to serve God’s children.

Environmental matters are not reducible to behaviors based solely on individual values or underlying emotions. Lertzman’s second area is systems, which we discuss frequently. All of you probably can relate to how systems shape your life. For example, if you want to buy used clothing but there are no secondhand clothing stores where you live, then you face a greater barrier. As another example, if you care about public health but your job is in a factory that has poor air quality, it is not always easy to leave that job and find another where your workplace can reflect your attitude. Further, if you want to initiate a local community garden, you need access to space and local ordinances to allow it. Throughout this textbook, often drawing on the work of sociology, we will address systems as relevant, including identity-based oppression, economic inequities, infrastructure, and more.

A third area from which to approach engagement, as noted by Lertzman, is experience. We began this book introducing some of our own experiences and sharing how we know ours shape what we write. We also will share stories, for example, of everyday people facing pollution or disasters and becoming environmental advocates as a result of those experiences. In addition, we will talk about experiences such as tours as advocacy tactics, since some have provided these opportunities in the hopes of motivating action.

Experience deeply matters to all of us—and we also believe a planetary imagination requires us to expand our perspective beyond personal experience. One should have the capacity to feel for those who have experienced traumas and joys we have not. Rhetorical scholar Jenell Johnson (2023), for example, makes the argument in her book *Every Living Thing: The Politics of Life in Common* that environmental communication requires vital advocacy, that is showing support for all life. She considers Indigenous water protectors, astrophysicists’ interest in Martian microbes, radical activist perspectives on deep ecology, and more. While we might not know what life is like to be a fruit fly, she writes, we do have in common the experience of living and dying, as well as loving strawberries. While experiences, then, are critical ways to transform attitudes, behaviors, and feelings, we also hope you will keep an open mind when reading this book about experiences that you might not have had or with which you can’t easily relate.



Finally, Lertzman identifies messaging. This is the understood area of communication studies, which we will emphasize throughout. Communicating information or education matters. We need to know what is happening in the world and be able to discern empirical evidence from lies. Throughout this book, then, we will talk about the ways information is manipulated, misrepresented, and managed by, for example, new AI technologies.

Further, we address environmental communication as relational, not existing in isolation or in a vacuum. Communication, as we explain, is more than a sender, receiver, and transmitter. It also is shaped by and shapes behaviors, experiences, and systems. Who communicates what and how communication occurs is central to this book, but we also find those questions are complimented by asking why communication occurs and where it occurs.

## Another Viewpoint

### Ecological Footprint and Structural Accountability

A lot of environmental textbooks start with self-reflection, which always is a good idea: Who you are, where you grew up, and how you live will shape how you engage the themes of environmental communication. However, too often, those conversations produce feelings of personal guilt and anxiety about one's individual "ecological footprint" and ignore that what we need for a more sustainable planet is systemic or structural change that exceeds any one individual (Kaufman, 2020; Pezzullo, 2023).

The Political Economy Research Institute (PERI) at the University of Massachusetts Amherst provides annual databases on the top corporate air and water polluters and top greenhouse gas emitters. In 2023, for example, they found the top toxic polluters to include Dow Inc., LyondellBasell Industries, Exxon Mobil, Duke Energy, and BASF. For more details, refer to <https://www.peri.umass.edu/top-100-polluter-indexes>

Meanwhile, *The Guardian* reported on the Climate Accountability Institute's list of the 20 fossil fuels companies who have contributed over one-third of the carbon emissions creating our climate crisis. To name just the top four: Saudi Aramco, Chevron, Gazprom, and ExxonMobil (M. Taylor & Watts, 2019).

Further, Aljazeera reported that the U.S. military alone has "a carbon footprint larger than any other institution on earth." (Mallinder, 2023). And as the wealth gap grows globally, Oxfam (2023) reports that the richest 1% of the world produced as much carbon pollution as the poorest two-thirds or five billion people.

What do you think are the limits and possibilities of focusing on our individual practices and/or focusing on corporate or military or even billionaire accountability? How do you weigh, for example, short-term versus long-term change or scale of impact in your response? What does your opinion reflect about how you constitute choice, feasibility, yourself, CEOs, companies, or war?

---

Sources: Matthew Taylor and Jonathan Watts (2019, October 9). Revealed: The 20 firms behind a third of all carbon emissions. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/oct/09/revealed-20-firms-third-carbon-emissions> Lorraine Mallinder (2023, December 12). 'Elephant in the room.' The US military's devastating carbon footprint. Aljazeera. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/12/12/elephant-in-the-room-the-us-militarys-devastating-carbon-footprint>

## Diverse Voices in the Public Sphere: Agents of Change

The landscape of environmental communication is complex, as is the possibility of having one's voice heard. Not merely predicated on whether or not one can speak, as communication scholar Eric King Watts (2001) emphasizes, “**voice**” is an embodied, ethical, and emotional occurrence of expression that cannot be heard or ignored void of communal contexts and commitments. Whether or not someone feels capable of expressing their voice and feels heard is connected to the health of the public sphere and one's ability to act or agency. While Watts's research has focused on race and conservative voices, his argument is relevant to the ways in which environmental communication scholars have long studied *voice* (Peeples & Depoe, 2014).

We all have a voice that constitutes, negotiates, and/or rejects environmental communication in public spheres. Consider, for example, the ways health professionals prescribe exercise or asthma inhalers, when weather forecasters link major storms to longer climate change patterns, how teachers design lesson plans on the water cycle, when faith leaders perform sermons or pray for the environment, and more.

In this final section, we describe just some of the voices you may hear in the public sphere on environmental matters. Individuals in these nine groups take on multiple communication roles—writers, press officers, group spokespersons, community or campus organizers, information technology specialists, communication directors, marketing and campaign consultants, and more. As we discuss in the book, their embodied identities and styles of communicating matter to the ways in which they are heard or not. In this introduction to the topic, we want to emphasize how various voices in public spheres that communicate about the environment may be motivated for different reasons and play different roles.

### Citizens and Communities

Everyday people who engage public officials about the local environment—such as dealing with asbestos in their children's school or establishing a neighborhood park—and who organize their neighbors to act are the common sources of environmental change. Citizens or residents of a community often are linked by common interests and activities. Consider individuals such as yourself, as well as groups with which you might or might not interact, such as gardening collectives, labor unions, religious communities, and informal neighborhood interactions. In Chapter 5, we will address how everyday people and communities organize social movements.

### Nongovernmental Organizations (NGOs) and Movements

Environmental **nongovernmental organizations** (ENGOS or **NGOs**) are nonprofit, voluntary citizens' groups organized locally, nationally, or internationally to advocate in the public sphere. Environmental NGOs and broader social movements are among the most impactful voices of environmental communication in public spheres. These groups come in a wide array of organizational types and networks, online and on the ground, well-established and emergent or new.

NGOs range from grassroots groups in local communities to nationwide and internationally established organizations. In every country, NGOs exist to advocate for a wide range of environmental concerns and hopes. In India, for example, Navdanya, meaning “nine seeds” ([navdanya.org](http://navdanya.org)), is a women-centered movement for protecting native seeds and biological diversity, while the African Conservation Foundation ([africanconservation.org](http://africanconservation.org))

is a continent-wide effort to protect Africa's endangered wildlife and their habitats. Other groups, such as the Canadian-based Greenpeace ([greenpeace.org](https://www.greenpeace.org)) and U.S.-based Avaaz ([avaaz.org](https://www.avaaz.org)), organize on an international scale in the fight against climate change and for environmental sustainability. Notably, students and campus groups have been at the forefront of environmental change throughout history. We will discuss many of these examples of grassroots actions as vital modes of environmental advocacy throughout this textbook.

Anti-environmental NGOs and movements also exist. Sometimes these are grassroots-driven, and sometimes they are industry front groups attempting to sound like grassroots or community voices. Though this book primarily focuses on the wide range of environmental advocates, we also bring your attention to voices like those who oppose wolf reintroduction or actions to address climate change to emphasize the ways in which the public sphere is a space of contest, in which the challenge is not just deciding what you want to communicate but also finding ways to move others who may not agree. Finding common ground with those who might seem to disagree can be an important first step for NGOs and social movements working across political affiliations.

## FYI Global Perspective

### Killing Environmental Advocates

Sadly, some have silenced the voices of environmental advocates over the years. On February 5, 2020, the body of Raúl Hernández, an environmental defender of the El Campanario monarch butterfly sanctuary in Central Mexico, was found. "His body reportedly showed visible signs of torture. Hernández is now the second fatality in the local community of conservationists after fellow environment defender, Homero Gómez González, was found in a well in central Mexico" ("Second Mexican Defender of Monarch Butterflies Found Dead," 2020, paras. 1–3).

"Their deaths are part of a growing trend in the assassination, violence and intimidation of people defending the environment, in Mexico, Colombia, and globally. Relatives told local media that Gómez González had received threats from an organized crime gang warning him to stop his campaign against illegal logging" ("Second Mexican Defender," 2020).

"Between 2002 and 2017, 1,558 people in 50 countries were killed for defending their environments and lands. . . . 'Environmental defenders' here refers to people engaged in protecting land, forests, water and other natural resources. This includes community activists, members of social movements, lawyers, journalists, non-governmental organization staff, Indigenous peoples, members of traditional, peasant and agrarian communities, and those who resist forced eviction or other violent interventions. These people take peaceful action, either voluntarily or professionally, to protect the environment or land rights" (Butt, Lambrick, Menton, & Renwick, 2019, p. 742).

The international watchdog group Global Witness (2022) reported, "On average, a defender was killed every other day in 2022, just as was the case in 2021." To find out more, including their campaign to amplify voices of environmental, climate, and land defenders threatened, go to their website: <https://www.globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/environmental-activists/land-and-environmental-defenders-annual-report-archive/>. For those in the United States interested in violence against environmental advocates, refer to Constance Gordon, "Criminalizing Care: Environmental Justice Under Political and Police Repression," *Environmental Communication*, 2024, 138-141.

## Politicians and Public Officials

Governments are organized at a wide range of scale, including but not limited to cities, states, nations, and intergovernmental organizations. Within any of these governing bodies, there is a range of public figures in charge of managing and communicating about environmental matters, including politicians and public officials. Politicians and public officials are charged with making decisions about public goods, such as utilities, public squares, national forests, and more, as well as making decisions about private interests. They also reflect whether or not a society is democratic, legislating, judging, policing, and protecting access to public goods, public speech, public participation, public spaces, public policy, and other elements that indicate the health of a democracy. While publics may exist without a government, governmental support can ideally enable under-heard, more diverse voices to have greater opportunities to be heard. Furthermore, the environment is a significant topic in most elections; the voices running for office or working in government, therefore, reflect the whole spectrum of political opinions, including anti-environmental backlash.

