

BEYOND CRISIS: EXPLORING THE POTENTIAL OF INSTRUMENTAL
RHETORIC IN ENVIRONMENTAL COMMUNICATION

by


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Title: BEYOND CRISIS: EXPLORING THE POTENTIAL OF INSTRUMENTAL

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Beginning with the assumption that the words and images we use in discussing the environment reflect and shape our understanding of the world around us, this thesis undertakes a comparative analysis of two rhetorical strategies employed by contemporary American environmental organizations: the language of crisis and instrumental, or “how-to,” rhetoric. While images of crisis and eco-apocalypse are unsustainable, reinforce polarized, over-simplified debates, and relocate blame and solutions away from the individual, instrumental rhetoric provides a means for reconnecting people and nature at the level of habitual, daily behavior and reach populations missed by more ideological, less hands-on environmental discussions. In the interest of bridging the gap between theoretical rhetorical study and the “on-the-ground” work of environmental organizations, I have collaborated with BRING Recycling to create an illustrative, usable example of instrumental rhetoric. The ReUse Recipe Book will assist BRING in educating the public, changing community behavior, and raising funds.

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POCKET MATERIAL: *ReUse Recipes: Creative Ways to Reduce Your Waste Size*

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

There can be little doubt that the content of our thought is the product of communication. Because we are symbol-using animals, we categorize and label what we experience, and these labels exert a powerful effect on the processing of information.

Of our environment, what we say is what we see.

James G. Cantrill, The Symbolic Earth

Rhetoric is traditionally defined as the art of using language, particularly rational discourse, to persuade. Rhetorician Thomas B. Farrell describes formal rhetoric as the “collaborative art of addressing and guiding decision and judgment” (1) and goes on to explain, “*Rhetoric is an acquired competency, a manner of thinking that invents possibilities for persuasion, conviction, action, and judgment*” (16, emphasis in original). Its lineage stretches back to ancient Greece and Aristotle, for whom rhetoric applied to participatory citizenship and discourse in the political realm (Farrell 8-11).

In the realm of environmental rhetoric, environmental philosophers Michael Bruner and Max Oelschlaeger claim that

Rhetoric teaches that *all* language is persuasive, the primary means by which we come to know and then share what we know about the world. In this deep sense, rhetoric constructs social realities and our perspectives on them. Meaning and knowledge – what is accepted as important and true – are rhetorical through and through. (388, emphasis in original)

If we accept Bruner and Oelschlaeger's statement about rhetoric above, it is easy to see how the activities of environmental organizations are indeed "rhetorical through and through." When it comes to environmental issues, what the public considers valuable and true is extremely malleable, and every contact between the public and environmental groups holds the potential to shape public understanding of our environmental situation. Environmental groups seeking to gain support and influence public ideas about the environment must use language effectively to convince their audience (1) that they are telling the truth, (2) to share their values about the environment, and (3) to take actions based on those values. The desired actions may direct, like biking rather than driving, or indirect, like sending money to an advocacy organization. Global warming is an illustrative example. With the heated debate and "scientific uncertainty" surrounding the issue, environmental organizations seeking to combat global warming must recognize that their first communication task is defining the problem as authentic.¹ Once the public audience agrees that global warming is a reality, organizations must convince them that alleviating it is a necessary and valuable activity *and* provide specific actions to reach that end.

Studies of environmental rhetoric attempt to explain how we use language, image, and behavior to construct what people know and value. James Cantrill explains that "while grave threats may in fact exist in the environment, the perception of such danger, rather than the reality thereof, is what moves people to action" ("Perceiving" 76), and

¹ Certainly one exception to all this is a nonprofit that only seeks to communicate with those who already share the organization's beliefs and values. This may be the case if the organization is directing fundraising efforts only at previous donors, or recruiting volunteers in a very isolated target group. However, for the most part, environmental nonprofits also seek the support of those who may not share their ideas and values.

“the environment that we experience and affect is largely a product of how we have come to talk about the world” (2). Environmental organizations are in the business of convincing the public to care about environmental issues; therefore, they are also in the business of framing what is accepted as valuable and true in regard to the environment. An awareness of how different uses of language and images construct different environmental “truths” will help groups communicate more effectively with the general public. Whether they are aware of it or not, environmental organizations shape the way people understand the world they inhabit. The trick is to create an understanding that agrees with the mission and objectives of the organization and fosters a positive public atmosphere in which all environmentalists must work. A keen awareness of rhetorical strategy will help organizations craft desirable environmental “realities.” On the other hand, sloppy, careless, or near-sighted rhetoric can damage not just funding and volunteer possibilities, but also the ideological climate in which all environmental groups operate.

In addition to helping environmental organizations rethink their rhetoric, this thesis also contributes to the growing body of scholarship on environmental rhetoric. The field came of age in the mid-to-late 1990’s with the publication of three major anthologies: *The Symbolic Earth: Discourse and Our Creation of the Environment* (Cantrill & Oravec, Eds., 1996), *Green Culture: Environmental Rhetoric in Contemporary America* (Herndl & Brown, Eds., 1996), and *Landmark Essays on Rhetoric and the Environment* (Waddell, Ed., 1998). All three texts focus on the social construction of the environment through language, and they bring together scholars of rhetoric, literature, history, philosophy, cultural geography, cognitive psychology, and an

array of other fields. The recent surge of scholarly interest in environmental rhetoric represents a form of activism as well as intellectual inquiry, since, as Cantrill so pointedly states, "The only hope we have of ever preserving our environment is collectively to understand and alter the fundamental ways we discuss what we continually create" (Introduction 2).

Project Overview

With Cantrill's call to action in mind, this thesis undertakes a comparative analysis of two popular rhetorical strategies employed by contemporary American environmental organizations in hopes of both understanding how these groups communicate and, in some instances, altering their methods. In the next several chapters, I question the environmental movement's long-standing affinity for the language of crisis and eco-apocalypse and investigate the potential of the oft-maligned instrumental, or "how-to," rhetoric.

Chapter Two looks closely at the use of crisis and doomsday rhetoric in environmental direct mail campaigns. The chapter is focused by two guiding questions: how did the images of crisis and doom become so prevalent in environmental communication, and is this the most effective and responsible way to educate, inspire, and motivate the American public? After a brief look at the history of apocalyptic thought in American culture and the environmental movement, this chapter links the use of crisis and doomsday rhetoric to its roots in the apocalyptic myth.

A wide range of scholars in the humanities and social sciences have studied the influence of the apocalyptic myth on American culture², but relatively few have focused specifically on its manifestations in environmental writings (Emsley, Opie & Elliot). The small amount of work that exists on the topic focuses almost exclusively on the apocalyptic imagery in seminal environmental works like Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* and Paul Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb* (Opie & Elliot), or on government and legal documents (Emsley). My analysis draws from both the larger body of work on American apocalyptic thought and the more limited collection focused on environmental texts in order to evaluate the use of crisis and doomsday imagery in environmental direct mail campaigns. This element of my study contributes to the larger field of environmental rhetoric by providing new insight into one of the major avenues of communication between environmental organizations and the general public.

Additionally, my critique of crisis and doomsday-laden direct mail asks those within the organizations to reconsider this form as their primary means of communication. In this chapter, I argue that while crisis rhetoric may be effective at bringing in funding dollars, its effectiveness is likely to wane as the public becomes overly saturated with crisis please. Additionally, it is an irresponsible approach because it can damage the public perception of the environmental movement as a whole. The time has come for environmental groups to explore alternatives to images of crisis and eco-apocalypse because this approach is unsustainable, reinforces polarized and oversimplified debates, and relocates both blame and solutions away from the individual.

