

# Messaging Forest Protection In An Era of Global Warming

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## SUMMARY

Few stories dominate headlines and TV cameras like a forest fire. When summer gets hot, fires burn and the media can't get enough roaring flames, swooping retardant planes and grubby firefighters in yellow shirts. For conservationists working to protect forests or working to stop global warming, the frame of fire season offers both opportunity – and peril – for advocating progressive policies.

The science is clear: human pollution is warming the globe. As the globe heats up, we can expect longer, hotter and more intense fire seasons. But as is often the case, public opinion lags behind science. Plus, people are by nature often shortsighted and quicker to focus on immediate threats over those that seem more distant.

Social scientists have given us important tools for crafting persuasive communication strategies, both to protect forests and to educate people about the perils of global warming. But these strategies can diverge, and too often one can undermine the other.

Even in an era of global warming, when discussing forest fires during fire season advocates must remember that safety is the number one public concern. Messages that fail to address that immediate concern will fall on deaf ears. Given that forest fires evoke strong emotional reactions, it's particularly important to include simple, commonsense solutions in all messages.

Like more intense hurricanes and more extreme drought, longer, hotter fire seasons are part of life on our warming globe. However, when people fear for their homes and neighbors' homes, concerns over



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immediate safety dominate the discussion. Messages need to reflect that immediate and very tangible concern.

By carefully crafting messages – and considering the mindset of their audiences – conservationists can find opportunities to advance the goal of scientifically sound and ecologically sensitive forest management policy.

## BACKGROUND

Forest fires have long been one of the most pressing issues facing conservationists working on public lands protection. Intense fires often prompt sensational news coverage filled with vivid imagery that stirs powerful emotions.

Conservation critics have shown that they are ready to leverage fire crises to achieve their political goals. And global warming is making fire issues even more complex as debate increasingly focuses on the role forests play in the global carbon cycle.



As a result, ever more forest conservationists are thinking and talking about global warming.

Talking about forests fires and climate change can be a complex, confusing communications challenge for the conservation community. On one hand, climate protection activists working to raise awareness of global warming point out that hotter, bigger forest fires are one result of global warming. On the other, forest activists are trying to address public fears of fire as a way of building support for policies that recognize fire as vital to healthy ecosystems.

Growing public discussion about the contribution that smoke from wildfires makes to global warming pollution creates another challenging dimension. Unfortunately, this range of messages can easily be misrepresented or taken out of context to abet policies aimed at “cutting down the forest to save it.”

Forest activists need a strategically sound, synchronized and simple message to defend national forests in an era of global warming. This document is intended to provide message advice that reflects sound communications principles and existing public opinion research on the topic. It also highlights significant gaps in our understanding of public opinion about fire,

forests and global warming. That's a topic worth further investigation, especially given the strong likelihood that these issues will be increasingly in the public eye in the years ahead.

## **CONSERVATION OBJECTIVES**

While the forest conservation community is pursuing a wide range of policy objectives, most conservation advocates share a few common goals:

- Forest management that embraces fire, where appropriate, as part of healthy forest ecosystems.
- Greater public support for leaving forests in a natural condition.
- Steering residential development away from fire-prone forests.
- Greater public understanding of global warming and support for stopping pollution that causes it.

## **TARGET AUDIENCE**

The discussion over forest fires is pertinent to a wide range of people. Fires are front-page news in the West because they affect the lives of people who breathe the smoke, are concerned for their homes and neighbors, and live with the blackened aftermath. Decision-makers on fire issues include local county commissioners, state and federal land and fire managers, state legislatures and members of Congress.

## **GLOBAL WARMING — WEDGE OR BRIDGE?**

A chief tenet of effective communications is to “meet people where they are.” That is, understand the perspective of the target audience and tailor messages within the context of their experience. We have limited public opinion research on the nexus of global warming and forest management, but what we do know provides important clues for how to communicate on this issue.

An overwhelming range of scientific evidence underscores that we are in an era of global warming fueled by pollution from smokestacks and tailpipes. Yet, despite decades of policy discussion about solutions and ongoing refinements in our scientific understanding of its causes and likely impacts, global warming continues to divide Americans – particularly in the rural communities that are most often subjected to forest fire.