## Businesses

The United Nations organizes environmental and other intergovernmental decision-making around three sectors: (1) **civil society** (citizens and communities) and NGOs that advocate on their behalf; (2) governments, and (3) business. The business sector represents corporations or what sometimes is referred to as “the private sector.” This realm of public life is referred to as “private” because, unlike governments, these organizations have little legal requirement to make decisions, knowledge, or opinions public or transparent.

As with all other voices we note here, the voices of corporations span the spectrum of environmental communication. Some corporations are building solar panels as thin as a strand of hair, selling recycled products, and imagining how to improve the public sphere by making Election Day a day off from work. Other businesses may prioritize private financial gain over improving the world we all live in, launch disinformation campaigns, avoid paying taxes for the greater good, pollute, and impede environmental legislation. No matter the intent or impact, the voices of businesses in the public sphere are undeniably present, from lobbying governments on decision-making to promoting public relations through multimedia campaigns. This also is why, as we will discuss later in the textbook, market pressure as a mode of environmental advocacy increasingly is a popular strategy, including boycotts and divest and reinvest climate campaigns.

## Scientists and Scholars

Much of what we know and believe about communication, the environment, and the public sphere has been established and studied by scientists and other scholars. In public spheres more broadly, environmental scholars play many roles: as organizers and advisors with NGOs, as consultants for governments and businesses, and in communicating their findings in published reports, public testimony, editorials, blogs, documentaries, performances, and more.

In 2011, environmental scholars and practitioners established the International Environmental Communication Association ([theieca.org](http://theieca.org)) to coordinate research worldwide.

Interest has grown not only in North America, the United Kingdom, and Europe, where “environmental communication has grown substantially as a field” (Carvalho, 2009, para. 1), but also throughout the world. We draw on these voices throughout the book.

Notably, scientists working for universities, governments, and corporations face different limitations and possibilities when communicating in the public sphere than in other areas. Climate scientists, for example, have provided vital research and testimony that has shaped public understanding of anthropogenic climate change, prompting public debate over actions by governments. Early warnings of scientists have contributed substantially to public awareness, debate, and corrective actions on everything from asthma in children to how species may adapt, resist, and evolve in relation to climate changes. Scientists also can help us, for example, identify keystone species and make connections between ocean plankton and our ability to breathe. Given the resistance to science that many have observed, more and more climate scientists specifically are considering how to improve the communication of their findings to the public in more effective and urgent ways. We address this topic in Chapter 3.

## Journalists

As we address in Chapter 9, it would be difficult to overstate the impact of journalism—both “old” and new—on environmental communication and the public sphere. Journalists not only share information but also may act as conduits to amplify other voices—citizens, public officials, corporate spokespersons, academics, and more—seeking to influence public attitudes and decisions about environmental matters. A healthy public sphere long has been gauged by the health of the press. Journalism has gone through a great transformation in our lifetime, given changes in communication technologies. With more people having greater access to share information more quickly, over farther distances, the role of journalists has adapted. Today, most of us do not worry about a lack of information; instead, the greater challenge is figuring out how to sort through, critically think about, and make judgments about environmental news. Who can we trust not to be driven by bias over evidence? Which sources of information can help us make links to causes and outcomes instead of just presenting isolated segments that can grab our attention momentarily? How will news organizations raise funds for long-term investigative research to hold governments and industry accountable?

## Communication Professionals and Creatives

In addition to journalists, numerous other applied communication professionals shape the public sphere, including artists, performers, media producers, public relations officers, advertisers, and more. If you tell people you want to become a communication professional or creative, they often think you’re learning to become a newscaster. Some are, but the field is much broader. In fact, there might not be a major industry today that doesn’t employ communication professionals, including “education, health, finance, not-for-profits, the government, and sports,” who have skills such as: “writing, graphic design, public speaking, research, video editing, blogging, social media strategy, community engagement . . . , data analytics, photography, search engine optimization, coding” and more (Clivane, 2017). Many students who have learned from this textbook, for example, have gone on to be hired in careers such as environmental nonprofit organizing, green advertising, and environmental lobbying.





Companies tell us plastic can be recycled, but what does that mean? Decisions about waste do not just go away after you throw them in a bin—waste moves. This is a picture from a plastic recycling factory in Dhaka, Bangladesh. “The plastics industry accounts for 1 per cent of Bangladesh’s gross domestic product. Its domestic market value is about \$1,000 million and the sector employs about five million people” (Islam, 2020).

Suvra Kanti Das/iStockPhoto

## Lawyers and Judges

As noted previously, environmental communication also is negotiated in the courts. Litigating, that is, seeking legal remedies through the courts for compliance with existing standards or to set new ones, is a vital mode of environmental advocacy. We provide examples throughout the textbook, particularly in Chapter 13, that illustrate how, in making arguments in courts and delivering judgments, litigation has been an essential sphere of environmental communication. Although Hollywood films have popularized the premise of a white savior lawyer willing to risk everything to save a community (Pezzullo, 2006), most court cases require many years of labor, community investment in collecting evidence, and do not guarantee success. Nevertheless, for example, 2020 saw three legal victories against pipelines that were won in courtrooms and celebrated by grassroots environmental communities and Indigenous rights groups who had protested or otherwise resisted their development: Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL), Keystone XL oil pipeline, and the Atlantic Coast Pipeline (Hansman, 2020).

## Places and Nonhuman Species

We open and close this book acknowledging and thinking about all the sentient life that communicates to us. Both of us live with four-legged family members who often are some of the first to communicate with us in the morning (expressing “Feed us” and “Let me outside” through snuggles, meows, and whimpers). Some might think these interactions are private, not relevant to the public sphere. Yet, environmental communication would not exist without places we love (for respite that we call “home,” forests, etc.) or nonhuman species (who doesn’t associate environmentalism with saving trees or whales?). While we tend to emphasize human voices in this textbook, environmentalists tend to agree that the nonhuman also speaks into publics, shaping—for example—our moods, our ability to breathe, and our sense of companionship.

## Ways of Studying Environmental Communication

Since the 1980s, environmental communication has proliferated as a professional field. Associated with such disciplines as communication, media, journalism, and environmental studies, it has emerged as a broad and vibrant area of study. We identify 10 general approaches existing today. This list is not exhaustive, but it provides touchstones to launch a wider range of thinking about environmental communication as a vibrant, interdisciplinary, multimodal field of study.

While we primarily focus on (1) rhetoric, cultural studies, and media in this textbook as vital perspectives in environmental communication, we also address and engage research from a range of approaches, including: (2) environmental interpersonal and intercultural identities; (3) green advertising, public relations, and design; (4) environmental journalism and mass media studies; (5) science and climate communication; (6) green applied media and arts; (7) public health and environmental risk communication; (8) green governance and public participation; (9) environmental organizational communication; and (10) environmental law and policy. To elaborate on each of these 10 approaches:

1. *Environmental rhetoric, cultural studies, and media* involve a range of communicative phenomena—language, discourse, visual texts, popular culture, place, environmental advocacy campaigns, movements, staged performances, and/or controversies in a public sphere. For such studies, thinking about context, voice, creativity, systems, structures, and judgment are vital. Such an approach bridges fiction and nonfiction; individual and collective expression; verbal and nonverbal interactions; communication face-to-face or face-to-screen; concerns for meaning, materiality, and affect; and more. Less interested in universal claims, rhetoric, cultural studies, and media explore the relationship among bodies, institutions, and power within specific situations or conjunctures. As the primary orientation of this textbook, we hope you will learn this approach more deeply throughout, particularly in this first section.
2. Environmental communication research focused on *environmental interpersonal and intercultural identities*, may involve assessing one's ecological footprint, autoethnography, consumption studies, a sense of self-in-place (Cantrill, 1998), environmental education practices, social interactions, or studying groups' environmental attitudes and practices in comparison to those from other cultures or identity groups. This approach might also focus on intercultural distinctions and dialogues, such as varying perspectives on discourses of dwelling (Carbaugh & Cerulli, 2012) or ways of engaging the nonhuman (Salvador & Clarke, 2011; see also Chapters 7 and 13). Most recently, contributors to the *Routledge Handbook of Ecocultural Identity* (2020, Milstein and Castro-Sotomayor) unpack the ecological contexts and constraints that contribute to, and constrain, our identities or "selves." For example, the conflicting social and environmental conditions along the U.S.–Mexico border aid us in understanding that "ecocultural identities for border residents, crossers, inhabitants—human and more-than-human—are constituted and complicated by a variety of tensions that must be negotiated" (Tarin, Upton,

& Sowards, 2020, p. 53). Although the emphasis of this book is on advocacy in public spheres, we hope that bringing in our own stories (and inviting you in each chapter to act locally) will help open up opportunities for you to make connections between personal and public life, to integrate course content with the personal and social implications of caring (or not) about the values of and connections between the environment, communication, and the public sphere.

3. *Science and climate communication* focuses on how science historically has developed within specific cultural contexts, as well as the ways scientists are perceived and engage publics. Given its complexity and urgency, climate communication has emerged as a robust area of specialty within this area. Drawing more on a social scientific perspective, this approach includes discourse analysis of mainstream news coverage of environmental topics, studies of the social construction and/or framing of the environment in the media, visual green brands, and environmental media effects, including framing, cultivation analysis, and narrative analysis (Boykoff, 2007; Carvalho & Peterson, 2012). While this perspective is integrated throughout, this edition of the textbook has a new Chapter 4 focused on climate communication.
4. *Environmental journalism and mass media studies* includes the professional training of those who create our news. As we discuss in Chapter 9, while journalism continues to go through major transformations due to changing media technologies and owners of media outlets, journalists continue to play a vital role in the public sphere. We address both their resilient power to set agendas and gatekeep, as well as the field's ethical debates around ethical crisis reporting and a duty to publicize accurate information in an age rife with dangerous rhetoric. In the Epilogue, we introduce speculative journalism as a new trend in the field; in Chapter 10, we introduce mass media approaches to sustainable storytelling.
5. *Green advertising, public relations (PR), and design* includes marketing, branding, and public negotiations of organizational reputation. Given its significance to public discourse, we dedicate Chapter 10 to green advertising and sustainability discourses to introduce these concepts and how they are used both by private industry and nonprofits. We note how at times, this work serves anti-environmental goals of greenwashing or image repair after environmental damages and, at other times, how advertising and public relations can be used to promote pro-environmental behaviors and attitudes.
6. *Public health and environmental risk communication* explore a range of subjects, from personal choices about technology and interpersonal communication in labs and hospital rooms to risk assessments of environmental policy makers. These approaches focus less on public and popular discourses and more on personal or technical discourse communities, such as doctor–patient interactions, public health campaigns, and how scientists may communicate more effectively with the public. Some of this scholarship values structural critique, such as Mohan Dutta's (2015) compelling communication research in Southeast Asia on how subaltern communities can embrace a culture-centered approach to public health decisions related to agriculture. Chapter 11 focuses on this approach.

