

a voice
for the natural
landscaping
movement



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Celebrating natives
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Grapevine

Communication and easy-to-understand explanations are more and more important for Wild Ones

By Maryann Whitman

Communication

The young boy had spent all his life in the city: He was enthralled by the woods. We battled endless brambles, thickets plucked at our clothes, and branches whipped our faces. Finally, we reached a clearing. Having survived the trek into the wilderness, we began exploring. We poked at raccoon scat on a log. We found some partridge berry, and chewed on its pleasantly flavored leaves. We explored a trail left by a small animal, that led to a barely noticeable opening at the base of an oak tree. We peered at a squirrel's feeding station on a mossy, long-ago sawn stump.

The boy's eyes, big with excitement at what he was discovering, shifted to me, and he asked solemnly, "Do you think anyone else has ever been in this place before?"

With lightning clarity I remembered being eight-or-so, in my cedar swamp, thinking exactly that same question. I moved away from the long-ago sawn stump, so I could answer without disturbing his wonderment, "On this very spot where I'm standing right now – I don't think so," I said.

Shifting baselines

The boy was experiencing something new. It was quite possible that this memory would be iconic for him, as mine had been for me. This represented undisturbed Nature; this was Wilderness to him. This vision might always define for him what Nature was like in his youth.

He and I were standing in a small clearing, within a hundred feet of my barn, and perhaps 1,000 feet of Twin Lakes Golf Course, but this proximity didn't matter to him. Just as it hadn't mattered to me so long ago – knowing that I was likely within an hour's walking distance from home. That was my vision of Wilderness.

Without a doubt, John Muir's vision of Nature was somewhat different from the boy's and from my own.

This phenomenon of differing reference points across generational periods is what some popular science writers are calling "shifting baselines." Marine biologist Daniel Pauly coined this phrase in 1995, to describe a phenomenon of "lowered expectations, in which each generation regards a progressively poorer natural world as normal."



One might quibble with the meaning of this phrase. A statistical baseline is a measurement that is static and relates to subsequent measures; but our idea of "Nature" is dynamic and ever changing. On the other hand, how else would we describe the very gradual, creeping changes that we notice now and then in our surroundings, the fewer birds and quieter frogs? Each realization, though not statistically measured for purposes of comparison, sets a milestone in our memory – a baseline against which to compare the next time we stop to think about it.

How this is relevant to Wild Ones

We have the generational differences in experience, compounded with gradual changes in personal experiences and awarenesses, standing in the way of communication. Our point of reference, when we try to explain our approach to landscaping our yards, our reasons for doing what we do, prevents us from being understood by those who organize their related concepts differently.

Where I see an ant foraging for breadcrumbs on my kitchen counter, another person sees a reason to go out and buy bug spray. Where I see the very existence of that ant as evidence that there is a healthy environment for that ant's colony to prosper and survive – an advantageous environment for humans as well – another person sees their home, as the ad on television affirms, as a fortress under attack by outside creepy crawlies.

We are competing with both points of reference acquired through memories and experiences (different from our own) and points of reference reinforced by the multi-million dollar promotion of bug killers and weed killers.

How can we communicate better?

We cannot effectively communicate by reference to our position as being "moral" and all other positions being, in comparison, "immoral." We cannot communicate by suggesting that our position is the more "educated" position, and all others are, in contrast, "ignorant." We must even be careful when we color our message with politically charged language such as "global

warming" and "climate change," however relevant these may be to the overall picture.

Perhaps we need to change our approach and our language, try to express our ideas in more concrete examples.

Consider this explanation: "I chose 'those plants' because they have very deep roots that break up compacted soil." "I hate washing my car and seeing all that water flow through the grass into the gutter. I figure I'm keeping the water I'm paying for, on my own land."

Or this one: "Why do I have a rain barrel? I see all that rain from my roof as free water. I'm just taking advantage of it. I use it to water my flower beds."

Nowhere have "native plants" been mentioned – only the description of their actual usefulness.

We could go on. "I have a vegetable garden, and I read that these plants attract all sorts of bees for my vegetables. My garden has been doing pretty well."

"I love having birds/butterflies around. These plants apparently are very attractive to them."

Concrete examples with no hard-to-explain ideas

And, if the listeners express no interest – let them go. If they do, be gentle; like taking a young child and providing one more step.

Jean Piaget, a biologist who developed one of the most influential theories of the development of the human mind argued that we cannot "assimilate" new information without the parallel process of "accommodation." A new framework for information needs to be acquired gradually. It's like blowing up a balloon, the first time the balloon has difficulty accommodating too much air, the next time it inflates a little more easily, until it can assimilate a great deal more with less need for accommodation.

We can come up with a variety of concrete explanations for our preferences: I don't have to



replace the plants every year; I don't have to spend money on fertilizers and pesticides; I don't have to worry about my kids/dogs playing in the flower beds, the plants recover.

Crucial Confrontations

Shortly after I wrote this, I received the Natural Area Preservation News from Ann Arbor, Michigan. Dave Borneman, the Natural Area Preservation Manager, in his "Coordinator's Corner," had written something that, with his permission, I reprint here.

Dave wrote, "I had the opportunity recently to attend an excellent training called 'Crucial Confrontations: Tools for resolving Broken Promises, Violated Expectations, and Bad Behavior.' I went into it looking for ways to better deal with the problems that other people bring into my life,... to my surprise I came away with an eye opening awareness of just how much I contribute to – no, co-create – those problems. It was easier when I could tell myself that others were the source of those problems, not I.

"But, if I can honestly confront the fact that I am part of the problem, that can be a source of hope. That's because, as hard as it is to change my behavior, it is still far, far easier than trying to change someone else's behavior! So maybe there really is a chance that those problems can be solved. Of course, the solution then takes on a very different look: start by changing myself and then worry about persuading others to change themselves."

It occurred to me that his message applied to what I had just written. By changing our language when we speak to someone who has made landscaping choices that are different from ours, we are in effect, changing our behavior. We're also changing the message the other person hears. By speaking in abstract, undefined terms we may take on a superior air, which, though unintentional, can be distinctly off-putting to the person we're trying to win over. When we make our goals concrete and clearly understandable, our likelihood of communicating increases dramatically. We also avoid using catchphrases that may have existing associations – associations that automatically raise walls, preventing communication.

Here's an example of a misfire in communication, on my part. Standing by the fence separating my land from hers (both sizable acreages), having a friendly chat, I spot a largish autumn olive, its trunk about a foot onto my land and immediately say, "That's got to go." My neighbor tells me, "It's such a pretty tree in the spring; I've admired it from my kitchen window since we moved here." I say something like, "It's an 'invasive plant' that isn't any use to our 'wildlife.'" She counters with, "Oh my, does everything have to be useful?" A dozen answers come to mind, but all I do is grin and say "I'll have to think about that one."

What do you think I should have said, or what should I do now?

My e-mail: editor@wildones.org or send a note to the WILD Center, it will reach me.