Reframing the Ocean

A FrameWorks Guide

November 2019

Moira O'Neil
Nicky Hawkins

FRAME WORKS INSTITUTE

20 YEARS

Celebrating 20 years of social science for social change.

CALOUSTE GULBENKIAN FOUNDATION
UK BRANCH

In partnership with the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation
www.gulbenkian.pt/uk-branch

Contents

Introduction	02
Establish that the Ocean Has Health	03
Turn to the Future	07
Explain How the Ocean's Health Has Worsened Over Time	09
Conclusion	12

Introduction

This communication guide outlines how to talk about the ocean to improve public understanding and increase support for solutions. Based on comprehensive research with the UK public, it reveals a new story that will change how people think about the ocean.

To tell the *Changing Health* story, communicators need to:

1. **Establish that the ocean has health**. Health language and body metaphors establish that the ocean can change. It helps people understand the role of the ocean in our planet's ability to function. It reveals how disruptions to the ocean's health can cause wider harm.
2. **Turn to the future** to increase people's sense that there are actions we can take to heal and take care of the ocean.
3. **Explain how the ocean's health has worsened over time**, specifying impacts and consequences.

For readers who want to learn more about the research base that informs these recommendations, see *Turning the Tide: Findings from Reframing Research on Ocean Health & Marine Conservation in the United Kingdom* (2019) and *Getting Below the Surface: Mapping the Gaps between Expert and Public Understandings of the Ocean and Marine Conservation in the United Kingdom* (2017).

What is framing?

Framing means making choices about what to say and how to say it.

This re-framing strategy can help communicators, experts and media professionals communicate more effectively with non-experts.

Using this strategy will foster better public understanding of ocean and planetary health. It will build support for the policies and interventions advocated by experts.

Establish that the Ocean Has Health

It is vital to establish that the ocean is a system that experiences states of wellbeing, poor health and injury, much in the way that human beings experience changing states of health. Making this issue about **the health of the ocean** and not just **the ocean** quickly and concisely adds explanation to communications.

Body metaphors are universally understood. They are used constantly to help us make sense of other complex, interconnected and dynamic systems. Body metaphors deepen public understanding of the ocean.

Use a wide variety of words and ideas that are associated with health when talking about the ocean.

The lexicon of health is rich and varied. Communicators can activate helpful and accurate thinking about the ocean in a range of vivid and creative ways.

Words like *hurting*, *injuring*, *inflicting*, *wounding* and *infecting* convey the active and real nature of the damage being done to the ocean. Talking about *healing*, *reviving*, *treating* and *curing* conveys a sense of intentionality and efficacy when talking about solutions. Communicators can highlight specific *symptoms*, *conditions*, *syndromes* and *ailments*. They can report on the *diagnosis*, the *prognosis* and the *treatment* required.

The ocean health frame is as flexible as it is productive. Communicators can dial it up and down in ways that are appropriate and engaging for different audiences and channels. This flexibility means that the ocean health story can be woven into many different types of communications about the ocean. It can be repeated again and again without having to parrot the same phrases verbatim.

Explicitly describe the *Planet as a Body* to connect the ocean to human and the planet's health.

People come with the understanding that the body is a complex, interconnected system. It is easy to understand that when one part of the body is hurt or threatened, it can impact on all other parts of the system. Communicators can leverage this knowledge to help people understand how the ocean – particularly when it is threatened – impacts on other systems like the land and atmosphere.

> ***Example:*** *The ocean, atmosphere, and land are connected. Like the parts of the body, what happens in each part affects the others.*

How to use the metaphor

Use the metaphor to explicitly connect the ocean to other planetary systems. Communicators should use the metaphor to frame concrete and specific ways that the ocean is connected to other systems. For example, the metaphor can set up a discussion of the precise ways that the ocean's health and human health are interconnected.

Be explicit about how harm to one part of the body can impact on other, connected parts. Liken problems to specific injuries and connect the dots to its impacts on other systems.

