



*Public Opinion Research  
& Strategy*



**TO:** The Nature Conservancy

**FROM:** David Metz  
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**RE:** Key Findings From Recent National Opinion Research on “Ecosystem Services”

**DATE:** April 25, 2010

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The Democratic polling firm of Fairbank, Maslin, Maullin, Metz & Associates (FM3) and the Republican polling firm of Public Opinion Strategies (POS) recently partnered to complete a national voter survey on behalf of The Nature Conservancy<sup>1</sup>. The survey was designed to assess voter understanding of the concept of “ecosystem services” and support for applying it as a framework for making decisions about the use and management of natural resources.<sup>2</sup>

The survey results showed that voters already recognize the many critical benefits that nature provides to people. Nine out of ten label such benefits as at least “very important,” and place a particularly high priority on nature’s role in providing clean air and water; food; medicine; and safety from floods and hurricanes. In keeping with this belief, **a majority of voters embraces calculating the benefits nature provides to people, and explicitly acknowledging it as part of decisions about how natural resources are managed and used.**

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<sup>1</sup> This project was a collaboration of TNC’s California Chapter, Conservation Campaigns Team and Central Science Department.

<sup>2</sup> **Methodology:** On March 10 and 15-21, 2010 FM3 and POS completed 802 telephone interviews with registered voters nationwide. The full sample has a margin of sampling error of +/- 3.5%; margins of sampling error for subgroups within the sample will be larger.

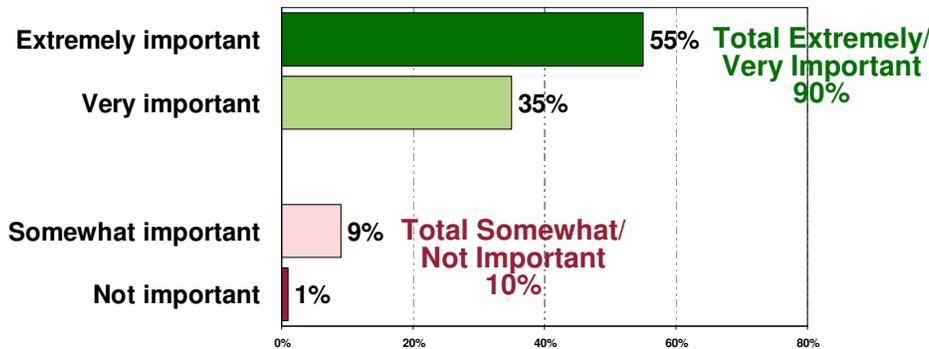
The balance of this memo is divided into two sections. The first section reviews some of the key specific findings of the survey, both in regard to voters’ attitudes toward the “ecosystem services” concept, and their reactions to messaging designed to advocate its use. The second section provides some recommendations for communications – in a “do’s and don’t’s” format – to help the conservation community articulate the ideas behind ecosystem services more effectively.

## KEY SURVEY FINDINGS

- American voters overwhelmingly recognize the vital benefits that nature has for people.** An early question in the survey presented voters with a brief summary of some of the various benefits that nature has for people, and asked them to indicate how important they thought such benefits were. As **Figure 1** indicates, a 55-percent majority of voters rates them as “extremely important,” the highest available rating on the scale. An additional 35 percent rate such benefits of nature as “very important,” meaning that nine out of ten American voters rate these benefits of nature as either “extremely” or “very important.” The consensus on this issue is extraordinary, with only one in one hundred American voters dismissing such benefits as “not important.”

**FIGURE 1:**  
**Evaluation of the Importance of Nature’s Benefits for People**

*Some people say that in making these decisions, we need to recognize that nature provides many benefits for human society. Some of those benefits are direct, such as fish, crops, timber, or ingredients for medicines. Others are less obvious, such as trees that filter pollution out of our air and water; lands that slow or stop floods; and wetlands that reduce the impacts of storm surges created by hurricanes. How important do you think these benefits that nature provides are: extremely important, very important, somewhat important, or not important?*



- Voters value a wide variety of specific benefits that nature provides, but place a particularly high priority on benefits for public health and safety.** Survey respondents were offered a list of some of the specific benefits nature provides to people, and were asked to rate each as either “extremely,” “very,” “somewhat,” or “not important.” As **Figure 2** makes clear, every one of a list of 20 benefits of nature

was rated at least “very important” by a solid majority of American voters. In general, those that help to protect public health and safety were assigned the highest priority. Among those items rated “very important” by at least four in five voters nationwide were several dealing with water quality, air quality, production of crops for food, production of medicines, and protection against floods and hurricanes.

