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# Language Matters: Environmental Controversy and the Quest for Common Ground

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## Language Matters: Environmental Controversy and the Quest for Common Ground

Scott Slovic\*

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### I. NATURE ITSELF CAN SERVE AS A BRIDGE: THE BUTTERFLY AND THE SUBWAY

In 1994, I was teaching American environmental literature at several universities in Tokyo, Japan, one of the most densely urbanized places on the planet—some thirty million people crammed into the Kanto Plain, an area roughly the size of Los Angeles. Toward the end of the semester, I asked my graduate students at Sophia University to write a brief narrative about a specific encounter they had had with the natural world during their ordinary lives in Tokyo. One young man who seldom spoke in class and whose name I can no longer remember told a rather extraordinary story that I remember well, although more than two decades have passed.

The student wrote that one day, when he was commuting to the university, he was riding in a typical Tokyo subway car, where the passengers were all minding their own business, occupied with books and newspapers and comics, essentially ignoring each other. When the train

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MLA citation format per the style of the piece.

stopped at a station, a butterfly happened to fly onto the car, catching the attention of one of the passengers. This passenger began using his newspaper to usher the butterfly toward the door. As the train continued its journey to the next station, other passengers joined the butterfly rescue effort. By the time the train came to a stop again, many of the passengers were working together, talking to each other, to help the butterfly through the door. When the butterfly left the train, the passengers continued talking to each other.

## II. LANGUAGE MATTERS, TOO

In our effort to respond to environmental disputes on every scale, we often forget the fact of our shared dependence on the natural world for our individual and collective survival, and there is a tendency, too, to overlook the essential role of language in widening or bridging gaps between adversaries. Rather than clinging to a winner-take-all approach to environmental controversy, it is vital that we find ways of communicating with and listening to our fellow citizens and working together to achieve what Frances Moore Lappé calls a “living democracy,” which really means a *functional* democracy—a society in which we bring multiple voices to the table and seek to negotiate and compromise in pursuit of a healthy civilization and a healthy, sustainable planet.

In his landmark essay “Language, Law, & the Eagle Bird” (1992), legal scholar Charles Wilkinson recognizes the role of language in either fostering constructive consensus or aggravating disagreement with regard to contentious debates over public land and natural resources. He notes that the legal profession has actively steered practitioners away from emotive modes of communication that have the potential to humanize discussions and guide disputing parties toward common ground:

From the moment first-year law students sit in their first class they are taught to keep a lid on. Strip off your emotions. Look only at the rational. Be orderly. Create a neat structure. Use gray words. Entering law students begin sentences with “I feel.” By graduation they respond with “it depends.” (13)

The function of these “gray words” is to maintain the status quo of contention rather than reaching toward yearned-for consensus. Wilkinson goes on to assert that if readers actually want to achieve

something positive with their writing or public speaking, they would be well advised to forget the conventions of legal discourse and return to their gut instincts. “Those who favor the status quo have much to gain by keeping emotions down,” he writes.

Evocative statutes with a strong emotional and scientific and philosophical content make a difference. A federal judge can more easily see the force behind the statute when he or she is alerted by bright words. (14)

By “bright words,” Wilkinson is referring to words that capture the feelings the writer is attempting to convey regarding the subject at hand, which might be a place or a species. But it’s not only the individual words that are important; the general style of communication, such as abstract analysis versus other modes of communication that might signify human feeling and stir attention and empathy in readers or listeners, must be considered. For various reasons, in the twenty-first century our feelings about individual places and our other palpable attachments in the natural world have become strained and abstract—gray emotions have evolved to match gray language. Most of us, lawyers and non-lawyers, have been trained to think rationally or at least in a benumbed, abstract way about our connections to the world. Literary critic Lawrence Buell attributes some of this dissipation of feeling to the “translocal—ultimately global—forces” (63) that shape our experience of the world today and the ubiquity of “non-places,” such as shopping malls and airport terminals, that define “supermodernity” (69).

