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## Quoting "the environment": Touchstones on Earth

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## RESPONSE TO COX

# Quoting “the Environment”: Touchstones on Earth

Donal Carbaugh

*This essay reflects upon the purposes of studying environmental communication by focusing on the variety of ways we quote “the environment” in our studies. Special attention is given to balancing the twin objectives of speaking about “the environment,” while also listening to what the environment says to us. In the process, we can serve a diversity of peoples, eco-parts and processes, through a language which can keep that diversity in view. How, then, can we assess movement, toward these ends? A proposal is made: We can gather Touchstones on EARTH into our studies, reminding ourselves that: Earth, “Environment,” is doubly quoted: Both the word and the world speak; Action is engaged in words, environments, and their peoples; Responsible research takes nature, or earth, to be the measure of the good; Time helps temper enthusiasms, and allows enduring insights to be built; Heuristic explorations as these can create insights about communication and environment, while generating better ways of dwelling on earth.*

*Keywords: Ethnography; Nature and Culture; Relation of Words to World; Tenets for Environmental Communication*

Professor Cox has delivered a provocative programmatic address, and essay, concerning the theory and practice of environmental communication. The main question he raises is of perennial importance: What is the purpose of environmental communication as a field? Implicit in the question are two imperatives. We must ask such a question, and periodically, we must revisit it: Toward what ends are we working when we engage in studies of environmental communication?

Professor Cox discusses instances where our quick responsiveness to environmental crises is needed. He brings to our attention enduring energy issues concerning coal,

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oil, climate, as well as how these issues are inextricably tied to verbal interpretations of what each issue indeed is. Highlighted is the way environmental concerns revolve around shifts in terms: are we experiencing “global warming” or “climatic dislocation”? Is this an “exotic species” or an “invasive species”? Is this land rendered a “mountain to be preserved” or a “project to be developed”? Are we currently visiting a “national park” or “an occupied territory”? History, politics, and cultures are invoked in the rhetorical uses of terms, in the ways our world is verbally cast, and in the social scenes constituted through these uses, through these ways of speaking (Carbaugh, 1996; Carbaugh and Rudnick, 2006; Schultz, 2001; Weaver, 1996).

In his address, Professor Cox’s comments at times both illustrate and lament a particular usage as when environmental discourse highlights specific entities (e.g., a focus on trees and species) while easily hiding what each is part and parcel of (e.g., the forest and interdependent ecocommunities). Tied into this mode of analytic rationality is what we might call a linguistic lag factor, due to a hyperfocus on some verbal part over the larger parcel on which it is dependent. Apparently, the ability to verbally interpret the larger parcel plods along well behind the rhetoric of the part—as when our terms focus on endangered species over their communities—while in the meantime there is a tragic passing of nature’s larger thresholds, as the ecosystem declines, the climate warms, the water becomes too acidic, and the like. As a result, we stand on the beach staring at a starfish, before realizing we are about to be consumed by a tsunami. The world’s waves sweep around us as we struggle to understand what hit us, trying to keep our proverbial head above the water.

Investigating the terrain of environmental discourses, that is, the communication of environmental issues, entities, and integrative systems, necessitates careful thinking, action based in what we know about the diversity of parts and processes, through a language that can keep those issues, entities, and systems in view. What, then, can we do, toward these ends?

Professor Cox’s comments insist that our research be responsible, emphasizing how the qualities of verbal communication that are intimately linked to our understanding are thus also linked to our actions concerning “environmental crises.” A rhetoric of urgency is formulated, prodding us to become engaged on behalf of our planet, and thus on behalf of ourselves. Toward that end, he formulates a useful set of “tenets” or principles or premises that may serve as starting-points for developing such understandings, and for responsible actions. I would like to focus on these, reflecting a little bit upon each, taking them seriously, for I find the group together to be quite fertile grounds for thought.

Let’s start with the first: “‘Environment’ imbricates material and social/symbolic resources” (Cox, 2007, p. 12). Reading further, Professor Cox explains that our understanding of “the natural world and environmental problems” is “mediated by systems of representation—by human communication” (p. 12). This makes good sense to me, and I want to explore in some detail specifically what this might mean.