**FIGURE 2:**  
**Ranking the Importance of Benefits of Nature**  
*(Split Sampled)*

<b>Benefit</b>	<b>TOTAL EXT. / VERY</b>	<b>Extr. Imp.</b>	<b>Very Imp.</b>	<b>S.W. Imp.</b>	<b>Not Imp.</b>	<b>DK/ NA</b>
Providing clean water for drinking and irrigation	<b>97%</b>	62%	35%	3%	1%	0%
Filtering water to keep it clean	<b>95%</b>	58%	37%	3%	2%	0%
Removing pollution from the air	<b>90%</b>	54%	36%	7%	2%	0%
Keeping soil fertile and productive	<b>89%</b>	43%	46%	8%	2%	1%
Providing protection against floods and hurricanes	<b>88%</b>	47%	41%	9%	2%	0%
Preventing erosion of fertile soil	<b>86%</b>	48%	38%	9%	3%	2%
Pollinating plants and crops to help them grow	<b>86%</b>	45%	41%	12%	2%	0%
Providing fish and wildlife for use as food	<b>85%</b>	42%	43%	10%	4%	1%
Offering sources of unique ingredients for medicines	<b>82%</b>	45%	37%	13%	3%	1%
Protecting us from the harmful ultraviolet rays of the sun	<b>79%</b>	43%	36%	14%	6%	2%
Removing carbon and global warming pollution from the air	<b>79%</b>	43%	36%	10%	8%	2%
Providing raw materials like wood that help to support industries and jobs	<b>78%</b>	34%	44%	19%	2%	1%
Providing green spaces to help reduce the temperature of urban areas	<b>75%</b>	32%	43%	16%	7%	2%
Providing a place for relaxation and spiritual renewal	<b>71%</b>	28%	43%	20%	9%	1%
Providing a place for hiking, camping, or other outdoor recreation	<b>69%</b>	28%	41%	26%	5%	0%
Providing places for exercise to improve health	<b>67%</b>	30%	37%	28%	4%	0%
Moderating extremes of weather	<b>65%</b>	27%	38%	19%	9%	7%
Providing timber for buildings and paper	<b>64%</b>	23%	41%	29%	7%	1%
Attracting tourists to support the economy	<b>58%</b>	18%	40%	34%	8%	1%
Increasing the value of surrounding properties	<b>56%</b>	24%	32%	27%	15%	2%

- **Voters support the idea of calculating the value of these benefits, and factoring it into decisions about the use and management of natural resources.** Survey respondents were offered the following explanation of how this valuation might be carried out:

*“We can measure these benefits of specific natural resources, including land and water, in a number of ways – including calculating the actual dollar value of the benefits a natural resource provides to people. Some people say that when deciding how we use or manage natural resources, we should carefully calculate the dollar value of the benefits provided by conserving them in their natural state, and compare it to the dollar value of the alternative uses.”*

Voters were asked to indicate their support for this concept on a 100-point scale. Only one in five objected to the idea (offering a score below 50), while 23% offered a neutral score of 50 and a 52-percent majority expressed support, with scores between 51 and 100. Overall, the mean level of support was 61 on a 100-point scale – indicating that most voters believe calculating the value of the benefits nature provides people is a worthwhile enterprise.

- **Voters are even more supportive of measuring the value of nature in terms other than dollars.** As shown in **Figure 3**, nearly three-quarters of voters (73%) believe that it is at least “somewhat” helpful to calculate the benefits of nature in dollar terms. But even higher numbers favor evaluating the benefits of nature through other metrics, like the number of jobs created (which 84% see as “helpful”), the number of people who benefit (87%), or the additional clean air and water a natural area provides (92%). These results show that voters believe the value of nature can be credibly quantified and expressed in a wide variety of ways.