But the emotional valence of experience and the language that underlies our relationships with places and other species, with each other, remains relevant and even crucial in contemporary discussions of natural resources. In 2003, when I conducted a workshop on writing and environmental values at Stanford Law School, I asked the group of law students and assorted faculty members (ranging from Nobel-laureate economist Kenneth Arrow to water law scholar Buzz Thompson) to begin, with minimal prompting, by jotting down their thoughts about an “important place in their lives,” and the words that emerged were those that evoked sensory images and specific lived experiences, not data about the extractive value of certain natural resources (“Love is never abstract” 242). Likewise, in the arena of public land and natural resource negotiations, experts have found that the discourse of story is a vital locus

of common ground between disputants. Jerome Delli Priscolli, the longtime editor of the journal *Water Policy* and an experienced mediator in water disputes, told me when he and I were attending a conference in Mexico City in January 2000, that he frequently begins negotiations by asking participants to tell personal stories about their attachments to disputed places or resources as a way of establishing common ground between the competing sides and inspiring at least a basic level of sympathy between the negotiators. Priscolli has also written significantly about the role of the public in guiding government agencies and officials toward sound policies. An important step in conflict management involves not only giving technical specialists and appointed or elected officials a stage for discussing their views, but creating a forum for meaningful public involvement and guiding decision makers to receive and appreciate the role of the public in contributing to policy. As he puts it, “Public awareness [...] includes receiving information from and being educated by various publics and officials” (*Public Involvement* 41).

Narrative theorists have long understood that narrative (or story) plays an essential role in cultivating shared feelings between the storyteller and audiences (readers, viewers, listeners). Suzanne Keen calls this “narrative empathy,” which she defines as “the shared feeling and perspective-taking induced by reading, viewing, hearing, or imagining narratives of another’s situation and condition” (*living handbook*). In cases where one might be communicating with audiences who are not members of one’s “in-group,” the effort to strike a chord with potential adversaries or with people holding different viewpoints is what Keen refers to as “ambassadorial narrative empathy.” This is surely what Priscolli has in mind when bringing disputing parties to the negotiating table and starting the conversation with stories rather than rational statements of grievances and demands. Professional storytellers, such as environmental writers William Kittredge and Terry Tempest Williams, also know intuitively the consensus-building function of narrative. In the introduction to our 2004 collection of interviews and samples of environmental writings titled *What’s Nature Worth? Narrative Expressions of Environmental Values*, Canadian anthropologist Terre Satterfield and I explain this:

Many stories offer readers or listeners an opportunity to know (i.e., construct) something about their world view through the act of monitoring or observing their reactions

to the story. “Storytelling,” notes William Kittredge in this volume, “invites readers to make up a story of their own, to use the story they’re being told as a mirror in which to view their own responses to their own concerns.” [...] For Terry Tempest Williams [...] storytelling [...] is akin to setting up a trance: “When a story is told everything quiets down, the body language changes and one is brought into the story.” This story or trance offers a place to retreat for reflection. (12-13)

When presented with a troubling policy statement or an ideological expression at odds with one’s own viewpoint, the natural response would be to flatly deny the validity of that statement and to present a counter argument. However, the innate response to a story is not “yes” or “no,” but rather another story, a story that builds on and interweaves with the preceding story rather than directly refuting it. Thus bridges begin to be built.

### III. SINGULARITY

Another key aspect of storytelling is the conventional focus of stories on small-scale phenomena, highlighting small groups of characters or individual characters, even when the point is to express the condition or experience of larger classes of people or animals (or other abstract phenomena). Our human ability to pay attention and feel empathy is extremely limited—we are prone to become insensitive to phenomena that exceed our capacity to care. Psychologists Paul Slovic and Daniel Västfjäll explain this as follows:

Our capacity to feel is limited [...]. Whereas Robert Jay Lifton (1967) coined the term “psychic numbing” to describe the “turning off” of feeling that enabled rescue workers to function during the horrific aftermath of the Hiroshima bombing, [psychological research] depicts a form of psychic numbing that is not beneficial. Rather, it leads to apathy and inaction, consistent with what is seen repeatedly in response to mass murder and genocide. (*Numbers and Nerves* 33-34)

A variety of psychological tendencies or conditions obstruct our ability to engage with important social and environmental phenomena. These limitations, as Paul Slovic and I outline in our 2015 volume *Numbers and Nerves*, include not only psychic numbing but pseudoinefficacy, the prominence effect, the asymmetry of trust, the anesthesia of destruction, and the difficulty of grasping the trans-scalar imaginary, among others. What is particularly disconcerting about our susceptibility to such conditions as psychic numbing is that our ability to care begins to decline almost immediately as numbers creep upward from one to two.

