

7-1-2017

## Caring, Killing, Euphemism and George Orwell: How Language Choice Undercuts Our Mission

David Johns

Portland State University, johnsd@pdx.edu

Dominick A. DellaSala

GEOS Institute

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Follow this and additional works at: [http://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/polisci\\_fac](http://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/polisci_fac)



Part of the [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

### Citation Details

Johns, David and DellaSala, Dominick A., "Caring, Killing, Euphemism and George Orwell: How Language Choice Undercuts Our Mission" (2017). *Political Science Faculty Publications and Presentations*. 61.

[http://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/polisci\\_fac/61](http://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/polisci_fac/61)

This Post-Print is brought to you for free and open access. It has been accepted for inclusion in Political Science Faculty Publications and Presentations by an authorized administrator of PDXScholar. For more information, please contact [pdxscholar@pdx.edu](mailto:pdxscholar@pdx.edu).

1 24 Mar 2017

2  
3 "Caring, Killing, Euphemism and George Orwell: How Language Choice Undercuts Our  
4 Mission."

5  
6 David Johns<sup>1</sup> & Dominick A DellaSala<sup>2</sup>

7  
8 David Johns, School of Government, Portland State University, PO Box 751, Portland OR  
9 97201, [johnsd@pdx.edu](mailto:johnsd@pdx.edu)

10 Dominick A DellaSala, GEOS Institute, 84 Fourth Street, Ashland, Oregon 97520,  
11 [dominick@geosinstitute.org](mailto:dominick@geosinstitute.org)

12  
13  
14  
15 What does George Orwell have to do with Conservation Biology? As one of the foremost critics  
16 of how language is used, he has quite a lot to say. He was not just a critic of the imprecise or the  
17 dreary, but of the power of language to mislead; he understood the power of language to evoke  
18 the passion of a mission-value-*morality* driven discipline such as conservation biology, or drown  
19 it in what he called orthodoxy—a condition that “seems to demand a lifeless, imitative style.”  
20 (Orwell 1964:IV: 135) Too often, he noted, speech about values was “the defense of the  
21 indefensible.” (Orwell 1964: IV: 136) We argue in this essay that euphemism is a means to mask  
22 the indefensible and conservation biologists should not be a party to that.

23  
24 Most papers presented at conservation biology meetings and published in our journals have to do  
25 with understanding how biodiversity is impacted by human activities. Less often we consider our  
26 purposes, values and motivation. But these aspects of our work are equally important; they  
27 address why we do what we do, and the purpose of what we do.

28  
29 For example, according to its mission statement, the Society for Conservation Biology “...  
30 advances the science and *practice* of conserving Earth’s biological diversity(;)” and “envisions a

31 world where people understand, *value*, and conserve the diversity of life on Earth.” (italics  
32 added)

33

34 To achieve the vision and fulfill the mission depends on motivating others to care and to act on  
35 behalf of biodiversity. In turn that means being clear about our moral purpose:

36                   Biodiversity is good (Soulé 1985)

37                   Humans are obligated to safeguard biodiversity

38 Science is not enough to resolve the extinction and climate crises we are in. Moreover science  
39 does not require we be passionless or meek—only that we be honest, do not distort our findings  
40 or otherwise try to make them conform to desired outcomes. Being unbiased does not require  
41 lack of caring; indeed, to not care is to be alienated.

42

43 We argue that the widespread use of euphemisms by many conservation biologists, conservation  
44 journals, and conservation biology course materials undermines our effort to evoke caring in  
45 others for life on Earth and even to care for ourselves.

46

47 A euphemism is           “The act or example of substituting a mild, indirect, or vague term for a  
48                                   harsh, blunt, or offensive one” that is more accurate. (American Heritage  
49                                   College Dictionary, 3d Ed, 1993: 473)

50

51 In more words the Oxford English Dictionary says the same thing.

52

53                    “That figure of speech which consists in the substitution of a word or  
54                    expression of comparatively favorable or less unpleasant associations  
55                    instead of the harsher or more offensive one that would more precisely  
56                    designate what is intended.” (Compact OED 1971, I: 903).

