

AWARE → CARE → DARE

Effective Environmental Storytelling

Fran Stallings

We are sure that stories can reach listeners' hearts and minds.

But can our stories affect people's actions?

Once upon a time, long ago in the late 1980s, storytelling about environmental subjects was not controversial. Schools and community groups hired us to tell stories about nature. We used stories to share information about the interconnectedness of the plants, animals, and natural cycles on which Earth's life depends. Collections of tales were published (see bibliography), including the landmark *Spinning Tales*, *Weaving Hope*, with contributions from many NEST members, pointing out the connections between social justice and environmental sustainability.

A memorable story can make us **Aware** of other creatures so that we can absorb information about conditions affecting them. If the story has engaged our hearts as well as our minds, we will **Care** about what might happen to them. But will we **Dare** to do anything differently?

This question burns ever hotter for storytellers who are concerned about climate change. Many NESTers are lucky to live where a majority of people share this concern, but in many midwest states, I'm dismayed to find that "environment" has become a fightin' word. Even nice green Aware and Care stories can be seen by self-styled "skeptics" as controversial and threatening.

If we believe climate change is an existential threat to the world as we know it, can we try to use the power of storytelling to shift opinions and influence action?

Rereading some of the early collections of "environmental" tales, I am discouraged to see how many stories just bemoaned the consequences of human meddling. Ain't it awful? Cautionary tales have a role, but it's not enough to learn what NOT to do: we need examples of what TO do. Furthermore, an overdose of disaster can trigger resignation rather than the constructive action we need. How do we get from Care to Dare? Here are some suggestions based on my experience telling stories to varied audiences nation-wide.

Narrative Non-fiction: Personal "Origin Stories"

"Effective science communication happens when we listen and connect. It happens when we use empathy. Communication is headed for success when we pay more attention to what the other person is understanding rather than focusing solely on what we want to say." - Alan Alda, Center for Communicating Science

Social psychology advises that we need to start where our listeners are, and forge a connection before they will be ready to hear our message. We may be wondering "What part of the environment don't you care about? The eating part? The drinking part? Or the breathing part?" but we need to start where we have something in common. Skeptical adults probably share a concern for their children's future well-being, if not for the survival of endangered exotic species. And almost everyone can recall a positive memory of feeling connected to the natural world, if we remind them gently.

Story Collider, a group that trains researchers to communicate better with non-scientists, urges scientists to start with a personal story about how they first became fascinated with their field. They find that a heart-felt “Origin Story” forges a connection with their listeners and makes them more receptive to hearing where a researcher's fascination has taken her. And I find that personal Origin Stories work for ecotelling too.

My mother said it used to take over an hour for me to toddle around the block with her, because I wanted to stop and look at every bug and plant. (I still do.) What do you remember?

Was it the seed in the little paper cup, the robins' nest outside your window, the starry night at scout camp that first struck you with wonder about our world? These Origin Stories not only show why we care, they can also revive listeners' own memories of comparable experiences. In my “Science: Tell It Like A Story” workshops for educators and park rangers, we recall and polish those anecdotes to use in introducing our programs. An Origin Story can help to get us and our listeners onto the same page of human experience.

Narrative Non-fiction: Biographies and Histories

Adult skeptics may not be comfortable with folktales, but they're probably used to hearing non-fiction talks. We can offer the **true life adventures** of Jane Goodall (with chimps), Dian Fossey (gorillas), Rachel Carson (author of *Silent Spring*), Wangari Maathai (Nobel Peace Prize for the Green Belt Movement in Africa). All of these faced significant resistance, “yet she persisted.” While focusing on the adventure, we can also convey WHY they pursued these particular goals. How did they become Aware? Why did they Care? What did they Dare? Do we have a local issue that matters as much to us?

History provides great stories in which the interrelationship of human action and the environment plays an important role. The Chipkos of India were literal “tree huggers,” risking their lives as far back as 1700s to preserve the forests on which their livelihood depended. More recently, “tree sitters” have blocked logging projects in other nations. Teens love

these stories of heroic non-violent action, and relate them to resistance movements such as Standing Rock, protests against gun violence, and more.