² See for example Beghoffer, Lippy, Cassara, Zamora, and Emsley.

In lieu of over-simplification and scare tactics, I advocate the incorporation of instrumental or “how-to” rhetoric into environmental communication strategies. This rhetorical strategy has often been criticized as placating and unable to inspire the major paradigm shift considered necessary for “real” environmental change. However, I attempt to construct a contrasting view of instrumental rhetoric, claiming that how-to guides can operate with a larger ideological context to support radical questioning of unsustainable behaviors and serve as inroads for segments of the population often missed by more ideological, less hands-on environmental discussions. Chapter Three presents instrumental rhetoric as a promising alternative to unsustainable crisis rhetoric. This chapter examines the history of instrumental rhetoric and its foundations in instrumental rationality, presents common critiques of the form, and attempts to construct an alternative view of instrumentality within the context of environmental behavior. I challenge both scholars of environmental rhetoric and organizations themselves to reconsider instrumental rhetoric. With the exception of work done by Killingsworth and Palmer, rhetorical scholars have paid relatively little attention to the role of instrumental rhetoric in environmental communication. Drawing extensively on the existing analysis of Killingsworth and Palmer, who have both supported and critiqued the green “how-to” book and environmental instrumentalism in general, I argue that instrumental rhetoric has the potential to meet many of the communication goals of environmental organizations, particularly on the grassroots level, while avoiding some of the dangers inherent in the use of sensationalized crisis imagery.

Finally, in the interest of bridging the gap between theoretical study and the “on-the-ground” work of environmental organizations, this thesis includes a project component. I have collaborated with BRING Recycling, a grassroots recycling and reuse organization in Eugene, Oregon to create a usable piece of instrumental rhetoric. The book, a collection of ReUse Recipes, provides the organization with a tool for educating the public about their mission, changing community behavior, and raising much needed funds. The book project illustrates the potential of the instrumental rhetoric advocated by my research, and, more importantly, it puts my theoretical work to practical use in my community. Chapter Four describes the Re-Use Recipe book project, and how the specific elements avoid the dangers of sensationalized crisis, realize the potential benefits of instrumental rhetoric, and demonstrate ways in which the how-to genre can present political and ideological critiques.

CHAPTER TWO

CRISIS IN ENVIRONMENTAL COMMUNICATION

To begin anecdotally, my interest in – or I could say frustration with – the use of sensationalized “doom and gloom” language in environmental communication began with my own feelings of helplessness in the face of environmental crisis. I came to realize that many of these feelings stemmed from all of the environmental mass mailings I receive. These pleas for assistance frequently follow a standard format: if you (the donor) don’t act NOW, the “bad guys” (government, industry, motorized recreationists, etc.) will destroy the [insert species or ecosystem here] forever!! For example, observe the membership letter I received from the Wilderness Society excerpted below.

America is losing its most special wild places at alarming speed [sic].
And right now there is more work to be done than ever.

Big Oil, timber companies, the mining industry, and land developers are using their political connections to exploit our wildlands for profits. They’re ready to tear apart even our most cherished places – like the greater Yellowstone area, Tahoe National Forest, the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, and other pristine, ecologically sensitive lands.

And while corporations have been eager to get their hands on our public lands for years, they now have friends in the White House – making our conservation work increasingly urgent.

We must take urgent action right away. (Document # TW-L-11)

All of the elements are present: the corporate and governmental bad guys, the urgency, the list of “pristine” wild places in peril. I believe that everything in the letter is true, and *I am certainly not arguing that our world is not in a state of ecological crisis*, but the

frantic tone of these letters is overwhelming rather than inspiring. It is important to ask what this sort of formulaic crisis campaign is and is not able to achieve, and if there is not a more desirable alternative.

My query into the use of crisis rhetoric in American environmentalism centers around two guiding questions of inquiry. First, how did the images of crisis and doom become so prevalent in environmental communication? Second, is this the most effective and responsible way to educate, inspire, and motivate the American public? I will begin to answer these questions by taking a historical look at one of the primary influences on contemporary environmental crisis rhetoric: the myth of the apocalypse.

The American Affinity for Apocalypse

With roots reaching back to the Judaic prophetic tradition in the century before Christ, apocalyptic thought has been an integral part of American identity since the first Puritan errand into the wilderness (Zamora, Introduction 3, Lippy 37, Cassara 64-65, and Glanz, 140). The word itself comes from the Greek "*apokalupsis*, to uncover or reveal" (Zamora, Introduction 2), and it signifies both cataclysm and revelation. The traditional apocalyptic vision is not merely one of doom (although Zamora argues that it mutates into this at specific periods in American history), but also one of a renewed world where the righteous are saved and evil is overcome. In true apocalyptic thought, a tension exists between millennial optimism and cataclysm, between destruction and renewal.

Taking a sociological look at the myth, Charles Lippy argues that apocalyptic ideas have remained a constant part of the American psyche in both religious and, more

recently, secular forms, but the level of interest in apocalyptic or millennial ideas has fluctuated in direct correlation with social factors (38). "For the most part," he argues "strong interest in apocalypticism comes during times of great social instability or transition, during times when an old order is passing and a new order has not yet appeared in established forms" (38). Certainly this was the case during the early settling of America, and again in the mid-1800's with the debate over slavery and ensuing civil war. Writings from both times are saturated with apocalyptic imagery (Lippy 37-8). During such periods, social instability can be convincingly represented as a signal of the end (Lippy 37-8), and the economic and social despair make the promise of renewal and revelation particularly appealing (Zamora, "Myth" 130).

Lippy and Zamora's claims about the correlation between apocalyptic thought and major social change point toward one of the perceived strengths of the mode and a reason it is so popular in environmentalism: apocalyptic rhetoric lends itself well to challenging the dominant worldview and promising its upheaval, something that is popular in many environmental circles. Apocalypticism's rich history of use in the public arena to criticize the ways of thinking supporting injustices like slavery and religious persecution have established the mode as staple of the revolutionary jeremiad, or political sermon. For environmentalists who view capitalism and consumerism as the root of environmental ills, this history lends validity to their challenge of dominant ideals by linking it to a strong, successful legacy of apocalyptic rhetoric in the U.S.

Zamora claims that while apocalyptic thought has always been present in American culture, the emphasis tends to shift between millennial revelation and the

destructive aspects of the myth ("Myth" 98-100). Like Lippy, she points toward social factors as the main influence on changing attitudes. The early period of American settlement was characterized by the Puritan millennial optimism and a faith that America was the land of salvation where the righteous would survive. However, issues about slavery, the shrinking frontier, growing industrialization and the consequent feeling that America was turning into the corrupt Europe it had sought to escape lead to a dramatic shift in the apocalyptic mood during the mid 1800's. America's focus settled on images of doom rather than revelation, and, as the following section will discuss, this was echoed in the early preservationist writings of the period³.

The Roots of Crisis in American Environmentalism: The Early Years

While many scholars have placed the beginning of environmentalism's affection for apocalyptic and doomsday imagery with the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (DeGregori, Killingsworth and Palmer, Emsley), a closer look reveals its presence in American environmentalism as far back as the first stirrings of the preservationist movement in the mid 1800's. The movement, arguably the beginning of American environmentalism, relied heavily on images of nature devastated by Western settlement and ensuing doom at the hand of civilization. Of course, all of this was made possible by the shifts in thinking handed down from European Romanticism.