7. *Green applied media and arts* is an umbrella term for those environmental practitioners and scholars who focus on *production*: in a specific medium, its circulation, its intermediation, and/or technology-based arts (including photo imaging, video, digital designs, sound, artificial intelligence, and live performance). Green applied media and arts could involve, for example, a campaign to increase sustainable practices in popular culture media companies, community poetry slam performances to inspire open discussion about public health risks, or making a mural or zine to amplify marginalized voices. We give examples throughout the book; in Chapter 7, we discuss visual protest and evidence, including documentary films.
8. *Green governance and public participation in environmental decision-making* draws on an interdisciplinary approach, including rhetoric, discourse studies, social interaction, and organizational communication, and reflects a commitment to democratic practices, principally ways to resolve or navigate controversies over public goods and the commons. When protest has not been successful or is desired to be avoided, studies of public participation inquire about the ways in which various stakeholders (for example, loggers, forest activists, and businesses) contribute to decisions about environmental policies and projects; studies include the diverse voices and interactions (verbal and nonverbal) that shape choices, such as management of a community's water supply (Sprain, Carcasson, & Merolla, 2014). While integrated throughout the textbook, Chapter 12 focuses on rights of public participation, legal barriers, and the international growth of public participation.
9. *Environmental organizational communication studies* inquire how certain institutions or networks talk about or organize around environmental matters. This area explores the hierarchal language, stories, rituals, roles, and/or rules of environmental and anti-environmental discourse affecting both our public and our everyday lives. Notable research includes, for example, scholarship on the discourses surrounding the U.S. government's production of nuclear energy and debates over the disposal of nuclear waste (B. C. Taylor, Kinsella, Depoe, & Metzler, 2007). In Chapter 12, for example, we engage how government secrecy in the name of military security limits public access to information (Kinsella, 2018) and how translation of technical information for publics may be done more ethically by paying more attention to culture (Mittra, 2018).
10. *Environmental law and policy* focus on litigation and policy as significant solutions to managing the checks and balances of power shaping environmental policy, enforcement, and harms. In classical Greece, rhetoric was invented for courts, to allow citizens to assess evidence, craft arguments, and make civic judgments. While relevant policies are noted throughout, we discuss national and international legal cases toward the conclusion of this book; in Chapter 13 we consider how a range of timely ethical decisions are being made in courtrooms: from who can protest where to who has a voice in the courts to how long of a timeline we should use when adjudicating environmental decisions.

Given the breadth of these 10 approaches, can there be a common thread in their undertakings? We believe there is, and we propose in the next section that this thread is *an ethical dynamic or dialectic between crisis and care*, which defines environmental communication.

## Summary

This chapter defined environmental communication, its major areas of study, and the three principal concepts around which the chapters of this book are organized:

- Communication is understood as *symbolic action*, emphasizing the entangled roles of speaking and doing.
- The term *environmental communication* was defined as the *pragmatic and constitutive modes of expression about our ecological relationships in the world, including those with nonhuman systems, elements, and species*. We also identify *environmental communication* as a *crisis discipline* and a *care discipline*.
- The *public sphere* was established as a democratic ideal where competing *voices* might advocate for environmental perspectives through communication.

Now that you've learned something about the field of environmental communication, we hope you're ready to engage the range of topics—from the challenge of communicating about climate change to your right to know about pollution in your community—that make up the practice of speaking for/about the environment. And along the way, we hope you'll feel inspired to join the public conversations about environmental crisis and care.

## Suggested Resources

- For a longer reflection on wolves as creatures that blur nature/culture dualism, read: S. Marek Muller, "Companion Cyborgs: Untethering Discourses About Wolf-Hybrids," *Environmental Communication*, 15.1, 2021, 99-115. <https://oi.org/10/1080/17524032.2021.1801483>. Or consider the book by Indigenous environmental scientist Jessica Hernandez, *Fresh Banana Leaves: Healing Indigenous Landscapes Through Indigenous Science*. North Atlantic Books, 2022.
- On why some consider single-use plastic bans vital in the Global South or some claimed they were ableist in the Global North, listen to Phaedra's podcast, *Communicating Care*, including but not limited to: James Wakibia on Kenya's Plastic Bag Ban & Hashtag Activism, February 2, 2022, Season 1, Episode 1, and "HellOnWheels on Plastic Straw Bans, Disability, & Accessibility," March 1, 2023. Season 2, Episode 3: <https://communicatingcare.buzzsprout.com>. Phaedra (2023) also wrote a book on this: *Beyond Straw Men: Plastic Pollution and Networked Cultures of Care*.
- As editor of the journal, Phaedra edited a double special issue of the journal *Environmental Communication* (2024, 18.1-2) on care, including contributions from scholars in every continent but Antarctica. Find out whether there is a scholar from your country, or, if one is missing, what research would you include from your country on care?



- To hear more voices of environmental communication, follow or subscribe to an environmental daily news site, like one of the following: Inside *Climate News* (<http://insideclimatenews.org/>), Grist ([grist.org](http://grist.org)), *The Guardian's* Climate Change page ([theguardian.com/environment/climate-change](http://theguardian.com/environment/climate-change)), *Democracy Now!* on environment or climate (<https://www.democracynow.org>), or the *Al Jazeera* Environment News page ([aljazeera.com/topics/categories/environment.html](http://aljazeera.com/topics/categories/environment.html)).

## Key Terms

Biospheric concerns	Pragmatic
Care discipline	Quadrants of Engagement
Constitutive	Rewilding
Crisis discipline	Scapegoating
Civil society	Social–altruistic concerns
Egoistic concerns	Speech act
Environmental communication	Symbolic action
Forest bathing or <i>shinrin-yoku</i>	Technical sphere
Nongovernmental organization (NGO)	Voice
Personal sphere	

## Discussion Questions

1. A classic philosophical question attributed to Anglo-Irish philosopher George Berkeley in the 1600s about the relationship between material life and human perception goes something like this: “If a tree falls in the forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound? It matters not, for the tree has fallen.” (The point, in part, is to suggest that we cannot imagine the environment outside of our own existence, though we know it exists without us because, according to Berkeley, God exists beyond human comprehension and created the tree.) Relatedly, rhetorical scholars Herndl and Brown (1996) claim that “in a very real sense, there is no objective environment in the phenomenal world, no environment separate from the words we use to represent it” (p. 3).

In communication, we are interested in who speaks for the tree: can a tree speak for itself? Should humans feel responsibility to speak on behalf of trees? And which humans have the right to represent the tree’s wishes, if they matter? How can trees improve your health? And how does your culture shape the value you ascribe to trees?

2. This book highlights “another viewpoint” to foster curiosity about a range of perspectives and about why disagreement occurs. With some people living in segregated neighborhoods and many using personalized digital media newsfeeds, do we hear a diversity of voices in our everyday lives? What steps do you take to hear voices and opinions that differ from your own? Do you feel you ever benefit from *dissoi logoi* (that is, learning from opposing arguments), or do you only learn from people who already agree with you? How does this chapter’s engagement with crisis and care illustrate a way to imagine differing viewpoints that can become complimentary rather than merely polarizing? What might debate over plastic pollution teach us about disagreement?

3. If you live in an urban area and took fieldtrips as a student to visit “nature,” watch this now old toy store ad on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WHhBaU4cFDQ>. Pragmatically, this company wants its audience to go to its toy stores and buy more toys that it sells; what is less obvious is the constitutive communication of the ad, deliberate or not: How does the company constitute its toys in contrast to trees? What assumptions does it make? What stereotypes does it reinforce or challenge about children, gender, and fun?
4. Wolf reintroduction debates have been active in more rural U.S. states like Colorado and Idaho of late, as well as EU countries such as Spain and Switzerland. Do wolves live in your part of the world? What stories do you associate with wolves? Do you value knowing there are “wild” creatures in the world, even if you never see one in person? Or do you think humans have so transformed this planet that no creature is still “wild”? Is rewilding a response to colonial patterns of separating and dominating the nonhuman world, which is why they arise in the United States and the EU—or is this consideration an outcome of a nation’s wealth? And if you do not relate to the example of wolves, as noted before, does the debate sound similar to one closer to you, maybe involving wild pigs, wildebeests, or Arctic musk oxen? What pragmatic and constitutive discourses arise in wildlife debates?

Do not copy, post, or distribute

## Chapter 2

# Cultural and Rhetorical Environmental Discourses: From Apples to Zendaya



Activists around the world have created a coalition to advocate for a Global Plastics Treaty. The #BreakFreeFromPlastic March was held in Nairobi, Kenya, in front of the United Nation Environmental Programme Headquarters. Here, they juxtapose plastic with life.

James Wakibia/SOPA Images/LightRocket via Getty Images

### Learning Objectives

After studying this chapter, you should be able to

- 2.1 Define key terms, including *rhetoric*.
- 2.2 Demonstrate the significance of *naming* and *framing* for environmental matters.
- 2.3 Compare food and related plastics controversies through applying the rhetorical situation.
- 2.4 Appraise *metaphors* in public controversies.

- 2.5 Describe *rhetorical genres*, including *apocalyptic rhetoric* and *environmental melodrama*.
- 2.6 Identify what environmental life, goods, and/or services should not be *privatized*, including access to drinkable water.
- 2.7 Compare *dominant* and *critical discourses* and the ability to apply them to food discourses.
- 2.8 Identify *rhetorical myths* and understand their importance to shaping cultural beliefs and practices.
- 2.9 Critically examine *eco-celebrities* as public figures that shape cultural discourses.

Cultures on every continent eat rice: paella, khichdi, Island Jollof rice, bibimbap, sushi, risotto, rice and beans, kao pad, tahdig, and the list could go on. What meanings and reactions we have in relation to rice and the ways we eat it vary. Personally, some prefer baking it to create crispy edges, while others debate whether the perfect rice is sticky or fluffy. Culturally, some link rice to fertility, others to prosperity, others as an essential food source. In the public sphere, when it comes to environmental communication, one might expect to hear debates over its growing conditions, routes of trade, and public health impacts.

For example, whether or not access to affordable rice—or any other food staple—is a human right is emerging as a significant issue globally as floods increase globally. Did you know, for example, that Myanmar and India have banned the export of non-basmati rice since 2023 in the name of domestic food affordability and security (Sharma, 2023)? And Brazil recently cancelled a rice auction out of concerns of the cost of rice (Cruz, 2024)? When topics of communal concern, such as collective affordability, access, health, and national interest, arise in public spheres, we are in the realm of environmental communication. Extending the vocabulary from last chapter, the following pages will introduce cultural and rhetorical terms to help us analyze environmental discourse.