**FIGURE 3:**

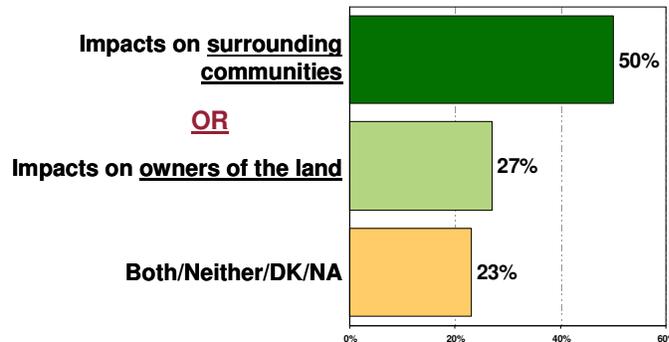
**Evaluating the Helpfulness of Various Ways of Calculating Nature’s Benefits**

Method	Very/S.W. Helpful	Not Helpful	Can’t Calculate/ DK
The amount of <u>additional clean air or water</u> a natural area provides	92%	4%	4%
The <u>number of people</u> who benefit from a natural area	87%	7%	7%
The <u>number of jobs created</u> or maintained by a natural area	84%	8%	8%
The <u>dollar value</u> of the benefits a natural area provides	73%	11%	15%

- Voters’ strong support for this approach stems from their firm belief that impacts on surrounding communities should play a primary role in land use decisions.** As illustrated in **Figure 4**, when offered a choice American voters believe – by nearly a two-to-one margin – that impacts on surrounding communities should be more of a consideration in land use decisions than impacts on owners of the land. Voters have a strong, intuitive belief that the benefits nature provides impact people throughout the surrounding area – and thus must be kept in mind when decisions are made about how land is to be used.

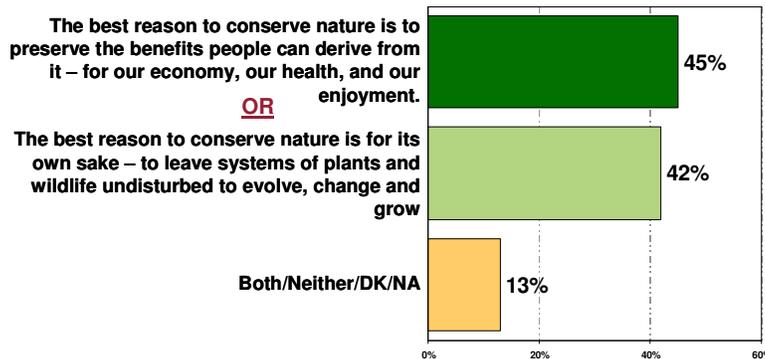
**FIGURE 4:**  
**Choice of Primary Considerations in Land Use Decisions**  
*(Split Sample)*

Next, which of the following do you think should be the primary consideration when making decisions about how a piece of land should be used:



- At the same time, a significant subset of voters believes that it is *most* important to conserve nature for its own sake – but most of them are already strong supporters of conservation.** As detailed in **Figure 5** in the following page, roughly equal proportions of American voters believe that the best reason to conserve nature is for its own sake (42%) and for the benefits it provides to people (45%).

**FIGURE 5:**  
**Choice of Most Important Reason for Conserving Nature**  
*(Split Sample)*



This finding provides an important caution, which was evident at a number of other places in our research: while voters believe that nature does provide essential benefits to people, a significant proportion nevertheless believes that nature has an inherent value that provides a better rationale for its conservation. However, the voters who place the greatest stock in nature’s inherent value tend to be those groups already most supportive of conservation policies, including Democrats, liberals, environmentalists and voters under 40. Key groups of swing voters – including independents, sportsmen, and voters over age 40 – are more likely to cite benefits to people as the more important rationale for conserving nature.