As the 18th century was drawing to a close, Americans, informed largely by the Romantic movement in Europe, were beginning to rethink their vision of wilderness as

³ See for example the writings of Muir, Audubon, Bryant, and Thoreau.

desolate places harboring evil (Nash 23-4). By the turn of the century in Europe, Edmond Burke and Immanuel Kant had developed the idea of sublime nature and William Gilpin had introduced the picturesque. Together these ideas offered the foundation for a celebration of natural areas as beautiful, awesome, and valuable spaces rather than sinister wastelands. Throughout Europe, the idea of romantic wilderness took hold in the works of writers like Montaigne, Rousseau, Chateaubriand, and Alexis de Tocqueville, many of whom wrote about and traveled to America. Nash gives credit to “European Romanticism’s century-long achievement in creating an intellectual framework in which it [nature] could be favorably portrayed” (50). “The first Americans who appreciated wild country relied heavily on this tradition and vocabulary in articulating their ideas” (Nash 50). With the foundation established by European Romanticism, some Americans in the late 18th and early 19th centuries began to reform their vision of wilderness, replacing the images of evil wastelands and hostile frontiers with an appreciation for the beauty and sublimity of wild landscapes. From the cities, people began to covet adventures in the wilds, primitivists seeking respite from civilization.

However, with the new appreciation came the realization that the wilderness, now seen by many as essential to healthy individuals and societies⁴, was quickly disappearing. Although Turner would not declare the frontier closed until the end of the century, preservationists during the first half of the 1800’s already saw it dwindling, and civilization in the form of cities and railways were reaching into formerly remote corners

⁴ See for example Thoreau’s journal for 1852.

of the country. Nature enthusiasts like John James Audubon, Thomas Cole, William Cullen Bryant, and Henry David Thoreau were horrified by the changes, and their unrest gave way to a number of essays, journals, and paintings lamenting the impending loss. With rhetoric similar to the jeremiads of the early Puritans and the mid-century abolitionists, these artists relied heavily on apocalyptic imagery in attempts to persuade the American public to value and protect remaining wild places⁵.

Thomas Cole's poem "The Lament of the Forest" is a telling example of early preservationist writings that draw heavily on both Romantic ideas and the myth of the apocalypse in their imagery. The poem first appeared in the *Knickerbocker Magazine* in June of 1841, and it opens like many Romantic writings, with the narrator's account of the awe he experiences upon viewing a serene mountain lake. Like much of the nature poetry written during the period, it celebrates the awesome beauty and divine glory of rugged nature. But beginning with the fourth stanza, the poem shifts dramatically; the speaker is no longer the solitary man gazing on nature, but the forest itself, and its story becomes a tale of apocalypse. In Cole's poem, the forest speaks directly to man, describing rampant destruction by human progress and consumption. The forest recounts a time when "all was harmony and peace" (84) "before the virgin breast of earth was scarred by steel," (78-9), then turns to extended images of destruction by human culture and technology.

⁵ Nash (1982) devotes an entire chapter of his *Wilderness and the American Mind* to an exploration of the preservationists' early attempts to inspire Americans to protect wilderness. In the chapter, Nash gathers an impressive collection of citations from the writings of major early American preservationists, and while it certainly is not Nash's focus in the collection, the men's words reveal an overwhelming reliance on images of crisis and/or apocalypse.

[. . .] but MAN
 Arose – he who now vaunts antiquity –
 He the destroyer – and in the sacred shades
 Of the far east began destruction's work.
 [.]
 [. . .] the axe unresting smote
 Our reverend ranks, and crashing branches lashed
 The ground, and mighty trunks, the pride of years,
 Rolled on the groaning earth with all their umbrage.
 Stronger than wintry blasts, and gathering strength,
 Swept that tornado, stayless, till the Earth,
 Our ancient mother, blasted lay and bare
 Beneath the burning sun. (84-99)

Cole's forest focuses its lament on the new continent in the second half of the poem, again beginning with an image of harmonious nature, including the indigenous people or "him, our native child" (ln.146), which is destroyed by European settlers.

[. . .] The tiny cloud
 Oft seen in torrid climes, at first sends forth
 A faint light breeze; but gathering, as it moves,
 Darkness and bulk, it spans the spacious sky
 With lurid palm, and sweeps stupendous o'er
 The crashing world. And thus comes rushing on
 This human hurricane, boundless as swift.
 Our sanctuary, this secluded spot,
 Which the stern rocks have guarded until now,
 Our enemy has marked. This gentle lake
 Shall lose our presence in its limpid breast,
 And from the mountains we shall melt away,
 Like wreaths of mist upon the winds of heaven.
 Our doom is near: behold from east to west
 The skies darken by ascending smoke [. . .] (177-191)

Cole's poem offers a telling reversal of the traditional crisis narrative of the time in which man was usually threatened by natural forces. The romantic valuing of wilderness allowed for a dramatic flip in traditional roles of aggressor and victim in

Cole's narrative. G.P. Landow's *Images of Crisis: Literary Iconography 1750 to the Present*, a survey of images of crisis in British and American art and literature, is filled with page after page of human beings threatened by malicious or overwhelming nature. Small ships and their sailors are drowned by vast and powerful storms, and forceful avalanches engulf the cozy mountain cabin. In all of his images of crisis, the small, helpless man must face being consumed by nature. Early preservationist writings like Cole's lament provide images of *nature* threatened by *man*. Cole's poem recalls the more familiar images of natural crisis outlined by Landow by likening western man's consumptive movement across the American continent to overwhelming natural disasters: a tornado and a hurricane. In Cole's poem, it is a hurricane of human expansion which sweeps across the land.

We can see in Cole's poem, as in the work of other early preservationists⁶, apocalyptic or crisis imagery performing much the same way it does today. At a time when westward expansion and the felling of forests were celebrated as part of American destiny, Cole's images of an environmental apocalypse offer a radical critique of human progress, a major function of apocalyptic environmental rhetoric. While it is hard to argue that Cole was consciously trying to uproot a techno-capitalist paradigm, the poet is clearly using the images to perform a radical critique that fundamentally questions the manifest destiny ideology of the period.

Even in a more modern, secular setting, the link between environmentalism and apocalyptic rhetoric remains strong. Two frequently cited examples of eco-

⁶ See Thoreau, Audubon, and Muir.

apocalypticism are the opening parable to Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, and Paul Ehrlich's influential book *The Population Bomb*. The publication of these texts, along with those of other apocalyptic environmental thinkers like Garrett Hardin and Paul Paddock, contributed to an era of eco-apocalyptic thought during the 1960's and 70's (DeGregori 206). Then, in 1980, the State Department published an eight hundred page document entitled "The Global Report to the President – Entering the Twenty-First Century." According to Emsley, it was "official recognition of the apocalyptic situation" (203) facing the world. It included dire predictions about species extinction, desertification, and population that would result in widespread famine and social upheaval. All of this was attributed to the horrible effects of a well-known environmental foe: technology. For early preservationists and major thinkers in contemporary environmentalism alike, apocalyptic imagery, delivered in a similar manner as the traditional jeremiads, offered an effective way to challenge the prevailing worldview and the American fascination with increasing technology and expansion. With the apocalyptic myth well-established in the American psyche, contemporary doomsday and crisis rhetoric benefited from a strong rhetorical lineage that gives it public validity and weight. Not surprisingly, many contemporary environmental organizations have recognized the power of this rhetorical strategy and adopted it as a prominent component in their public outreach. The following section begins to question this strategy, particularly as manifested in direct mail campaigns.