As Slovic and Västfjäll demonstrate in their article on psychic numbing, we would expect the value of a human life, for instance, to remain constant as we move from talking about a single life to discussing an event that involves two, ten, a hundred, or a thousand lives. Why should the value of any individual life diminish when that individual is part of a collective? But psychological studies reveal that as soon as an experimental subject is asked to consider the value of more than a single life, the importance of each individual life declines. When faced with statistics representing a large-scale phenomenon, such as a mass shooting, viewers or listeners are apt to care less than they would if told the poignant story of an individual victim. Psychologists refer to this phenomenon as the “singularity” effect (*Numbers and Nerves* 167).

A case in point would be the news coverage of the current refugee crisis in the Middle East and elsewhere in the world. There have been many disturbing reports about desperate refugees in the international news media, often accompanied by vivid images, such as the photograph of an overturned boat en route from Turkey to Greece in the April 25, 2015, issue of *The Economist*, with dozens of people standing on the flipped boat and others floating in the sea. Images of this kind flooded the media but had little impact on public attention until, on September 3, 2015, the image of three-year-old Syrian boy Aylan Kurdi lying face down on a Turkish beach, when published in the *New York Times*, sparked a tremendous surge of public concern and generosity (as recorded in donations to the Red Cross). The fact that such triggers of compassion result in only temporary attention and concern is also significant. As Paul Slovic and Nicole Smith Dahmen argue,

It’s time to confront some uncomfortable psychological facts about ourselves and our flawed arithmetic of

compassion. The fact is that there will be no sudden emotional tipping point triggering aggressive humanitarian intervention.[...]

[W]e should remember to go beyond quick and relatively easy responses, such as donating money to victims or sounding off on social media. We need to push for laws and institutions that are grounded in moral reasoning and carefully considered values. If properly designed, laws and organizations will not falter even when individuals are lulled into complacency by psychic numbing and a sense of inefficacy. (“A Year After”)

If understanding the singularity effect helps us to appreciate the power of individualized narratives in galvanizing attention and prompting at least short-lived responses to a crisis, the lesson of the Aylan Kurdi story and other similar stories (such as the case of five-year-old Omran Daqneesh, whose dirt-and-blood-caked image was splashed across the media after a bomb attack in Aleppo) is that we really need multidimensional communication strategies in order to adequately convey information and spur appropriate public and governmental responses. The importance of multidimensional communication strategies is corroborated by the work of statistical evidence scholar Edward Tufte, who writes in his book *Beautiful Evidence*, that “The world to be explained is indifferent to scholarly specialization by type of evidence, methodology, or disciplinary field. A deeper understanding of human behavior may well result from integrating a diversity of evidence, *whatever it takes to explain something*” (131).

#### IV. EXAMPLES OF MULTIDIMENSIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL COMMUNICATION

In the field of environmental communication, we can find many eloquent examples of effective writing about complex, large-scale phenomena by way of the multidimensional strategies suggested above. Certain modes of discourse seem to be especially effective in promoting “moral reasoning and carefully considered values,” as Slovic and Dahmen call for, as well as offering the emotional poignancy that also seems essential for meaningful engagement with potentially overwhelming or numbingly abstract topics. These strategies include reducing large-scale



phenomena to individuals (or singularities), such as the way my opening story in this article represents nature by way of a single butterfly; equally important is the process of scaling up to the bigger picture (and sometimes fluctuating between large and small scales), which is what happens when we step back to reflect on the meaning of the story of the passengers and the butterfly on the subway car; stories of vulnerability (such as efforts to convey the plight of the butterfly on the subway—or the refugees risking their lives to cross the Aegean Sea) are particularly effective in striking a chord with audiences, not surprisingly; the same is true of stories that reveal dramatic change (or conversion) of some kind, as in the case of the isolated subway passengers who come together to help the butterfly achieve its freedom.

We need look no further than Aldo Leopold's classic essay "Thinking Like a Mountain," from *A Sand County Almanac* (1949), to see all of these communication strategies at work. This small article is one of the most prominent examples of American environmental literature, written by a young ranger who went on to become a professor of natural resources at the University of Wisconsin. The overarching topic of the essay is the value of predators within a healthy ecosystem—if we learn to "think like a mountain," we come to appreciate the complex interrelationships among the many species that inhabit an ecosystem and the devastating effects of removing certain species from the biotic community. Leopold begins his piece by confessing that as a young ranger, he believed he could enhance opportunities for hunters by killing every predator he encountered. He intuitively uses the concept of singularity in offering the story of his own experience when he came upon a wolf pack and unthinkingly emptied his rifle at the animals. In one of the most famous passages of American environmental writing, he states:

