



LANGUAGE

GUIDE

A guide to better communicate with communities in your work and to decolonize your language.

Who we are

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The Ocean Equity Collective is a coalition of BIPOC-led organizations and people focused on holistic ocean conservation, protection, and appreciation. Our goal is to foster the next generation of ocean stewardship and create a community-centered sustainability movement where all people can access and cherish the ocean's ecosystems. Our mission is to address historical inequities in the ocean conservation movement and include historically excluded communities in the protection and enjoyment of the ocean's ecosystems.

The Next 100 Coalition was established in 2016 as a collaborative national network of Black, Indigenous, People of Color leaders from community-centered conservation, outdoor recreation, environmental education, public health, environmental justice orgs. Together, we work towards a shared vision of a more diverse and inclusive lands and ocean conservation movement.

How to help

Your feedback is highly valued as we strive to improve this Language Guide. We wholeheartedly invite you to join our collaborative efforts by sharing your thoughts and inquiries through the QR code provided below. The QR code will lead you to a form in which feedback and input will be collected to develop the next iteration of this resource.

Thank you for your invaluable contribution.



Prologue

The Ocean Equity Collective is an affinity program of the Next 100 Coalition, composed of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color-led and serving organizations and individuals. Our mission is to foster the next generation of ocean stewardship while elevating and creating a community-centered sustainability movement where all people can access and cherish the ocean and its ecosystems. We envision a community-centered and led sustainability movement, where the ocean's ecosystems are conserved, accessible, protected, and cherished by all people.

The Ocean Equity Collective works to ensure all communities can participate in the protection and enjoyment of the ocean's ecosystems by addressing the current and historical inequities built in the ocean conservation movement. We do this by continuing in our cultural traditions, centering communities, and working to support a movement that includes those who have been historically excluded.

This guide has been written to aid in community support. Whether the guide is used by an individual, on behalf of an organization, government agency, or a corporation, we hope this guide is used to better communication and relationships with communities, and to decolonize the language we use. Language is the basis of trust building and so important in interactions with new partners, and communities. Especially when creating new partnerships for research, data collection, or projects, it is of the utmost importance that communities feel comfortable, safe, and heard in those partnerships. Communities can tell when interactions are transactional and/or paternalistic, and not only does this weaken the outcome of the partnership, but it creates distrust, lessening the opportunity that the community will work with that person or group again.

As many Black, Indigenous, and communities of color have been on the unsafe end of these transactional interactions, we sought to create a resource that will work to lessen these kinds of interactions and open the door for more fruitful conversations and partnerships across communities and sectors. This language guide was created by members of the Next 100 Coalition's Ocean Equity Collective and we recognize that it is just a start to a more comprehensive language guide that will be built with community. Therefore, this first iteration of the guide will continue to grow with community input.

We look forward to engaging more BIPOC community members as we expand on this growing document and collectively build a resource that all communities can utilize and learn from.

Disempowering Language and 'Insteads'

Our words are not without meaning, they are an action, a resistance. Language is also a place of struggle.

-bell hooks

Disempowering rhetoric is frequently used in the environmental sector, including the ocean conservation community.

This is often done both verbally and in written form. Disempowering language should be avoided as it is dismissive of the power and autonomy BIPOC communities hold, while also centering and giving power to predominantly white institutions, which reinforces a white savior complex and prevents meaningful engagement.

What follows are examples of commonly used words or phrases that we often hear and/or read but should avoid using.

~~DISADVANTAGED~~

disadvantaged

Why not use this word: Environmental racism is about circumstances not individuals—structural and economic inequalities cause disadvantage,¹ but to call someone disadvantaged places the emphasis on them, as if it is an individual's direct failing that has caused their circumstances, not systematic inequity.

Alternative words: Ex. “X community has been at the forefront of the systemic inequity causing _____ to affect them more so than other communities/ X people.”

