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## COMMUNICATION: TALKING ABOUT WILDLAND WEEDS



Reaching out to all kinds of people is one of the best things you can do for the long-term health of your favorite park. Talking to passers-by while you're working can be even more important than getting the work done. Doing so can lead to a big donation to your cause or even turn angry adversaries into awesome advocates.

Such outreach can have ripple effects that extend far beyond the park's borders. When enough people understand the impacts that invasive plants can have on the landscape, they will avoid planting them in their gardens and become more likely to support stewardship efforts at the ballot box by voting for local parks and open space measures.

Some people are blessed with the ability to communicate complicated ideas quickly and effectively. These natural communicators make it look effortless in a way that can be intimidating for the rest of us. But we're not doomed to being tongue-tied. This chapter provides some simple techniques that will help you convey important messages about wildland weeds to diverse audiences.

### **THE ABCs OF INTERPRETATION**

You are engaged in the art of interpretation whenever you are talking with park visitors along a trail or to a group of volunteers at a work party. This word came into widespread use among park rangers during the last half-century to distinguish between mere instruction and information on one side and provocation

and revelation on the other. The National Association for Interpretation defines interpretation as “a communication process that forges emotional and intellectual connections between the interests of the audience and the meanings inherent in the resource.”

Interpretation is an art rather than a science because it requires you to re-create all the information that you have learned—the number of weeds in the park, their names, what plants they’re crowding out, all the stories you’ve heard

about invasive plants worldwide—in a way that’s accessible, meaningful, and compelling to your audience. Since it took you months and years to learn all those things, it doesn’t make sense to expect your audience to do so in just a few minutes. But that doesn’t mean you can’t convey complicated ideas. Follow these ABCs of interpretation, which come from a talented interpreter who has also led hundreds of work parties.

“When we encounter people on the trail, they’ll ask, ‘What are you doing?’ They can even be a little bit confrontational. They just see green plants lying dead on the ground. We sit down and explain why we’re doing this, and more often than not—probably 80 percent of the time—they turn around completely and say, ‘You know, I’ve never thought of that. I’ve never thought that a plant could be a problem.’ And sometimes people walking along the trail have said, ‘You know, I’d like to write you a check right now, on the spot.’ Even as much as \$500!”

*Ken Moore, Wildlands Restoration Team, Santa Cruz*

**Know your Audience.** If you can connect what you have to say to something in your audience’s experience, your message is much more likely to be remembered. Don’t assume that they know how pervasive the problem of invasive plants is, or how it affects the beauty of this special place. Build connections with them by using photographs (before-and-after photos of your site) and visual cues (point out a plant in flower that you’re trying to protect). Engage as many senses as possible. Crush a yerba buena leaf, for example, and invite them to smell the

delicious scent and then tell them how it’s threatened by ivy. Have fun with those common names. Why is it “sticky” monkeyflower? What about skunkweed? Should you make a coffeeberry brew?

**Keep it Basic.** Don’t overwhelm your audience with information, even if it’s a captive audience that has joined you for a work party. They came to work, not listen to you ramble on, and a person is only going to retain so much. Stick to the most important ideas. Don’t worry, though, that your knowledge about the nat-

ural world will not be useful. It will serve you when the occasion presents itself—when you notice a rare migrant bird singing in a nearby thicket, or when you encounter an uncommon plant that has seeded itself into your worksite following weed removal, or when you respond to innocent questions about the name of that hawk with a red tail. Seize the teachable moment—but keep it only for that moment and then let it go!

**Remember the Context.** If a couple out on a walk stops to ask a simple question, respond with a simple answer, in a manner that encourages dialogue. Be respectful of the context and make it your goal simply to forge connections with others. Don't launch into a ten-minute lament about how invasive species are turning the planet into a single homogeneous biosphere. Develop an elevator version of your spiel: it should last no longer than an elevator ride and convey enough interesting information and inspiration that your listeners want to spend more time with you.

These principles apply not only to speaking but also to the printed word. Take advantage of opportunities to spread the word about your project. For instance, posting signs at your worksite with before-and-after photographs can serve as excellent advertising for your work.

## TERMS

Part of the genius of the English language is its versatility and its remarkable abundance. Take *weeds*, for example, and the other words we use to describe them: invasive plants, alien plants, exotic plants, exotic pest plants, non-indigenous plants, non-native plants. The meanings overlap, but none are exact synonyms.