## Rhetorical Perspectives: On Apples

The study of rhetoric traces its origins to classical Greek philosophers such as Isocrates (436–338 B.C.E.) and Aristotle (384–322 B.C.E.), who taught the arts of citizenship to political leaders in democratic city-states such as Athens. The practice in these city-states was for citizens to speak publicly in law courts and the political assembly, where each citizen represented his own interests. (In Athens and other cities, civic speech was limited principally to native-born, property-owning male citizens.) As a result, competency in public speaking, debate, and persuasion was vital for conducting civic business—war and peace, taxes, construction of public monuments, property claims, and so forth.

It was during this period that Aristotle defined **rhetoric** as “the faculty of discovering in any given case the available means of persuasion” (Herrick, 2009, p. 77). This art of rhetoric rested not simply on skillful delivery but on the ability to discover the resources for persuasion that were available in a specific situation. This draws our attention to



rhetoric as a purposeful choice among the available means useful in accomplishing some effect or outcome to avert crisis or to promote care. As a result, we can say that a rhetorical perspective focuses on purposeful and consequential efforts to influence society's attitudes and behavior through communication, including public debate, protests, advertising, and other modes of symbolic action (Campbell & Huxman, 2008). This definition also underscores rhetoric as a perspective that is social or publicly oriented and contextual. By *contextual*, we mean that rhetoric addresses *particular* situations, audiences, and concerns about the environment that are not universal. What might be relevant or compelling in one place with one **audience** regarding a particular topic might not be in another. (Consider, for example, how you might make an appeal to care about fish to your grandparent or another older person compared to persuading a peer to do the same.)

Since ancient times, rhetoric has expanded its field of study from legal speeches to a whole way of life (Pezzullo and de Onís, 2018), which is why many who study rhetoric also deeply study culture. In this chapter, we will introduce rhetorical concepts to help broaden our appreciation of the specific ways communication choices matter in particular contexts from what we eat to what we drink. We chose marine life, water, and food, including single-use plastics in the food industry, for examples throughout to emphasize how everyday many of these decisions are. Overall, we introduce a symbolic constructionist approach in order to better understand the different ways in which “environment” is constituted and negotiated in public spheres.

Language powerfully shapes or mediates our experiences—what is selected for notice, what is deflected from notice, and therefore how we orient ourselves. As noted in Chapter 1, communication is both pragmatic and constitutive. Likewise, rhetoric has instrumental goals and constitutive impacts. Since we cannot talk about everything we care about all the time, we constantly are making choices about where our attention is given.

In grappling with the incomplete nature of communication, Kenneth Burke (1966) used the *metaphor* of “screens” to describe the way communication orients us toward certain things or aspects of the world and not others, a concept we now call **terministic screens**: “If any given terminology is a *reflection* of reality, by its very nature as a terminology it must be a *selection* of reality; and to this extent it must function also as a *deflection* of reality” (p. 45, emphasis in original). That is, because no form of communication is exhaustive, we must make choices about what we say and do not say, what we show and do not show, and so forth. Studying these choices as *terministic screens* allows us to consider how communication choices—intentionally or not—can powerfully orient our attention, beliefs, and, accordingly, behaviors. As a result, whenever we communicate, we actively participate in constituting our world.

For example, recall or notice apples at your local grocery store. In our neighborhoods, some apples are marked as “apples” and others as “organic apples.” Yet, fruit labeled as “organic” generally are those grown and minimally processed without synthetic pesticides, fertilizers, artificial ingredients, or preservatives; meanwhile fruits labeled as “conventional”—or simply unlabeled fruit, just as “apples,” for example—often are those sprayed with pesticides, even though the name normalizes it as the “usual” way fruit is grown. Through these labels, then, how “conventional” apples are produced becomes normalized by deflecting attention away from the pesticides and related industrial practices required to produce the norm of “apples.” Considering this example of a terministic screen, it is important that we be reflective about what is being selectively said, as well as what Burke terms “deflected,” or *not* being said.

Carol J. Adams's (2015) classic book, *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, suggests one way to think about what is not said is to consider the **absent referent** or the missing or unspoken symbolic action that is necessary for the interaction. In our example, pesticides are the absent referent for "apple," without which those apples could not exist and yet whose role often is unspoken or ignored. In Adams's example, animals become absent references when eaten as meat because we use language to obscure the death of most animals when they are eaten, even as the possibility of eating animals is predicated on killing them. She considers, for example, how we use the words *meat* or *beef* instead of *dead cow*.

In choosing what to communicate or not, another key term for Burke's rhetorical theory is **identification**, imagining commonality or common ground between two figures. His goal with this move in the mid-20th century was to expand our understanding of rhetoric beyond persuasion as competition among rivals and instead to help move others through identifying with each other. "That is," as Burke (1955) wrote, "one does not merely want to outwit the opponent, or to study him [her/them], one wants to be affected" (pp. 283–84). In this chapter, we will consider food and how people do and do not consider their diets a core part of their identification. Choosing people with whom to organize for collective environmental action might be based on a common *identification*: Do we both love organic apples? Or perhaps we both abstain from eating cows? Throughout the book, we'll spotlight activists who organize around a common identity, such as age, occupation, ethnicity, or geographic location. Conversely, when we cannot *identify* with someone else, we often find a growing sense of division or polarization.

Identification has the potential to shape not only how we might respond but also what questions we might imagine asking. Consider, for example, a recent study that found pesticides carcinogenic impact is comparable to smoking for some types of cancer (Gerken et al, 2024). The research team found increased rates of leukemia and non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, as well as bladder, colon, lung, and pancreatic cancer. The study was prompted by a graduate student who had grown up on a farm (Parsley, 2024). That student's lived experience with pesticides as part of their everyday life led to insights that shaped the scientific inquiry.

## Naming: From "There's a Whale!" to Advocating "Beans for Beef"

Another foundational dimension of a rhetorical perspective is the indexical act of **naming**—the assigning of word(s) to invite an orientation, a valuation about an assemblage of persons, statements, and relationships. Tema Milstein (2011) argues wildlife tourism can foster human *identification* with nonhuman nature, such as endangered called the Southern Resident Killer Whales. The act of *naming* something or someone, as Milstein (2011) reminds us, is "a foundational act"; pointing and naming, therefore, are "the basic entry to socially discerning and categorizing parts of nature" (p. 4). She, for example, quotes a whale tour boat captain observing: "I think people have this insatiable desire to point at and name things. 'Oh, that's a . . .'" or "What is that?" (p. 4) or "There's a whale!" (p. 10). And in doing so, naming—like pointing—also indicates "an orientation" to the world and thus "influences our interaction with it" (Oravec, 2004, p. 3). In her study, Milstein addresses scientific acts of naming species and specific research subjects, as well as tourists' attitudes of wonder.

Consider, as another example, how we name our diets in our everyday lives. One of our students told us that he completely supports all environmental advocacy—as long as he can eat a burger. For him, being an omnivore was a significant part of his sense of self or identity, and naming himself as such was, therefore, meaningful to declare publicly in class. Surely, we replied, if we can agree on everything else, we can forge more sustainable change together than focusing on the one issue we disagree on. One of us (Phaedra) addresses this approach as **impure politics**, that is, ethical actions that are judged contextually without adhering to the impossible standard that any of us can become (or want to become) “pure” environmentalists without choices that are imperfect. The risk, of course, is that we could rationalize any action and not care to change to make the world more sustainable and just; the possibility, however, is that we can approach each other with more humility and create a bigger tent for all who want to improve environmental and social relations.

Back to naming, though. As people continue to find ways to live more sustainability and with increased health benefits, more and more names are becoming coined for a range of diets addressed at reducing meat (especially red meat) consumption. One study, for example, estimated the U.S. could reduce 46%–74% of the reduces of global greenhouse gas emissions to meet climate goals just by substituting “beans for beef” (Harwatt et al, 2017). Consider those who identify as a “reducetarian” (someone who loves meat but wants to eat less) or countless other names: vegan, vegetarian, lacto-ovo vegetarian, climatarian, flexitarian, plant-based, plant-rich, sustainatarian, locavore, and more. Conversely, many who eat plant-based foods might not use these labels. For example, how many of you have eaten a banana, a bean burrito, or a salad this week, but would not use one of the foregoing names to describe yourself?

## Water as Commodity or Culture

To consider the relationship between naming individual choices and broader systems of power, let’s turn to another environmental theme in this chapter: water. Consider, for example, whether you think water or food should be named as a **public good** or **privatized commodity**. A public good is an element or service often managed by the government because it is considered significant to collective life and should be available to all (such as access to clean air, fire protection, and schools). In contrast, **privatization** is the process of making something that once was publicly owned and managed by a government into something an individual or corporation exclusively owns and manages.

Naming something like food a public good can impact whether or not you believe school children deserve unpaid lunches, restaurants should charge on a sliding scale, or disaster relief should include a plan for feeding survivors. Given global trends to privatize water sources, more people have begun voicing concerns about whether or not something necessary to life should be allowed to be owned by a few instead of the many (See “FYI: Naming Water Cultures Versus Water Commodities”).

Conversely, however, if words serve to orient us to the world, what happens when we *lose* words? Robert Macfarlane (2016) calls our attention to this possibility in the “culling of words concerning nature” in a recent edition of the *Oxford Junior Dictionary* (p. 3). Among the words deleted were “*acorn, adder, beech bluebell, buttercup, . . . dandelion, fern, hazel, heron, ivy, lark, mistletoe, nectar, newt, otter, pasture, and willow*” (p. 3). The reason, Macfarlane says, is nowadays, many children no longer live in rural areas; newer words are being used instead (*blog, broadband, celebrity*, etc.). These substitutions are understandable, he admits, but there

is “also an alarming acceptance of the idea that children might no longer see the seasons, or that the rural environment might be so unproblematically disposable” (p. 3). In the following example, we want to emphasize the *constitutive* role of *communication* in *naming*.