The Dangers of Crisis Rhetoric

With a better understanding of how crisis and doomsday rhetoric came to be such a major part of environmental communication, I would now like to turn to my second question about its use: is this the most effective and responsible way to educate, inspire, and motivate the American public about environmental issues? A number of scholars concerned with environmental communication have argued, as I will, that the answer is no. Oelschlager explains “neither gloom and doom rhetoric nor the rhetoric of sacrifice resonates with audiences in the United States” (395), and Roszak, one of the few researchers to have studied environmental behavior and information processing, claims “habitual reliance on gloom, apocalyptic panic, and the psychology of blame takes a heavy toll on public confidence” (35). Roszak’s statement is particularly distressing because it points toward the effect that poor rhetorical choices by a few organizations can have on the public perception of environmentalism as a whole.

We are all familiar with the apocalyptic outcomes predicted by environmental groups; dire predictions abound about global warming melting the icecaps and submerging parts of California, the total collapse of American agriculture due to aquifer depletion, and the devastation in biodiversity by species extinction. Environmentalists use apocalyptic or crisis rhetoric to convince the public that a problem really exists. When the goal is to educate the public about and/or raise funds for environmental causes through mass mail campaigns, this is an essential first step.

I do see applications of the mode that are useful, and images of eco-apocalypse in artful and thought-provoking contexts provide a necessary challenge to our most deeply

held beliefs. Clearly, the environmental movement is deeply indebted to Carson and Ehrlich for their visionary and revolutionary writings. But my concern is about the use, or *over* use, of crisis and doomsday imagery by environmental organizations (usually large ones) in direct mail campaigns and mass media. As the primary method of contact between environmental groups and mainstream America, it may not provide the best reflection of the movement. Crisis rhetoric is unsustainable, leads to over-simplified and polarized debates, and moves the locus of responsibility away from the individual. While these problems seem inherent in direct mail as a form, those which depend on sensationalized crisis and doomsday predictions are particularly guilty. Moreover, direct mail as a vehicle for communication almost necessitates the use of sensationalized crisis to succeed.

Tom Knudson, a staff writer for the *Sacramento Bee*, published a series of articles in 2001 examining fundraising efforts by large American environmental nonprofits, and the pieces provide telling evidence of the groups' dependency on sensationalized crisis. Knudson argues that "in turning to mass-market fund-raising techniques for financial sustenance, environmental groups have crossed a kind of conservation divide" (par. 10). They have become "dependant on a style of salesmanship that fills mailboxes across America with a never-ending stream of environmentally unfriendly junk mail, reduces the complex world of nature to simplistic slogans, emotional appeals and counterfeit crises, and employs arcane accounting rules to camouflage fund raising as conservation" (par. 10). In his investigation of environmental direct mail, Knudson begins to flush out some of the characteristics of crisis rhetoric that make me uneasy.

My first critique of the crisis strategy is that it is unsustainable – in all senses of the word. First, the medium of delivery -- pamphlets, letters, and stickers -- is antithetical to the resource conservation agenda of the movement. According to Knudson, more than 160 million bits of direct mail from environmental organizations were sent in 2000. The Wilderness Society alone sent about 348,000 pounds of direct mail in 1999, and while many environmental mailings use recycled paper, many end up in the landfill and they are frequently filled with non-recyclable items like bumper stickers, address labels, and decals (Knudson par. 17-8).

Landfills are not the only things becoming over-filled with these little packets of crisis; the American public may also be reaching its capacity for this sort of plea. Crisis rhetoric is doubly unsustainable because of the form's inherent need to continually solicit a fear response in order to be effective, and as the fevered crisis pitches become commonplace, their effect grows weaker. The sheer abundance of these sorts of claims in environmental communication makes it difficult to solicit the desired shock. Knudson quotes Ellen McPeake, director of finance and development at Greenpeace, as saying, "the market is over-saturated. There is mail fatigue" (par. 16), and she recognizes that it is beginning to bring an angry response from the public (par. 17). Environmental organizations need to be wary of direct mail crisis not just because it conflicts with their images and missions, but because their donor base is becoming aware of these contradictions.

While not all environmental direct mail relies on crisis or doomsday messages, much of it does. Christopher Bosso links the addiction to images of crisis in mass mail

campaigns to the constant need for new members. He explains, “dropout rates are high because most members are but passive check writers, with the low cost of participating translating into an equally low sense of commitment” and “holding on to such members almost requires that groups maintain a constant sense of crisis. It does not take a cynic to suggest [. . .] that direct mailers shop around for the next eco-crisis to keep the money coming in” (qtd. in Knudson par. 24). Since all crises are not created equal, some big groups like the Sierra Club have come up with a way to create conservation programs based on whatever crisis to which the American public seems the most willing to give money (Knudson par. 25). The Sierra Club’s conservation director, Bruce Hamilton told Knudson that he himself is somewhat offended “both intellectually and from an environmental standpoint” by their “crisis-of-the-month” approach, but he defended in by saying, “It is what works. It is what builds the Sierra Club. Unfortunately the fate of the Earth depends on whether or not people open that envelope and send in that check” (qtd. in Knudson par. 25-34). The Club’s director, Carl Pope goes so far as to blame the public for the organization’s use of increasingly sensationalized crisis. “We don’t do this because we want to. We do it because the public behaves this way,” i.e. not renewing memberships (qtd. in Knudson par. 33).

Contemporary U.S. environmentalists, like many apocalyptic groups before them, end up accused of a sort of ecological chicken little-ism. While I personally believe the vast majority of environmentalists’ claims about the rapid rate of ecological degradation, it is important to consider not only the validity of crisis claims, but also the public perception of their validity. In order for crisis rhetoric to work, it must continually solicit

an adequately agitated response from its audience, and that means they must accept the environmental group's framing of the debate as "crisis." As environmental organizations push toward increasingly sensationalized incidents of crisis in the drive to raise funds, some lapse into questionable claims. Knudson cites a number of cases in which environmental groups are called out for false claims by respected environmental scientists or incorrectly represent the findings of others (par. 36-50). In these rare cases, creating crisis comes at the price of undermining the credibility of the movement as a whole.

My second criticism of crisis rhetoric is its tendency to drastically over-simplify complex debates into polarized battles. Cantrill claims that "the little we know about the cognitive representation of the environment suggests that people are relatively simple-minded when it comes to perceiving our world" ("Perceiving" 78). Contemporary American audiences are adverse to complexity, and favor simple, easily understood messages (Zarefsky 412). Citing a number of cognitive studies,⁷ Cantrill concludes that the world is too much for us to comprehend and therefore must be simplified in order to be understood. To this end, the complexity of environmental reality is reduced to "condensational symbols [. . .] tidy perceptual collections of various thoughts and feelings about the environment that come to be represented by powerful terms or phrases" (Cantrill, "Perceiving" 88-89). This is the basic idea behind environmental groups' use of key images and tag lines. Rhetorical scholar, Michael Lange explains that

⁷ Cantrill includes Freedle, 1981, and Streufert & Streufert, 1978 as examples.

in information campaigns, “simple, easily absorbed, and dramatic images and slogans are substituted for analysis or explanation of phenomenally complicated issues” (136).

But Lange and others (e.g. Moore and Cantrill) warn of the dangers in using this sort of reductionist rhetorical ploy. Cantrill claims that “when people use condensational symbols in discourse, they may reflect back to their audience the over-simplistic environmental schema it uses to structure the world” (“Perceiving” 89), and he credits these oversimplified schema with “continually reinforce[ing] counterproductive environmental perceptions” (“Perceiving” 88). Lange argues that the strategy of simplifying complex issues to easily digestible sound bites inevitably leads to an either/or framing of those issues (136-8). It polarizes environmental debates in such a way that the compromise required to resolve the conflict becomes impossible. In other words, in their attempt to rally support for their cause, environmental organizations construct irreconcilable conflict, and the resulting polarized debates become impossible to solve.