~~EMPOWER~~

empower

Why not use this word: “The notion of empowerment presumes that the organization has the power and benevolently ladles some of it into the waiting bowls of grateful employees. That’s just a slightly more civilized form of control.”— Daniel Pink.² You should not be empowering anyone, each person has their own power of voice and experience, but not necessarily the opportunity or platform to share.

Alternative words: sharing power, encouraging people in power to give this opportunity to someone with lived experience on this issue

~~LIFT UP~~

lift up

Why not use this word: This word has the implication of white saviorism. Just as the term empower is just a nicety of doling out power at the convenience of the oppressor, so is the phrase ‘lifting up’. The problem here is that lifting up is a phrase of clear impermanence, when the person in a position of power no longer wants to hear a voice or ‘look good’ they can shove that ‘lifted voice’ back down and snatch their power back.

Alternative words: moving aside for X person/community member.

~~lower-case communities~~

Lower case of Black, Brown, and Indigenous

Why not use lower case: It is disrespectful and dehumanizing to not capitalize words when discussing people. It takes away a key part of a person's identity when you describe them as a you would the coloring of an inanimate object.

Alternative words: When discussing people (individuals and communities), Black, Brown, and Indigenous, should be treated out of respect as a proper noun.

~~MINORITIES~~

minorities

Why not use this word: This word should not be used because it implies that we have no power and are "less than". Currently, BIPOC communities do not encompass the majority of the United States population, but we do account for three-fourths of the world population. It is important to acknowledge that we have greatly shaped culture and practices in this nation. For some, minority/minorities is simply a term that denotes numbers and basic math or community census. However, this term is reserved when discussing BIPOC populations, despite the fact that there are other demographics who are not called minorities and get called less than.

Alternative word(s): BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, Communities of Color). Note that BIPOC is only appropriate when discussing multiple communities of different identities—as often as possible name the population you are talking about.

~~SPEAKING FOR~~

speaking for

Why not use these words: BIPOC communities can and do speak for themselves. It is not the role of anyone outside of that community to speak on their behalf. The goal is to not speak for communities, but instead to work alongside communities as they continue to voice their will and needs.

Alternative words: 'ceding my time' so that X person with lived experience can speak to this issue, I want to 'invite X person to speak' as I know they have experience in this area

~~“THESE COMMUNITIES”~~

“these communities”

Why not use these words: The lack of specificity when discussing poor people and BIPOC people lends itself to the notion that these communities are beyond help, unspeakable, and embarrassing. This wording, again, places the onus on a person, not a systemic inequity and purposeful oppression of specific peoples and communities.

Alternative words: ‘___ communities’ ex. Black communities, people living under the poverty line, etc. Specify the exact community you are referencing and speak of the clear connection to said communities oppression and harm that has led to the issue at hand.

~~UNDERPRIVILEGED~~

underprivileged

Why not use this word: This is another word that ignores the systemic inequities that many frontline and BIPOC communities have been oppressed by. While the term is supposed to refer to people who don't "enjoy the same standard of living or rights as the majority of people in a society," but has increasingly become a lazy shorthand to refer to any minority, regardless of economic status.³ This also implies that no person of color lives above the poverty line, further perpetuating the narrative that people of color are a drain on the economy and social services.

Alternative words: people living below the poverty line, people who do not have access to a quality standard of living.

~~VULNERABLE~~

vulnerable

Why not use this word: Using the word vulnerable implies something is wrong with the people of discussion. Most of the struggles BIPOC communities experience are not to their own fault, instead communities experience the effects of systemic racism. Therefore, language needs to take away any fault of communities.⁴

Alternative words: Susceptible or “X people are more likely to experience...”

Definitions and Examples

SOCIAL JUSTICE IS ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

Social justice for people and communities is integral to the protection of the ocean, and our planet at large. Conservation and resilience work for the environment cannot be separated from the communities that surround and care for these sites. We affirm that communities are a part of the larger ecosystem of the environment and people cannot be separated from the conversations to conserve specific areas.