We reached the old wolf in time to watch a fierce green fire dying in her eyes. I realized then, and have known ever since, that there was something new to me in those eyes—something known only to her and to the mountain. I was young then, and full of trigger-itch; I thought that because fewer wolves meant more deer, that no wolves would mean hunters' paradise. But after seeing the green fire die, I sensed that neither the wolf nor the mountain agreed with such a view. (130)

Immediately after recording the encounter with the individual wolf—and the heart-wrenching image of the “fierce green fire dying in her eyes”—Leopold scales up to the ecosystemic level in the next paragraph and offers a bird’s-eye view of the topic:

Since then I have lived to see state after state extirpate its wolves. I have watched the face of many a newly wolfless mountain, and seen the south-facing slopes wrinkle with a maze of new deer trails. I have seen every edible bush and seedling browsed, first to anaemic disuetude, and then to death. I have seen every edible tree defoliated to the eight of a saddlehorn. [...]

I now suspect that just as a deer herd lives in mortal fear of its wolves, so does a mountain live in mortal fear of its deer. (131-32)

The combination of singular narrative and large-scale systemic analysis provides both emotional and rational views of Leopold’s topic. The poignancy of the essay is heightened by the vulnerability of the dying wolf and the meaningful conversion of the trigger-happy young ranger to a wiser author and scholar of natural resource management.

If we keep these basic principles of poignant environmental communication in mind, we can see them at work in many literary and journalistic texts, from Terry Tempest Williams’s *Refuge: An Unnatural Story of Family and Place* (1991) to Helen MacDonald’s *H Is for Hawk* (2014). Another particularly memorable example appears in the op-ed article by Alaskan author Richard K. Nelson, who stepped away from writing in his usual scholarly field (as an anthropologist) of the lifeways of northern hunting cultures to respond to the Exxon Valdez oil spill with a short piece in the *Los Angeles Times* on April 9, 1989. In this case, Nelson frames his article with large-scale moral questions about our society’s consumption of oil. He begins:

[...] I wonder who is to blame for this catastrophe? Who will pay the costs? What can be learned from it? The answers are not as simple as they might seem. (*Being in the World* 675)

And he works his way toward a morally reflective conclusion:

And who will pay for the Prince William Sound disaster? You and I. We will cover the cost to government when we pay taxes. We will cover the cost to the oil industry when we buy fuel or anything made with petroleum products. The notion that someone else will pay is an illusion.

There is yet another cost to us, this one far greater and more consequential. The natural world of Prince William Sound is not just scenery; it is a vital part of our continent's living community, a community that includes all of us, a community that supplies the air we breathe and the food we eat. Any wound to that community diminishes the environment we depend upon for every moment of our lives [...]. (676-77)

But in addition to asking big questions and offering vast ethical assertions, Nelson employs the concept of singularity by telling a brief story in the middle of his article. He alludes to an experience he had when he was a graduate student in Santa Barbara, California, and experienced “the first great American oil spill” in 1969 (675). In a half-page narrative, he provides a single haunting image that conveys the emotional message of culpability that motivates his writing of the op-ed and aims to spur readers to reflect on their own connection to the Exxon Valdez spill and other petroleum-related “costs”:

[...] I found a bird, hiding among the kelp and boulders just above the tide. A western grebe, big as a mallard, long-necked, with a slender needle beak, half-submerged in a puddle of mixed oil and water.

I have forgotten how many barrels of oil went into the Santa Barbara Channel, how much it cost to clean up the spill, how those who suffered damages were compensated, how blame was decided, how punishment was administered, how many animals were calculated to have died and how many were saved. But one memory is lodged forever in my mind—that dying bird, her feathers

matted and shining with oil, her wings drooped, her body quivering.

She stared up at me, blinking her bright red eyes, the one part of her that still seemed fully alive. Caught in the bird's unwavering gaze, I could not escape my own feelings of guilt. (676)

One human observer, one bird—one pair of “bright red eyes,” akin to Leopold’s image of the “fierce green fire” (in fact, it is likely that, on some level, Nelson was invoking Leopold’s famously evocative image from the 1940s in expressing his own self-recrimination in the 1980s, alluding to a familiar earlier piece of writing as authors often do). The movement back and forth between large-scale questions and ideas and small-scale narrative, the vulnerability of the bird, the author’s shift from finger-pointing indignation to personal guilt. These are essential ingredients in effective, multidimensional environmental communication.