Take the example of Smokey Bear. The condensational symbol of Smokey and the simplified terms of the campaign reduced the complex issue of fire and forest ecology to forest = good, fire = bad. While the intent of the campaign may only have been to educate people about safe campfire and smoking practices, it established a simplified understanding of fire’s relationship to forests that still influences policies and public attitudes today.

Crisis/doomsday rhetoric, partly because of its roots in the apocalyptic myth, is particularly reliant on polarizing condensational symbols. Strong binary opposition is one of the defining characteristics of the apocalyptic tradition from which modern

environmental crisis rhetoric springs. The mode is founded on an “absolute distinction between the sacred and the profane” (Bercovitch 178) and is “fundamentally dualistic” (Zamora, Introduction 3). It requires an absolute separation of good and evil, a distinction that clearly resonates with a contemporary American audience. Such polarizations and over-simplified debates are appealing because, like passively writing a check, they require relatively little effort to understand. In his review of cognitive psychology’s findings about environmental perception, Cantrill claims that the complexity of environmental problems “forces us to simplify and to dichotomize the world into a series of either/or propositions” (“Perceiving” 87). Then, each individual must work only once to position his or herself in relation to each side of the binary. Once this is in place, a rhetorical strategy need only reference an issue or side of the binary and the individual can quickly decide how to feel about it based on a previously developed schema. Crisis rhetoric may damage the ideological climate in which environmental organizations operate not only with the disenchantment that comes from direct mail saturation, but also by establishing polarized and confrontational terms in which to frame the debate.

My third and final criticism of crisis/doomsday laden direct mail communication is that it moves the locus of responsibility for environmental problems and their solutions away from the individual. Recall Bosso’s claim that in a direct mail situation, the individual is “but a passive check-writer” and the Wilderness Society letter quoted at the beginning of this chapter. These appeals ask for one of two actions by an individual: send money or sign a petition. In both cases, the underlying assumption is that the

solutions to environmental problems reside either in the hands of the environmental organization itself or with the government.

Additionally, the causes of environmental problems are placed apart from the individual and his or her daily life. Again the Wilderness Society letter offers an illustrative example. It blames conservative government officials and industry executives for ecological ills; there is never any mention of how my personal consumption of resources supports drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge or any request that I drive less to ease the need for Arctic oil. Perhaps it is assumed that any good environmentalist will readily make these connections and the subsequent behavior modifications. Or perhaps it is much more dangerous to challenge people's personal lifestyles than ask for money to take down an environmental boogey man. Most environmental direct mail I have received does come from nation-wide organizations, so it is not surprising that solutions and responsibility are placed on a national rather than community or personal level.

However, it may be that environmental crisis rhetoric itself is poorly suited for addressing issues on a local or individual level. Killingsworth and Palmer warn that "the apocalyptic turn in the treatment of global environmental problems may [. . .] breed frustration at the local level. The problems come to seem so large as to make local or small-scale action seem utterly inadequate" ("Trends" 226). Overwhelming, large-scale problems are the life-blood of the direct-mailed crisis, and these sensationalized pleas remove responsibility and solutions away from not just individuals, but local communities as well. This may be a byproduct of the size of many direct-mail dependant

organizations (national rather than regional or local), but the issues are often concerned with very specific locations. Local solutions, however, do begin to feel futile. Since crisis rhetoric, at its core, depends on depicting issues as enormous and overwhelming to stir up support, the devaluing of individual and local problem-solving and participation will almost always accompany the form.

While crisis rhetoric may seem appealing at first and may be able to bring in significant dollars through one-time donations, it is ultimately an unsustainable and potentially damaging choice. Even if crisis rhetoric (or any other reductionist strategy) is initially effective in bringing in funds, volunteers, or support, this does not necessarily mean it is responsible or sustainable for the long-term. While direct-mailed crisis may have the benefit of reaching a wide audience with an array of environmental attitudes, and the doomsday form itself may be well suited to challenging dominant paradigms, the dangers inherent in the form should not be overlooked. The question is: what better way is there to inform and motivate the public and bring in the funding necessary for environmental organizations to continue working? The next chapter explores instrumental rhetoric as a possible candidate.

CHAPTER THREE

THE POTENTIAL OF INSTRUMENTAL RHETORIC

Walter Beale describes instrumental discourse as “the kind of discourse whose primary aim is the governance, guidance, control, or execution of human activities” (94), and he limits his examples to forms of writing like laws, technical manuals, and contracts. M. Jimmie Killingsworth expands on Beale’s definition, which is clearly problematic in its emphasis on control, to include all language aimed at influencing people on the level of habitual behavior. He includes “wisdom literature, proverbs, maxims, and religious litanies” (219) in his list of traditional types of instrumental discourse and ultimately argues that most language is instrumental at the root (221). I prefer Killingsworth’s definition because it allows for the use of instrumental discourse within overtly ideological and value-rich arenas like religion and ethics, rather than perpetuating the perception of instrumentalism as objective and value-free.

I use the term instrumental “discourse” rather than “rhetoric” at this point in deference to Beale and other rhetoricians who reserve the term “rhetoric” for language that is considered the opposite of instrumental, language that is fundamentally persuasive and seeks to change the values and ideological undercurrents of a society. However, as the chapter progresses, I ultimately argue that instrumental discourse is more often than not persuasive and ideological, and can therefore be appropriately termed “instrumental

rhetoric.” Instrumental *discourse* refers to all instrumental language, whereas instrumental *rhetoric* refers only that which seeks to persuade. With that clarification, I turn now to some of the most prevalent criticisms leveled against instrumental language and present an alternative context in which to view the form.

Major Criticisms of Instrumental Discourse

As Beale’s definition above hints, there are a number of unsavory characteristics associated with instrumental discourse, and the form has been criticized by rhetoricians, social theorists, and environmentalists for decades. This section examines some of the most noteworthy problems and attempts to provide potential safeguards.

The criticisms of instrumental discourse that I find most valid, and consequently most disturbing, when applied in an environmental context are listed below.

- It typically gives directives from a position of expert authority to those below, creating/reinforcing a hierarchical structure of knowledge and power.
- It is associated with instrumental rationality, scientific management, and institutionalized control.
- It is placating and easily co-opted by environmentally questionable groups.
- It is apolitical and unable to inspire the major ideological shifts necessary for radical environmental change.

Killingsworth cautions that “instrumentalists must account for the association of their characteristic discourse not only with the aesthetic dullness of the technical enterprise but also with the more sinister aspects of mechanization and control” (173). The latter association is reinforced by both the hierarchical positioning of author over audience and the form’s roots in instrumental rationality, a line of philosophical thinking criticized for its all-consuming emphasis on productivity and efficiency⁸. Killingsworth explains that in instrumental discourse, “directives usually flow from a point of greater knowledge and authority to a point of lesser knowledge and authority” (171), and it depends “upon faith in the rationality of an authority, a technical expert, or a self-perpetuating and all-encompassing managerial system” (174). The actions in many instrumental texts are validated by the positions of power and authority from which they are crafted, and in examples like laws and governmental regulations, that authority is reinforced by an elaborate and well established system of consequences. In Killingsworth’s words “the systems of instrumental rationality are construed as a hierarchy, with experts steering other people along designated paths” (175). Since many in the environmental movement tend toward suspicion of governmental, technological, and corporate authority, the hierarchical nature of traditional instrumental texts may make the form highly suspect in environmental arena.

For this reason, organizations like the EarthWorks Group, who published a wildly successful series of green how-to books in the 1990s⁹, have gone to great lengths to

⁸ See for example, the work of Marcuse, Weber, and Habermas.

