STORYTELLING AS STRATEGY

at the nexus of nature, environmental justice, and public health.

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"Every person in America deserves to grow up healthy and safe, breathing fresh air, drinking safe water, and thriving in safe outdoor spaces." 91% of us agree.

A healthy relationship with every part of nature is a birthright. In a world of bleach-masked air and yellow-tinted drinking water, we are being bankrupted by inaction. Our air, our water, and our future are all connected.

"Nature, Justice, and Health (NJH) Nexus" is a goal we collectively share. Conservation is not separate from Environmental Justice; Environmental Justice is not separate from Public Health; and Public Health is not separate from Conservation. Language, specifically Stories, is one of the tools we have to build power and eventually shift popular culture.

In this document, we respond to the Frequently Asked Questions about our Coalition's Storytelling strategy.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

- What is a story, according to our coalition?
- Why is the coalition using storytelling as strategy?
- What kind of stories can I tell?
- How do I submit a story?
- What happens after I submit a story?
- How do we plan on using these stories?
- What is the Story Directory?
- How do I ethically collect stories from my community?
- What format can I submit stories in?
- What Is The Monthly Story Theme About?
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- What is the difference between a Story, a Message, a Frame, and a Narrative?
- Is your Storytelling Strategy grounded in evidence?
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WHAT IS A STORY, ACCORDING TO OUR COALITION?

A story is a true account of a person, a place, or a community's relationship with their ecological, social, and health environment. It is told by or with the consent of the person whose experience it reflects. It is grounded in specifics: a named place, a real experience, a particular moment, rather than abstractions.

A story is not a statistic, though it may be informed by data. It is not a talking point, though it may support an advocacy goal. It is not a press release or a social media caption. It is a human or other species in nature's account that makes the invisible visible: the health cost of a policy decision, what a wildlife crossing means to an Indigenous community's relationship with the animals we share land with, the community excluded from a conservation process, the connection between a waterway and a family's livelihood. It is a living organism narrating "this is what happened to me and this is why it matters."

Our coalition stories typically contain our #NatureJusticeHealth nexus:

- What happened to the land, water, or air?
- Who decided to let that happen, and why this community?
- What happened to people's bodies?

WHY IS THE COALITION USING STORYTELLING AS STRATEGY?

Stories are how we build power and then ultimately shift popular culture. Our research shows that 91% of Americans agree every child deserves clean air and safe water, but they don't always connect that belief to action. Stories make abstract issues concrete. When a parent in Louisiana describes their child's asthma attacks near a refinery, or a tribal elder explains what a sacred site means to their community, people feel the stakes. We want environmental justice and conservation to be impossible to ignore when people vote. We want the nature-justice-health nexus to be a framework leaders in every sphere of society use before making decisions.

Neuroscience research further demonstrates that narrative activates empathy and cooperation in ways that data alone cannot. Stories synchronize the listener's brain with the storyteller's, creating a shared experience rather than a one-way information transfer. A person who reads that PM2.5 levels exceed EPA standards processes a statistic. A person who hears a mother describe her daughter's three-times-daily inhaler use because of the refinery across the street processes an experience. They remember the daughter. They feel the injustice. They act.

More specifically, our coalition needs storytelling because we operate at the nexus of movements that do not naturally share a language. Conservation, environmental justice, and public health have different emotional registers, different evidence standards, and different persuasion traditions. Stories are the only medium flexible enough to carry the full nexus without collapsing it into a single frame.

WHAT KIND OF STORIES CAN I TELL?

Our coalition values four types of stories:

- **Lived Experience Stories:** A real person, in a real place, affected by a real policy or environmental condition. These collapse the distance between the audience and the issue.
- **Translation Stories:** A story that holds conservation, nature, environmental justice, and health simultaneously in a single narrative. These demonstrate the nexus in human terms.
- **Power Stories:** A community, an organization, or an individual organized, acted, and changed an outcome. These move audiences from sympathy to belief that collective action works.
- **Proof-of-Concept Stories:** The coalition or a member organization accomplished something concrete. These build credibility with policymakers, funders, and prospective members.

HOW DO I SUBMIT A STORY?

Feel free to use any or all of the following methods

- Send it to us privately and, depending on your preference, we will publish it
- Post to our Reddit
- Post to our Flickr

WHAT HAPPENS AFTER I SUBMIT A STORY?

Once submitted, stories enter our Story Directory, a searchable collection the coalition can draw from. The communications team reviews incoming stories and identifies ones to amplify through newsletters, social media, and direct advocacy. We may follow up with you

to confirm details, ask clarifying questions, or coordinate timing with a live policy moment. You will always have the chance to review and approve before anything is published or shared beyond the directory.
If your story is selected for amplification, we will let you know when and how it was used, and share the impact if we can measure it.

HOW DO WE PLAN ON USING THESE STORIES?