## Naming Water Cultures Versus Water Commodities

The following is an extended excerpt from an interview Andy Opel published of a conversation he had with Vandana Shiva, a physicist, ecologist, activist, editor, and author of many books. We share this response from Shiva at length because it poignantly illustrates the stakes of naming water as a commodity, something that can be bought and sold, or as a key feature of culture:

To me, water culture is the consciousness of water, the consciousness of being immersed in a water cycle, the consciousness of knowing that we are 70% water, and that the planet is 70% water, and to tread extremely lightly to ensure that water balance is not destroyed. Heightened water awareness creates water culture and water cultures build into them cultures like the sacredness of India's rivers. If Indians could have such a long-term evolution of civilization in the Ganges basin, it is because the Ganges was related to as a sacred mother nourishing the entire basin. The culture that creates is extremely different from the culture which sees water running into the sea as wasted and sees rivers as wild women to be tamed and creates the most violent technologies for rerouting rivers, imprisoning rivers and drying out rivers. That idea of control that develops technologies that disrupt the water cycle and impair the water culture goes hand in hand and [is] leading to the current thinking that water is just another *commodity* on the planet, you don't have to give it any special respect. And every right wing think tank that is promoting and supporting water *privatization* repeatedly states that water is just another commodity. (Shiva, 2008, pp. 498–499; emphasis added)

**Water culture**, a term coined by Shiva and used above, is the recognition that water is precious because it is essential to our whole way of life, involving the collective awareness that we are made of water, immersed in a water cycle, and living on a planet that is mostly water. Naming water a commodity or culture, then, is a decision that reflects our values and shapes our world in profound ways. Depending on which name you give water, you might believe water is a basic human right that should not be denied anyone or that water is a privilege only some may have bought the right to access and to control.

### FYI: Controlling Versus Channeling Floods

Shiva suggests that water culture stands in opposition to imagining water as a commodity, in part, because the latter hinges on the belief one can control water. Another way to consider this tension in perspectives is to consider how humans have choices of how to approach flooding based on the ways water is socially constructed for them.

Many of us live somewhere that has flooded and expect floods to return. Local planners, then, might anticipate flooding and make choices based on their perspective on water. If one believes water can be controlled, one might decide to try to

build a dam or levee—or perhaps drain a wetland. Globally, many engineers have advocated for these choices. If you live near one, consider whether or not this works.

In Boulder, Colorado, where Phaedra lives, a geographer, Gilbert F. White, argued that floods could not be stopped, only channeled; therefore, humans need to adapt in anticipation of floods to come—to live with floods. The flood infrastructure in Phaedra's town and campus, therefore, does not have any critical or hazardous infrastructure (like gas stations) in the path of potential floods and does have large boulders and bike paths to provide routes to channel floods. If you live some place that expects flooding, has your community adapted to life with flooding? Maybe you live somewhere with drainage or ground floors built of tiles in anticipation of floods to come?

For more on White's approach to floodplain management and influence on the national flood insurance: Robert E. Hinshaw, 2006. *Living With Nature's Extremes: The Life of Gilbert Fowler White*. Johnson Books.

## Framing: On Plant-Rich Diets, Artificial Turf, and Farmer Backlash

Naming then may become linked to a broader set of relations through *framing*. The term **frame** was first popularized by Erving Goffman (1974) in his book *Frame Analysis*. He defined frames as the cognitive maps or patterns of interpretation that people use to organize their understanding of reality. A frame, then, is *constitutive*; it helps to construct a particular view or orientation to some aspect of reality. It also may be *persuasive*, because one frame might make a person's worldview more compelling over another's.

Let us return to plant-rich diets. For two years, the World Resources Institute's Better Buying Lab studied which words increased the sales of plant-rich dishes on their menus, finding *provenance*, *flavor*, and other adjectives (look and feel) made them more appealing than using labels such as “meat-free” or vegan or vegetarian (Vennard et al, 2018; Wise and Vennard, 2019). In analyzing these names, however, we move into the realm of frames, that is, not just labels for our diets or ourselves or dishes we eat, but also how choosing those words become associated with broader *frames*.

Dario Krpan and Nanne Houtsma (2020) conducted a study of 11,066 U.S. participants to explore how what is named vegetarian food influences whether or not people will eat it. (Note: The average person in the United States eats more meat than anyone else in the world.) They also discovered the influence of broader frames in the process:

A pro-environmental frame (i.e. “Environmentally Friendly Main Courses for a Happy Planet”), a social frame (i.e. “Refreshing Main Courses for Relaxing Conversations”), and a neutral frame (i.e., vegetarian and nonvegetarian dishes mixed in the same section “Main Courses”) all increased likelihood of vegetarian choice compared to a vegetarian frame (i.e. “Vegetarian Main Courses”). (para. 1)

These results confirmed a growing number of studies that find broad and narrow frames that are credible, salient, and feasible shape dietary choices for consumers and producers throughout the food industry about conventional meat consumption.

An earlier study by Joop de Boer and Harry Aiking (2017) likewise emphasized the complexity of context-based positive cultural frames. They distinguished between object-related frames (e.g., associations with meat or plants) and social interaction frames



(e.g., associations with people who don't eat meat or the ways meat eating was habituated in everyday life). De Boer and Aiking found with positive food frames, being attuned to sensory associations (e.g., savory, sweet, umami, satisfying) were pivotal "to make positive sensory associations and coherent interpretations of healthy and sustainable protein dishes . . . that fit best into the present eating practices, climate, and agricultural tradition of a particular region" (p. 246).

As another way to consider the importance of frames, let us consider one in relation to addressing microplastic pollution. A **problem frame** interprets a particular topic in terms of an important value held by an intended audience to make it worthy of attention through establishing a crisis. Consider, for example, artificial turf on a sports field, which gives the appearance of a fake evergreen lawn and is favored by some for its durability compared to the mud and temperamentality of grass fields. Ernesto Abalo and Ulrika Olausson (2023) write of how news about artificial turf as a microplastic pollutant in Sweden navigated scientific uncertainty to establish a problem frame though creating a sense of unambiguity, relatability (local experiences with turf), and precautionary policies. Whether it is a technology like artificial turf or gas stoves or just a question of access, a range of water and food related problems are framed every week in the news. Whether or not we are moved to believe if a frame identifies a problem to us matters to how much we care.

Once we understand about a problem frame, we might consider the value of a **collective action frame**. As developed by social movement scholars Marshal Ganz and William Gamson, a collective action frame diagnoses an issue, offers a prognosis or solution, and motivates a concerted response (Snow and Benford, 1988; see also: Sorce & Dumitrica, 2021). Korien van Vuuren-Verkerk, Noelle Aarts, and Jan van der Stoep use this key term to analyze responses to nitrogen emission pollution (locally known as *stikstofcrisis*, or the nitrogen crisis) in the Netherlands in 2019, which led to Farmers' Protests. In a backlash movement against governmental environmental regulation to control nitrogen, farmers reasserted their value as experts on nature and animals and contested the prognosis of the government to promote livestock reduction with their own analysis of the condition of nature as not as fragile as one might think, leading to massive nationwide protests.

The farmers' response incorporated all three elements of a *collective action frame* because it: (1) invited identity among those the collective felt was most affected, the farmers; (2) attributed responsibility for addressing the major sources of nitrogen as not their farming; and (3) compelled people to action. As environmental regulations remain important to sustain life on Earth, backlash against the so-called green agenda provides evidence that natural sciences need communication insights to build public trust and pass meaningful protections (Tullis, 2023).

We hope it is clear now that naming and framing help constitute how we imagine problems and crisis and, therefore, pose rhetorical choices. How then do we judge what we should choose?

## The Rhetorical Situation: Getting Our Feet Wet

Rhetorical studies are not invested in seeking universal truths (what would be the best mode of persuasion at all times for all people?); instead, rhetoric focuses on analyzing what is most appropriate and feasible in a particular situation. This is an important point for environmental communication. Environmental problems, particularly, might

be helpfully analyzed through the idea of a **rhetorical situation**, that is, the context that shapes our arguments.

Any rhetorical situation has three key elements: (1) **exigency**, a set of conditions that have been constituted as a situation that becomes marked by a sense of urgency (e.g., “we are running out of clean water”); (2) audience, the people being addressed, and their beliefs, actions, and larger cultural understandings (e.g., “water is necessary for health”); and (3) **constraints**, the cultural limitations and possibilities of the context (e.g., water access feels essential to protect and complicated, as it is related to long histories, including property rights and global relations). We adapt to our rhetorical situations all the time. For example, you probably wouldn’t explain the impact of water access or a plant-based diet in the same way if you were talking to your roommate versus speaking to a school board versus an older person in your family.

For people making decisions about environmental issues, considering how an *exigency* is constructed and then addressed with particular people within a particular context is vital to how they make judgments. Let us consider plastics.

## Constructing Plastics as a Crisis

As we noted previously, a rising number of countries and cities are banning single-use plastic, including those used often in relation to the food industry: straws, cups, utensils, beverage bottles, to-go or takeout containers, individual condiment sachet packets, and so forth. As these countries symbolically construct a sense of exigency about single-use plastics they articulate or name key environmental concerns, such as: negative impacts on public health, particularly during production and consumption; harming marine life and other nonhuman species once disposed; and contributing to the climate crisis by creating an increased demand for fossil fuels. In this section, we want to draw on a book one of us (Phaedra) recently wrote, *Beyond Straw Men*, to consider when and how plastics become imagined and constructed as a crisis (or not) through using the vocabulary of a rhetorical situation.

In this section, we hope to illustrate how the exigency of plastics is related to who we consider our audience (or not) and the constraints (limitations or possibilities) we face. In 2002, for example, Bangladesh was the first country to ban plastic bags, offering a further *exigency*—the bags choked drains during Bangladesh floods in the late 1990s, literally causing people to drown; one *possibility* enabled by the ban became increasing production of bags made of locally sourced jute instead. Countries in the Global South, such as Bangladesh, have become leaders in turning the tide, as advocates say, of single-use plastic production, including ongoing international negotiations related to a Global Plastics Treaty.

Meanwhile, when the U.S.-based NGO Lonely Whale launched a multimedia coalition effort in Seattle, Washington, in the United States, to persuade businesses to withdraw plastic straws from their establishments to protect what they considered an exigency for ocean health, including marine life endangerment, a controversy erupted. They chose straws over bags as the focus because the industry previously had made a bag ban controversial, which was a constraint or limitation for their rhetorical situation. Lonely Whale Foundation’s “Strawless in Seattle” campaign (playing off the title of the 1993 film *Sleepless in Seattle*) went viral, mobilized voters, and—in a year—created a political tipping point for the city to become the first major U.S. city to ban plastic straws. Celebrities, sports teams, and wildlife advocates in support of the ban tweeted, sported T-shirts, and appeared in videos with the hashtags #StopSucking, #StrawBan, #SkiptheStraw,

#PlasticPollutes, #StrawlessOcean, and more. They cleverly played on straw-related language as another *constraint*, in this case a possibility, for their rhetorical situation. Straws also were pretty relatable items in the everyday life of people, making a complex issue like plastics have a more concrete example for people to consider what is unnecessary, taken-for-granted consumerism versus what matters.

