

Ask EcoGirl

By Patricia Dines

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Skillful Aim For Your Eco-Message

Over the years, one of my top goals has been to help our culture steer away from eco-disaster and towards a healthier, happier future. A key way that I've sought to do this is by exploring more effective ways for us to think and talk about eco-action. I know that people often find the usual approach to be depressing, disempowering, and overwhelming, which can turn away even those who want to treat the earth well. At the other extreme, we see answers presented that are too trivial or ill-designed to make much difference.

Thus I've sought to create a different eco-writing style, one that's so inspiring, empowering, and practical that people feel joyful satisfaction in taking effective action for our shared well-being. I've been thrilled to hear people say that my approach offers them just that. Yay!

So I decided to distill a list of what I see as the top harmful eco-communication approaches (to help us avoid them), and the key principles that I find encourage cheerful, constructive, and effective eco-action. I hope that you find this model useful, and I welcome your feedback!

The Top Six Eco-Messaging Errors, and Their Remedies

1) ERROR: Seek to motivate people by declaring that a vast frightening future is certain, ignoring all positive possibilities and variables. These dire predictions just confirm people's despair, as they shrug with numb resignation.

REMEDY: Recognize that each eco-issue has its own status, leverage points, and range of possible outcomes. So offer fact-based descriptions of each *specific* problem, as just a project to take on. Say that a certain trend will *probably* continue unless we *act* to change it. Describe possible positive outcomes and call forward people's own urge to act!

2) ERROR: Speak from blanket fantasy denial, brushing away fact-based concerns, seeking to avoid "negativity," and assuming only passively positive outcomes. It's just as harmful to say "It'll all be fine" as "It's all hopeless," because both approaches ignore important distinctions and the vital role we play.

REMEDY: Tell people about the challenges and reasons for hope, and that our actions will determine our future.

3) ERROR: Use only environmental criteria as motivators, assuming that everyone shares that priority. Unfortunately, most people in our culture see the environment as abstract rather than the foundation of everything we do.

REMEDY: Consider the real lives of your target audience. Describe how your eco-problem harms them, and how your proposed solutions will meet their tangible needs. We're all part of our environment, so smart eco-action also benefits us personally. So you might say how your proposal will also protect their health and children; save time and money; make them feel and look good; connect them with friends and allies; and let them leave a valuable legacy.

4) ERROR: Fail to note any tangible actions people can do. This keeps them stuck in pain and avoiding the topic.

REMEDY: Give people specific realistic ways they can help achieve important eco-goals. Humans are built to channel their energy from problem to solution!

5) ERROR: Make exaggerated untrue demeaning assumptions about the motives and beliefs of other community members, clumping them into broad simplistic groups. This might get attention and entertain some, but it also harms relationships and alliance opportunities, blocks

fact-based strategy, and sends people in destructive directions.

REMEDY: Recognize that those doing wide-scale eco-harm have lots of money and power, and the key tools we have on our side are facts, fairness, relationships, and community. So look for ways to understand different viewpoints, meet different needs, discover common ground, and make alliances.

6) ERROR: Broadly insult people in power with negative lies and personal insults that ignore anything they've done well and show no empathy for their position. How receptive would you be to such an approach?

REMEDY: See our leaders as simply human beings working within imperfect systems and balancing various interests. Speak to them respectfully, look for shared values, appreciate what they do well, call on their better selves, and make specific useful requests. Even when holding them accountable, model the fact-based collaborative conversations that best serve our democracy.

Also, don't wait for our leaders to magically fulfill our wishes. Instead, support groups and coalitions that offer constructive proposals, and call on our leaders to act on them.

Ask EcoGirl is written by Patricia Dines, Author of The Organic Guides, and Editor and Lead Writer for The Next STEP newsletter. Email your questions about going green to EcoGirl@AskEcoGirl.info for possible inclusion in future columns. Also see "Ask EcoGirl" on Facebook! And contact EcoGirl for information about carrying this syndicated column in your periodical.

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