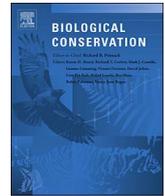




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Caring, killing, euphemism and George Orwell: How language choice undercuts our mission



What does George Orwell have to do with Conservation Biology? As one of the foremost critics of how language is used, he has quite a lot to say. He was not just a critic of the imprecise or the dreary, but of the power of language to mislead; he understood the power of language to evoke the passion of a mission-value-morality driven discipline such as conservation biology, or drown it in what he called orthodoxy—a condition that “seems to demand a lifeless, imitative style” (Orwell, 1968: IV: 135). Too often, he noted, speech about values was “the defense of the indefensible” (Orwell, 1968: IV: 136). We argue in this essay that euphemism is a means to mask the indefensible and conservation biologists should not be a party to that.

Most papers presented at conservation biology meetings and published in our journals have to do with understanding how biodiversity is impacted by human activities. Less often we consider our purposes, values and motivation. But these aspects of our work are equally important; they address why we do what we do, and the purpose of what we do.

For example, according to its mission statement, the [Society for Conservation Biology \(2016\)](#) “... advances the science and *practice* of conserving Earth's biological diversity(;)” and “envisions a world where people understand, *value*, and conserve the diversity of life on Earth” (italics added).

To achieve the vision and fulfill the mission depends on motivating others to care and to act on behalf of biodiversity. In turn that means being clear about our moral purpose:

Biodiversity is good (Soulé, 1985)

Humans are obligated to safeguard biodiversity

Science is not enough to resolve the extinction and climate crises we are in. Moreover science does not require we be passionless or meek—only that we be honest, do not distort our findings or otherwise try to make them conform to desired outcomes. Being unbiased does not require lack of caring; indeed, to not care is to be alienated.

We argue that the widespread use of euphemisms by many conservation biologists, conservation journals, and conservation biology course materials undermines our effort to evoke caring in others for life on Earth and even to care for ourselves.

A euphemism is “The act or example of substituting a mild, indirect, or vague term for a harsh, blunt, or offensive one” that is more accurate ([American Heritage College Dictionary, 1993](#), 3d ed.: 473).

In more words the Oxford English Dictionary says the same thing.

“That figure of speech which consists in the substitution of a word or expression of comparatively favorable or less unpleasant associations instead of the harsher or more offensive one that would more precisely designate what is intended”. ([Compact OED, 1971](#), I: 903)

Euphemisms, then, use language choice to describe activities in acceptable words that audiences would otherwise find objectionable. Euphemisms mislead by candy coating reality. They sanitize and disguise, and are *not neutral* terms. As one example, “we harvested a sample of 100 fish for analysis of stomach contents”, rather than “we caught and killed 100 fish for analysis of stomach contents.”

Other words can mislead for different reasons, including metaphors—a “figure of speech in which a name or descriptive term is transferred to some object different from, but analogous to, that to which it is properly applicable” ([Compact OED, 1971](#), I: 1781). For example, using economic metaphors to describe the natural world—natural assets, stocks, maximum sustainable yield, natural capital and debt—is reductionist: it suggests the natural world is part of the human economy rather than the other way around and that the former operates like the latter in a literal and mechanistic way; it also strongly implies that only those aspects of the larger world that have economic value have value ([Coffey, 2016](#)).

Metaphors can also create strong, vivid images that impart insight via their analogies. But analogies are just that—not meant to be literal, wholly accurate terms. In contrast euphemisms purport to be accurate descriptions when in fact they misrepresent. Both may mislead—some metaphors may be bad metaphors, i.e. not good analogies. But all euphemism, intent aside, candy coat and undercut caring by creating emotional distance from that which conservationists seek to evoke caring. A metaphor might undercut caring but if so it is more likely because of the listener's error in taking it literally rather than rejecting it as a bad analogy. For example, the metaphor “forest health” alludes to actions taken to maintain the function of a forest much like actions may be taken to maintain human function in the face of disease. Cutting old growth trees, however, is a bad analogy with treating disease.

Similarly, language that is vague and unnecessarily abstract can be problematic—so-called buzzwords, which appear to offer easy insight and information and in the course of that become commonly used. “Sustainability” or “sustainable” are widely used, including in policy statements, but they are rarely defined. Just what is proposed to be sustained? Human societies? The human species? Or ecological systems and their full

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complement of species? The difference is significant—one species or all species. And the course of action necessary for the latter is quite different than the former.

Students of story recognize that they are useful to humans because they simplify reality and thereby help make life manageable. But what about when understanding is the goal, as with science? Goldstein (1999) argues that scientists too often fall victim to the temptation to simplify in the face of the tremendous complexity of the biological world. They seek shortcuts understanding the natural world, the damage done to it by humans, and in figuring out ways to heal it. The results include abstractions which represent vaguely defined processes or properties of systems that lack empirical validity and cannot be substituted for life history of populations and therefore result in recommendations that usually cannot help real organisms. He argues, for instance, that “ecosystem management” is too broad to be evaluated (1999: 249)—ecosystems are dynamic and goals such as maintaining predation (our example) mean little apart from understanding specific native predator populations. Ehhrenfield (1979) and others raise important related questions, such as whether humans are capable of understanding let alone managing such complexity. Buzzwords gloss over these questions and give false impressions of precision and are misleading if also the product of good faith efforts at problem solving.

How do we know if a word or phrase is a euphemism? Here's a self-test. Apply the term or phrase to some entity or group you care about and gauge your reaction. If you are uncomfortable it is probably a euphemism. If it makes you feel dishonest it almost certainly is a euphemism. Would you “sacrifice” or “cull” those you care about so that some knowledge might be gained?