57

58 Euphemisms, then, use language choice to describe activities in acceptable words that audiences  
59 would otherwise find objectionable. Euphemisms mislead by candy coating reality. They sanitize  
60 and disguise, and are *not neutral* terms. As one example, “we harvested a sample of 100 fish for  
61 analysis of stomach contents”, rather than “we caught and killed 100 fish for analysis of stomach  
62 contents.”

63

64 Other words can mislead for different reasons, including metaphors—a “figure of speech in  
65 which a name or descriptive term is transferred to some object different from, but analogous to,  
66 that to which is properly applicable” (Compact OED 1971, I: 1781). For example, using  
67 economic metaphors to describe the natural world—natural assets, stocks, maximum sustainable  
68 yield, forest harvest, natural capital and debt—is reductionist: it suggests the natural world is part  
69 of the human economy rather than the other way around and that the former operates like the  
70 lateral in a literal and mechanistic way; it also strongly implies that only those aspects of the  
71 larger world that have economic value have value (Coffey 2016).

72

73 Metaphors can also create strong, vivid images that impart insight via their analogies. But  
74 analogies are just that—not meant to be literal, wholly accurate terms. In contrast euphemisms  
75 purport to be accurate descriptions when in fact they misrepresent it. Both may mislead—some

76 metaphors may be bad metaphors, i.e. not good analogies. But all euphemism, intent aside, candy  
77 coat and undercut caring by creating emotional distance from that which conservationists seek to  
78 evoke caring. A metaphor might undercut caring but if so it is more likely because of the  
79 listener's error in taking it literally rather than rejecting it as a bad analogy. For example, the  
80 metaphor "forest health" alludes to actions taken to maintain the function of a forest much like  
81 actions may be taken to maintain human function in the face of disease. Cutting old growth trees,  
82 however, is a bad analogy with treating disease.

83

84 Similarly, language that is vague and unnecessarily abstract can be problematic—so-called  
85 buzzwords, which appear to offer easy insight and information and in the course of that become  
86 commonly used. "Sustainability" or "sustainable" are widely used, including in policy  
87 statements, but they are rarely defined. Just what is proposed to be sustained? Human societies?  
88 The human species? Or ecological systems and their full complement of species? The difference  
89 is significant—one species or all species. And the course of action necessary for the latter is  
90 quite different than the former.

91

92 Students of story recognize that they are useful to humans because they simplify reality and  
93 thereby help make life manageable. But what about when understanding is the goal, as with  
94 science? Goldstein (1999) argues that scientists too often fall victim to the temptation to simplify  
95 in the face of the tremendous complexity of the biological world. They seek shortcuts  
96 understanding the natural world, the damage done to it by humans, and in figuring out ways to  
97 heal it. The results include abstractions which represent vaguely defined processes or properties  
98 of systems that lack empirical validity and cannot be substituted for life history of populations

99 and therefore result in recommendations that usually cannot help real organisms. He argues, for  
100 instance, that “ecosystem management” is too broad to be evaluated (1999: 249)—ecosystems  
101 are dynamic and goals such as maintaining predation (our example) mean little apart from  
102 understanding specific native predator populations. David Ehrenfeld (1979) and others raise  
103 important related questions, such as whether humans are capable of understanding let alone  
104 managing such complexity. Buzzwords gloss over these questions and give false impressions of  
105 precision and are misleading if also the product of good faith efforts at problem solving.

106

107 How do we know if a word or phrase is a euphemism? Here’s a self-test. Apply the term or  
108 phrase to some entity or group you care about and gauge your reaction. If you are uncomfortable  
109 it is probably a euphemism. If it makes you feel dishonest it almost certainly is a euphemism.