Always include solutions when using the metaphor to describe threats to the ocean. People understand that injuries and health problems persist or worsen if not addressed. The metaphor primes people to see the need for action, and positions policy solutions as common sense.

Why the metaphor works

People know that the ocean is in some way connected to other parts of the planet, but they have difficulty understanding how the ocean is connected. For example, people do not understand how the ocean and atmosphere are connected through exchanges of temperature, oxygen and currents. They struggle to think about how all people are impacted on by ocean change, not just people living in coastal areas. The *Planet as a Body* not only deepens people's understanding of how the ocean is connected to other systems and processes, but it also helps people understand how threats to one part of the system can have wide-ranging impacts.

> ***Before:*** *The ocean is a critical part of our planet's complex systems. Threats to the ocean threaten life on earth.*
>
> ***After:*** *Just as parts of the body are interconnected and dependent on one another, the ocean plays a vital role in regulating the health of our planet.*

Compare marine protected areas (MPAs) to physiotherapy to build understanding of what they are and how they work.

To explain marine protected areas (MPAs), position them as a form of physiotherapy for the ocean. This extension of the *Planet as a Body* metaphor strengthens the association between the ocean and health, and powerfully illustrates the need for MPAs.

Marine protected areas take care of ocean health by allowing the ocean to heal, just as physiotherapy helps injuries heal.

How to use the metaphor

Use the metaphor to set up a discussion of the specific aspects of MPAs. It is important to remember that the metaphor is not a stand-alone message. Rather, it opens space for people to more deeply understand what MPAs are and how they work. Even with the metaphor, communicators still need to be detailed and concrete in their discussions of MPAs.

Emphasise how physiotherapy addresses the root causes of the ocean's pain. People understand physiotherapy as a way to alleviate the root or underlying causes of pain and injury and can map this understanding on to MPAs.

Remind people that physiotherapy can help restore ocean health, not just serve as a temporary fix.

Emphasise that physiotherapy is ongoing and targeted. People understand that physiotherapy is something that needs to be done actively on a recurring basis in order for it to be effective. Activate this understanding to show how MPAs need to work.

> ***Before:*** *Well-designed and managed marine protected areas can help the ocean and turn around the downward trends of marine biodiversity.*
>
> ***After:*** *Well-designed marine protected areas are like physiotherapy for the ocean's health. When we heal the ocean, we turn around the downward trend of marine life.*

Why the metaphor works

People do not know what MPAs are or how they work. When people can talk about them, they focus on how MPAs may protect a single species, but have little understanding of their broader role. The *Physiotherapy* metaphor helps people think about how healing one part of the body has positive knock-on effects. They can connect that understanding to MPAs and ocean and planetary health.

People believe that the ocean is too vast and other-worldly to be impacted on by human activity. While this assumption fuels the idea that human activity could not harm the ocean, it simultaneously drives fatalism and the sense that nothing can be done to redress harms already done to the ocean. Comparing MPAs to *Physiotherapy* allows people to see that there are concrete steps we can take to heal the ocean. It opens space for discussions of how MPAs can redress existing damage and prevent future damage from occurring.

What to avoid: Communicators should avoid language that suggests that the ocean is a self-correcting system or has the capacity to heal itself. Referring to the 'ocean's resilience' activates the idea that the ocean is self-governing and resilient: it will return to a state of balance and harmony if left on its own. Triggering this way of thinking shuts down thinking about specific policy interventions,

like expanding MPAs, because people believe the best course of action is to let nature take its course. Communicators must open up space in their messages for the role of marine intervention and its ability to heal the ocean.

Use *Blue Belt* to explain the specific migratory function of MPAs.

Communicators focusing on migration of various marine species can use the *Blue Belt* metaphor to explain how MPAs facilitate this process.

MPAs can form a 'blue belt' that protects nature in the ocean, just as the green belt protects nature on land. A blue belt of connected MPAs creates a safe migration route for fish and other animals.

