



The Lake CONNECTION

Framing the message

The use of values-based language to engage the public in lake management

By Robin McLennan, DNR Basin Supervisor

Do you ever find yourself struggling to make a point when you're talking with someone? Sometimes it can seem like you are talking a different language. That's certainly the feeling I get when my mechanic tells me what's wrong with my car. To be honest, language can be a very imprecise means of communication.

Failing to communicate

A few years back I was at a crowded lake district meeting where I explained the need for lowering fall water level earlier in the season because "it was good for the frogs and turtles". When I uttered that phrase a loud groan, perhaps it was more of a growl, rose from the assembled group. At that moment I realized we had what was called in the movie Cool Hand Luke, "a failure to communicate."

We've all experienced failures to communicate, but this time, for me, the failure hit hard. I wasn't prepared to effectively communicate on a critical lake management topic with a group of lake residents. I was not communicating with



Using values-based language to talk about lakes and solving lake problems can help lake residents understand how lake management options can improve the experiences and opportunities they value.

them in a manner that they could relate to. It's not that they hated frogs and turtles. It was simply that the welfare of frogs and turtles was not ranked as high on their value system as other things that were of more immediate importance to them.

Framing

Shortly after this experience, I happened to hear a radio interview with Dr. George Lakoff, a linguist from the University of California-Berkeley. Recently he has been studying the use of language by political parties. He did a wonderful job of explaining how the careful use of values-based language

leads people to think about a topic in a specific way. He calls the concept “Framing”.

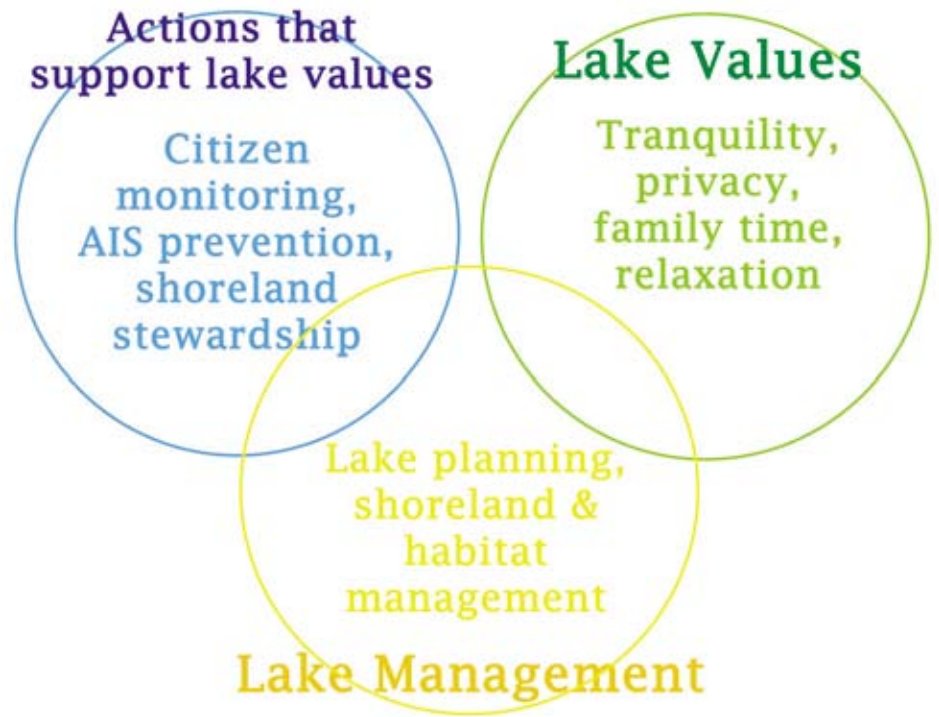
Dr. Lakoff used a very simple phrase to illustrate framing. The phrase is “tax relief.” At first blush, this phrase is nothing special. It seems to simply be a logical choice of words to describe a philosophical approach to the taxation debate in Congress. However, this terminology didn’t arise by happenstance. It was carefully crafted to lead people to think about the issue of taxation in a specific way.