People like to hear **success stories** demonstrating that it's not too late to create positive change. Histories of habitat restoration are fun to tell, although interweaving all the relevant factors can be a challenge. (Everything Is Connected, right?) Here are a few examples:

Returning beavers to the San Pedro River, AZ

<https://www.nature.org/ourinitiatives/regions/northamerica/unitedstates/arizona/placesweprotect/san-pedro-river.xml>

Also on my CD *Stories & Songs for a Green Earth*

Saving Ash Meadows (now a National Wildlife Refuge)

<https://vimeo.com/groups/13672/videos/87197860>

Returning wolves to Yellowstone National Park (trophic cascade)

<https://www.wimp.com/how-wolves-change-rivers/>

These non-fiction narratives avoid the “gloom and doom” that can inspire resignation rather than action. I find that listeners of all ages enjoy hearing them, and the discussion afterward can make a connection with local issues where persistence could be rewarded.

Recent social history provides hope-inspiring evidence that people's behavior can change rapidly. Younger listeners may have thought cars always had seatbelts. (Wrestling with my brother in the back seat, I only knocked him out the door once — and caught him before he hit the road.) Old movies remind us that cigarette smoke used to be everywhere. (When I took a note to my 4th grade teacher in the teachers' lounge at PS104 Queens, I couldn't see her through the blue smoke.) Didn't we always have Designated Drivers?

(<https://www.madd.org>)

Yes, habits can change. If we could learn to remember to plug in our phones, we can learn to remember to plug in our electric cars. And bring the canvas shopping bags along...

Folktales, Fiction, and the Teachable Moment.

Traditional tales have proven track records of success in grabbing listeners' attention, holding it with entertainment, and leaving an indelible mark! (Besides, they're often easier than crafting a tellable tale out of non-fiction.) Whenever possible, I like to follow stories with discussion of alternatives. We can recommend at least one reasonable action that listeners can take.

Listeners of all ages have probably heard of **King Midas** but don't know the details of the story. I like to emphasize the way he figured that if something is good (gold), more is better. It's fun to imagine everything turning to gold... until it's not fun. Dang.

Let's think of other things that can be Good or Bad, depending on the amount and the location. Salt? Rain? Heat/cold? How about antibiotics? Lawn chemicals... Let's remember that many things are not inherently Good or Bad. Almost anything can cause trouble in the wrong amount or the wrong place.

Jenni Cargill-Strong's original “**Rustle and Shelly**” describes the journeys of a plastic shopping bag who just wanted to be useful. Improperly discarded after several admirable re-uses, Rustle was washed into the ocean and almost killed Shelly, a hungry sea turtle who mistook him for a jelly fish. But this isn't the end: the plastic scraps removed from her blocked stomach by a vet surgeon became part of an educational display warning people about plastic hazards — and teaching proper safe disposal.

This is a cautionary tale with a happy ending and a call to action as well. With Jenni's encouragement, I tell her original story to elementary school kids far from the ocean, but well within the area drained by the Mississippi River. Yes, a plastic bag from Oklahoma might end up in the Gulf of Mexico! I use a plastic shopping bag as a “rustling” prop as I tell about Rustle's travels — and then I show the kids how to tie it in knots so it won't get blown out of a landfill as Rustle was. Fortunately many grocery stores now have plastic recycling bins, a preferable fate which we discuss. How can you help your parents remember to collect and recycle the plastic bags they receive?

We also discuss the even better alternative: sturdy, washable, re-usable cloth grocery bags. How can you help your parents remember to bring the bags from kitchen to car, from car to store? I pull a couple nylon bags from my purse, where they wait compactly folded for those times that I forget to bring in my canvas bags.