- **Congressional advocacy:** providing tested language and constituent stories to Hill staffers who are asking us, directly, "What do you want us to say?"
- **Earned media engagement:** equipping coalition members with ready-to-use stories for op-eds, press statements, and interviews.
- **Movement infrastructure learning:** our coalition is the first of its kind to exist. We are proof that 300+ organizations across issue area, race, geography, and organizational size can sit at a table together. That they can share resources, align without being absorbed, and center the voices of the people closest to the harm. The stories we collect are raw data that helps us and subsequent movements improve this emergent strategy.
- **Member recruitment:** showing prospective members the coalition's value through the voices of current members.
- **Newsletter and digital communications:** maintaining engagement with our 300+ member organizations through stories that demonstrate what the coalition makes possible.
- **Funder communications:** demonstrating the coalition's impact and value proposition through narrative, not just metrics.
- **Coalition cohesion:** reinforcing shared identity, especially during politically hostile periods when policy wins are scarce.
- **Ecosystems restoration tool:** demonstrate that collective storytelling can function as a (freshwater) restoration tool, not just communication about restoration but a mechanism that actually motivates and sustains it.

WHAT IS THE STORY DIRECTORY?

A living webpage that hosts our story collection from across the United States and houses our movement infrastructure storytelling resources. It is both a public-facing archive of the stories our coalition has gathered and a resource hub for members who want to strengthen their own storytelling practice.

Explore at americathebeautifulforall.org/storydirectory

HOW DO I ETHICALLY COLLECT STORIES FROM MY COMMUNITY?

Storytelling can easily become extractive. Taking people's pain for our purposes without giving back. Our coalition is committed to non-extractive storytelling. This means:

- **Consent first, always.** The storyteller decides whether to participate, what to share, and how their story is used. Consent is ongoing, not a one-time checkbox. A storyteller can ask for their story to be removed from the directory at any time, for any reason, and we will honor that.
- **Start with relationships.** The least extractive stories come from people who already trust you or your organization. If you're reaching into a new community, go through a trusted intermediary.
- **Community leads.** Wherever possible, let the community determine the questions, the focus, and the framing. You are a facilitator, not an author. The community/ individual storyteller is the knowledge producer.
- **Cultural humility.** Different communities have different norms around sharing, privacy, and representation. Ask. Listen. Follow their lead.
- **No editing someone's voice.** Grammatical cleanup, graphic, audio, and video editing, are appropriate. Changing someone's meaning, tone, or emphasis is not. Their story, their words. Let them control their narrative.
- **Prioritize storyteller's safety.** When collecting stories of children and minors: always get parental or guardian consent. When collecting stories on sensitive topics including but not limited to health conditions, immigration status, etc., be extra careful about what identifying details you include.
- **Reciprocity.** What does the storyteller get from sharing? Recognition? Access to resources? A platform? Policy overturn? If the answer is "nothing," reconsider whether you should be asking.

- **Credit and ownership.** The storyteller is always named first (unless they request anonymity) and always retains ownership of their story. The story collector/ interviewer (if any) gets credited second.
- **Be transparent about purpose.** Tell people upfront: "We're collecting stories to share with policymakers and the public to build support for environmental and conservation stewardship. Your story might be posted online, shared in newsletters, or used in advocacy materials. Is that okay with you?"
- **Follow up.** If circumstances allow, let people know when and how their story was used. Share the impact if you can measure it.
- Check out our larger **Ethical Storytelling Resource here.**

WHAT FORMAT CAN I SUBMIT STORIES IN?

Any format that feels natural to you. The most important thing is the story itself, not the production quality. You can submit as

- a written piece (any length),
- a voice memo or audio recording,
- a video from your phone,
- photographs with captions,
- or a combination of any of these.

Our communications team is also available to have a 20-60 minute conversation with you, you talk, we listen, we may ask questions, and we draft the story from your words. You review it, approve it, and it gets published. You maintain full editorial control throughout. Please be assured that we will never change your voice, your meaning, or your framing. Your story, your words.

WHAT IS THE MONTHLY STORY THEME ABOUT?

Each month, we focus our story collection around a theme drawn from our messaging research and our coalition's policy calendar. This helps us build a coherent narrative across the coalition and ensures we are collecting stories that align with what we know works. For example, a month themed around "Home" might prompt: "What does 'our common home' mean to you? Who is harming it, and what are we protecting?" A month themed

around "Babies, Kids, Grandparents, Elders" might ask: "Tell a story about a child or elder in your life and what you want them to inherit. Who or what is threatening that future?"
These monthly themes are guides, not requirements. A story that does not fit the monthly theme is still very valuable to our coalition and our movement.

WHAT IF MY ORGANIZATION ALREADY COLLECTS STORIES?