The thought process for tax relief goes something like this: If you need relief from something it implies that you are subject to a burden or affliction. It makes tax payers victims. The party that relieves the affliction is seen as the hero, while those who would oppose giving relief are therefore, villains. This terminology eventually became so widespread that the other political party even began using it. Yet every time it was used, even in a counter argument, it only reinforced the underlying frame that tax payers are victims in need of rescue.

Communicating about lake management

It occurred to me that I might be able to apply the concept of framing to communications on lake management issues. I began exploring and using framing language when talking with people and I discovered that lake management issues were more broadly supported when I framed the discussion with values-based language.

As scientists, most lake management professionals are trained to think and speak



in terms that don’t mean very much to typical lake residents. It is common for managers to talk about plants such as *Vallisneria americana* and *Potamogeton crispus* in the same way other people talk about daisies and roses. We talk about water quality measures in milligrams and micrograms per liter; units that few people can relate to.

We use Latin words such as macrophytes, hypolimnion, and eutrophication, and expect people to understand the complex concepts we’re talking about.

We are now beginning to understand that the scientific language of lake management is a foreign language to many of the people we need to communicate with. If I ask you to change how you live on the lake shore by eliminating phosphorus in your lawn fertilizer, and installing a shoreline buffer and rain gardens to help change the average summer

chlorophyll-a concentration from 25 micrograms per liter to 10 micrograms per liter, how are you going to respond? Be honest. Does that really mean anything to you?

Using values-based language

A major part of the framing concept is to use values-based language which leads people to think about an issue in a specific way. Each person lives their life with certain things that they value. Tranquility, privacy, family time, relaxation, fairness, prosperity, and justice are examples of typical personal values. If we craft lake management concepts and goals to focus on values, people are much more likely to respond positively to the message.

A colleague of mine recently used framing concepts in a lake management plan. He initially used typical lake management language to state goals and objectives for the lake, but then decided to use values-based

language to link the goals and objectives with the values shared by lakeshore residents and lake users. (See below for one example from the plan).

This values-based statement makes a world of difference. It leads people to think about the goal and objective in very personal way. The bottom line is that people will respond to goals and actions that support the values they hold.

Try using values-based framing and I think you'll find that people will respond in a favorable manner whether the topic is lake management or even taxes!



Example: using framing to communicate about lake management plans

Goal:

Protect water clarity; prevent algae blooms; reduce nutrient levels in the lake.

Objective:

Protecting water quality will be achieved by reducing spring turnover total phosphorus concentrations to 16-18 ug/l and summer total phosphorus concentrations to 14-15 ug/l.....reducing controllable phosphorus inputs to the lake by 50-90%.

Scientifically, this is a laudable goal and objective statement, but why would anyone change how they live their lives for something as intangible as 14-15 ug/l ? Before the plan was presented to the lake group he reframed the message by inserting values based language so that it would read:

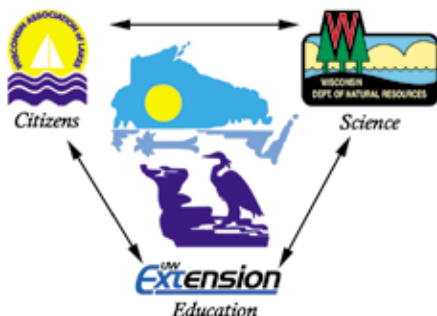
Goal:

Protect water clarity; prevent algae blooms; reduce nutrient levels in the lake. Families and individuals, particularly our children, deserve to have a lake with clean water to use and enjoy.

Objective:

Protecting water quality will be achieved by reducing spring turnover total phosphorus concentrations to 16-18 ug/l and summer total phosphorus concentrations to 14-15 ug/l.....reducing controllable phosphorus inputs to the lake by 50-90%.

Wisconsin Lakes Partnership



This article was originally published in the summer 2007 edition of *The Lake Connection*, a quarterly publication of the Wisconsin Association of Lakes. The article was written by Robin McLennan (Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources). Photo (page 1) Tim Hoyman. Photo (page 3) Eddie Heath. This article may be reprinted for educational purposes with citation.

Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources

<http://dnr.wi.gov>

UW-Extension Lakes Program

www.uwsp.edu/cnr/uwexlakes/

Wisconsin Association of Lakes

www.wisconsinlakes.org