110 Would you “sacrifice” or “cull” those you care about so that some knowledge might be gained?

111

112 Beyond a self-test, ask if the words or phrase convey an accurate description of what is  
113 happening, or obscure it; does it preclude a negative emotional response to an activity through  
114 use of vague and pleasant words. We are all familiar with the common use of euphemisms in  
115 human politics—terms such as “collateral damage,” which aims to soften our reaction to killing  
116 of civilians in the course of military action. The term “bycatch” is similar, referring to the  
117 (foreseeable) killing of non-targeted wildlife during efforts to capture and kill commercial  
118 species. “Bycatch” may be as high as 40% by weight of all life killed (Davies et al 2009). Why  
119 don’t biologists use a more straightforward description?

120

121 “Harvest” is common and in wide use in conservation biology as well among those who study  
122 forests, fish and wildlife with a goal to maximizing exploitation and economic benefits. And it  
123 illustrates the history of the adoption of this and similar terms in conservation. Harvest is an  
124 ancient term and generally refers to “gathering in a crop,” usually of grains, fruits, or vegetables  
125 planted or tended deliberately as human food. “Wildlife managers” in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century borrowed  
126 the term from agriculture (Leopold 1986 [1933]: 3-4), ironically the principal threat to wildlife  
127 and wild places for the last 12 millennia.

128

129 Although Leopold later changed his thinking on this topic his initial conceptualization regarded  
130 wildlife management as producing crops of wild game, while maintaining maximum yield via  
131 human interventions in the landscape—interventions which included targeting other species such  
132 as predators to maintain the yield of these desired species. Several of these agricultural terms  
133 seeped into various biology disciplines before his understanding changed.

134

135 “Harvest” is used to describe killing part or all of the individuals of a wild species for food,  
136 because a species is inconvenient to some humans, for fun, or because humans have degraded  
137 habitat and ecosystems are “out of balance” and need to be righted. Interestingly the killing of  
138 domestic animals for food and sometimes other purposes is referred to as slaughter, a harsher  
139 term. Even “killing” can obscure the grim details: poisoning, shooting, leg-hold trapping,  
140 snaring, drowning, suffocating, chasing down with machines.

141

142 Harvest preempts acknowledgement of qualities that may be possessed by those being killed:

143           Sentience

144 Uniqueness

145 Place in social structure

146 Desire to avoid death

147 Fear

148

149 Harvest does not evoke caring and empathy, outrage at loss of life, but instead distances and  
150 objectifies.

151 It does not evoke the moral purpose of conservation but wildlife as crops owned by humans. It  
152 implies the human right to inflict injury and even impose death to balance the “books” we have  
153 brought disorder to. It conveys the idea that the killing is orderly process intended to benefit  
154 people and that such benefit is presumptively justified; it may also presume that the species  
155 being killed benefits along with the ecosystem of which it is a part.

156

157 Wild plants are also subject to the term harvest. It is sometimes used to describe the destruction  
158 of complex living systems called forests and their replacement by tree farms, domesticated  
159 monocultures, or subdivisions.

160

161 There are many other euphemisms that attempt to sanitize human violence toward the natural  
162 world:

163

164 “Collect” is to kill for the sake of human knowledge without considering the knowledge lost by  
165 killing. Sometime sacrifice is used as if we were priests.

166



167 “Working lands” is one our favorites, calling to mind the laziness of Wilderness. In facts the  
168 lands referred to as working are domesticated, usually degraded. A common example is  
169 rangelands heavily grazed by cattle, sheep and other domestic animal. In fact such lands are  
170 occupied lands, with human activities displacing other species. In many countries, such  
171 rangelands often receive massive public subsidies in terms of tax benefits, road construction, and  
172 energy use.

173

174 “Fire destroys, blackens...” ignores the essential role of fire in many systems and the serious  
175 and lasting damage of fire suppression. Using the term “fuels” instead of “dead wood” in a fire-  
176 adapted forest tends to distance foresters from seeing vegetation and its important role in such  
177 forests. It allows foresters to ignore their own role in creating an ecosystem prone to massive  
178 fires.

