

# Forestry<sup>The</sup>Source

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## Thirty-Two Years of Telling the Forestry Story

By Mike Cloughesy

I have always been a storyteller, but for the past 32 years, I have made a career of it. I worked for 16 years for the Oregon State University (OSU) Extension Service and for the last 16 as director of forestry for the Oregon Forest Resources Institute (OFRI). Throughout my career, I have had successes and failures, and I have learned a few things.

In this essay, I will describe my top 10 tips for telling the forestry story. My storytelling takes many forms. Sometimes I call it teaching, sometimes writing, sometimes giving a presentation to a service group, sometimes making a video, sometimes moderating a panel, and sometimes visiting with friends over a glass of wine.

**1. Know the facts.** A favorite storyteller from my college years was Emily Litella, played by Gilda Radner on *Saturday Night Live*. Emily would go on and on about some misunderstanding that she had with the facts. Then when newscaster Chevy Chase from “Weekend Update” would point out what the real facts were, Emily would say, “Never mind!” Being the one to say, “Never mind!” is not good. I have found myself in this situation once or twice, and it has taken a bit of work to overcome it. As professional foresters, we have a very positive reputation

with the public. It is important that we keep that reputation intact. Today, it is easier to check facts than it has ever been. There is no excuse to skip this crucial step.



**2. Know your audience.** Interests, background, education, and knowledge levels are different for each audience and even from individual to individual. For instance, policymakers are smart people, but their knowledge on any given subject is generally comparable to the Platte River: “a mile wide and an inch deep.” It is very likely that your audience is not as expert on your topic as you are. Never assume they know too much. One of the keys to OFRI’s success with outreach and communication of the forestry story is that we gather information about our audiences. We try to know how much they know, what messages resonate with them, and what their values and beliefs are.

Understanding where an audience stands on a topic is also very important. For most questions, there is a group that agrees, a group that disagrees, and a group that is

undecided or doesn't know. It is important to know where your audience is on this continuum. If they are already your supporters, your message should thank them and recognize them for their support. If they are solid detractors, your message should recognize this difference of opinion and agree to disagree. If your audience is in the middle of the bell curve, this may be a teachable moment. Americans like to have an opinion about important issues like forestry. By telling your story, you can help them be or become pro-forest management.

**3. Develop messages that resonate with the audience.** Telling a story to high school students is very different than telling it to policymakers, professional foresters, or the general public. Telling the general public that a certain forest-management practice such as clearcutting is economically efficient is a waste of time and may even be counterproductive. Telling the same audience that clearcutting can help create habitat for species such as songbirds and pollinators is much more effective. Crafting the correct message for an audience requires knowing the audience. A good example is developing messages relating to forestry and carbon. If the audience recognizes the role of carbon in climate change, it will be amenable to messages that talk about the positive impacts of forest management for climate solutions. If the audience is climate-change deniers, you are better off promoting the positive economic impacts of forest management and accepting carbon storage as a bonus.

In outreach efforts, whether through an article, booklet, or video, the first step is to identify the objectives of the piece and the key messages you want to communicate. You may get lucky and develop messages that reach your audience without an intentional message-development exercise, but your odds are much better if you have a system. This step will also help you to keep

your objectives and messages few in number.

**4. Find a hook.** A hook is a story-starter that gets people's attention and encourages them to read, listen, or watch. One of my favorite hooks is in the Euell Gibbons' Grape-Nuts cereal commercial, in which he starts out by asking his audience if they have ever eaten a pine tree. He then states that "many parts are edible" and makes a comparison to Grape-Nuts, which supposedly also have many edible parts. I must advise that you be very careful with humor as a hook. I have found out over the years that it can be very easy to offend people, and offended people rarely listen to the rest of your message. I apologize to any Grape-Nuts lovers reading this essay, but I bet I got your attention with my hook.

I am often reminded that YouTube videos featuring puppies and kittens are nearly universally watched and "liked." A forestry careers video that features a forester's dog in the woods with him or her is going to get more views and likes than will a video of the forester discussing the importance of selecting the right basal area factor (BAF) for a stand exam. Not dissing BAF here, but just sayin'.

**5. Follow the KISSING principle.** I learned the KISSING principle early on. This acronym stands for Keep It Simple, Stupid, I'm No Genius. Although most people do think they are "smarter than the average bear," many, actually, are not. As experts, foresters often try to tell people everything we know about a subject because we think they will be impressed with our knowledge and, therefore, believe what we tell them. I have learned that it doesn't work that way. Instead of attracting listeners with my level of knowledge, I lose them in the details. Another way to say this is, don't try to put 10 gallons in a five-gallon bucket. The key to successful outreach and communication is

to put complex subjects into simple terms. If people don't understand the first statement, they won't even go to the second. A great way to use this principle in a discussion is to start with simple statements or questions and have the audience respond to you in their own words. Then build on their words to move to the second statement, and so on. I recently gave a brief talk about forest pests to a group of high school students doing a service-learning project at OFRI's Rediscovery Forest. I tried to put myself in their shoes and was somewhat effective. The grossness of pitch tubes was a big help. The kids may not remember sequoia pitch moths, but they will remember how the pitch smelt, stuck, and looked, and that these bugs were not good for the trees.