Beyond a self-test, ask if the words or phrase convey an accurate description of what is happening, or obscure it; does it preclude a negative emotional response to an activity through use of vague and pleasant words. We are all familiar with the common use of euphemisms in human politics—terms such as “collateral damage,” which aims to soften our reaction to killing of civilians in the course of military action. The term “bycatch” is similar, referring to the (foreseeable) killing of non-targeted wildlife during efforts to capture and kill commercial species. “Bycatch” may be as high as 40% by weight of all life killed (Davies et al., 2009). Why don't biologists use a more straightforward description?

“Harvest” is common and in wide use in conservation biology as well among those who study forests, fish and wildlife with a goal to maximizing exploitation and economic benefits. And it illustrates the history of the adoption of this and similar terms in conservation. Harvest is an ancient term and generally refers to “gathering in a crop,” usually of grains, fruits, or vegetables planted or tended deliberately as human food. “Wildlife managers” in the 20th Century borrowed the term from agriculture (Leopold, 1986 [1933]: 3–4), ironically the principal threat to wildlife and wild places for the last 12 millennia.

Although Leopold later changed his thinking on this topic his initial conceptualization regarded wildlife management as producing crops of wild game, while maintaining maximum yield via human interventions in the landscape—interventions which included targeting other species such as predators to maintain the yield of these desired species. Several of these agricultural terms seeped into various biology disciplines before his understanding changed.

“Harvest” is used to describe killing part or all of the individuals of a wild species for food, because a species is inconvenient to some humans, for fun, or because humans have degraded habitat and ecosystems are “out of balance” and need to be righted. Interestingly the killing of domestic animals for food and sometimes other purposes is referred to as slaughter, a harsher term. Even “killing” can obscure the grim details: poisoning, shooting, leg-hold trapping, snaring, drowning, suffocating, chasing down with machines.

Harvest preempts acknowledgement of qualities that may be possessed by those being killed:

Sentience

Uniqueness

Place in social structure

Desire to avoid death

Fear

Harvest does not evoke caring and empathy, outrage at loss of life, but instead distances and objectifies.

It does not evoke the moral purpose of conservation but of wildlife as crops owned by humans. It implies the human right to inflict injury and even impose death to balance the “books” we have brought disorder to. It conveys the idea that the killing is an orderly process intended to benefit people and that such benefit is presumptively justified; it may also presume that the species being killed benefits along with the ecosystem of which it is a part.

Wild plants are also subject to the term harvest. It is sometimes used to describe the destruction of complex living systems called forests and their replacement by tree farms, domesticated monocultures, or subdivisions.

There are many other euphemisms that attempt to sanitize human violence toward the natural world:

“Collect” is to kill for the sake of human knowledge without considering the knowledge lost by killing. Sometimes sacrifice is used as if we were priests.

“Working lands” is one our favorites, calling to mind the laziness of Wilderness. In fact the lands referred to as working are domesticated, usually degraded. A common example is rangelands heavily grazed by cattle, sheep and other domestic animals. In fact such lands are occupied lands, with human activities displacing other species. In many countries, such rangelands often receive massive public subsidies in terms of tax benefits, road construction, and energy use.

“Fire destroys, blackens...” ignores the essential role of fire in many systems and the serious and lasting damage of fire suppression. Using the term “fuels” instead of “dead wood” in a fire-adapted forest tends to distance foresters from seeing vegetation and its important role in such forests. It allows foresters to ignore their own role in creating an ecosystem prone to massive fires.

“Silvicultural treatment...” usually includes the application of toxic chemicals that poison soil and water, or the use of heavy equipment that compacts or otherwise disturbs soils.

The conceptual grandparent of so many euphemisms might be “natural resources.” It reduces all the world to narrow utilitarian human uses. One of us (DD) has a PhD in “Natural Resources” from the School of Natural Resources, University of Michigan.

Tag, administrative removal, incidental “take” and other terms come to mind.

These terms disconnect us from the consequences of our actions. They diminish or preclude emotion. Yet it is emotion that connects us to each other, to other creatures, to the wider world that made us. Without emotion we would be hollow and lonely indeed. We would not be conservationists.

One more term deserves mention in this brief survey: cull.

Cull is a term that can obscure the cause of conservation problems. US agencies have killed, are killing and plan to kill sea lions and cormorants in the Columbia River because they eat salmon that are endangered. Indeed they are, but why? Because of dams, water temperature increases in

streams, logging, grazing, and road-building. Not because of sea lions and cormorants.

The term cull makes the destruction of the largest double-crested cormorant colony in the world—at the mouth of the Columbia River—seem a difficult necessity rather than a case of scapegoating that rationalizes the violent destruction of life. By invoking the implication of unfortunate necessity, the real, human causes of salmon decline are off the table: massive hydro dams, logging which destroys spawning streams, grazing, and pollution. The difficult problem of changing human behavior, including weaning us from cheap energy (because the costs are externalized), do not have to be dealt with.

What are conservation biologists to do? We have an obligation to:

Accurately describe how biodiversity works in the world and to advocate for our values—not to make people comfortable.

Explore more accurate language for how plants and animals are treated by humans, including ourselves.

Use language that evokes our moral purpose.

Euphemism is not part of the solution, it is part of the problem. It is up to all of us to invent a new and better language. Maybe a simple place to start is to give animals names. Cecil the lion had a name and it generated an important discussion about the value of life.

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