- **Voters would prefer to call this framework something other than “ecosystem services.”** Survey respondents were asked to rate the appeal of a variety of terms that might be used to describe this approach to thinking about the use of natural resources. As shown on the following page in **Figure 6**, of 16 terms tested the three that received the *fewest* strongly positive responses were some of the ones in most common current usage: “ecosystem services,” “nature’s capital,” and “earth’s capital.” In contrast, voters had far more positive reactions to some alternate terms, particularly “nature’s value” and “nature’s benefits.”

**FIGURE 6:**  
**Reaction to Alternative Phrases to Describe Ecosystem Services**  
*(Split Sample; Rated on a Scale From 1 to 7 in Terms of Appeal)*

Name	% Rating a 6 or 7 (Very Appealing)	Mean Score
Nature’s Value	61%	5.5
Nature’s Benefits	53%	5.3
Earth’s Benefits	55%	5.2
Environmental Value	49%	5.2
The Planet’s Assets	45%	5.0
Nature’s Health and Safety Systems	46%	4.9
Environmental Wealth	45%	4.9
Environmental Goods	44%	4.9
Natural Life-Support	44%	4.9
Ecological Wealth	42%	4.8
The Planet’s Products and Services	34%	4.6
Natural Infrastructure	32%	4.6
Ecosystem Services	31%	4.5
Nature’s Social Safety Net	34%	4.4
Natural Capital	30%	4.3
Earth’s Capital	29%	4.2

- **The strongest messages articulating the key role of nature’s benefits address issues of public health and safety.** Majorities of voters rate each of the following messages – which all share connections to public health and safety – as “very convincing” reasons to calculate and take account of nature’s benefits in making decisions about how natural resources are used and managed.

*“In coastal states, wetlands are the first line of defense to slow down and absorb storm surges and hurricane winds. Yet, every day, states along the Gulf Coast remove huge areas of coastal wetlands. **We need to recognize the value natural areas like wetlands have in protecting communities** – both from catastrophic storms and the billions of dollars in damage they cause.” (56% “very convincing”)*

*“We spend billions every year to clean up our water. **But it is much cheaper and easier to prevent water pollution naturally** – by protecting and restoring wetlands and rivers -- than it is to treat water after it has been contaminated.” (55% “very convincing”)*

*“Nature plays a critical role in ensuring our health. Of the top 150 prescription drugs used in the US, 118 come from natural sources – and nine of the top ten drugs originate from natural plants. **Conserving nature protects an invaluable natural laboratory that provides medicines we rely on today** – and may come to need in the future.” (52% “very convincing”)*

In contrast, messages that focused primarily on the economic benefits of nature were significantly less persuasive; while most voters accepted them, they generally did not generate as strong of a positive response as the messages listed above.

- **Voters trust what farmers and public health organizations have to say on this issue.** Figure 7 below details the degree to which voters trust the information that a variety of kinds of people might provide about the value of nature’s benefits – as well as the degree to which they would be suspicious of it. There are a number of categories of messengers that at least seven out of ten voters trust – including farmers and ranchers; people with connections to public health (doctors and nurses, the Red Cross, the American Lung Association); hunters and anglers; conservation organizations; and people with some kind of neutral scientific expertise on the issue (including scientists, state departments of natural resources, and professors at a major research university).

**FIGURE 7:**  
**Evaluating the Trustworthiness of Messengers on Ecosystem Services**  
*(Split Sample)*

Person / Group	TOTAL TRUST THEIR INFO.	Trust a Great Deal	Trust Somewhat	Total Suspicious of Their Info.	Never Heard of/ DK
Farmers and ranchers	84%	45%	39%	14%	1%
The American Lung Association	79%	38%	41%	16%	5%
The Red Cross	78%	37%	41%	16%	5%
Doctors and nurses	77%	25%	52%	19%	4%
Scientists	76%	28%	48%	21%	3%
Your state department of natural resources	74%	28%	46%	23%	3%
Fishers and hunters	74%	25%	49%	24%	3%
Conservation organizations	71%	31%	40%	25%	5%
Professors at a major research university	70%	25%	45%	26%	5%
Professors at a local university	68%	19%	49%	29%	4%
Private landowners	63%	19%	44%	34%	3%
Local small business owners	57%	16%	41%	38%	5%
Independent economists	52%	12%	40%	40%	8%
Your state chamber of commerce	48%	11%	37%	48%	4%
Timber companies	36%	7%	29%	58%	6%
Business analysts	32%	6%	26%	63%	5%

Overall, the survey results provide powerful evidence that voters have a deep and persistent belief that nature provides critical benefits for people – and they are ready to embrace many methods of analysis that will acknowledge those benefits and better incorporate them in decisions about how we use natural resources.

