

# Communicating About Conservation:

## WHAT'S IN IT FOR ME?

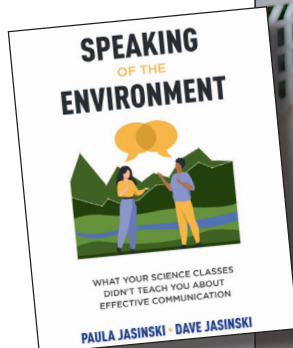
Building support for conservation among diverse interest groups requires good storytelling and great messages about why the science matters.

By Beth Hester

**M**aybe you're part of a neighborhood garden club advocating for no-mow lawns and pollinator-friendly park plantings. Perhaps you're an angler requesting the cooperation of local farmers and ranchers to help restore riparian buffer zones to increase water quality for fish. You could be a hunter making the case for why hunting is wildlife conservation, or you've been called upon by your organization to make a science-based presentation about sea level rise adaptation to an audience of decision-makers with wildly divergent political views and uneven levels of subject matter knowledge.

You're armed with extensive research, PowerPoint decks, loads of data, and good intentions, but how will you connect with your audience to maximize the impact of your message? How will you deal with audience members who've come not to learn, but perhaps, to disrupt? Do your visuals and infographics breathe life into the story behind the data?

Working collaboratively with a wide range of organizations and stakeholders to effect change can be challenging. The authors of the book *Speaking of the Environment: What Your Science Classes Didn't Teach You About Effective Communication*, Paula and Dave Jasinski, have helped scientists, laypersons, and everyday environmental advocates connect their science and environmental goals with the kinds of



Dave and Paula Jasinski work to help organizations shape conservation messaging effectively.

effective communication strategies that lead to successful outcomes and fruitful collaborations.

The Jasinskis and their staff help science, conservation, and sustainability organizations make science accessible and actionable to their audiences from their Green Fin Studio in Richmond. Green Fin's work with the Delmarva Land and Litter Collaborative has become a national model for how diverse groups with seemingly conflicting interests can work together at the intersection of sustainable food production and the achievement of environmental goals. Their practice is informed by a firm grounding in science, data analysis, and policy work.

"During our early careers as scientists and as policy specialists, Dave and I kept seeing this recurring information gap," Paula explained. "So often, the

scholars and scientists who have the relevant data don't have the kind of background or training to successfully communicate with people who don't have scientific degrees. They're used to preaching to the choir. There wasn't a focus on creating clear, digestible content that people could relate to. We made it our mission to dig deeply into innovative data visualization, video work, storytelling, outreach efforts, and strategic thinking to help organizations tell the right story to the right audience. Whether the topic is fisheries management, climate change, heat islands, or wildlife habitat, people need to know why the science matters."

Paula recalled speaking with a group of farmers about a project to restore wetlands on farms located within the Chesapeake Bay watershed. One farmer told her: "Don't sell me on

Courtesy of Sara Harris Photography

the value of wetlands, sell me on why they're valuable *to me*." "He made an important point, and we kept this in mind as we continued to communicate the program's benefits," Paula said.

Ultimately, the success of that particular wetlands program was due in part to the Jasinskis' understanding that for their target audience, the environmental benefits needed to be put on an equal footing with the economic benefits. In other words, effective conservation communication isn't always about convincing people to care about an issue for reasons that are important to you—it's about convincing them to care about and act on an issue for reasons that are important to them.

The Jasinskis emphasize that one of the most important components in any organization's communications plan is the ability to answer the question: "What's in it for me?"

"We learned over time that the information deficit model wasn't working; it wasn't enough," Dave said. "From a social science perspective, we decided to make a shift. Going forward, the focus of our practice had to be on showing stakeholders how a particular issue would impact them, and to make the science both relatable and approachable through multiple vehicles. We recognize that for many people, thinking environmentally is a luxury. Free time is limited. They're working hard to pay the bills."

Here's a small sampling of the tips, tools, and strategies drawn from the Jasinskis' combined five decades of experience:

- Use storytelling and narrative building as powerful tools to engage your target audience
- Turn scientific findings into powerful infographics for communicating ideas
- Use story maps effectively
- Understand why language matters
- Build bridges and outreach strategies. Legislation alone isn't the answer
- Combat misinformation
- Craft clear, jargon-free messaging that resonates
- Deal with disruptors
- Collaborate with diverse entities to advance mutually beneficial outcomes
- Practice active and empathetic listening to advance trust
- Communicate hope and focus on positive solutions

These messaging best practices can be used by anyone who seeks to broaden the base of public support for their conservation-oriented projects.

So how are environmental advocacy entities in Virginia integrating effective communication techniques in their own outreach missions to move important projects forward? To find out, we asked three organizations representing diverse regions of the commonwealth to share their insights: The Elizabeth River Project (ERP), The Piedmont Environmental Council, Virginia (PECVA), and the Virginia Department of Wildlife Resources (DWR).