In my first reading, I was intrigued by the word, “imbricates,” and admittedly, wasn’t exactly sure what it meant. There, on page 1378 of my Oxford Compact Dictionary, the term was defined through metaphor, “to place so as to overlap,” as in

the layering of one tile over another. One intriguing reading of this first tenet, then, with this definition, is that “environment” overlaps, or is layered over “material and social/symbolic resources.” Given this, we might immediately wonder, what is layered over the material, and conclude, well, words, representations, or signs. We are reminded that “environment” is a word that adds a layer, linguistically, onto material, social/symbolic processes. The metaphor suggests, then, that “environment” be understood as a verbal lamination on top of, or surrounding such material, social/symbolic process, or entities. And it is that verbal lamination that grounds, or is used to express, our meanings about the material. In a sense, then, “environment” as a word is laminated over the utterly real environment. Good enough.

I then began puzzling considerably over the quotations around “environment” in this first tenet. What does this mean, environment in quotations?

One possible reading of the quotations is an emphasis on the process of imbrication, as a way of reminding us that “environment” is a word, being quoted, drawing attention to its use. As a quoted word, this suggests that we reflect upon standard usage concerning the matters we discuss, and to what we mean when we use the word, and words like “environment.” Consulting Cox further about this, we find two additional points on the matter: that “environment” in particular involves what “we know,” “our ideas, beliefs, attitudes, policies, and practices involving the natural world and environmental problems” (p. 12). We might think of this as an anchoring of “our ideas” in the cultural world of taken-for-granted knowledge, as formed in the sediment of our social sayings. We find, further, that this knowledge is already “mediated by systems of representation—by human communication” (p. 12). We are born into an expressive system that mediates our relationship with the environment. So both our ideas about, and our expressions of, the world are implicated in the way we laminate the “environment.”

At this point, Professor Cox adds a second example of this process that is like the word “environment.” It is “the very idea of wilderness.” He notes how this idea is indeed also “mediated through various technologies”. In fact, he states, “‘wilderness’ already, inescapably is mediated” (p. 12, quotation marks in original). (This statement about “wilderness” is drawn from the call for the 2005 Conference on Communication and Environment.) So, “environment” and “wilderness” are, in a sense, “ideas,” encapsulated in verbal concepts, which are “already, inescapably . . . mediated.” Through these pre-existing terms, and similar others, we are “wired” and drawn into what might be called a “prison-house” of language, rhetorical terms and tropes that stand over and between our relation with nature’s world.

Given this, we find ourselves caught in a grand imbricating process, representations revolving around a central signifier, “environment.” On this premise, we are all already subjected to a verbal layering process, principally, but not exclusively, of placing words over the world. It is those words that already exist, on top of each other, and on top of our world. Is it possible to scrape off the layers of words and get to our natural world? It seems, Cox reminds us, that there is some glimmer of hope that we can. But our footing in this matter is not quite as firm.

We find the first tenet has another foot, if ever so lightly and only delicately on the ground. Professor Cox guides us to Peterson, Peterson, and Grant (2004) to find this additional footing, in the "reality" of the rhetoric of representations like "environment" and "wilderness." Here, the term "reality" evidently refers to something, in some sense, beyond language? As a result, Cox's language of the first tenet places one verbal foot in rhetorical "tropes," "social constructions," and "social practices," and the other in "real terrains," "real consequences," and "biophysical processes." We are reminded through the quotations around the former set—tropes, social constructions, social practices—that these are already humanly manufactured ideas within a linguistically mediated world. The latter set is also, apparently, of this sort, that is, terms in our language, yet somehow this latter set goes beyond the (mere?) social and verbal realm. (I will return to this dynamic between the sets of terms in a moment.)

Through this dual usage, then, and treated metaphorically as an imbrication, the first tenet makes explicit the wordedness of environment or wilderness, casts this process as a layering of significations over "material, and social/symbolic processes;" yet also the first tenet props the door open to the real world, through "the real world." With this reading in mind, let's return for a minute to the question: What to make of those quotations? I think a more elaborate response to the question can fortify our view.

As we have discussed, we can understand "environment," as quoted, as a word that is, in one sense, somehow layered onto the material stuff of nature. Some may worry that this characterization wrongly assumes that the "material" of "reality" is more primary than the "words" used to discuss it, like "environment." We might respond to them by saying: Perhaps this word-to-stuff relation is also interpretable as an imbricating process in which words and world are mutually constituted. Just as our language struggles to make sense of the natural world, so too do our senses of the natural world seek a language about that of which we are a part. Whether we proclaim a determining force in one or both directions, these readings draw attention to our word, "environment," and its intimate link to nature's world. Our interpretation here also makes the point that our words, like "environment," have a formative hand in shaping our understanding and our actions regarding nature's world. I take all of this to be good, as far as it goes.