⁹ These include *50 Simple Things You Can Do to Save the Earth*, *50 Simple Things Kids Can Do to Save the Earth*, and *Vote for the Earth*.

counter the hierarchical flavor of instrumental writing and establish their narrative voice as that of an average citizen with some good ideas about how to save the earth. The books frequently use the term “we” to refer to what both the authors and readers need to do, creating a sense that everyone is in this together. There are no experts, save the introduction by Chris Caldwell of the Natural Resources Defense Council, and the authors themselves have blank identities other than their goal of improving the ecological health of the planet.

However, issues of power and control may be even more deeply embedded in instrumental discourse than just privileging the position of an expert authority. In his investigation of instrumental discourse and its philosophical history, Killingsworth offers a critique of instrumentalism via Max Horkheimer and Herbert Marcuse that gets at its roots in instrumental rationality. Instrumental rationality, as conceived by Max Weber, has the following characteristics (most of which will be unsavory to a contemporary, liberal environmental audience): “hierarchical distribution of power and control, standardized rules and procedures, specialization and division of labor according to tasks and subtasks . . . , prescriptive and rigid information flow, and subordination of individual needs to organizational goals” (Cummings, Long, and Lewis 34, qtd. in Killingsworth 173). Instrumental rationality is concerned with efficiency, speed, and technological advance over individual freedom and well-being.

According to Killingsworth, Horkheimer cautions against a world where instrumentality reigns and “men are acting more and more like machines” (174), and Marcuse “understood instrumental discourse as a threat to both individual creativity and

social change, a reductively imperative 'closed language' that 'does not demonstrate and explain' but rather 'communicates decision, dictum, command'" (174). For both thinkers, instrumental discourse was dangerous in its support of oppressive and increasingly technological systems and was fundamentally about control. For Weber and Habermas as well, instrumental rationality represented the "modus operandi of modern bureaucracy" (Killingsworth and Palmer, "Trends" 226), supporting rigid systems of oppression.

Documents motivated by instrumental rationality have as their sole purpose control of the document's readers. Clearly, such instrumental writings . . . create, for the purpose of maintaining the system, a narrow path of action that has been chosen or created in advance of the document's preparation by hierarchically arranged powers. This kind of writing manifests neither the interest in persuasion and identification that characterize rhetorical writing, nor the interpretive and theoretical verve that characterize scientific writing, nor the interest in craft and intersubjectivity that characterize poetic discourse." (Killingsworth 175)

Killingsworth's characterization of instrumental discourse agrees with the criticisms of Marcuse, Horkheimer, and Habermas as it presents the form as one of systematic and hierarchical control. The excerpt also points toward some of the major differences between instrumental and other modes of communication, clearly positioning instrumental discourse as inferior.

However, in an interesting twist, Killingsworth also uncovers the foundation for reevaluating and re-valuing instrumental communication. He offers Habermas' "communicative action" as way to return instrumental discourse to the larger framework of rhetorical communication and avoid some of the form's tendencies toward systematic control. "Communicative action may be seen as an attempt, as it were, to redistribute the capacity for rational action to a wider range of people with a more diverse set of goals

and patterns of thought and behavior” (Killingsworth 175). According to Habermas, “*communicative rationality* carries with it connotations based ultimately on the central experience of the unconstrained, unifying, consensus-brining force of argumentative speech” (qtd. in Killingsworth 175, emphasis in original). Instead of technical experts establishing the goals of society, as is the case with instrumental rationality, the goals emerge from the overlap of varied voices. Thus, the expert control is replaced by a collaborative decision-making process.

Killingsworth argues that instead of viewing instrumental discourse as opposed to persuasive discourse and/or communicative action, it can be located within these arenas (177). In this way, instrumental language, that gives directions on action, is reinserted into a larger ideological and community context. Killingsworth describes Habermas’ communicative action as “an effort to rescue a humanistically inspired version of rationality from the iron cage of instrumental action” (174). In Habermas’ communicative rationality, “goal-oriented thought and behavior” remains but is divorced from its “absolute commitment to efficiency and hierarchical structure” (Killingsworth 174). Within communicative rationality, technical experts and government agencies are no longer the sole goal-creators, and diverse communities come together to establish their own goals and ideas. Then, instrumental discourse becomes just another useful tool for sharing information about how to achieve the collaboratively-established goals.

Part of understanding instrumental discourse within the context of Habermas’ communicative action is unraveling the participatory relationship between individual, community, and language. Killingsworth explains that

Both forms of rationality [instrumental and communicative] are concerned with what sociologists Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann call “social construction of reality”; the difference lies in the means by which each form allows people to shape and intervene in the world. Instrumental rationality tends to treat people as objects [. . .]; communicative rationality treats people as subjects, as participants [. . .] (175)

Instrumental discourse is not synonymous with instrumental rationality, and when located in the communicative framework, it recognizes audience members as participating subjects.

Killingsworth describes instrumental discourse in the communicative context as “a kind of writing that authors use to empower readers by preparing them for and moving them toward effective action, the ends of which have been established by rhetorical, scientific, and mythic interplay in an open social arena” (178). This description is a far cry from the hierarchical system of expert control feared by early critics of instrumentality, and it is far more open and egalitarian.

Instrumental discourse within a larger cultural context (complete with values, beliefs, and norms) is what I call instrumental “rhetoric.” It is rhetorical both in the more general application of the term which appears in the introduction to this thesis, but it is also rhetorical in the more ideological/ persuasive sense represented by Beale’s definition at the beginning of this chapter.

The relocation of instrumental discourse into the rhetorical realm begins to address another primary criticism of the form, particularly in its manifestation as the green consumer guides of the mid 1990’s. These texts have been charged, from within the environmental community, with being apolitical and failing to challenge the consumerist values responsible for many environmental problems. When coupled with

the green consumer movement in texts like *50 Simple Things You Can Do to Save the Earth*, instrumental discourse can be interpreted as side-stepping any critique of consumptive capitalism while offering individuals a false sense of environmental benevolence. The *50 Simple Things* text itself recognizes that some environmentalists “worry that books like this one will lull people into believing that doing a few positive things for the environment is enough” (94). The concern is that things like using cloth bags at the grocery store and turning off the water while brushing your teeth make people feel like they are doing their part to save the earth but fail to challenge the dominant consumerist values they see as the root of environmental problems. If people think these small actions are enough, they may stop short of the political and social action needed to bring about real environmental change. The Earthworks Group counters this critique by including recommendations that readers get involved at a political level (94-96). Green consumerism as a whole, one of the environmental sub-movements that has been most reliant on instrumental rhetoric, may not offer a radical critique of over-consumption in all cases, but the “simple” things also may not be as placating as they seem.

A study done by the 1-2-3 Program of the First Unitarian Church in Portland, Oregon found that a commitment to changing small daily behaviors can actually lead to an increase in environmental concern and action. The program asked congregants to sign a pledge to do three *simple* things: reduce their home thermostat setting by one degree, reduce highway driving speed by two miles per hour, and replace three regular light bulbs with compact fluorescent ones. An evaluation of those who signed the pledge found that sixty three percent of respondents began to take further environmental action beyond

those recommended by the program (1-2-3 Program, Evaluation Summary). The findings hint that simple behaviors can serve as inroads and lead to increased awareness and more radical behavioral modification. Clearly, for the majority of the respondents, the actions were inspiring rather than placating.