CO-STEWARDSHIP/CO-MANAGEMENT:

Co-stewardship/co-management describes the working relationships between First Nation Peoples/Tribes and the nation state that forcibly removed them from their lands and continues to occupy them today. At its core, co-stewardship/co-management refers to the joint care and supervision of Indigenous lands by tribal authorities and current government departments.

When enacted properly, co-stewardship/co-management should protect treaty, religious, subsistence and cultural rights of the Indigenous entity. It should also ensure consultation, collaboration, self-governance, and acknowledgement of tribal authority over their lands. Co-stewardship/co-management work should be mutually led and should be a first step in a wider process of land repatriation/land back initiatives.

CONSERVATION

Conservation as defined by this group is holistic, collaborative, and inclusive efforts to protect and revitalize earth's natural resources and ecosystems while respecting and prioritizing long-standing cultural relationships to place and fostering trust with all people.

ACCESSIBILITY

Accessibility as defined by this group is the quality of being able to connect to the ocean and coastal spaces and other natural spaces for mental and physical wellbeing and revitalization. This is taking into account different perspectives and connections as well as recognizing the barriers and unjust practices that have been experienced by many communities. Some of the ways that we can provide equitable and just accessibility is to consider some of the different barriers for communities to truly connect to ocean and coastal spaces. **Here are some examples:**

- **Historical (or historical to social) segregation** - kept out “legally”, turned to being kept out implicitly
- **Physical** - Physically getting to the ocean and coastal spaces is one of the first things we can think about when it comes to accessibility. How open are these spaces physically and are there any physical barriers such as distance, highways, gates impeding from reaching the outdoors, the type and nature of paths leading to ocean and coastal spaces.
- **Financial** - The financial ability to get into spaces or transport to places is a barrier for many low-income communities who oftentimes cannot afford to get to those spaces.
- **Language and Signage** - Signage should take into consideration the various communities it is serving and require that the language in the signage is reflective of the communities that it is serving.

LIVED EXPERT

A lived expert is someone who has spent a portion or the entirety of their life experiencing growth and wisdom in a particular geographical area or subject matter. Often these experts are looked to/trusted in their communities to be able to critically assess problems being faced.

LEARNED EXPERT

A learned expert is someone who has gone through extensive training and education to learn about a subject or geographical area. These learned experts often have degrees from institutions of higher learning and are practitioners of western science fields.

MARINE PROTECTED AREA

Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) are places in the ocean that receive protection to safeguard biodiversity from abatable threats. MPA's seek long-term protection of coastal and marine ecosystems and are typically marked by restricted human activity.

While MPA's have much potential to conserve coastal areas and protect ecosystems against serious threats like overfishing, they also have the potential to limit or stop Indigenous and other community-led stewardship efforts.

MPA's tend to operate under a "look, but don't touch" conservation model, which clashes with Indigenous approaches to stewardship that recognize humans as an integral part of nature and its ecosystems.

Under a Traditional Ecological Knowledge framework, the removal of humans is not a valid long-term conservation solution. Therefore, MPA initiatives should be carefully considered and include community input.

TRADITIONAL ECOLOGICAL KNOWLEDGE

Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) represents an ever-growing body of data, wisdom, practice, and knowledge acquired by Indigenous/Local Peoples through the multiple generations they have spent connected to their respective environments. Passed down and built upon across generations, TEK denotes deep connection to place, and cannot be narrowly defined.

TEK is a combination of cultural identity, ancestral wisdom, ethics, cosmology, factual observation, experiential knowledge, environmental setting, and multigenerational practices. Within a TEK framework, the environment is part of a wider social, physical, and spiritual relationship that humans are an integral part of.

Acknowledgments

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The collaborative spirit, expertise, and insights shared by individuals within these organizations have been instrumental in shaping the recommendations and insights presented here.

We acknowledge that this Language Guide is non-exhaustive and there are many other organizations and individuals contributing to advancing language and environmental justice; and we recognize and appreciate their efforts. We hope that this guide can serve as a starting point for further discussions and collaborations.

This guide stands as a testament to the power of unity and collective action.

Oceans Equity Collective Members



Citations

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