How to use the metaphor

Be explicit about the metaphor. Like physiotherapy, the *Blue Belt* metaphor does not work as a stand-alone message. Communicators need to fill the metaphor out with specific information about the migration of marine species and the role of the MPAs in facilitating that process.

Compare the belt to the migratory pathway.

Use the metaphor to exclusively explain MPAs benefits on migration. This was the only way that the metaphor was effective. Using the *Blue Belt* metaphor will not work to explain other aspects of MPAs.

> ***Before:*** *New research finds that MPAs benefit on migratory marine species when they are carefully designed, strictly enforced, and integrated with sustainable fisheries management.*
>
> ***After:*** *New research finds that MPAs work like a Blue Belt for the ocean. When they are carefully designed, strictly enforced and integrated with sustainable fisheries management, they improve ocean health and help species to thrive.*

Why the metaphor works

People understand the concept and value of a green belt of land around a city where building is restricted. They can apply this understanding to the role and function of MPAs.

Turn to the Future

People need an aspirational vision of what the future *could* look like if we act. They need to know that the ocean's health can and should change in the future and that there are steps we can collectively take to heal the ocean. Communicators can point people to the future by employing a future frame and emphasising the value of *Stewardship*.

Future frames paint a picture of the potential for positive change.

People need to understand that the ocean's health has changed for the worse as a result of human activity. But they also need to know that it *can* change for the better.

A framing strategy that paints a positive and achievable vision of the ocean's future health increases people's sense of collective responsibility for taking care of the ocean. It increases support for a range of policy solutions, including reducing pollution, strengthening MPAs, and policies that make fishing more sustainable.

It is important to leave space in communications for improvement, positive change, and a future state of wellbeing.

> ***Before:*** *There is now overwhelming scientific evidence that the ocean's health is in jeopardy, which will have drastic repercussions for us all.*
>
> ***After:*** *The actions we take today can revive the ocean's health tomorrow and into the future. There is now overwhelming scientific evidence that the ocean can help stabilise the climate and secure our future.*

Why it works

People can be overwhelmed and become highly fatalistic about the threats to the ocean's health. Communicating about how we can collectively implement changes at the policy level to secure a future of ocean wellbeing can help thwart this tendency towards fatalism and skepticism and help people envisage positive change.

The value of *Stewardship* activates responsibility for future generations.

Emphasising our shared responsibility to future generations helps communicators to make the case for policies that reduce threats to the ocean, especially policies that reduce pollution and policies that make fishing more sustainable.

Reminding people that we have a responsibility to protect the ocean for future generations attunes people to the importancte of sound policy that will restore ocean health.

> ***Example:*** *We have a duty of care over the natural world and a responsibility to take care of it for future generations. The ocean is not ours, but is in our keeping, and we must pass it on in good condition to those who follow us.*

How to use the value

Use language that connects to people's sense of health and change over time. Phrases like 'taking care of our planet' and 'watching over our oceans' situates the ocean as experiencing wellbeing and injury and places the human activity of caretaking as something that can impact on those states.

Use words that trigger our shared responsibility for the ocean's health. Pronouns like *we*, *us*, and *our* all signal that this is a problem that impacts on everyone, and requires collective action to solve.

When appropriate, specifically name responsible governments, corporate or community actors when using the value. With *Stewardship*, communicators can frame ocean protection as a public issue in need of policy solutions.

Avoid framing stewardship as a matter of fairness to future generations. Fairness was an ineffective value and in fact depressed people's concern for the ocean. This is likely because it sparks 'us versus them' thinking.

> ***Before:*** *We owe it to our children to address the ocean's decline. It is not fair or right for them to have to deal with the disaster we created.*
>
> ***After:*** *When we take care of our ocean, we make it healthier for future generations.*
>
> ***Before:*** *The actions we take now will affect people later. It is not fair that we do nothing and not take every action we can to restore the ocean's health.*
>
> ***After:*** *The actions we take now will affect people later. We have a responsibility to people who come after us to do everything we can to restore the ocean's health.*

Why the value works

This value activates people's sense of responsibility to future generations, while simultaneously fostering a sense that the ocean's health can move in a positive direction as a result of human action and policy. The value connects to people's sense that the health of the planet is dynamic and needs to be cared for, tended to, and maintained.