First, it is important to be accurate. Not all non-native plants are invasive, so these terms should not be used interchangeably. In fact, only a small percentage of non-native plants are widely naturalized in California's wildlands, and of these, only a few cause significant ecological damage—these are the invasive plants.

Second, it is important to use such terms with an appreciation for their cultural meanings. In a place with as much cultural diversity as the Bay Area, consider how your terms might be heard. You may use “non-native” in an innocent and descriptive manner, but it may carry other meanings for an audience of schoolchildren from immigrant families. This makes it doubly important to stress that it is not the non-native nature of the plants that present problems—there are many non-native plants that we love! But there are a few that can be quite destructive.

Familiar metaphors can help illustrate the point. A common one is that invasive plants act like bullies, taking over entire habitats. Another is that invasive

plants act like a business monopoly that uses its market power to force other firms out of business and drive up prices. Like the anti-trust regulators who rein in monopolies, weed workers are helping to level the playing field for everyone.

Metaphors can be incredibly useful, but they can also oversimplify your message. Writers in the popular press often latch onto war metaphors to express a sense of drama. Weed workers are described as “weed warriors” battling an invading army of invasive plants marching through native plant territory. Such metaphors paint an antagonistic image of weed workers and do not capture the positive spirit or complexity of ecological restoration.

## **FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT INVASIVE PLANTS**

Here are some questions that you should be prepared to encounter when you work on invasive weeds, along with some general answers.

**Does the park staff know you’re doing this?** Yes, they are quite supportive of this project. They are especially concerned about these weeds because they threaten some sensitive areas that they’re trying to protect.

**That plant is pretty, why are you removing it?** Pretty, yes, but it can have harmful effects on our natural environment. Many other plants—and the animals that need them—are being crowded out by this plant species. Some invasive plants are easy to hate because they’re ugly or prickly, but many are quite beautiful. In fact, many of these plants were brought here originally for use as ornamentals, without knowing that later they would become such problems.

**Why are you cutting down trees?** It’s true that trees are beautiful and we tend to think of trees as good for the environment. We’re definitely not removing all the trees. But these particular trees are taking over this area, destroying the vegetation that was here before and replacing it with a much less diverse plant community.

**Are all weeds bad?** Not all plants that we call *weeds* are a problem ecologically. Not all of the “weeds” that grow in your yard are a problem here in the park, although some are. But it’s true that wildland weeds have a negative ecological effect. Plants are not inherently good or bad—remember, each of these weeds is native somewhere. Back there, it might even be threatened by invasive plants from somewhere else—perhaps even California! Some plants simply have the ability to do more damage than good in the natural environment in a particular place.

**Since most of us humans are from somewhere else, does this mean we should be removed?** Definitely not. We’re working on plants, and in fact many non-native plants do just fine here. It is a very small percentage that actually take off in the

landscape at the expense of many other organisms. This is typically because the climate suits it, and because native animals or insects don't eat the plant, giving it a competitive advantage over other plants. Weed work is about supporting natural diversity—removing these few problem species allows hundreds of others to flourish.

**What will happen if we do nothing?** Some of these invasive plant infestations have the potential to become a virtual monoculture, forming patches where almost no other plants grow. The diverse mix of plants and animals that were here before is then lost.

**What will happen to the animals that are using those invasive plants?** Usually, the animals are using invasive plants for food or shelter because the native plants that historically served that purpose are gone or greatly reduced. If we restore those plants as the invasives are removed, the animals can begin using the native plants again.

**What will it look like when you're finished?** At the very end, it will look beautiful, more like that area over there that hasn't been invaded. In the medium term, it might look rather bad, since we have to remove a bunch of plants.

**Why is this area fenced off? Will it always be fenced?** It's important that we protect the newly planted seedlings so they can get established. Once they are strong enough to stand up to deer browsing, foot traffic, and new weed seeds, the fences can come down.

**How can I get involved?** Glad you asked. We have materials right here with contact information to make it easy for you to get involved.

When confronted with questions like these, keep in mind that you often have only a minute or two to answer the question. Using the ABCs of interpretation—know your Audience, keep it Basic, remember the Context—will help you have a creative, constructive conversation. It's some of the most important work you'll do!