Many of our 300+ member organizations have their own storytelling infrastructure, and we do not want to duplicate or replace it. Here is how the coalition's storytelling strategy works alongside yours:
If your organization already collects stories from your community, consider whether any of them hold the nexus (nature, justice, and health together). If they do, submitting them to our Story Directory gives them a second life: they reach policymakers, funders, and fellow coalition members who may never encounter your organization's own channels. You retain full ownership and credit. The coalition amplifies; it does not absorb.
If your organization's stories tend to focus on one dimension (conservation, or environmental justice, or health), the coalition's framing can help you surface the nexus that may already be present in those stories but unnamed. Our Story Crafting Lounge and our storytelling resources are designed to support that kind of translation.
And if your organization wants to adopt our ethical storytelling commitments or our messaging research for your own work, you are welcome to. That is part of what the coalition is for.

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A STORY, A MESSAGE, A FRAME, AND A NARRATIVE?

These terms get used interchangeably, but they are different tools that operate at different scales.

- **Narrative.** Narrative is the big story underneath everything. It is the worldview you are asking people to adopt. It answers: Who are we? What is happening? Who is responsible? What world are we building? A narrative is not something you say directly. It is the constellation that makes everything else make sense. People absorb it over time through repeated exposure to messages, stories, and experiences that reinforce it. For example, a narrative our coalition is advocating for is: We are the

people who live here—in cities and rural towns, on coasts and in mountains, across generations and backgrounds. This land, this water, this air—it's our shared home.

- **Frame.** Frame is the lens through which a piece of information gets interpreted. Framing is the science of how context shapes meaning. Drawn from the science of communication, a frame is the angle that decides which facts feel relevant and which values get activated. The same fact lands differently depending on the frame around it. "Who decides what happens to your land, your community or a corporation?" is an agency frame. "When you pollute the water, you attack people's health and their home" is a health-and-home frame. Our frames come from tested research, not instinct.
- **Message.** Message is how you express the narrative in specific, repeatable, tested language. Messages are the phrases and framings that move an audience to a particular action. They are portable: you can hand one to a coalition member, a Hill staffer, or a reporter and say "use this language." *These lands and waters are our shared inheritance, not a government asset to liquidate* is a message. It carries the frame in words a Hill staffer can drop into a floor speech or a member can use in a letter to the editor.
- **Story.** Story is the foundational unit. It is a specific person's experience in a specific place at a specific time. A story makes the narrative concrete. It fills the frame with a face. It gives the message a heartbeat. Without stories, narratives are abstractions, frames are academic, and messages are slogans. With stories, all three come alive.

IS YOUR STORYTELLING STRATEGY GROUNDED IN EVIDENCE?

Yes, and here is what that evidence looks like.

- Our coalition's messaging research was conducted by two research partners.
    - ASO Communications performed a comprehensive linguistic analysis of how conservation, environmental justice, and public health movements talk, identifying patterns that strengthen and weaken our language (for example: active voice outperforms passive voice, "healthy and safe" outperforms "clean," naming specific actors outperforms vague institutional language, and "steward" outperforms "protect" in moving people to action).
    - Lake Research Partners then tested messages with a national poll of 1,500+ registered voters, with oversamples of Black, Latino, Spanish-speaking, and

Native and Indigenous voters, to determine which frames resonate across partisan lines and demographic groups. The finding that 91% of Americans agree every child deserves clean air and safe water comes from that research.

- The neuroscience evidence we reference throughout this FAQ draws on published research demonstrating that narrative activates neural coupling (the listener's brain synchronizes with the storyteller's), increases oxytocin production (which drives empathy and cooperation), and produces stronger recall and behavior change than statistical information alone.
- Our ethical storytelling framework draws on established practices in community-based participatory research, Indigenous data sovereignty, and the broader field of non-extractive storytelling, adapted for coalition-scale work.
- And our story type taxonomy (Lived Experience, Translation, Power, and Proof-of-Concept) was developed from our coalition's own practice: observing which kinds of stories actually moved policymakers, recruited members, secured funding, and held the coalition together.

I AM STILL A BIT OVERWHELMED

That is okay. Here are two things that can help.

- **Come to our Story Crafting Lounge.** Join us on the third Thursday of every month, 3:00 to 4:00 PM ET, for 60 minutes of focus and community. Our Story Crafting Lounge is a drop-in, production-focused, virtual workspace grounded in our shared Messaging Framework. You do not need a finished story. You do not need an idea. You just need to show up. We will help you find it.
- **Use this filter before you collect.** Before you collect or tell any story, it may help to run it through these questions:
    - **Which job does this story do?** (Move a policymaker / Recruit a member / Move a funder / Hold the coalition together). If you can't name the job, don't collect it yet.
    - **Is there a live policy hook?** A bill, a budget fight, an agency decision, a state legislative session.
    - **Does it hold the nexus?** Can you draw the line from the ecological issue to the justice dimension to the health outcome? If you can only see one dimension,

it's a conservation story or an EJ story or a health story, but it's not an AtB4A story.

Read stories and explore all of our storytelling resources at
americathebeautifulforall.org/storydirectory

For questions about storytelling, ethical collection, or the Story Directory,
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