## The Elizabeth River Project

### Marjorie Mayfield Jackson, Executive Director

We spent our organization's formative years breaking down barriers, and finding common ground between the Elizabeth River's polarized interest groups. It was intense. Studies were emerging about fish cancers, and regulatory agencies were beginning to crack down on industries regarding their discharges as the river had served as a dumping ground for industrial waste. Drastic changes were needed, but the various factions were angry and not talking to each other.

We enlisted a small branch of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to help us put in place a disciplined planning process designed to align science with public values. We created a team of 120 stakeholders from all walks of life. It's important to have the right people around the table. They met in four committees; government, science/technical, business, and citizen interests. We hired the best facilitator we could find, and we held clam bakes, and overnight retreats in wilderness settings.



Engaging stakeholders in projects like cleaning up the Elizabeth River requires that they buy into the value of the project and its results.



Effective conservation messaging explains why a project, such as restoring a shoreline by planting native grasses, has an impact on a stakeholder.

Courtesy of The Elizabeth River Project

Courtesy of The Elizabeth River Project





"The Goo Must Go" was the tagline that helped clean up Money Point in Chesapeake, one of the Elizabeth River's most contaminated areas that has been transformed into a thriving natural shoreline.

Over a beer and a campfire, the real conversations happened. Ultimately there was powerful consensus among virtually all interests for 18 specific actions to clean up and revive a river that had been given up for dead. Since our founding in 1993, there's been remarkable progress. In 2011, the Stanford Social Innovation Review cited our organization's work as an example of what successful collective impact looks like when you work toward mutually beneficial outcomes and build trust.

We've had success in our messaging and community outreach efforts through the use of simple, memorable, and compelling phrases. "The Goo Must Go" tagline for the initiative to clean up toxic sediments at Money Point in Chesapeake is one example. Our newest tagline, "Do Something Beautiful," encourages people to feel great about engaging in efforts to achieve a clean, beautiful, healthy river.

The challenges? Today's polarized political landscape has made communication more difficult. Zoom as a remote communications tool in the Covid era makes it harder to form genuine relationships. We're re-thinking how to strengthen our collaboration model to meet emerging needs, and we're trying to do a better job of engaging vulnerable communities, while continuing our work with industries to inspire positive change.

### **The Piedmont Environmental Council, Virginia** **Chris Miller, President**

Science is important, but in general, people don't make decisions based upon science, statistics, and data. This is true for individuals and for society as a whole. We understand that as an organization we need to be creative about our messaging, which means finding ways to get the science from the data owners (scientists and researchers) and convey that information to the public and to the decision-makers in ways that are compelling. People want to know that there's science behind

what you're doing, but they may not be interested in the details on a granular level.

PECVA is a community-based organization. The majority of our resources go to local programs and activities, and we're always looking for ways to partner with other organizations and businesses to achieve environmental goals. Over the years we've learned that the challenge of communicating complex issues is to be able to explain to stakeholders the why as much as the how. We have to be able to connect science to outcomes at the local level so that people have a sense of possibility.

Take the Virginia Grasslands Bird Initiative. It's a collaborative program designed to stem the tide of grassland bird decline, improve the resiliency of working landscapes, and positively impact the livelihoods dependent upon those lands. We're promoting the benefits of bird-friendly land management practices on private land so that birds like northern bobwhite quail, short-eared owls, northern harriers, and eastern meadowlarks can survive and thrive.



Landowners listened as Piedmont Environmental Council representatives explained the Virginia Grassland Bird Initiative at an event in Fauquier County.

Research shows that environmentally sound land management enriches soil, improves watershed health, and helps restore functionality to working landscapes. That's the "what's in it for me?" for the landowners and farmers. There's a mutual benefit for both the birds and the landowners. Farming with intention is a win-win. But how do you reach people and share scientific information in a way that's both personal and efficient?

Whether the topic is grassland birds, climate resiliency, or stream restoration, we began to weave the science into our messaging via multiple vehicles. We are leveraging the power of social media, story maps, interactive media, direct mail, and video to produce content that can multiply the numbers of people we can reach to raise awareness. It's a more equitable way of making information available, and we're seeing our

programs grow because of these efforts. If we can make issues like stream restoration, land conservation, and riparian buffers TikTok-worthy, then that's a great thing.

### **Virginia Department of Wildlife Resources Becky Gwynn, Executive Deputy Director**

One of the most interesting and complex projects that DWR was involved with has to be the relocation of Virginia's largest seabird colony during the Virginia Department of Transportation's (VDOT) Hampton Roads Bridge Tunnel (HRBT) expansion project. It was a highly technical project with a tight timeframe that involved coalition-building, problem-solving, and working in concert with various entities that had competing interests: transportation and safety, city and federal government entities, historic preservation groups, contractors, military interests, and conservation and birding organizations. It's one of the projects of which we're most proud.