But, as much as I agree with and espouse these points myself, I also think there is a risk this view might be a bit oversocialized, or a bit overdetermined from a rhetorical view. The verbal or social "construction metaphor" can be overworked, all of us being wordsmiths while losing sight (and sense) of the raw materials that are the subjects in our constructions. We might sound a horn of caution by returning to the quoted environment. How so?

There is, I believe, a deeper and more general interpretation possible of the quotations around environment. In this sense, attention is not drawn in the first instance to the word "environment," but to a process through which the world expresses itself. In this sense, when we write, or speak, about such matters, we are indeed quoting the environment, serving as spokespersons for what it—that is, the world—has indeed already "said." Heard in this way, and ironically here through

these words, we are drawing to our attention, not the word itself, but the natural world that it references, and the processes through which it indeed “speaks” about itself, and thus to us.

This point is difficult to put into words, and this is why the quoted “environment” serves it well. We are reminded, in this deeper sense, that we are, indeed, putting into words a communicative process that is in the first instance not constructed through words, but is something that has already been “said” by the environment.<sup>1</sup> Why else do we walk beautiful beaches, or oil-soaked beaches, if not, partly at least, to hear what each says, and thus for inspiration in better ways of “speaking” about them? Why do we, as Henry David Thoreau, saunter through swamps, or like John Muir make our way through the wonderful storms in a wilderness valley, or watch the ouzel, if not to hear nature’s voice, beyond the constraints of civilization, telling us things our prior words could not quite capture. And struggle to capture nature’s “sayings” we must. Ralph Waldo Emerson reminded us that “we know more from nature than we can at will communicate” (Emerson, 1983, p. 23). I think we should never forget Emerson’s dictum, and thus should not forget the process from whence it came: Nature speaks, we listen, we somehow learn, we struggle to put what we have learned into words, but we are forever frustrated by the process, thus we return to nature, and forever enjoy the spiral—it’s never really a simple cycle since we learn something each time—all over again. A challenge this poses for all of us is to open our understanding to the world beyond our words, beyond our representations of it, to learn anew from it, and to be in a position better to speak about what we come to know and thus to act accordingly. This suggests further that our words not become the primary or exclusive measure of things, but that nature be so. Put differently, the medium of words must not dominate our means of communication when striving to know nature’s world.

This reading of the quotations elaborates features of, and adds important emphases to our opening tenet. We are reminded that our education and understanding should never be focused solely on our words, or simply on our verbal and visual representations of nature, environment, or wilderness. Yes, the verbal representations are crucial and focal in much of what we do as environmental communication scholars and practitioners, but these are not our sole concerns. In yet other words, we must focus of course on “representations of environment,” but we must also focus on its *presentations*, in the first instance on its being in and of itself, what it has to say to us. We must not forget that our verbal imbrications are in some sense secondary translations of other natural systems of expression, from rocks and rapids to ravens. And we must become better attuned to those other expressive systems, to what each is saying to us, in its own way, and then we might learn to speak better, in our own words, on its behalf, as a result of this process. Without constant reminding of this as part of the larger process, we stand leaning heavily on our own words, and are somewhat less steady in the world we seek to understand, or the world we “stand up for” and care for, as Edward Abbey put it.

There are several cautionary points here that bear repeating. One is the keeping of a balanced view, keeping both the world and our words about it in sight. Each is not

the other. We should not confuse the one for the other. We must be careful not to load the dice in favor of our own interests in the linguistic, rhetorical, socially constructed nature of things. As Professor Cox states, our "representations" like "environment" are indeed already constructed. Where, then, do we stand in order to gain a larger perspective on our "interested" representations? Are we somehow stuck in our own worded worlds, mired in our vested imbrications, interested party versus interested party? How do we move on? One way is to learn to listen beyond the human words, beyond the humanly manufactured systems of representation. In the process, we can consult what else is being "said," through other means of expression, by the whales, waters, winds, and others which can suggest much to us as we listen. If we are willing to admit this as a part of a basic tenet, we can balance our words with what we hear in other ways in the world, opening our words to the world's teachings, making nature the measure of what we say so not to be enslaved by our own preconstructed representations.<sup>2</sup>