Additionally, instrumental discourse's perceived lack of radical and political critique of mainstream society is not inherent to the form. It is true that some environmental texts which rely on instrumental discourse lack an *overtly* political or radical agenda. However, some texts, like *Ecotactics: The Sierra Club Handbook for Environmental Activists*, are profoundly political, instrumental texts. Earth First!'s *Ecodefense : A Field Guide to Monkeywrenching* offers an example of instrumental discourse at work within one of the most radical and revolutionary environmental contexts. The book gives step-by-step instructions for hindering environmental exploitation through disabling logging equipment and other acts of eco-sabotage, and it supports one of the most radical and controversial strains of contemporary environmental activism. These examples illustrate the effective use of instrumental rhetoric by two major environmental groups with profoundly different tactics and agendas, but both working toward profoundly political ends.

I also agree with Killingsworth's claim that there is always an ideological message underlying instrumental texts (181), be it subtle or overt. Moreover, the subtlety of some ideological and political claims can allow for a wider, more diverse audience than impassioned direct rhetoric because it is less confrontational and does not demand a specific environmental worldview. How-to environmental guides, like those published

by the EarthWorks Group, may target an audience with an assumed basic level of interest in environmental change, but they do not require a specific or well-developed ideological stand (Killingsworth and Palmer, "Trends" 223). Even within the environmental movement, there are radically divergent worldviews and opinions on the roots of environmental problems. Instrumental rhetoric can be incorporated into more or less radical environmental agendas and can be designed to reach very specific or diverse audiences. This flexibility is one of the form's great strengths and a reason it is well suited to a variety of applications within environmental communication.

The Benefits of Instrumental Rhetoric

While the above concerns are entirely valid and must be kept in mind at all times, instrumental discourse can be effectively incorporated into an environmental rhetorical strategy without falling into a structure of hierarchy and control and without lapsing into the dry, uninspiring language of technical manuals. In my attempt to address some of the criticisms of instrumental discourse, I have pointed toward some of the form's strengths (flexibility and ability to reach diverse audiences), but the most intriguing and promising benefit is the form's potential for effecting change on a habitual, behavioral level.

As I discussed in Chapter Two, mass-mailed crisis rhetoric disconnects the individual from responsibility for both environmental problems and their solutions. Instrumental rhetoric in a communicative context remedies this dangerous distance by placing responsibility back in the personal sphere. In the context of green instrumental texts like the *50 Simple Things* series, connections are established between daily

consumptive behaviors like eating or driving and the ecological health of the world. It is perhaps the most important connection the environmental movement can make, and as historian William Cronon points out, it is one that has been too often overlooked. In his controversial essay "The Trouble with Wilderness" Cronon claims that the romantic ideal of pristine and untouched wilderness establishes a false dichotomy between it and the places we live (then assumed to be too touched by humans to be natural or worthy of protection). The split leads to a notion of nature that is divorced from daily behaviors and routines. Cronon argues that instead, our everyday lives are profoundly connected to the natural world; nature and civilization are inextricably intertwined (82). Moreover, failure to recognize this connection allows us to practice profoundly ecologically damaging habits without realizing it. The reassertion of personal responsibility and involvement in the natural world at the level of habitual action are the most promising traits of instrumental rhetoric and make it a form worthy of consideration by environmental groups of all sizes and missions.

Killingsworth and Palmer hint at the participatory foundation of instrumental rhetoric, as manifest in green consumer books, claiming that by connecting environmentalism to daily actions, environmental values become "rooted in habitual physical experience" ("Trends" 228).

Instead of distant phenomenon – associated with the faraway and disappearing rain forests or with the equally distant processes of Washington government – the idea of saving the Earth becomes something the environmental enthusiast can experience locally and feel with the body, the starting place of all consciousness and all human action. ("Trends" 228)

We know the world through our experiences and daily, bodily interactions with it, so it is important that environmental communication recognize this level of connection.

Rhetoric teaches that our understanding of the connection between ourselves and the world is largely mediated by language, and this reinforces the relevance of finding a sustainable and responsible way to talk about the natural world and our relationship with it. As Killingsworth and Palmer point out, this discourse must be grounded in our bodily, everyday experiences of the world. Mass mailed crisis rhetoric falls short because of its separation from our lived experience, but locally-based instrumental rhetoric can and should be rooted in these experiences. Instrumental rhetoric is fundamentally about participation toward a desired end, and that participation is directly linked to personal responsibility.

By removing instrumental rhetoric from the realm of social control and placing it in a participatory context like Habermas' communicative rationality, the form is made into a desirable alternative to eco-crisis rhetoric. Keeping the dangers of instrumental rationality in mind, environmental groups should be able to meet their communication goals (community education, fundraising, etc.) and also motivate changes in community behavior in a way that is sustainable for the long-term. Positive instrumental rhetoric will maintain a friendly, upbeat tone rather than commanding or controlling one. The basic how-to format, presenting direction in the forms of ideas and suggestions rather than directives, should help organizations move beyond *telling* the public to act toward *showing* them practical examples of how and why they should alter specific behaviors. The next chapter offers an example of how instrumental rhetoric was used to meet the

communication goals of a grassroots recycling and reuse organization in Eugene, Oregon through the creation of the book *ReUse Recipes: Creative Ways to Reduce Your Waste Size*.

CHAPTER FOUR
PUTTING INSTRUMENTAL RHETORIC TO WORK:
BRING RECYCLING'S REUSE RECIPE BOOK

It is my goal to make my academic work practically useful in my community. Scholarship is a form of service, and in order to fulfill this edict, I have worked with BRING Recycling to create a piece of instrumental rhetoric that will help them educate the local public about waste reduction and sustainable lifestyle choices. Working with the organization's education coordinator, I have compiled a book of ReUse Recipes, practical tips and ideas for reducing waste and consumption through reuse of everyday items. This chapter will provide background on BRING and explain how the recipe collection fits with the organization's mission and the theoretical argument of this thesis.

BRING Recycling

BRING Recycling is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization located in Eugene, Oregon. BRING's self-stated mission is to create a healthy and sustainable environment through education; innovative waste reduction, reuse, and recycling programs; and by involving the community in conserving natural resources. They promote the conservation

ethic, provide resource conservation education, and create reuse and recycling opportunities throughout Lane County¹⁰

BRING was founded in 1971 by citizen activists determined to start recycling in Eugene. They introduced recycling in Lane County and helped it gain broad public acceptance through curbside pickup and recycling depots, conservation education programs in the schools, used building materials salvage and resale, building deconstruction, community-wide electronics collection and, most recently, collecting televisions for recycling. Over the past thirty-plus years they helped make recycling the most popular civic activity in the Eugene-Springfield Metropolitan area, with an impressive nine out of ten households currently using recycling services.

However, even with such high community participation in recycling efforts, Lane County, in which the cities of Eugene and Springfield make up most of the population, continues to see an increase in the amount of waste being sent to the its limited landfill space at the Short Mountain facility. In 2000, per capita daily waste generation in Lane County was slightly less than 8 pounds, up from 6.5 pounds in 1995—a 19% increase. That extra 1.5 pounds per day meant a family of four made more than an extra ton of waste in 2000 vs. 1995. Numbers like this have prompted BRING to realize that recycling is not enough because it doesn't address the real problem, over-consumption. While BRING still provides a variety of recycling services (curbside pick-up and most processing have been adopted by the cities of Eugene and Springfield), the organization's focus has shifted to resource conservation and sustainability through education and

¹⁰ Information, statements, and statistics in this section taken from unpublished organizational documents authored by myself and Julie Daniel, General Manager of BRING Recycling.

demonstrating that living well without waste is not only achievable, but can also be rewarding and fun. According to organizational materials, BRING believes few people change their habits or behavior because they are told it's the right thing to do. They shift because they are inspired, amused, assisted and given practical examples and hands-on experience, and that is precisely what the ReUse Recipe collection attempts to provide.