#### V. TOWARD CITIZEN INVOLVEMENT

In the important chapter from *The Eagle Bird* that I cited earlier, Charles Wilkinson argues that regular citizens—laypeople—should get involved in public discussions of issues that matter to them. This is, he suggests, one of the reasons to keep legal and policy language from becoming too entangled with jargon and, in fact, one of the ways to insure that rich, evocative language makes its way into public documents. He writes:

[...] citizens ought to take a much greater role in drafting plans, regulations, and statutes affecting projects they care about. They should not automatically defer to the lawyers [...]. Remember Howard Zahniser, who refused to back down when he was told that words like “untrammeled,” “solitude,” and “premeval” had no place in the statute books. Case after case under the Wilderness Act has proved that Zahniser’s language was not surplus. It set a tone and a spirit, and the courts enforced it, as Zahniser dreamed they would. (15)

And just as citizens have a responsibility to help humanize such discussions (bringing moral judgment and emotional urgency into the

public realm), Wilkinson suggests that lawyers and policy professionals should keep an open mind about the relevance of other disciplines to their work. He criticizes compartmentalization as follows:

Science is science, poetry is poetry, and law is law. That is wrong. Law at its best is organic and obtains its nourishment from other fields of knowledge. Good natural resource law is good science, good business, good wildlife policy, and good land management. And it ought to be good literature and even good poetry, too. (18)

One of the key reasons for encouraging the public to participate in open discussions of important social and environmental issues is that such discussions are the foundation upon which a healthy democracy is built. In *Democracy's Edge: Choosing to Save Our Country by Bringing Democracy to Life* (2006), Frances Moore Lappé calls this “democracy as a living practice”—and, like Wilkinson, she identifies language as a fundamental aspect of this practice, stating, “We cannot create what we cannot imagine, and to imagine, we humans need stories and we need words to tell them” (315).

In the American West, there is a widely held but often unstated yearning to facilitate gatherings of neighbors to talk through and resolve controversial subjects—or at least to fill the air with diverse voices as a way of getting a fuller view of the issue at hand. Public libraries sometimes provide appropriate forums for such conversations, as in the case of the “Let’s Talk About It” series sponsored by the Idaho Commission for Libraries. Other times, colleges and universities seek to play this role. A particularly compelling literary representation of such a public meeting on the subject of land use appears in the “January 1990” chapter of James Galvin’s 1999 novel *Fencing the Sky*, where he depicts a lecture on environmental stewardship by “a professor from the Environmental Sciences Department,” which unleashes a diverse array of public comments by ranchers and treehuggers. The professor notes in his lecture that

“Stockmen and environmentalists have long been at odds. They demonize each other out of fear. Both groups are afraid of losing what they value most. They burn up bushels of rhetoric over issues like grazing fees

and wolves. But really, both embattled camps have more in common than they have to disagree about.

“In the first place, they both love the land. In the second place, they are both idealists. [...]” (100)

The air fills with voices. A New Age woman tells the story of gazing into the eyes of a fox: “Our eyes met. Meaning passed between us” (101). A rancher speaks from the heart: “We just want a fair market for our product. We want to live on the land and take good care of it” (103). Nothing in particular is resolved in the discussion, but the common ground between the seemingly disparate community members begins to emerge. Language is the essential glue that begins to bind together the community, particularly the language of story.

In aggregate, such stories have the potential not only to help the community cohere, but to influence large-scale policy. In other words, communities of average people throughout the world have power to exert in pursuit of the common good. Daniel C. Taylor, Carl E. Taylor, and Jesse O. Taylor offer various examples of this in their book *Empowerment on an Unstable Planet: From Seeds of Human Energy to a Scale of Global Change* (2012):

Genuine human progress involves the use of human hands, hearts, and minds to do what we can with what we have, here, today. Every human being, even the most impoverished, has a portion of discretionary energy to direct. Begin with that, grow it. (xv)

This vision is closely in sync with the philosophy of bioregionalism, the social movement that emerged in the American West in the 1970s, with a particular focus on the validity and viability of locally based resource management in specific watersheds. As Gary Snyder describes bioregionalism in a 1992 lecture (and subsequent article in the *San Francisco Examiner*), “Watershed consciousness and bioregionalism is not just environmentalism, not just a means toward resolution of social and economic problems, but a move toward resolving both nature and society with the practice of profound citizenship in both the natural and social worlds. If the ground can be our common ground, we can begin to talk to each other (human and nonhuman) once again” (235).