The audience reactions were varied. To some, it appeared as a tangible first step for resisting the ubiquity of single-use disposable plastics in contemporary U.S. culture, a welcome sign of environmental hope during a period of environmental protection backlash emboldened and enabled by the 2016 and 2024 U.S. presidential election results. The backlash to the successful straw ban, however, was immediately expressed in the public sphere from multiple voices nationally, out of fear the campaign would spread. Conservative news outlet FoxNews claimed the movement was “taking away freedom for nothing in return” (Stossel, 2018). Adopting U.S. President Trump’s popular “MakeAmericaGreatAgain” slogan, “#MakeStrawsGreatAgain” began to trend on Twitter (the platform now known as “X”), and Trump himself went as far as sponsoring plastic straws with the new slogan, which promptly sold out (Rosane, 2019). This backlash became a limiting rhetorical constraint for the campaign.

Disability justice advocates also responded swiftly and adamantly against the ban, generating the new hashtag #SuckItAbleism. Their argument was that plastic straws are more than a convenience item, but necessary for temperature control and flexibility for some disabled people, which could have been addressed in the public policy if they had been invited to the decision-making table as a key audience for this campaign. For people with ALS, dementia, stroke, seizures, or other health disabilities, advocates argued, plastic straws are a necessity, at times the only way to eat or take medicine (Danovich & Godoy, 2018). This critique claimed, in other words, that the bans had the potential to foster **eco-ableism**, the marginalization of disabled people through environmental design; the exclusion of disabled people in environmental decision-making; and the discrimination against disabled people through environmental discourses, beliefs, and attitudes (Pezzullo, 2023; see also: Cram et al, 2022). Lonely Whale did follow up with disability justice advocates and became a proponent of disability accommodations in legislation globally as a result, broadening their *audience* and showing their capacity to adapt their assessment of the rhetorical situation as it evolved.

Still other criticisms of the campaign included the longstanding critique of environmental consumption approaches to systemic ecological crises. Richard Stafford and Peter J. S. Jones (2019), for example, argue that climate change and overfishing pose more of a crisis than plastic pollution in marine environments: “Ocean plastic can provide a convenient truth that distracts us from the need for more radical changes to our behavioural, political and economic systems . . . as well as the cause of plastic pollution, i.e. over-consumption” (p. 187). The disagreement here became: Which issue is of greater relevance to ecological exigencies?

While we don’t aim to resolve this controversy here, we encourage you to consider it from a rhetorical situation perspective: what motivated an *exigency* for this campaign and responses to it? How did the audiences experiences shape their sense of what was the crisis or exigency? And what were the constraints—both the limitations or possibilities—about the Seattle straw ban that differed from the previously noted plastic bag ban in Bangladesh? Do you know of any plastic-related bans where you live? How does their rhetorical situation compare?

Phaedra's book, *Beyond Straw Men*, encourages us to think about plastic straws as an articulator of crisis, that is, as an object that became linked to many crises, making it a charged symbol, particularly from 2016 to 2020. Perhaps you can think of a different symbol that invokes controversy today where you live, something that is creating heated debates as a sign of crisis?



As the planet continues to break records during heatwaves, access to water becomes harder. Pictured is an image of women and girls in India carrying water long distances in temperature over 100 degrees Fahrenheit (50 degrees Celsius).

NurPhoto/Contributor

## Metaphors: On Orcas Uprising

Among the most common rhetorical resources we usually learn about at a relatively early age are *metaphors*, which abound in the landscape of environmental communication: Mother Nature, Spaceship Earth, and food chain are just a few examples. **Metaphors**, as you might be aware, are when a symbol is applied to something else that is not literally comparable but suggests a connection.

Though relatively simple, metaphors can become powerful rhetorical choices in environmental communication to shape public attitudes or agendas. Consider, for example, Rachel Carson's 1962 classic *Silent Spring*. Although she wasn't writing literally just about spring but rather about toxic pesticide use in agriculture and beyond more broadly, Carson's book uses a metaphor in the title and opening of the book to create an exigence about the idea of a spring without songbirds, silence and death in a season known for rebirth and abuzz with new life. (For a deeper analysis, see: *And No Birds Sing: Rhetorical Analyses of Rachel Carson's Silent Spring*, Craig Waddell, ed. Southern Illinois University Press, 2000.)

Metaphors, in other words, can have consequences. Another example is illustrated by Madrone J. K. Schutten and Caitlyn Burford (2017), who argue that language matters in controversies over captive orcas on display at theme parks, including metaphors of prisoner, activist, and martyr. They argue that when the Tilikum, an orca (also known as black-fish and killer whale), killed his Sea World trainer, Dawn Brancheau, in 2010, spectators

“should have seen an imprisoned orca attempting a jailbreak, taunting his captors, and demanding liberation” (p. 263). Whether or not you agree with this interpretation of the event or what witnesses took away, Schutten and Burford persuasively argue that the metaphors through which we imagine our species and other species, that is, as well as tourist destinations of captive animals (such as zoos and aquariums), reflect our ways of knowing and the values we hold about relationships between people and nonhuman animals.

More recently, consider which metaphors you would use to write the headline of the orcas that have been damaging boats since 2020: are they “ramming,” “attacking,” “playing,” “mourning,” or starting an “uprising”? And do you think they are captivating attention in the public sphere because we care about the actual orcas or because they provide a fantasy for challenging the increasing gap between most of us and the world’s wealthiest elites? (For more on this trend, see: Beddington, 2023.)



People have known Earth was round since ancient times. Nevertheless, this image became instantly iconic. “Blue Marble” is the official name of the first photograph of Earth taken from outer space (in 1972 by the *Apollo 8* crew on their flight to the moon). What does the metaphor of a marble signify compared to other choices? Why emphasize “blue” over “green” or “blue and green”? What name would you give this image?

NASA, U.S. Public Domain

## Apocalyptic Rhetoric and Melodrama: *Silent Spring* or Chicken Littles?

Environmental actors also often rely on different genres to influence perceptions of an issue or problem. Though studied throughout the humanities, **rhetorical genres** are generally defined as distinct forms of composition that share a recognizable similarity in style, form, and/or topic. That is, they “share characteristics distinguishing them” (K. H. Jamieson & Stromer-Galley, 2001, p. 361), such as a similar tone, structure, and/or theme. To illustrate this term, we will turn to current examples of two common environmental genres: *apocalyptic rhetoric* and *environmental melodrama*.

As a genre, **apocalyptic rhetoric** references a vision or prediction of the end of the world as we know it. For example, the classic Carson book previously mentioned, *Silent*



*Spring*, appropriated apocalyptic rhetoric literary styles to warn of impending and severe ecological crises: the former on the fear that the exponential number of people on the planet would overstress its life-supporting systems and the latter on the impact of the massive, under-regulated use of pesticides on biological life cycles, including public health. Jimmie Killingsworth and Jacqueline Palmer (1996) explained that

in depicting the end of the world as a result of the overweening desire to control nature, [these authors] have discovered a rhetorical means of contesting their opponents' claims for the idea of progress with its ascendant narratives of human victory over nature. (p. 21)

Apocalyptic rhetoric also includes climate-related science fiction books such as Margaret Atwood's (2004) *Oryx and Crake* or Octavia Butler's unfinished trilogy of *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *Parable of the Talents* (1998). Sometimes, the genre explicitly holds out hope, such as the children's classic by Dr. Seuss, *The Lorax* (1971), which concludes with the line: "Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It's not." Arguably, however, the genre is an exercise in imagining unchecked environmental degradation in the hopes that we will choose otherwise.

The popularity of this apocalyptic rhetoric across nonfiction environmental advocacy issues (for example, when addressing extinction of a species or destruction of a habitat) often places environmental communicators in a conundrum: How do we create a sense of exigency without sounding like what some anti-environmentalists call "Chicken Littles"? That is, if the world always appears to be on the brink of apocalypse, does the genre begin to lose its capacity to create a sense of urgency? Does apocalyptic rhetoric actually ever help us to avoid crisis? (See "Another Viewpoint: The Rhetoric of Diverting Crisis.")

## Another Viewpoint

### The Rhetoric of Diverting Apocalyptic Crisis

While environmental communication often addresses crisis, when successful, it can divert apocalypse. In January 2018, stories emerged internationally that the city of Cape Town, South Africa, apocalyptically declared that April 12, 2018, would become named "Day Zero," indicating a severe water crisis for the nation. When April 12 arrived, however, crisis had been averted and the world quickly forgot that feeling of exigency that had been declared. Was this an example of environmental Chicken Littles fabricating a crisis when there was none?

Josephine Walwema (2020) argues that the reason Day Zero never came as predicted was the rhetorical success of declaring a water emergency—and that studying what worked will be important for future crises to be diverted. Walwema claims: "Declaring Day Zero may have been apocalyptic, but it . . . simplified the complex science of the drought and appealed to those likely to be concerned about what that meant for the future"; "That declaration served the rhetorical function of rallying the public and keeping the water issue present" (p. 28).

Do you think Walwema's findings might work in other rhetorical situations? When has declaring a crisis diverted a crisis in your lifetime?

---

Source: Walwema, J. (2020, February 7). Rhetoric and Cape Town's campaign to defeat Day Zero. *Journal of Technical Writing and Communication*, 1–34.

The idea of apocalyptic rhetoric has also been used in another way. Jennifer Peeples, Peter Bsumek, Steve Schwarze, and Jennifer Schneider (2014) have documented how often anti-environmental voices in the public sphere frame environmental voices as sounding “apocalyptic”; the effect is to deflect attention away from how those same anti-environmental voices draw on the same genre themselves. As they elaborate in their book *Industrial Apocalyptic*, a study of contemporary discourses of the coal industry, J. Schneider, Schwarze, Bsumek, and Peeples (2016) claim **industrial apocalyptic rhetoric** involves “a set of rhetorical appeals that constitute the imminent demise of a particular industry, economic, or political system and the catastrophic ramifications associated with that loss” (p. 27). “In the case of the coal industry,” they argue, industrial apocalyptic rhetoric involves appeals that “disrupt . . . categories of establishment and outsider, generate adherence from supportive audiences, marginalize environmental concerns, and thwart environmental regulation” (pp. 27–28). Their work is an important reminder that a rhetorical genre may be used by any voice in the public sphere for any ends as a rhetorical resource to shape environmental attitudes, practices, and policies.

Steven Schwarze (2006) also has analyzed another genre, **environmental melodrama**, to clarify issues of power and the ways advocates moralize an environmental conflict. Environmental melodrama, then, serves as a rhetorical genre used by advocates to dramatize power imbalances and moralize an environmental conflict intended to move emotions. Schwarze (2006) argues that this mode of address “generates stark, polarizing distinctions between social actors and infuses those distinctions with moral gravity and pathos” and is, therefore, “a powerful resource for rhetorical invention” (p. 239).