Every spring, thousands of seabirds migrate to Virginia's nesting grounds. Though our coastal plain is host to multiple nesting and fledgling grounds, the South Island of the HRBT complex located at the mouth of the James River has for decades been the location of choice for one of our state's most well-established seabird colonies. It's a great place for them to fish and feed their young before they migrate south to overwinter (which is an incredible spectacle in itself), so the birds have a high fidelity to this habitat. Many of the seabirds, the royal and sandwich terns, nest nowhere else in Virginia. Five of the species are listed as Species of Greatest Conservation Need in Virginia's Wildlife Action Plan. But the \$3.8 billion HRBT expansion, which was our state's largest transportation initiative to date, led to the displacement of the South Island Colony.

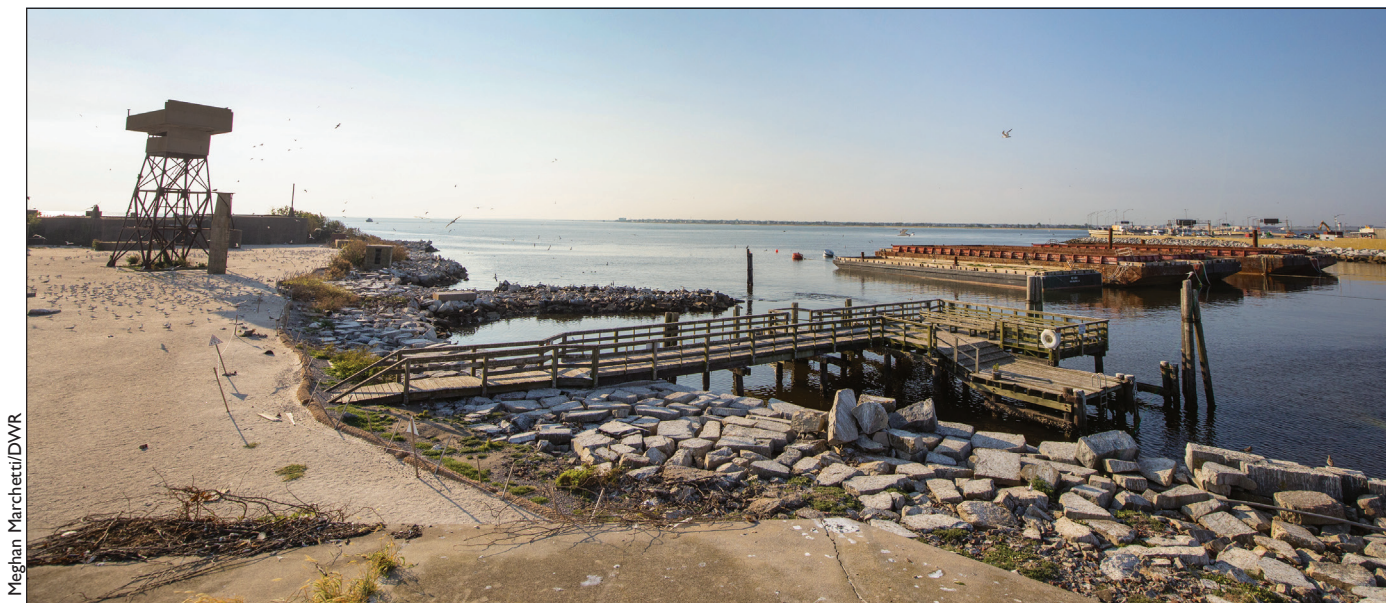
DWR was tasked with finding a solution. How could we find or construct an alternate nesting place so that the colony could return, and how could we entice the birds to use the new spot once it was located? People had a hard time understanding why it was important to accommodate the seabirds. People asked, "This is a multi-billion dollar transportation project, and you're worried about some birds?" We needed to make VDOT a partner in this voluntary conservation initiative, so we needed to provide factually correct information to all of the stakeholders, and we needed to tell the seabirds' story.

By telling their story through compelling images, videos, and graphics via multiple channels, we could generate enthusiasm and get people invested in the colony's success. We could show people why relocating the birds was important, how loss of species would impact the health of the Chesapeake Bay ecosystem and aquatic vegetation, and how much money the state could lose if the seabird colony dispersed and never returned. Not all of the interested parties understood the economic value of the birding community in Virginia; it's a multi-billion dollar business that benefits the state and local economy.

We did a lot of community outreach, made presentations to the public, engaged with stakeholders, enlisted the help of subject-matter experts, and fostered relationships with people and organizations who care about the same things. Ultimately, the coalition that led to the relocation project's success miraculously began to build itself. It was a win-win for all involved. 🌿

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*Beth Hester is a writer and freelance photographer from Portsmouth. Her passions include reading, shooting, kayaking, fishing, tying saltwater flies, and tending her herb garden.*



Meghan Marchetti/DWR

Telling the seabirds' story was essential in turning the relocation of Virginia's largest seabird colony into a hugely successful project.