179

180 “Silvicultural treatment...” usually includes the application of toxic chemicals that poison soil  
181 and water, or the use of heavy equipment that compacts or otherwise disturbs soils.

182

183 The conceptual grandparent of so many euphemisms might be “natural resources.” It reduces all  
184 the world to narrow utilitarian human uses. One of us (DD) has a PhD in “Natural Resources”  
185 from the School of Natural Resources, University of Michigan.

186

187 Tag, administrative removal, incidental “take” and others come to mind.

188

189

190 These terms disconnect us from the consequences of our actions. They diminish or preclude  
191 emotion. Yet it is emotion that connects us to each other, to other creatures, to the wider world  
192 that made us. Without emotion we would be hollow and lonely indeed. We would not be  
193 conservationists.

194

195 One more term deserves mention in this brief survey: cull.

196

197 Cull is a term that can obscure the cause of conservation problems. US agencies have killed, are  
198 killing and plan to kill sea lions and cormorants in the Columbia River because they eat salmon  
199 that are endangered. Indeed they are, but why? Because of dams, water temperature increases in  
200 streams, logging, grazing, and road-building. Not because of sea lions and cormorants.

201

202 The term cull makes the destruction of the largest double-crested cormorant colony in the  
203 world—at the mouth of the Columbia River—seem a difficult necessity rather than a case of  
204 scapegoating that rationalized the violent destruction of life. By invoking the implication of  
205 unfortunate necessity, the real, human causes of salmon decline are off the table: massive hydro  
206 dams, logging which destroys spawning streams, grazing, and pollution. The difficult problem of  
207 changing human behavior, including weaning us from cheap energy (because the costs are  
208 externalized), do not have to be dealt with.

209

210 What are conservation biologists to do? We have an obligation to:

211

212                    Accurately describe how biodiversity works in the world and to advocate for our  
213 values—not to make people comfortable.

214                    Explore more accurate language for how plants and animals are treated by  
215 humans, including ourselves.

216                    Use language that evokes our moral purpose.

217

218 Euphemism is not part of the solution, it is part of the problem. It is up to all of us to invent a  
219 new and better language. Maybe a simple place to start is to give animals names. Cecil the lion  
220 had a name and it generated an important discussion about the value of life. .

221

222

223

224 Citations

225

226 *American Heritage Dictionary, The*. 1993. 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed. Houghton Mifflin. Boston, MA

227

228 Coffey, Brian. 2016. “Unpacking the Politics of Natural Capital and Economic Metaphors in  
229 Environmental Policy Discourse.” *25 Environmental Politics 2*: 203-222.

230

231 Davies, R., Cripps, S., Nickson, A., and Porter, G. 2009. Defining and estimating global marine  
232 fisheries bycatch. *Marine Policy*, doi:10.1016/j.marpol.2009.01.003.

233

234 Ehhrenfield, David. 1979. *Arrogance of Humanism*. Oxford UP. New York.

235

236 Goldstein, Paul Z. 1999. “Functional Ecosystems and Biodiversity Buzzwords.” 13 *Conservation*  
237 *Biology* 2: 247-255.

238

239 Leopold, Aldo. 1986 (1933). *Game Management*. University of Wisconsin Press. Madison WI.

240

241 *Oxford English Dictionary, Compact*. 1971. (2 vol.) Oxford University Press. New York City.

242

243 Society for Conservation Biology. 2016. Strategic Plan 2016-2020.

244 [http://conbio.org/images/content\\_about\\_scb/SCB\\_Strategic\\_Plan\\_2016-2020\\_Final.pdf](http://conbio.org/images/content_about_scb/SCB_Strategic_Plan_2016-2020_Final.pdf)

245 (accessed 7 Oct 2016).

246

247 Soulé, Michael. 1985. “What is Conservation Biology?” 35 *BioScience* 11: 727–734. (Soulé  
248 freely admits plagiarizing from Genesis 1: 12, 21 and 25.)

249

250