Many environmental stories portray a David and Goliath or underdog versus billionaire or Big Institution storyline using this genre. Consider, for example, how many food documentaries set up an opposition, like *King Corn* (2007), *Food, Inc.* (2008), *Forks Over Knives* (2011), *Cowspiracy* (2014), and so forth. These films frame a conflict between everyday people and the industries they are critiquing for unsustainable food systems. In *Food, Inc. 2* (2024) government calls for (featuring two U.S. senators) and is called upon to stand up to “very powerful companies” on behalf of farmers, worker rights in the food industry, and the health of everyday people who are being marketed **ultra-processed foods**. It is not inaccurate to draw upon the genre of environmental melodrama in this context because of the power differences documented and the emotional stakes of how important it is to eat healthy and have well-supported agricultural workers.

Creating these rhetorical tensions is a way of troubling or denaturalizing taken-for-granted ways of thinking and speaking about an everyday topic like food. In the next section, we’ll introduce related terms through the topic of another environmental topic relevant to all of our everyday lives: water.

## Dominant Versus Critical Discourses: Revisiting Water and Food

Discourse reminds us that rhetorical resources are broader than any single word, phrase, or performance. A **discourse** is a pattern of knowledge and power communicated through linguistic and nonlinguistic expression. Discourse functions to “circulate a coherent set of meanings about an important topic” (Fiske, 1987, p. 14). Such meanings often influence our understanding of how the world works or should work.

For example, you probably have heard **fatalist discourse**, communicating a pattern of belief that no action makes a difference because the results are predetermined as inevitably failing. Consider when you have heard people disparage an action (voting, protesting, reducing red meat consumption, etc.) without suggesting what might make a difference. A fatalist discourse serves the status quo well.

Samantha Hautea et al (2021) studied TikTok discourses and identified fatalist discourse as a common trope on social media, such as the following excerpt from one video:

Right now, the Amazonian rainforest is on fire, and scientists agree that unless every single country agrees to fight climate change, we're all heading towards a global extinction. And there's nothing you can do about it, 'cause you're only one person. So go ahead, use that plastic straw: we're all as good as dead anyway!

Hautea et al. explain this particular video is a sarcastic parody of fatalist discourse, which is another sign that what someone is communicating is reflective of a broader pattern. Once the pattern is obvious, it is easier for audiences to get the joke because the pattern sounds familiar to them too.

When a discourse gains a broad or taken-for-granted status in a culture (e.g., “drinking water is important for your health”), or when its meanings help legitimize certain practices (e.g., “buy bottled water because it is the cleanest, most convenient choice”), it can be said to be a **dominant discourse**. Dominant discourse is a pattern of knowledge and power communicated through linguistic and nonlinguistic expression that is widely accepted as the norm in a culture or context. Often, these discourses are invisible in the sense that they express naturalized or taken-for-granted assumptions and values about how the world is or should be organized. Perhaps one of the least controversial claims we can make in our classes is that drinking water is good for our health—a sign that that discourse is widely accepted. Yet dominant discourses are themselves rhetorically invented, reinforced, and sustained over time.

Likewise, as we will illustrate, **critical discourses** are rhetorical. That is, critical discourse refers to a pattern of knowledge and power communicated through linguistic and nonlinguistic expression that challenges, questions, or interrupts a dominant discourse. In some contexts, critical discourses may appear muted or absent, whereas in others, they may be boisterous, widespread, or even longstanding. One might consider, for example, the message quoted earlier in this chapter from Vandana Shiva; her articulation of water culture now might be understood as a critical discourse. Below, we will provide more examples, revisiting the two topics of this chapter: water and food.

## Bottled Water Versus Tap Water

If you search online for “bottled water trends,” you’ll see a steady increase in the popularity of bottled water for decades now, particularly in China, the United States, Mexico, Indonesia, and Russia (Statistica Market Insights, 2024). Some estimate that it will soon become the top-selling packaged beverage globally. Such popularity, however, is not an accident. *Business Insider* reports that this trend away from tap water to bottled water has been encouraged by the advertising of multinational corporations, such as PepsiCo and Coca-Cola. As a former chief executive officer of Gatorade said of the company’s communications campaign to shift public opinion: “When we’re done, tap water will be relegated to irrigation and washing dishes” (Goldschein, 2011; see also Gleick, 2011).

As Lucy Atkinson and Yoojung Kim (2015) showed in a study of women who identified as green consumers, the rationalizations for consuming bottled water were abundant. For example, some prioritized convenience as motive, others denied responsibility claiming it was the only option, and still others rationalized as long as the companies selling the bottled water were promising to improve their efforts to reduce plastic waste. Humans are, as they conclude, “complicated and oftentimes contradictory” (p. 51).

The irony, in part, is that bottled water often *is* tap water. In 2016, for example, PepsiCo admitted that Aquafina is treated tap water (Walia, 2016). Identifying how private industry eroded public trust about tap water and then promoted buying water (even when it cost more and didn’t always win taste tests), Annie Leonard (2010) argues dominant discourse about bottled water is an exemplar of **manufactured demand**, which persuades people to believe they need to spend money on something they don’t actually need or already have.

Critical discourse about water, as noted, might include imagining water culture as a human right and not a commodity. Signs of this discourse carrying weight or mattering might be if your school or community provides public water fountains, where people can drink water for free. Although free water fountains are common in some communities, they are not yet the taken-for-grant norm in many communities today.

## Fast Food Versus Slow Food

Food is part of our daily lives, but what we eat is not merely instinctual but shaped by collective norms and policies. At the turn of the millennium, Eric Schlosser (2001) shocked many when he shared how popular the fastfood restaurant McDonald’s had become, including evidence that the logo of the company was more widely recognized than the Christian cross, and that children sometimes recognize the logo before they recognize their own names. Observations such as these suggest that fast food had become a *dominant discourse* in U.S. culture. In 2020, the popularity of fast food remained high and projected to grow with Europe leading the global share of “convenience foods, on-the-go snacks, ready meals, and cold cuts” (Fortune Business Insights, 2024).

Alongside the development of fast food has been the dominant discourse of farm worker disposability. Although we will address farmworker labor movements in Chapter 3 and 8, for now, we want to share one example of a *dominant discourse*. Sarah Dempsey et al (2022) argue that during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, the dominant discourse of **corporate exceptionalism**—the belief that private companies should be allowed to operate by their own rules because they provide extraordinary value—abounded. Dempsey et al. argue this discourse was maintained through: 1) “casting themselves as a critical economic linchpin”; (2) deflecting criticism by aligning “themselves with heroic portrayals of meatpacking workers”; and (3) promoting “images of themselves as competent stewards.” Again, through this example, we hope you appreciate *discourse* as a pattern expressed linguistically and nonlinguistically, and *dominant discourse* as maintained through taken-for-granted norms.

*Critical discourses* challenging the dominance of fast food and the disposability of the people who grow food also has arisen globally. In Italy, for example, Carlo Petrini helped

mobilize an international food movement in the late 1980s. Two events helped solidify the exigency that Petrini felt about Italian culture, food, and economy transforming in unsustainable ways. First, he argued that the opening of the first McDonald's fast-food store in Piazza di Spagna, a well-known public square in Rome, was a sign of increased multinational influence on eating habits and local economies. Second, the poisoning of hundreds in northern Italy, including the deaths of 19 people, as a result of cheap wine cut with methanol underscored the high risk of becoming alienated from one's food sources and the laws that govern them. Petrini since helped foster an international, critical discourse that resists the dominant discourse of fast, cheap, unhealthy food called the "**Slow Food movement**," which promotes local food cultures for "good, clean, and fair food" (<https://www.slowfood.com/>).

The Slow Food movement also has built an international coalition with La Via Campesina, a self-declared international peasant movement based out of Jakarta, Indonesia. La Via Campesina challenges dominant corporate-driven transnational agriculture in defense of small farmers and **food sovereignty**, the right of everyday people, farmworker unions, and sovereign countries to public participation in agricultural and food policy (see Act Locally! for more). Relatedly, Mohan Dutta and Jagadish Thaker (2017) have written about "communication sovereignty" by Dalit women farmers in South India who resist the dominant discourse global cash crop agriculture through collective farming organizing.

Carlos Monteiro, a Brazilian nutrition epidemiologist, became concerned about unhealthy trends in his country and not only created a classification system of food processing (NOVA, from the Portuguese *nova classificação* or, in English, "new classification"), but coined the term *ultra-processed food*. He and his colleagues defined **ultra-processed food** as a range of unhealthy industrially manufactured foods that are marketed for convenience and profits; that is, they "are designed to create highly profitable (low-cost ingredients, long shelf-life, emphatic branding), convenient (ready-to-consume), and hyper-palatable product" (Monteiro et al, 2019). After an evidence-based campaign, health advocates in Brazil in 2023 celebrating the passing of Law 3766, which prohibits the advertising or distribution of ultra-processed products (UPPs) in schools.

Constance Gordon and Kathleen P. Hunt (2019) have provided a complex framework to assess environmental communication about **food systems**. They argue, "Food is fundamentally communicative: it is both ordinary and profound, signifying shared meanings and narratives, constituting communities and identities, and also nourishing relational bonds through what some have called 'foodways'" (p. 10). Further, Gordon and Hunt argue how food sovereignty, food system reform, and food justice offers a way to critically engage

the ways ecosystems, humans and non-humans, consumers, advocates, farmworkers, food service workers, laborers of all sorts, farmers, peasants, landowners, technology and chemical companies, distributors, grocery stores and retail chains, governments, regulatory, legal, and international institutions, and so many others, both constitute and contest the food system itself. (p. 17)

To consider the many sources of food communication in our lives can be overwhelming and confusing; yet we all make food choices daily.



## Act Locally!

Critical to food sovereignty is the right to make decisions about food access, labor, and production. In 2007, the Food Sovereignty movement organized the International Nyéléni Forum for Food Sovereignty in Selingue, Mali. The outcome was “The Six Pillars of Food Sovereignty,” which are: (1) Focuses on Food for People, (2) Values Food Providers, (3) Localizes Food Systems, (4) Puts Control Locally, (5) Builds Knowledge and Skills, and (6) Works With Nature.

To enact these principles, you could do many things, including, but not limited to:

- volunteering at a community food garden or food waste facility
- facilitating a collection for a local food bank or setting up composting on your campus
- hosting a speaker on campus to discuss working conditions for food workers
- creating a local healthy food zine or guide for new classes of students
- organizing a food justice tour to support and to publicize the food sovereignty movement where you live

Try one of these activities and share with the class what you learned. If you already have done one or more of these, share why you feel they are more or less effective where you live.

---

Resource: La Via Campesina website: <https://viacampesina.org/en/>

From this perspective, food systems include the entire life cycle of feeding, from growing to consuming or disposing. Given this complexity, it perhaps is no surprise that there are so many discourses about food, including but not limited to dominant discourses of agribusiness to critical discourses of local food, organic food, fair trade, food sovereignty, and more.