## VI. BEGINNING TO TALK TO EACH OTHER

In the September 1995, inspired by Wallace Stegner's "Wilderness Letter" (1960) to the incoming Kennedy Administration, in which a citizen used his voice to speak about the importance of wilderness as an idea in American culture, Utah writers Stephen Trimble and Terry Tempest Williams quickly assembled short pieces by twenty writers into the limited edition volume titled *Testimony: Writers of the West Speak On Behalf of Utah Wilderness*. Stegner's letter helped to articulate some of the core ideas of what became the Wilderness Act four years later. Thirty-five years after Stegner wrote his letter, Trimble and Williams printed 1,000 copies of *Testimony*, and these were hand delivered to each member of Congress and to members of the press. After a press conference at the United States Capitol on September 27, 1995, a journalist asked what Trimble and Williams would do if the book made no difference in prompting support for wilderness preservation in southern Utah. The authors/editors responded: "Writers never know the effect of their words. [...] We write as an act of faith" (second edition 7). In fact, when President Bill Clinton signed into law the act designating the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument on September 18, 1996, he displayed a copy of *Testimony*, stating, "This little book made a difference" (*When Women Were Birds* 157).

*Testimony* has made a difference in other, less obvious ways as well. It inspired an entire wave, a social movement, of testimony collections, many of these gathering not only the voices of accomplished writers and politicians, but the words of "ordinary citizens," including students and first-time writers. I joined the movement myself in the early 2000s when Ranger Robert Moore from Great Basin National Park in Nevada enlisted me to help her compile a book that we eventually titled *Wild Nevada: Testimonies on Behalf of the Desert* (2004) with the goal of supporting public discussion of the meaning and importance of arid roadless areas in the State of Nevada, where I was living at the time. Thirty-one people contributed to the book, ranging from Senators Harry Reid and Richard Bryan to Shoshone elder Corbin Harney. Similar volumes have sought to mobilize support for the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska (*Arctic Refuge*) and Petroglyph National Monument in New Mexico (*Voices from a Sacred Place*).

As a university professor and itinerant lecturer and writing instructor, I have also taken the testimony movement on the road, so to speak. When I began teaching Environmental Writing in the University

of Idaho's Semester in the Wild Program in the fall of 2013, I incorporated a special unit on engaged citizenship and testimony writing at the end of the class, reckoning that even if my undergraduate students (most of whom were natural resource sciences majors) might never decide to become professional writers, all of them would spend their lives as citizens—and I hoped they might choose to be *engaged* citizens, confident in their ideas and voices and willing to write letters and opinion pieces and, if appropriate occasions arose, to stand up and speak at public meetings. I coached my students to write short testimonies on subjects they really cared about and to identify the audiences they were writing for, ranging from university officials to parents, and sometimes to corporate leaders. These are the essential facets of the testimonies my students write (and present to our class):

- Short, personal statements (300-500 words);
- Begin with brief self-introduction, emphasizing one's connection with the issue;
- Incorporate story (brief presentations of experience that bring places and specific issues to life);
- Describe landscapes, seascapes, encounters with individual phenomena or people;
- Briefly articulate arguments or concerns, combined (if possible) with story;
- Try not to be overly abstract—accentuate the local and the personal.

I often begin my workshops by introducing participants to the building blocks (description, narration, and reflection) of what I call “the personal essay of environmental experience.” We read and discuss several examples of such essays, including Scott Russell Sanders's “Buckeye” (1995) and Annie Dillard's “Living Like Weasels” (1982). We also take a look at examples of testimony, such as the statement before the U.S. Senate subcommittee on the Utah Public Lands Management Act of 1995, that Terry Tempest Williams included her book *Red: Passion and Patience in the Desert* (2001). I find that workshop participants quickly begin to internalize the value and the style of such language if they hear the words coming out of their own mouths. We take the time to read these essays aloud, moving around our group, paragraph by paragraph.