Note that the caution involves several ingredients, balancing our words with the world, our verbal with various other means of expression, and our metaphors of "construction" and "representation" with direct apprehensions of nature's offerings, with what indeed is immediately present to us through this mode, through, what Paul Rezendes calls "direct communication."<sup>3</sup>

This then situates our first tenet with a doubly quoted, dual allegiance, to know "environment," "wilderness," "nature" and the like as words and signs that are already represented to us, and which already mediate our relation with the world; but also, to know what is being expressed to us by the world itself, through its other means of expression, beyond our familiar verbal and visual representations. Through both, communication mediates the relations between people and nature, with this inviting a larger view of environmental communication, from words to other wordless means of communication, affirming both as powerful sources of knowledge. Our allegiance can, then, stand squarely both on various social representations of the word, and on the world's presentations of itself.<sup>4</sup>

We can, now, trace the reverberations of this doubly quoted environment throughout the remaining tenets that Professor Cox formulates. A second reminds us that "social/symbolic representations of environment embody 'interested' orientations toward their object(s)" (p. 13). Any environmental discourse elevates some vantage for viewing above others, some perspective, position, and purpose over others. This brings into view the partial and selective nature of any environmental discourse, and heightens our sense of at least one problem: If each such discourse about the environment is indeed partial, and each indeed interested, what to do about that? Too often, each antagonizes another, asserting its own interests against the others, resulting in a war of words and a worse world. Listening to the range, and consulting the world in which each plays its role, may give a renewable place from which to speak. Responsible research and constructive action can be formulated accordingly. Let me briefly discuss an example of how this may be so.

Over the past years I have been participating in a land-use controversy in western Massachusetts (Carbaugh, 1996). My initial perspective, position, and purpose in this

controversy was as an avowed environmentalist, tutored in the trails of the terrain, seeking to stop development in an area of natural beauty with a deep history. Over time, by exploring others' discourses for the place, I began understanding the limits of my discourse, its partial perspective, and indeed its potentially destructive qualities in this case. Placing an ethnographic cap over my environmental hat helped me understand various counter-discourses and opposing codes in ways that were instructive and productive not only to me, but to others caught in the controversy. It also led me back to the trails, to nature's place, consulting it for further knowledge and guidance. Eventually, I wrote about these discursive dynamics, and at one point my words were quoted by a state environmental official at a public meeting as a rationale for bringing diverse interests together in order to live better in this natural and social place. The meeting resulted in the creation of a political body of various interests who had the authority to put on paper an official integrative plan for the place. The plan permitted but limited development on it. My discussion about this research here is not solely an exercise in immodesty (I hope), but simply the illustration of a way the careful study of different and dueling environmental discourses can, with a careful consultation of places in the world, result in productively engaged actions.

Given the "interested" nature of environmental representations, we must consult the range-in-use, and the earth, giving time to each, to know how best to proceed. Without the range in view, and without nurturing our capability of verbalizing each, we risk being simply "self-interested," without an integrative stance, unable to be properly attentive to peoples and places. The risks can be considerable. As I write these words, we are at war. Something better is needed. A commitment to understanding multiple discourses, to weaving the best of them together, within places well known, can offer one small kind of hope.

Professor Cox's third tenet reminds us that "social, economic and ideological contexts both enable and inhibit the production of representations of 'environment'" (p. 13). Just as species live in bioregions, so too do our discourses inhabit their own worlds. At times these are economically driven, at times ideationally driven, and so on. The distinctive histories of places, and discourses about them, need to be understood. Each has affordances; each also has limitations. As Kenneth Burke discussed in his first book, *Permanence and Change*, our symbolic orientations equip us with capacities, but also constrain us with incapacities (Burke, 1965). This is yet another reason to explore the variety of discourses in view, while consulting the earthly places where each finds root. Just as biodiversity is an important principle in understanding ecosystems, so too is discursive diversity important in grasping human ecocommunities. Embracing the variety, and moving with the range in view, offers a good way to proceed.

The final tenet that Professor Cox formulates is this: "Dominant systems of representation of 'environment' influence societal deliberation and/or response to environmental signals, including signs of deterioration of human health, climate, or ecological systems" (p. 14). We must seek to understand what each environmental discourse brings into view, what it permits, what it prohibits. A commitment to

understanding a range, rather than standing with only one, helps loosen the hold of any one on the rest. This, I think, is at the heart of critical praxis. We are informed about a variety of discourses, about that which each espouses to know (i.e., natural worlds), and are thus equipped with knowledge of the range-in-use, ready to act responsibly on the ground, so to speak, of biodiscursive diversity.