The ReUse Recipe Collection

As an intern at BRING, I was continually inspired by all the creative ideas they had for reusing everyday materials. Sarah Grimm, the organization's education coordinator is a veritable guru of reuse, and her home is an artistic testimony to her skill and enthusiasm. Like many of my friends and colleagues, I had more good intentions about reducing the amount of waste I produce and one-use plastic things I consume than I had knowledge about achieving it. Because I was so impressed by BRING's reuse ideas, and I was looking for a practical application for my thesis research, I proposed a book project that would collect the reuse ideas and present them in a usable form for the public.

The ReUse Recipe book provides BRING with a tool to educate the community about resource conservation and sustainability and offers an illustrative practical example of the instrumental rhetoric outlined by this thesis. The book also offered me a chance to produce the sort of communication I am asking environmental organizations to consider as an alternative to crisis, balancing the critical with the creative.

The book, located in the pocket following this thesis, has been printed in full color on non-recycled paper in order to illustrate its graphic potential and to provide the durability necessary for an archived document. For BRING's purposes, a black and white printing will be preferable for two reasons. First, the cost of color printing is beyond the organization's current budgetary capabilities, and it is unlikely they could charge their current clientele enough to recuperate the printing costs (upwards of thirty dollars per copy). Secondly, there are issues associated with printing color on paper with recycled content. Color image quality is poor on recycled content paper, and many local print shops refuse to use it in their color copy machines because of potential damage. According to local printers, the ink does not adhere to the recycled paper well and can flake off and smear onto other pages or the copy machine itself. Because of BRING's recycling mission and the motivation behind the book, paper made from one hundred percent post-consumer paper is preferable. However, BRING will have the capability to print the book in color if it so desires. With that caveat in place, I would like to present a brief description of the ReUse Recipe book

The book offers step-by-step instructions on how to make things for your home and garden without buying new, poorly made, environmentally unfriendly gadgets and without consuming limited resources unnecessarily. The projects in the book are almost entirely examples BRING has been demonstrating in the community for years, but the book will allow them to reach a much larger audience than in-person demonstrations. The book also has the potential to help raise funds for BRING activities and the new facility they are currently developing to house their operations.

One of the most important goals of the ReUse Recipe book is to reconnect everyday behaviors, particularly buying things and disposing of them, to the health of the natural world. It asks readers to consider all the resources that go into the things they consume, including those associated with material extraction, production, transportation, and disposal. Buying a soda in an aluminum can may not *feel* like a way to connect to nature, but this book asks consumers to acknowledge and respect the profound connection between everyday consumption and the use of finite resources. The resources embodied in that soda can go beyond the metal of which it is made to include all the resources that went into extracting the metal, transporting it to the factory, processing it, delivering it to the store and home, and carting it off to the landfill or recycling facility. When we consider the layers of resources involved in the things we use, they become precious, too precious to casually throw in the trash. While recycling the can is a great option, helping decrease the materials and energy involved in making new cans by up to ninety five percent, reusing the can in a lasting, creative way can also put all those resources to good use. For example, the ReUse Recipe book recommends using aluminum and tin cans to make garden luminaries. By using these instead of electric lights or newly manufactured candle holders, a consumer can greatly decrease the resources consumed in lighting a garden path or outdoor table.

The ecological benefits of creative reuse extend beyond immediate resources savings. Connecting everyday stuff to resource extraction and use begins to change the way we view the things we buy and the way we shop. At a fundamental level, the book hopes to change what it means to go shopping, to alter the way we acquire the things we

need and want, even to alter what we want. In a culture obsessed with conspicuous consumption, these are indeed radical ideas, and thus the book illustrates the way instrumental rhetoric can be effectively used to support a rather revolutionary agenda.

However, the book itself does not *seem* radical, so it remains accessible and inviting to a wide audience. Rather than attempting to convince readers that conserving natural resources is a valuable goal, the book assumes that the reader already accepts this premise, or will be interested in the reuse ideas for one of the other reasons presented (saving money, enjoyment of crafting). While the book does continually present BRING's conservation agenda and is primarily designed to deliver this message, it does not demand a particular or well-developed environmental worldview. As I discussed in Chapter Three, this characteristic has contributed to the success of other green how-to books, and I have consciously tried to emulate it here.

Because BRING Recycling's audience is politically, ideologically, and economically diverse, the book has to be appealing to a broad audience. By presenting the economic and stylistic benefits of reuse along with the ecological ones, the book attempts to reach segments of the population that may be skeptical about environmentalism in general. However, it does emphasize the need to alter general habits of consumption and thereby has the potential to alienate readers who strongly disagree with such ideas.

Considering the recent surge in television programs, magazines, and websites dedicated to home improvement on a budget, the book has the potential to reach beyond people already dedicated to reuse as a means of ecological health. The book, like most of

the new shows and magazines, furthers the idea that creativity can substitute for a lot of unnecessary and expensive stuff. Home and Garden Television currently offers two programs, *Treasure Makers* and *Decorating Cents*, which focus on reuse for its monetary benefits and quaint ambiance. The shows reveal that people are interested in reuse for reasons other than environmental sustainability, and the book has tried to cater to those without shying away from its ecological agenda. The *ReUse Recipe* book points out the personal and community benefits of reuse including saving money, the pride of creating something rather than buying it, *and* reducing the local landfill load. It also subtly asks readers, regardless of the motivation behind their interest in reuse, to redirect their energy from consumption to creation.

The *ReUse Recipe* book informs, offers practical examples, and hopefully inspires the public without resorting to sensationalized crisis, negative portrayals of industry and conservative politicians, or damaging the local perception of environmental organizations as a whole. Neither is it completely apolitical or cowardly about the radical nature of the sustainability project. As the 1-2-3 Program mentioned in Chapter Three reveals, simple adjustments to daily behaviors are the beginnings of major changes in the way we think about the world. The book uses instrumental rhetoric because it is concerned primarily with altering behavior as a means for altering ideas. The two are inextricable from one another, yet so much of environmental communication fails to reach the public at the behavioral level. While the majority of Americans claim to be concerned about the environment, their daily practices do not reflect this. The *ReUse Recipe* book seeks to address this disconnect by showing how daily behaviors like

shopping are profoundly connected to the environment and offering practical examples of how to change some unsustainable everyday practices. Like other green how-to books, it attempts to “provide an alternative to mass media reporting and to activist polemics, both of which stress conflict, and to build environmental consciousness through positive practical activity” (Killingsworth and Palmer, “How-to” 394). Ultimately, the project questions American consumptive behaviors by focusing on solutions rather than problems. The up-beat tone contrasts with the dreary or frantic rhetoric discussed in Chapter Two, and the approach agrees with both the central argument of this thesis and BRING’s existing philosophy about inspiring community change through a positive vision of sustainability.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

The motivation behind this thesis has been to change the way environmental organizations communicate with the public, to find a way of talking about environmental issues that is responsible, effective, and sustainable. This is a job for scholars, media, and nonprofit organizations alike. As mainstream media becomes increasingly dependant on shock and fear, perhaps the environmental community can offer a respite from the angry chaos.

I have argued in this work that giving people practical information which can help them make ecologically sound decisions in their daily lives will do more than fear to bring about environmental change. I have also attempted to construct a tangible example of how to undertake this rhetorical shift in the context of a grassroots recycling organization. It is my hope that this project will inspire other organizations to consider using a how-to approach in their outreach.

As Cantrill pointed out, in order to change the way we think about the environment, we must change the way we talk about it. Instead of looking into a future of ecological collapse, I would like to begin constructing a vision of environmental sustainability. The language we use to describe our future shapes what it can be.

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