Over time, word of my Environmental Writing workshops, including the personal testimony assignment, began to spread among my colleagues throughout the United States and abroad. In recent years, in conjunction with my lecture trips to various parts of the world, I have taught a three-day workshop in the Malaysian jungle (under the auspices of Universiti Putra Malaysia) and two-hour workshops at Istanbul Kultur University in Turkey and International Islamic University in Islamabad, Pakistan. In 2017, either on my own or with colleagues, I taught nine of these brief workshops, some of them specifically for environmental scientists or other targeted audiences, such as Native American elders, and others for the general public. The essential goal of these writing workshops is to empower participants to express their own knowledge and concerns—and to contribute their voices to public discussions of important topics. After I taught a day-long Environmental Writing on the Beach pre-conference workshop at Tumon Bay before the April 2016 International Conference on Island Sustainability, I was pleased to see that the University of Guam’s Center for Island Sustainability put the poem about invasive rhino beetles that undergraduate Arielle Lowe wrote for the workshop up on its website (<http://www.uog.edu/center-for-island-sustainability/center-for-island-sustainability-cis>), amplifying the power of Arielle’s voice, as she expresses concern about global climate change by describing a local impact (the spread of destructive beetles) on her island.

Through our individual voices, our idiosyncratic personal experiences and viewpoints expressed in the form of story, we have the ability to convey what we most care about—our concerns, our attachments. We do this most effectively when we use the highly particularized language of story, often in tandem with more formal scientific or professional information and analysis. Australian environmental journalist William J. Lines has written eloquently, in an essay about the danger of monetizing the value of nature, that “People exploit what has a price or what they conclude to be merely of value.” He continues:

[...] they defend what they love. Love cannot be priced.  
But to defend what we love we need a particularising  
language, for we love what we particularly know.  
(*Literature and the Environment* 372)

Here Lines echoes the famous words of Wendell Berry, who wrote similarly in his essay “Word and Flesh” that “Love is never abstract. It does not adhere to the universe or the planet or the nation or the institution or the profession, but to the singular sparrows of the street, the lilies of the field [...]” (200).

It is easy to drift into the comfortable linguistic conventions of our professional niches, and all too often this means that we drift into jargon and data, into recycled code words, into the abstraction of numbers. Such discourse has its purposes, including efficiency and the ability to capture the broader context of specific cases. But language does matter, and the language of image and story has its place in our efforts to communicate about public lands, natural resources, and our deep attachments to the more-than-human world.

## VII. BACK ON THE SUBWAY

The bare-bones summary of the story I told at the beginning of this article about the butterfly, or “chou,” in the Tokyo subway is what I recall from my student’s response to that writing assignment in 1994. In my imagination, though, the story has taken on vivid details and symbolic significance. This is what stories do. We craft them from the raw material of our lives and they, in turn, work on us, flowering in our imaginations.

I imagine the train passengers on that subway car nearly a quarter-century ago, salarymen and salarywomen, dressed in austere black suits and skirts, each in his or her own world, indifferent to fellow passengers and to the natural world. The Tokyo train system, like train and highway systems in other urban areas, is what theorist Marc Augé calls a “non-place,” an anonymous, featureless, interchangeable realm that defies emotional attachment (qtd in Buell 69).

But as my student’s brief story takes hold in my imagination, I picture the initial scene of isolated passengers changing. The butterfly, not described in detail in the original story, takes on bright color—perhaps the rusty orange wing stripes of a vagrant American copper or the faded blue of a milkweed butterfly, perhaps the speckled brightness of a marbled fritillary.

When this erratic speck of brightness enters the train car, the stern and indifferent human passengers gradually come alive. First one man—perhaps my student—notices the butterfly and a small spark of concern lights up in his mind: this delicate being must be helped to fly back out

into the world. He takes his newspaper and uses the wing-like pages to guide the butterfly back toward the door of the car.

But butterflies dart left and right, up and down—it's how they move, whether in a meadow or on a subway car. So the student needs some help in his efforts. Other passengers stand and move toward the activity, wielding their manga or their music players or simply their hands. The individual rescue effort becomes a team effort.

In the dark subterranean maze of the Tokyo subway system, stirred by the presence of the butterfly, a human community has been born, strangers brought together by an “animated / scrap of paper,” as poet Alison Hawthorne Deming once wrote about the monarch butterfly (*The Monarchs* 1).

I hope that we can learn to use our various attachments to the natural world—attachments all of us have in one way or another—and our stories about such attachments to build bridges between us, in some cases bridges that may be codified by policy and law. We all share this planet—with our fellow human beings and with many other beings. We need this planet, and future generations will as well. Let our stories of encounters with the more-than-human world be the connective tissue that reminds us of our dependence upon each other and the world.

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