This is validated by the disparate results of recent public opinion polling on global warming. For example, a June 2010 poll from Yale and George Mason Universities indicates that 61 percent of Americans think “global warming is happening,” while a March 2010 Gallup poll showed that just 53 percent of Americans agreed that the effects of climate change were already underway or were set to begin soon.

This stands in stark contrast with the broad scientific consensus that the earth is warming because of human pollution. Clearly, there is a disconnect between how scientists think about global warming and

the way the issue is viewed by ordinary Americans. Making matters more difficult, even people who believe in global warming rate it as a lower concern than issues like the economy, war and health care.

In addition, whether people believe global warming is a problem or not, it is a complex and difficult topic. Many have a tendency to shut down and move on when faced with such a complicated and seemingly intractable issue. Global warming and fire makes matters even more difficult by bringing together two very complex issues: forest ecology and climate science.

**In order for most target audiences to engage in either issue, the information about each needs to be separated, simplified and presented in ways that people can easily understand.**

## **FOREST FIRES — SAFETY FIRST DURING FIRE SEASON!**

Understanding the values held by target audiences is the bedrock of persuasive communications – the key to opening hearts and minds. While sparse, currently available public opinion research on forest fires demonstrates that attitudes about fire are evolving. Even more importantly, it shows that safety is the key value that resonates across geographic and political boundaries when talking about fire.

An April 2008 survey of people who live near national forests – conducted by Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin & Associates in collaboration with Public Opinion Strategies – found 61 percent of voters in agreement that putting out all fires in natural areas can “create conditions that will make later fires burn faster, hotter and more out of control.” And over 75 percent of those polled believe that some fires can benefit our forests.

On the other hand, as indicated above, polling on climate change shows differences in understanding and opinion. For example, a Stanford poll released in early August 2010 found that roughly 76 percent of voters in three states – Florida, Maine and Massachusetts – agreed that climate change was likely connected to human activity and that they believed the U.S should limit greenhouse emissions from U.S. businesses. However, a Virginia Commonwealth University Life Science poll conducted in May 2010 found that only 48 percent of respondents agreed that global warming is a proven fact, and that it is mostly caused by emissions from cars and industrial facilities such as power plants and factories. Given the strong numbers on public safety from the wildfire polling, we must lead with messages about safety, particularly during fire season.

## **MESSENGERS: CREDIBILITY IS KEY**

While global warming is a critically important conservation issue, large percentages of people in the West do not perceive global warming as a pressing threat. Moreover, global warming has become a highly politicized topic.



Photo by Karen Nichols

This is a conundrum for conservationists who want to garner strong forest protections in an era of global warming. It also emphasizes the need to incorporate proven communications strategies, messages and spokespeople that can promote the most effective policies for conserving the forest without falling into the political pitfalls of the global warming debate.

A message is only as good as the credibility of the person who delivers it. Local experts with on-the-ground experience tend to be the most trusted spokespeople on fire issues. According to the April 2008 *Resource Media* Page 4 of 7 *Climate & Forest Fire Summer 2010* Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin & Associates and Public Opinion Strategies survey, park rangers, firefighters and state foresters are, by a large margin, best positioned to credibly speak on fire issues. They are perceived to be on the “front lines” and regularly confront fires. Conservationists need to work with fire managers, foresters and scientists to help deliver credible messages about forest management in an era of changing climate.

### **MESSAGES: SOLUTIONS WIN PUBLIC SUPPORT**

When grappling with an issue as emotional as fire, it’s imperative to include simple, common sense solutions in all elements of communication:

- People support the solution they think will keep them safe.
- Audiences intellectually understand the ecological benefits of fire — within limits.
- People tend to view naturally started fires that do not threaten people’s lives or property or pollute their air as mostly benign.
- People view fires that are started by accident or that threaten property, lives or the health of an area considered to be urgent threats that need to be addressed.
- Nonetheless, solid majorities accept approaches to fire that recognize its beneficial attributes for the health of natural areas *as long as precautions are taken*.
- Fire is perceived by most with caution, if not outright fear.

To build strong linkages within communities most affected by fire, conservationists must support actions to keep those communities safe. Conservation solutions that meet this test include *protecting water sources, careful thinning, better community planning and controlled burning*.