**6. Tell the story in a journalistic style.** Put the most important points you want to get across first and then add the details. Don't build a deductive case. Foresters are generally trained in the scientific method, and we like to communicate in this way. Don't do it. Use the journalistic style for your story, and state your conclusions and key messages upfront. Most people read only headlines as they scan a paper, journal, or newsletter. Some read the first paragraph, fewer read half the story, and almost no one reads to the end. If you don't have your main point in the first or second sentence, most people will never read it. (By the way, if you have made it this far in my essay, you probably are "smarter than the average bear.") Sidebars and photos are also very useful in this style. Photos naturally catch people's attention, and they will often read the captions. I always try to make sure that my captions have an important message.

**7. Recognize the emotional response of the audience.** People would generally rather hear good news than bad news, in spite of what you see on the evening news. Messages that affirm the good in people are readily accepted by most folks. This point

ties back to understanding the audience. People value not only puppies and kittens, they also value wildlife, water quality, beauty, and recreation. The good news is that foresters also value wildlife, water quality, beauty, and recreation. Explaining forest management in these terms will likely get a positive response from your listeners.

People also have an emotional need for balance and fairness. They generally support forestry activities and plans that balance economic, social, and environmental benefits. They want jobs and a strong economy, and they also want a healthy environment and strong social/cultural networks. Active management to create fire-resilient forests provides a great example of a type of forestry activity that creates balance and achieves a positive emotional response. Thinning interior western forests can create better fire resiliency, better wildlife habitat, local jobs, and revenues for local government. This win/win/win/win scenario is one of the reasons that the many collaborative groups working to increase the pace and scale of forest restoration on federal lands have been so effective.

**8. Use the right messenger.** Research by OFRI and others over the years has found that not all messengers are equally trusted and listened to by the public or policymakers. People today have an inherent distrust of corporations, the federal government, and environmental groups. They have much stronger trust in university professors, state government employees, family forest landowners, and professional foresters. I believe part of the reason for this trust is based on the education versus advocacy continuum. In Extension, we always said that when advocacy starts, education stops. Good environmental-education programs like Project Learning Tree teach students how to think, not what to think. It is very tempting to tell voters or legislators how to vote. I have found that it

is much more effective to help them understand the real consequences of their vote, and they will usually do the right thing. This educational style also helps you get called back when the next forestry issue arises.

**9. Measure the audience's reaction.** One of the advantages of being a professional storyteller is that you have the resources to see how effective your stories are. When OFRI runs an educational advertisement, we follow up with surveys to see if people recall our ads, if they support the point we were making, and how our ads have changed the way people believe about important issues. Many of our ads in recent years have been about the key provisions of the Oregon Forest Practices Act: planting trees after harvest and protecting water, fish, and wildlife. We have discovered through follow-up surveys that well-designed ads can significantly influence how people view an issue. We have also discovered that if you stop telling the story, people forget it.

**10. Repeat, repeat, repeat.** Someone once told me that the word “repeat” has earned the shampoo industry millions of dollars. This is also the million-dollar word when it comes to storytelling. Every time I hear or tell a story, I get a different level of meaning out of it. People forget, and they also love to hear stories they know. By the end of his life, my dad only had about five good stories and jokes, but he loved to tell them over and over. His kids also loved to hear them because they tied us to our roots. Luckily, I still have many more than five stories, and I love to tell them over and over. As new people move into an area, hearing such stories is part of the way they become integrated into the local culture. In Oregon, where I have spent most of my career, forestry is still a huge part of the culture. The Tillamook Fires of 1933 to 1951 required massive reforestation efforts and even spurred the development of the Forest

Research Lab at OSU. Schoolchildren planting trees were a highly visible, but very small part, of the reforestation effort of the Tillamook burns. However, people in Oregon are very proud that the area, now the Tillamook State Forest, is the People's Forest, because we planted it.

Thank you for reading my story and, more importantly, thank you for telling yours. My final point is that if we don't tell our story, someone else will, and no one is better equipped to tell the story of forestry than we foresters.

*Mike Cloughesy is the director of forestry with the Oregon Forest Resources Institute and the District 2 Representative on the SAF Board of Directors.*