Further, Singer (2017) points out in study of online discourses of the Meatless Monday campaign, a seemingly critical campaign also can use dominant discourse by reinforcing cultural norms (e.g., featuring White heteromascuine norm-centered middle-class protagonists) and obscuring more radical discourses about human and nonhuman oppression. We would do well, then, to learn to identify these discourses, as well as who benefits and, if any who pays for their assumptions.

In an inspiring essay on how social change can work at a local level, Gordon (2024) more recently wrote about the community fridge movement in the United States and Canada, describing the networks of providing food access through refrigerators in public spaces (like sidewalks) and pantries. She describes this practice as one of **mutual aid**, defined as “informal and improvisational care work to meet each other’s basic needs.” Through an analysis of their social media, she illustrates how their critical food discourse is able to “disrupt dominant food charity discourses—scarcity, saviorism, and surveillance” (p. 158). Perhaps you have been involved in food charity or *mutual aid* and can recognize these dominant versus critical discourses as well?

If not, consider whether all school-aged children receive food access at public schools or whether this access costs money? In places where food is considered a basic human right (like water), some communities have made school lunch and breakfast free for all children. In the United States, the Black Panther Party’s school breakfast program, which

began in 1969 in Oakland, began as what many—including the U.S. government—perceived as a threat but ended up changing dominant perspectives on food access for some (Massie, 2016; Alonso, 2020).

## Myth

Another way one can analyze dominant discourses is through identifying *myths*. A **myth** is a foundational story of a culture, often naturalized as a common-sense moral order or worldview through ubiquitous communicative repetition. The unification of a myth, in this sense, occurs through pervasive signification, that is, the repeated linking of symbols with particular meanings (Barthes, 1957/1991). Consciously or not, we all participate in myth making and breaking.

Myths go beyond everyday stories by the scope of their recognition in and impact on a culture. They sometimes involve epic stakes and heroic figures. We will discuss, for example, the *Frontier Myth* in Chapter 3. Myths also can appear more subtle, though still justifying an interpretation of reality that imbues hierarchies.

For this chapter, let's consider one study that combines this older concept of *myth* with the popular understanding of when such stories distort meaning. In 2021, consultant and semiotician Natasha Delliston conducted a study for Greenpeace summarized in a report titled: *The Seven Myths of Big Meat Marketing* (Greenpeace, 2021). Each myth identified reflects a foundational story about meat and moralizes the consumption of more meat. In addition to interviewing experts in communication, linguistics, culture, sociology, and psychology, she analyzed over 51 brands in six European countries, all of which were attempting to increase meat consumption in the face of a larger number of people turning to plant-based diets (Denmark, France, Germany, Poland, Spain and Switzerland).

The report identified seven myths promoted in the ads examined:

The Green Myth

The “Meat Is Good For You” Myth

The Masculinity Myth

The “Good Woman” Myth

The National Identity Myth

The Human Togetherness Myth

The Freedom Myth

To consider just the first to illustrate our key term, let us consider The Green Myth. Here, *The Seven Myths of Big Meat Marketing* identifies the ubiquity of literally the color green in the advertising, from green fields to logos, as well as environmental or “green” claims, such as “climate-controlled pork,” and positive descriptors suggesting none are bad, including the ambiguous “farm-fresh” label. The report then refutes these taken-for-granted symbols by challenging the messages, including that: (a) Big Meat will help “solve” the climate crisis through technology without anyone needing to reduce consumption (while the meat industry is a contributor to global greenhouse gases); and (b) all meat comes from “small-scale, pastoral idyll farm” (which is far from the norm for most large-scale meat production today) (pp. 15–17).

Whether or not you agree with Greenpeace, we hope this example helps illustrate how myths work. The environmental communication about meat in European cultures (and arguably elsewhere) reinforces the idea that consuming meat is—or at least can become—a green act. In addition to marketing, which we address at greater length later in the book, celebrities influence dominant and critical discourses as well.

## Eco-celebrities: Cool or Cruel?

We know celebrities pose an extraordinary ability to garner attention—as well as cynicism—about environmental issues. Consider, for example, Taylor Swift's private jet use, Leonardo DiCaprio making an environmental speech, The Roots celebrating the launch of Green Music Group, and Jane Fonda getting arrested (again) for her protests as part of Fire Drill Fridays to raise the alarm about a climate emergency. Let alone the stories actors portray on screen.

Famous people who identify with environmental causes, such as actors Mark Ruffalo or Jane Fonda, or choose vegan diets, such as singer-songwriter Billie Eilish, actress-singer Ariana Grande, and tennis champion Venus Williams, sometimes are called **eco-celebrities**. Zendaya (Zendaya Maree Stoermer Coleman), the Emmy and Golden Globe winning actress, is perhaps is best known for her roles in the *Dune* and *Spider-Man* enterprises. As someone who has lived as a vegetarian for decades, one might consider her an eco-celebrity. Does her discourse on food challenge norms because she is a famous actor who is resisting animal consumption, or is she unable to challenge dominant discourse because she is so closely tied to an industry of consumption?



Celebrities shape culture; so, when a celebrity like Zendaya, pictured here with her favorite fries, shares she's a vegetarian, does it make a difference?

Rich Polk/Getty Images for The Weinstein Company

political critique. And yet—Doyle clarifies that celebrities are important for environmental communication because they do have the potential to shape culture in ways that are extraordinary. It seems possible, then, for our diets and eco-celebrities to both reify and trouble unsustainable norms.

Today, many public figures foster great debate about the possibility if any global elite can claim environmentalism. The world's richest person currently is Elon Musk, owner of many companies, including Tesla and X/Twitter. According to *Business Insider*, "Musk's private jet emitted 132 times as much carbon as the average American does in an entire

year”—let alone compared to people who live in less carbon-intensive countries (Relman, 2023). Nevertheless, Musk claims to be “objectively one of the world’s leading environmentalists in terms of doing things” (Sanderson, 2023). Since environmental communication crosses political and economic boundaries, how do you judge the rhetorical and cultural impact of famous people?

## Summary

In this chapter, we’ve described a perspective on communication that emphasizes cultural and rhetorical dimensions of the broader field of environmental communication. We introduced several rhetorical concepts in this chapter that bear relevance to environmental communication:

- Rhetoric, particularly the use of terministic screens, naming, and framing, helps remind us of the importance of symbolic communication as an orienting action that reflects and deflects.
- The rhetorical situation is a helpful way to analyze the ways we construct environmental crises to mobilize action, including exigencies, audiences, and constraints.
- Metaphors are useful to interpret human dramas about the environment in ways that both persuade and constitute environmental attitudes and actions.
- Dominant and critical discourses provide a means to analyze both prevalent and counterintuitive beliefs, values, and actions that sustain and challenge a culture’s view of the environment, as illustrated through water and food examples.
- Eco-celebrities garner attention culturally with mixed impacts.

The examples in this chapter and previous ones broadly illustrate rhetorical choices related to environmental communication. In the next chapter, we turn to climate communication.

## Suggested Resources

- In 2022, Constance Gordon, Kathleen P. Hunt, and Mohan J. Dutta coedited a special issue of the Open Access journal *Frontiers in Communication*, edited by Tarla Rai Peterson, on food systems communication amid compounding crises. The issue includes 12 contributions you can read here on dominant and critical food discourses facing specific rhetorical situations: <https://www.frontiersin.org/research-topics/16047/food-systems-communication-amid-compounding-crises-power-resistance-and-change/articles>
- July 3 is International Plastic Bag Free Day, often involving actions on every continent. For more on how and why Africa is providing global leadership on plastic bag bans, see: Ephrat Livni, “Africa is leading the world in plastic bag bans,” *World Economic Forum*. (2019, May 23). Available at: <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2019/05/africa-is-leading-the-world-in-plastic-bag-bans>

- For more on *manufactured demand* of bottled water, watch Annie Leonard's (2010) short video: "The Story of Bottled Water," The Story of Stuff Project, available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Se12y9hSOM0>.
- Adams' *Sexual Politics of Meat* makes a compelling argument about the relationship of how people in the United States treat nonhuman animals and women as "meat." The 2018 film *The Game Changers* features vegan professional athletes, including Patrik Baboumian, an Iranian-born German-Armenian strongman, and Arnold Schwarzenegger, an Austrian-American actor, businessman and politician, to dispel the myth that you need to eat animals to be strong or potent (<https://gamechangermovie.com/>). For more on dominant discourse in the United States linking meat eating to masculinity and, therefore, a crisis of masculinity to a reduction of meat eating, see the following article: Rogers, R. A. (2008, November). Beasts, burgers, and Hummers: Meat and the crisis of masculinity in contemporary television advertisements. *Environmental Communication*, 2(3), 281–301.

## Key Terms

Absent referent	Identification
Apocalyptic rhetoric	Impure politics
Audience	Industrial apocalyptic rhetoric
Collective action frame	Manufactured demand
Commodity	Metaphor
Constraints	Mutual aid
Corporate exceptionalism	Myth
Critical discourse	Naming
Discourse	Privatization
Dominant discourse	Problem frame
Eco-ableism	Public good
Eco-celebrities	Rhetoric
Environmental melodrama	Rhetorical genres
Exigency	Rhetorical situation
Fatalist discourse	Slow Food movement
Food sovereignty	Terministic screens
Food systems	Ultra-processed food
Frame	Water culture

## Discussion Questions

1. As we note, some of the words we use for nature are being replaced in reference sources to make space for new terms. When Professor Audrey Wagstaff teaches this textbook, she encourages students to brainstorm all the words about nature we use in other contexts to consider the loss of these words, as well as how their meanings change contextually; for example, depending on the situation, "buttercup" could signify a flower, a term of endearment, or an animated Power Puff Girl on television. Time yourself and list how many words related to water (like *flow*) you can name that have at least two other meanings in different contexts. Swap with a classmate to discover who recalled more.

2. *Naming* can be empowering or disempowering. Are there naming controversies in the places you grew up in or on your campus? Some debate, for example, whether or not environmental features such as rivers or mountains should use Indigenous names or settler colonial ones. Others debate if we should or should not honor historical figures that caused environmental and human degradation in statues or as building names.
3. The plastic straw ban controversy moved many voices from many perspectives, including but not limited to ocean, disability, and anti-environmental advocates. Which group did you find most compelling? Does the rhetorical situation of plastic straw bans vary from plastic bag bans? What are the biggest constraints for each in your own community?
4. There are many debates over food today. If you have time, watch the documentary *Food Inc., 2*, featuring Professor Carlos Monteiro's critique of ultra-processed foods and a critique of those marketed as meat substitutes. Garrett M. Broad (2020) published an analysis of powerful metaphors of new plant-based and cell-based "meat." Have you eaten "meat" that was not once from an animal? What metaphors have you heard used to describe "real" meat versus these new innovations in "alternative proteins"?