

# Having a Rough Conversation? Try This!

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Ah, the holidays are here. The only chance all year many of us get to see the relatives and old friends in the home town. And argue with them.

With my family, there are many topics of conversation. The cute, sparkling eyes of the tots when they awake and see presents left by Santa under the tree. The funny story of the old neighbor who couldn't quite get the words right on the neighborhood caroling nights. The best recipes for cranberry sauce. I, of course, immediately steer the conversation to human-caused climate change, biodiversity, and environmental protection.

Many of my friends and family do not share my enthusiasm—some might say obsession—with the natural environment and conservation. Furthermore, my brother-in-law, a former police lieutenant in the Phoenix area, tells me most domestic violence occurs during the holidays; therefore, when I talk to my friends and relatives, I watch my step. Fortunately, I teach a class in conservation communication at the University of Arizona, and I have written a book on the subject. Since many of you, no matter how hard you try to steer clear, may find yourselves in difficult conversations with family and friends, I'll pass on a few tips. Consider it my Christmas present to you—how to talk with someone about a controversial environmental topic and actually get them to listen to you. The good news is that I have had many of these conversations with confirmed climate change deniers and anti-conservation types. The conversations have actually been fun, and I haven't had my nose broken...yet.

First, get yourself in the right frame of mind. I would say only a small percentage of climate change deniers/anti-conservation types are bad folks—the sort of people who would do anything for a dollar. The rest can be swayed. Most climate deniers or anti-conservation types either don't know what to believe; think the problem is too big to tackle and prioritize; or listen to the garbage spewed out by people who profit from denial—those who market the idea that having unclean air and water and less biodiversity are somehow good for humanity. Environmental issues just aren't on many people's minds and most are unfamiliar with the specifics. For example, imagine if 97% of economists came to us and said, "You need to plan for short and long-term financial goals with at least 10% of your savings deposited into 401K investments to take advantage of compound interest rates;" and 3% of economists came to us and said, "You'll be fine; just spend, spend, spend till your heart is content. The other economists don't know what they are talking about." A sizable number of us might consider the option of the 3%'ers because it is easy—no matter how many economists were in favor of the alternative. To avoid this scenario on environmental subjects, we conservation professionals need the skills to communicate with people who disagree with us because they believe faulty "science" or have little knowledge

of the urgency of environmental problems. With this in mind, here are a few tips to converse with that naysayer when you—or the other person—brings up an environmental topic:

- (1) *Listen to them and ask questions.* Most people are very upset if people don't listen to them. This should always be your first step! If they aren't specific, ask them what they mean. Remember to *keep your cool* during this stage. If somebody calls you a jerk, ask them why they think you are one. After letting them talk and talk, they will (1) tire, and (2) you will have a good idea about what is specifically bothering them.
- (2) *Use verbal "judo." Always be truthful!* Three options are to legitimately compliment them about something they say (e.g., "You really have a strong opinion about this! Sounds like you have been doing a lot of good thinking about it!"); agree with them in some way (e.g., "You are correct, sometimes the scientists don't explain climate change very well!"); or show them empathy (e.g., "We used to own oil wells in Indiana. I know exactly how you feel about the chance that you might lose some of yours").
- (3) *Repeat the first two steps until you feel they are ready to listen. Then diplomatically state your point of view.* (For example, on climate change: "I really care about your kids and mine. I work with lots of scientists who are good, smart people, and who are really worried about the environment/climate change and are not just pushing an agenda to get money. We really need to do something about this, and I hope you will commit to doing something about it—e.g., not voting for climate deniers, etc.").

When things get tough, give these suggestions a try. Or for more detail, you can read my book (Bonar 2007). There is also a type of "Police Verbal Judo," which is really useful for getting someone to comply with a request. (I used this on my teenage daughters to get them to clean up their rooms. Sorry ladies!). These methods really work and should be helpful for those of you who may find yourself in an awkward position. Learn them to help convey your science. Remember, we need to get those who are anti-science, anti-environment, anti-climate change to realize holding those positions are not in their interest at all! Now get back to the caroling.

*The opinions and tips given here, like all my columns, are mine and do not necessarily represent AFS or my employer. This column is an updated version of one I wrote for the AFS newsletter some time ago – These skills are so important, I thought I would share them again!*

## REFERENCE

Bonar, S. A. 2007. The conservation professional's guide to working with people. Island Press, Washington, D.C. [AFS](#)