**LANGUAGE RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on the results of the survey – and on some extensive focus group research that preceded it – the following are our recommendations for communicating about the benefits of nature:

- ✓ *DO talk about “nature’s benefits” or “nature’s value.”* The term “ecosystem services” does not adequately convey the meaning of the concept to less knowledgeable audiences. Few voters spend time visiting “ecosystems” – they visit forests, wetlands, rivers, deserts and mountains. And some resist the idea that nature provides “services” to people – while they acknowledge that people depend upon and benefit from nature, the idea that nature exists to “serve” them is off-putting to some. Though “ecosystem services” is a term that scientists and policymakers understand and will continue to use without difficulty, using it to communicate with the general public runs the risk that the term will not be properly understood.

In contrast, the terms “nature’s value” and “nature’s benefits” were rated as highly appealing by clear majorities of voters nationwide. And in the focus groups, both terms were seen as intuitive and self-explanatory. Either provides a vastly preferable alternative for general communications to “ecosystem services.” (It should be noted that “value” may prompt people to think about the benefits of nature in economic or dollar terms – which may be advantageous in some circumstances and less so in others.)

In talking about nature’s value and benefits, we recommend the following approaches:

- *DO encourage people to think broadly about the benefits of nature.* Voters understand that nature provides many benefits for people, from a place for recreation to clean air and water. But the more that they are encouraged to think broadly about the diverse range of benefits that nature provides – including everything from pollinating crops to providing green spaces that cool down urban areas – the higher priority they assign to conservation. Providing diverse, specific and tangible examples of the categories of benefits nature provides can help lead voters to a more full appreciation of the many ways nature is important to people.
- *DO focus on public health and safety as primary benefits.* Throughout the research, the connection between healthy natural areas and public health and safety was the most obvious and compelling benefit for people that voters saw in nature. In particular, providing natural filters to clean water and air and providing natural protection against floods and hurricanes tended to score most highly.
- *DO remind people of nature’s role in providing materials for medicines.* Relatively few voters name medicines as a top-of-mind benefit that nature has for people. However, when prompted to think about the idea – and particularly when given information like the number of prescription medications that come from natural sources – voters see it as an urgent rationale for protecting nature.
- *DO highlight the benefits of nature for providing food.* Similar to medicines, voters do not instinctively name the production of food as a benefit of nature. However, when prompted more than three-quarters of voters rate benefits such as “pollinating plants and crops to help them grow,” “preventing erosion of fertile soil,” and “keeping soil fertile and productive” as “very important” benefits of nature.
- *DO NOT place too much emphasis on highly specific examples that may lack relevance outside their local context.* In the poll, a specific message describing the money New York City was able to save by protecting watersheds to preserve water quality – as opposed to building a new treatment plant – was one of the less

persuasive messages tested. A far more effective message omitted the specific New York example, and simply described the concept that watershed protection could offer a more cost-effective way to preserve water quality.

Of course, localized examples can be very effective if relevant to the community where they are used. In the focus groups, for example, we saw that talking about wetland restoration to protect from storm surges was more effective in Tampa than elsewhere. But examples from communities that are remote, or that are perceived to have different circumstances from the one where a voter lives, may be distracting or invite criticisms based on their relevance. Since voters are already generally accepting of the ecosystem services concept in principle, there may not be a pressing need to introduce such examples into communications.

- ✓ *DO position this approach as a way of acknowledging impacts on surrounding communities in making decisions about the use of natural resources – and as a way of acknowledging the long-term impacts of those decisions.* In focus groups, voters express frustration that the needs and desires of local communities are not adequately considered when land use decisions are made. From voters’ perspective, well-connected and wealthy special interests that stand to make money from their use of a natural resource tend to guide the decision-making process. In the poll, voters prioritize the needs of surrounding communities over the needs of individual landowners by a two-to-one margin when land use decisions are being made.