Stealth Ecotelling

An effective story doesn't have to be "about" nature, but rather a **metaphor** demonstrating an ecological principal. I credit Kevin Strauss with pointing this out, and his book *Tales with Tails* itemizes ecological concepts we might want to convey via metaphorical tales.

Kevin told me his original tale <http://www.naturestory.com/Goodies/thestonemason'sd.html> in which a king seeks a successor by challenging candidates to remove a huge block of solid stone from his courtyard. They try brute force and clever mechanical systems, but can't budge it. Then the stonecutter's daughter succeeds by cutting off pieces she can carry away, tackling the job one manageable piece at a time. (With Kevin's permission I have added that she uses the pieces to build a clinic for the poor, tying social justice into the story.)

Kevin's story reminds us that we don't have to tackle an environmental problem all at one go, or alone. Individuals can address parts of it, and thanks to the way Everything Is Connected, each small action makes a difference.

No one has to do it all alone. No one could.

What are some of the actions individuals can take? Our daughter, Rebecca Stallings, suggests trying a change "just for Lent." Traditionally, many Christians gave up meat for the forty days before Easter. Becca suggests trying that in any season! You might decide to continue beyond forty days.

"Just for Lent" (or for some other short, measurable span), try leaving the car home: walk, bike, take public transit, carpool. Or decline all offers of single-use plastic bags, containers, utensils, straws: in addition to cloth

tote bags, Becca carries wooden chopsticks and brings reusable food boxes to restaurants. You can compost at home, recycle at work, etc. After forty days, it may become a way of life. And each action reminds us that what we do, does matter. Every day.

These small actions cannot of themselves counterbalance the massive impact of CO₂ from utilities and transportation and concrete, methane from cattle, toxic oil spills, and so on. The big stuff happens at corporate and government levels, which won't change until we force them to. But while we're working on that, we don't have to feel helpless. We can tell stories that help even skeptical people become Aware and Care, so that we will all Dare to make the differences that matter.

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Member publications of environmental organizations such as:

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- Union of Concerned Scientists <https://www.ucsusa.org>
- Friends of the Earth <https://foe.org>
- Environmental Defense Fund <https://www.edf.org>

<http://www.yesmagazine.org>

<https://www.resilience.org>

<https://www.giraffe.org>

Over 1,300 entries in a free database of real heroes: people who have stood tall and stuck their necks out for the common good.

<https://www.goldmanprize.org>

Goldman Environmental Prize gives annual awards to grassroots environmental activists, whose stories are on their website.

On the psychology of effective communication and opinion change:

NPR TED Radio Hour May 18, 2018 “Inspire to Action”

<https://www.npr.org/podcasts/510298/ted-radio-hour>

Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway *Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming* Bloomsbury Press; Paperback Reprint edition 2011, ISBN-10: 1608193942

“The Science of Everyday Thinking” a free on-line, self-paced course in social psychology

<https://www.edx.org/course/science-everyday-thinking-uqx-think101x-5>

Browse college textbooks in social psychology at your library to learn more about research on attitude change and decision making.

Communicating science through storytelling:

Story Collider: True personal stories about science.

<https://www.storycollider.org/podcasts/>

Alan Alda Center for Communicating Science.

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LF1xaPb2Nqo>

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Kevin Strauss “The Stonemason’s Daughter”
<http://www.naturestory.com/Goodies/thestonemason’sd.html>

Finding fellow eco-tellers:

NSN Environmental Storytelling Discussion Group:
<https://storynet.org/groups/environmental-storytelling-discussion-group/>

NSN Healing Stories Alliance SIG Environmental pages:
<https://storynet.org/groups/healing-story-alliance-hsa/healing-the-earth/>



Fran Stallings has been interpreting for traditional Japanese folk-teller Hiroko Fujita since 1995, after she saw how Americans in 22 states “didn’t understand a word, but understood the story!” Fran and Hiroko taught tellers and educators in US and Japan to use these techniques, and Fran has taken them nationwide as well as to Hong Kong, Macau, and Singapore.

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