When using spokespeople, align the expertise of the messenger to the message.

Messengers amplify the power of messages. When a messengers' expertise aligns with the message, this can increase the positive message effects. For example, communicators can use medical professionals to talk about the impact of the ocean's health on human health; business owners or leaders to explain the negative consequences on economic development; or climate scientists to talk about environmental impacts. Communicators should not be limited to these messengers, but people need to feel that spokespeople know what they are talking about.

Explain How the Ocean's Health Has Worsened Over Time

People do not understand the extent of threats to the ocean and they have difficulty connecting the ocean's health to other disruptions and changes. This means that communicators are facing a salience challenge – a lack of awareness that something is going wrong and needs to be addressed.

While pointing to the possibility of positive change in the future, communicators need to build a stronger understanding that the ocean's health has been injured as a result of human activity.

To increase salience, however, we need to go beyond highlighting the scale of the problem.

Crisis-laden messages only get communicators so far – and can elicit fatalism. Avoiding this does not mean that communicators should avoid talking about the scope of the problem. Communicators should *explain* the problem rather than assert it.

Communicate that the ocean's health has changed for the worse.

People working towards marine conservation and protection need to communicate that human activity has changed (and damaged) the ocean's health. Communicating that harmful changes have already occurred builds people's understanding of how the ocean's health has dramatically changed, but at the same time it increases their sense of efficacy that something can be done.

How to use past frames

Use this with the ocean health frame. People know health is dynamic and can worsen or improve. Focusing on health over time helps people focus on *change*.

Show how human activity has injured the ocean. In order for people to appreciate proposed policy solutions such as reducing fossil fuel use or pollution, people need to understand that these and other human activities have damaged the health of the ocean.

> ***Before:*** *We are facing an ocean crisis. The unprecedented changes we are seeing in ocean activity should be a stark wake-up call to all of us.*
>
> ***After:*** *The ocean used to be healthy but its health has deteriorated over time because of human activity. With the right policies and interventions, we can try to reverse this trend.*
>
> ***After:*** *The health our ocean enjoyed in the past is crumbling. Fossil fuels and overfishing are inflicting serious injury. We need the right policies and interventions to help the ocean heal.*

Why using past frames works

People's beliefs about the ocean impede their ability to see that the ocean's health has changed. People see the ocean as a vast, unknowable and separate world that is governed by natural processes and cannot be affected by human activity. Relatedly, people assume that the ocean is composed of a system of relationships that remain in balance and harmony unless they are disturbed. Both ways of thinking obscure understanding that the ocean's health has worsened as a result of human activity.

Be specific about consequences.

To make the case for marine intervention, communicators should talk specifically about the interconnection between the ocean and human health, the environment or economic development. It is not enough to say that the ocean's health has worsened. People need to be able to connect those impacts to other spheres.

How to talk about the consequences of the ocean's health

Be specific. Talk in concrete ways about how the ocean impacts on either human health, environmental health or economic development. Help people understand the mechanisms through which the ocean's health brings wider impacts.

Focus on human health when trying to cultivate a sense of collective responsibility. When communicators are clear about how the ocean's health is interconnected to human health, people are more likely to understand that we all have a role to play in protecting the ocean.

Avoid pitting the economy against the environment. People assume that marine conservation (or any effort to protect the environment) is incompatible with economic development. Talking about negative economic and environmental consequences of the failure to protect the ocean's health can help complicate this understanding.