The “ecosystem services” approach can be positioned as a way to address the imbalance voters perceive – by more explicitly valuing the broader set of benefits that a natural resource provides to a larger community, and giving it a more prominent role in decision-making processes.

- ✓ *DO position this approach as a way of acknowledging the long-term impacts of resource decisions.* In a similar vein, voters regularly express frustration that decisions about land use and resource management are too often made with short-term convenience and profitability in mind, rather than a long-term evaluation of a community’s needs. The ecosystem services framework can be positioned as a way of helping decision makers understand – and take into account – the longer-term impacts that decisions about resource use can have on a community’s health and safety.
- ✓ *DO clarify the economic value of conservation.* Voters understand, instinctively, that there is economic value to clean air, clean water, and plants and wildlife. And quantifying those benefits – in terms of dollars or other metrics – allows voters to compare the benefits of different land use decisions. Quantifying the economic benefits of nature may help voters recognize that conservation provides specific, quantifiable benefits to the public that must be considered as a counterbalance to the benefits of development or resource extraction.

The following are a few other recommendations regarding expressing the value of nature in economic terms:

- *DO highlight other ways of quantifying the benefits of nature, beyond simply dollars.* In the poll, voters were far more receptive to methods of calculating the benefits of nature that rely on the number of people benefited, the amounts of beneficial materials generated (like clean air and water), or the number of jobs created.
- *DO NOT assume that, because we are in tough economic times, voters are more receptive to “dollars and cents” messages.* Other research our firms have conducted shows that even in the current economic climate, economic rationales for conservation policies are generally less compelling than messages that emphasize other benefits of nature. The same was evident in the research on ecosystem services. Voters generally assign far less importance to the economic benefits of nature, and are less responsive to messages that are built around them.
- *DO NOT overemphasize the precise dollar-value estimates of nature’s benefits.* While voters accept the idea that nature has value for people, they are skeptical of efforts to translate it into precise dollar amounts – assuming that any such calculation involves dozens of potentially erroneous assumptions, and provides an opportunity for the ideological agenda of the person doing the estimation to color the results.
- ✓ *DO NOT forget to invoke the unquantifiable value of nature.* Even the steeliest non-environmentalist in our focus groups acknowledged a value to nature that is difficult to quantify on a balance sheet. Many spoke of its calming, spiritual benefits – simply being able to be away from a city and from people was seen as enormously valuable to many of those we spoke to. For some, discussions of nature’s benefits that are too practical and utilitarian seem to slight these very real benefits. And in the survey, many of those who objected to the ecosystem services concept based their objection on a belief that it slights some of these non-quantifiable benefits.
- ✓ *DO NOT position nature as subordinate to people.* Many voters actively resist the idea that nature exists to “serve” people, or merely to provide them resources to be consumed. Communications should be crafted to avoid framing nature in this context.
- ✓ *DO use farmers, hunters and anglers, scientists, and natural resource agencies as messengers.* In the survey, voters indicated that they are highly likely to trust what these types of people had to say about the benefits of nature – presumably because they see these types of people as having relevant knowledge and expertise and being

free of an ideological bias or self-interest.

Other recommendations regarding messengers include the following:

- *DO use as many public health messengers as possible.* Given the central importance of the public health benefits of nature, it is perhaps not surprising that the Red Cross, American Lung Association, and public health organizations were among the most trusted sources of information tested.
- *DO NOT rely on the credibility of economic or financial “experts” to make the case for the benefits of nature.* Participants generally indicated that they would be suspicious of information that timber companies, business analysts, or chambers of commerce might provide on the benefits of nature – presumably because they view them as having some type of conflict of interest on the issue.
- ✓ *DO use this approach as a way of reaching voters in the middle, who are not traditionally supporters of environmental policies.* Overall, the poll results suggest that the broad appeal of the ecosystem services framework makes it ideally suited to reaching voters in the middle of the electorate – ones who may not have an ideological commitment to environmental protection, but who nonetheless recognize the vital self-interest they have in protecting nature’s health.

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