Based upon this reading and discussion of Professor Cox’s tenets, then, I want to supplement the tenets with a set of Touchstones that summarize some of our main points of discussion. With these, we can draw attention to environmental communication as both what we do when we communicate about the environment AND what the environment or earth is as it “speaks” to us. Both need to be firmly placed if we are to know from whence, and about what, we speak. I have formulated these touchstones as a mnemonic device, so it spells EARTH, and so it takes communication not just as its subject matter, but as its primary theoretical concern.

### **Touchstones on EARTH**

**Earth**, “environment” and the like should be understood as doubly quoted, as both words used to say things, and as things or processes ably speaking in their own right. This grounds our views of environmental communication in a dual allegiance to words and worlds, each with voices worth hearing, worthy of deep reflection.

**Active** is a way of characterizing communication research that is engaged in the earth, its peoples, and our communication with each. We seek to be actively responsive to our environment and its needs, to be accessible as well to it and its people. In the process, we seek to understand environmental discourses that mediate relations between people and nature, to understand the places in which they are used, to act in favor of nature, of people, and thus to honor earth, through better knowledge about it.

**Responsibility** in environmental communication aims at the good, here using nature as the measure of what is good. Not only do our words (and other signs) give shape and meanings to the world, but so too does the world shape and give meanings to our words. Responsible research keeps both in view, drawing attention to ways we speak about the environment, while also giving voice to the earth, its diversity of peoples and natural places.

**Time** is necessary for responsible action, and for good environmental communication, research and practice. To know environments, what they say, and what people say about them requires time, and patience. This point stands uneasily beside a need for urgent action, and beside one cultivating a sense of crisis. Certainly crises there are! Yet generating deeper and enduring understandings about such matters is not an exercise in a quick fix, nor is it a formula for fast action. As through traditions of ancient wisdom, time is needed to temper the impulse to get it done now, to productively channel the emotion of urgency, to move in ways steeped in knowledge about environmental words, worlds, and ways people live in places. Based upon time-tested experiences, discipline in one’s research, applied over time, offers something a quick reaction to crises may not. While there are times when quick reaction is

absolutely necessary, there are also times and places when careful research can add to knowledge about communication and environment, actively engaged in the issues it studies, responsibly addressing what is of concern. While we act quickly at times, we must keep in our sights a kind of wisdom, like the late Sioux scholar Vine Deloria (1991) discussed, which has met various generational and practical tests.

**Heuristic** explorations in environmental communication are needed, especially those which generate knowledge about communication as it mediates the relationship between people and earth's places. Some have explored how some indigenous practices are nonverbally attentive to the world; some are emphasizing the spirited nature of environments; some draw attention to the limits of language in these processes; and so on. We need investigations that inquire how various means of communication are active in and about our worlds. These will help create better insights about communication, environment, and people, and the ways they are related; these will help nurture a variety of ways people live environmentally emplaced lives; these will offer critical perspectives for living well in places, and expressing all that that entails.

And so we can gather Touchstones on EARTH into our studies, reminding ourselves that:

**Earth**, "Environment," is doubly quoted: the word and the world speak.

**Action** is engaged in words, environments, and their peoples.

**Responsible** research takes nature, or earth to be the measure of the good.

**Time** helps temper enthusiasms, and allows enduring insights to be built.

**Heuristic** explorations create insights, while generating better ways to proceed.

## Notes

- [1] I am drawing heavily here for background on various literatures including the ideas of "speaking in silence," by Paul Rezendes (1999); how "the land stalks people" among western Apache by Keith Basso (1996); communicating nonverbally with nature by Michelle Scollo Sawyer (2004); and "listening to nature" among Blackfeet by D. Carbaugh and David Boromisza-Habashi (in press).
- [2] Wendell Berry's (1990) essays surrounding "nature as the measure" in *What are people for?* are highly instructive here.
- [3] The limits of the "construction" metaphor are discussed in Tim Ingold's (1992) "Culture and the perception of environment"; see also Rezendes (1999, pp. 143–159).
- [4] The tenet suggests developing our ability to utilize various means of expression beyond words and manufactured images. Nature's systems of signification are bountiful, and in need of our attentiveness, in addition to what we have already said about them. For an interesting illustration of this point, see Scollo Sawyer (2004). For a discussion of related ideas and materials, see Carbaugh and Boromisza-Habashi (in press).

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