## LANGUAGE MATTERS — DO'S AND DON'TS

On an issue as complex and highly charged as wildfire, it's easy to confuse – or even alienate — the people we need to talk to most. Pick your words carefully.

### ***Do:***

- ALWAYS emphasize simple, commonsense solutions.
- Reassure people that safety is the No. 1 priority.
- Emphasize the present and future over the past.
- Highlight *both* the ecologic and safety benefits of controlled fire or other solutions.
- Use plain English and boil down the message to its simplest elements.
- Recruit spokespeople that people trust.
- Incorporate people into your communications by demonstrating how they will be affected by changes in the approach taken to fire.

### ***Do NOT:***

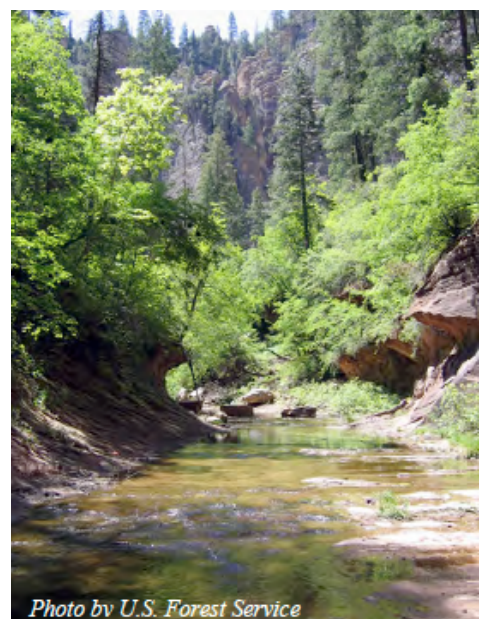
- Lead with global warming arguments.
- Talk about ecosystems without emphasizing the human element.
- Bring up old battles and rhetoric of the Timber War.
- Talk in the abstract or use jargon.
- Blame people for where they build their homes.
- Belittle people's fear.

## BRIDGING THE GLOBAL WARMING/FOREST PROTECTION DIVIDE

Global warming may be a good reason to protect a forest, but watersheds, recreation or local economics are more likely to compel voters and decision-makers. Conservationists are most likely to find public support when they emphasize protecting clean water sources, favorite areas or valuable habitats.

However, conservationists do not always set the frame. We often must respond to the frames put forth by others, such as reporters asking questions. Even in that instance, we can bridge back to messages that we know will speak to and be understood by a great number of people. We must be ready to pivot back to the values that are closest to the daily lives of people living in closest proximity to the forest.

When asked about global warming, conservationists should be prepared to bridge back to well-supported forest conservation



*Photo by U.S. Forest Service*

solutions.

For example: “Global warming is just another reason why we need better planning, careful thinning and protection of our water supplies.”

Or: “Regardless of your opinion about global warming, most of us agree we need to protect our water supplies, and grow our communities so they are safe from wildfires.”

**Remember, there is a difference between politics and education. There is a great need for educating the public about global warming. However, it is best done as an independent effort, not entangled in the already difficult job of advancing forest protections.**

## AVOID THE CARBON SINK QUANDARY

Do forest fires contribute to global warming? Does cutting trees and turning them into lumber and paper bags “store” carbon? Clearly, there are many things we do not understand about the complex relationship between forest ecology and a healthy climate. Scientists and forest advocates have their work cut out for them in clarifying the linkages.

In the media, this uncertainty is quickly translated into a conflict. Industry advocates embrace science that suggests cutting trees is a good thing, while forest advocates trumpet findings that support their policy positions. The competing views have made for lively debate and ever more “industry versus environmentalists” news copy. Unfortunately, the debate leaves the average person confused and increasingly cynical. Conservation is best served when we focus on what we know, using messages that will be most compelling with a broad variety of western voters:

*Intact, natural forests serve people in many ways — filtering clean water, cleaning the air and storing carbon that would otherwise contribute to global warming. If we abuse our forests, we’ll squander these many benefits.*

## CONCLUSION

Utilizing clear and compelling messages that resonate with audiences across many walks of life will ultimately serve us far more effectively than trying to navigate our way through a maze of unsettled scientific debate. By incorporating scientifically sound, simple, solution-oriented messages, we can better defend our national forests in an era of global warming and further advance our goals of better forest management practices and policy.