> ***Before:*** *Humanity is exacting a terrible toll on the ocean. Global warming, combined with the negative impacts of numerous other human activities, is devastating our ocean.*
>
> ***After:*** *Our health is intertwined with the ocean's health. For example, pollution in the ocean can expose us to toxins in our water and food supply that can make us sick. Healing the ocean heals our health.*

Why it works

By connecting the ocean's health to other domains such as human health, the environment or economic development deepens people's understanding of *why* the ocean is so important. Foregrounding the specific negative consequences moves people from vague notions about threats to the ocean to concrete understandings of the kinds of disruptions that the ocean's health is having on human health, economic development and the environment in general.

In addition, because people can think about the ocean as another world disconnected from human life, they particularly struggle to see how the ocean's health can impact on human health. Explicitly making these connections in communications can start to build awareness of this relationship.

Conclusion

Ocean experts and advocates face three of the most difficult challenges in public perception when trying to increase public understanding, engagement and support for marine intervention:

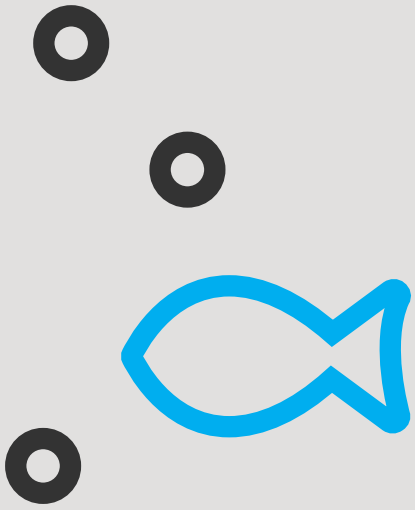
1. People are not aware of the extent of the problem.
2. People struggle to connect the problem to human activity. They lack a deep understanding of the ocean's role in supporting human and planetary life and cannot grasp the wide-ranging consequences to the planet if changes are not made.
3. When people do understand the scope and extent of the threats to the ocean, there is a tendency to become deeply fatalistic about the possibility of redressing the harm that has been done.

With such high stakes and a closing window of opportunity for action, communicators cannot afford to be stuck in the wrong story. The *Changing Health* story navigates unhelpful and inaccurate default thinking, landing a better understanding and sense of efficacy. It offers huge potential to change the public dialogue about the ocean's health and motivate action on marine intervention.

But this framing evidence base is just the beginning. Stories only work when people hear them – and they need to hear them multiple times to replace default beliefs. This framing strategy needs to be brought to life in engaging and creative ways in lots of different places over a sustained period. Ocean communicators need to harness the power of repetition by telling the new story in policy discussions, media communications and popular culture.

ABOUT FRAMEWORKS

The FrameWorks Institute is a nonprofit think tank that advances the mission-driven sector's capacity to frame the public discourse about social and scientific issues. The organisation's signature approach, Strategic Frame Analysis®, offers empirical guidance on what to say, how to say it, and what to leave unsaid. FrameWorks designs, conducts, and publishes multi-method, multidisciplinary framing research to prepare experts and advocates to expand their constituencies, to build public will, and to further public understanding. To make sure this research drives social change, FrameWorks supports partners in reframing, through strategic consultation, campaign design, FrameChecks®, toolkits, online courses, and in-depth learning engagements known as FrameLabs. In 2015, FrameWorks was named one of nine organisations worldwide to receive the MacArthur Award for Creative and Effective Institutions. Learn more at **www.frameworksinstitute.org**



Reframing the Ocean

A FrameWorks Guide

November 2019

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of the FrameWorks Institute.

Please follow standard APA rules for citation, with the FrameWorks Institute as publisher.

FrameWorks Institute. (2019). *Reframing the Ocean*. Washington, DC: FrameWorks Institute.

© FrameWorks Institute 2019

Acknowledgement

This work was supported by the National Science Foundation under grants DUE-1043405 and DUE-1239775. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material were those of the author(s) and did not necessarily reflect the views of the National Science Foundation.

FRAME WORKS INSTITUTE

20 YEARS

CALOUSTE GULBENKIAN FOUNDATION
UK BRANCH

In partnership with the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation

www.gulbenkian.pt/uk-branch