

Ecologue

NEWSLETTER FOR ENVIRONMENTAL ADVOCACY

Winter 1993 Volume 4, No. 2

The Conference on Communication and Our Environment: A Review

The Yellowstone Conference Center in Big Sky, Montana, was the site of this summer's Conference on Communication and Our Environment (July 23-25, 1993). Organized by James Cantrill of Northern Michigan University and Jimmie Killingsworth of Texas A&M, the conference follows up the Conference on the Discourse of Environmental Advocacy, held in 1991 in Alta, Utah. Because of the participants' enthusiasm and the continuing timeliness (if not urgency) of the topic, the organizers have tentative plans for another conference two years from now.

The conference began on Friday night, July 23, with a keynote address and discussion led by Robert Ekey, the Communication Director for the Greater Yellowstone Coalition, a local environmental advocacy group devoted primarily to wilderness and wildlife protection. Panels of academic papers, selected by double blind review, were scheduled from Saturday morning through Sunday noon. A total of thirty-three papers were presented to more than fifty individuals in attendance. In addition to papers, Saturday night featured a slide show and open discussion of landscape photography and environmental politics, led by James Frost of Texas A&M. Between panels, conference attendees had the opportunity to sample meals

and services provided by the staff at Big Sky; although the weather did not permit extensive views of the alpine environment, the grandeur of the Yellowstone Conference Center was greatly appreciated.

The papers offered a number of approaches, illustrating the inevitably interdisciplinary nature of the topic. Rhetorical analyses, which tended to dominate the first conference, were still the leading discipline at this year's conference although contributions in journalism, visual communication, and literary and cultural studies increased significantly.

One indication of diversity of approaches appeared in the first panel of papers, entitled "A Thematic Showcase":

* David Sachsman of the Department of Communication and Public Affairs, University of Tennessee, Chattanooga, spoke on "The Mass Media and Environmental Risk Communication: Then and Now," offering a historical overview of twenty years of environmental coverage, and arguing that journalists have stuck to their own values rather than emphasizing "importance," the only value they share with science.

* Christine Oravec of the Department of Communication, University of Utah, in her paper "To Stand Outside Oneself: The Sublime in the Discourse of Natural Scenery," argued that the conventional representation of the sublime,

(Continued on page 2)

which is basic to our understanding of nature, plays three functional and historic roles: as a perceptual screen for viewing nature, as a formula for representing the scenery of the nineteenth century American West, and as a component of contemporary environmental issues.

* Norbert Elliot and John Opie of the Department of Social Science and Policy Studies, New Jersey Institute of Technology, in their paper "The Significance of Rhetoric in the Turner Thesis," contended that both the end-of-the-frontier thesis set forth in Frederick Jackson Turner's famous 1883 essay and the rhetorical strategies employed by Turner continue to be used by environmental writers.

* Marilyn Cooper of the Department of Humanities, Michigan Technological University, presented "Environmental Rhetoric in an Age of Hegemonic Politics," a paper drawing on cultural studies that contrasted the oppositional rhetoric of Earth First! with the hegemonic rhetoric of the Nature Conservancy.

Space prohibits a full account of the papers, but the organizers of the conference will produce a volume of proceedings, which should be ready late in 1993. Copies can be ordered directly from James Cantrill, Communication and Performance Studies, Northern Michigan University, Marquette, Michigan, 49855-5362.

Though the range of presenters was fairly broad, the organizers hope that, for the next conference, there will be yet more diversity of participation, topical coverage, and methodology. Inquiries concerning the 1995 conference should be directed to Jimmie Killingsworth, Department of English, Texas A&M University, College Station, Texas, 77843.

-James Cantrill

-Jimmie Killingsworth

Review of Eastern Communication Association 1993 Conference

"Earthtalk: Saving Our Planet and Ourselves Through Communication Empowerment" was the theme of the 1993 Eastern Communication Association Conference held April 29 - May 1, 1993 in New Haven, Connecticut. For those of us committed to communication research involving environmental disputes, it was a love feast of sorts. Of the 185 panels, programs, workshops, and symposiums, 25 reflected environmental communication themes, far more than SCA conventions or other regional conferences have supported.

Provocative papers and lively discussion focused on diverse themes, from "Eco-babble: Examining the Language of Environmentalism" to "Conversation, Environmentalism, and Ecofeminism: Old and New Ways of Talking About the Earth" to "Metaphor and the Advance of Environmental Discourse." Several people whose names should be familiar to *Ecologue* readers and Alta/Big Sky participants presented papers and led or participated in discussions; Star Muir, Sue Senecah, James Atkinson, Carol Corbin, Kevin DeLuca, Nick Smith-Debastro, and Derek Bouse (apologies to anyone missed). An exciting corollary to this was the number of scholars who were just discovering the richness and distinctiveness of environmental discourse.

Evident throughout the conference were attempts to afford a forum for the presentation and discussion of environmental issues. On Saturday night, hundreds of conference attendees participated in an entertaining and educational sustainable development board game that required a gym-sized "board" that made human game pieces seem as big as, well, game pieces. Amidst the academic publishers' displays were those of People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), Zero Population Growth (ZPG), and Greenpeace. The spiral-bound conference program, while not noted as being printed on recycled paper, was printed in eco-green ink and contained full page ads from sponsoring environmental groups. Brief

"Ecofacts," 59 of them in all, were sprinkled throughout the program on subjects such as chemical-free cleaners, endangered species, eco-shopping tips, and rainforest threats. A tree planting ceremony commemorated Arbor Day, and the President's Reception was held at Yale's famous Peabody Museum where we munched and imbibed beneath the suspended remains of dinosaurs and whales, I suppose a subtle but grim warning of our own fate as a species if the conference theme was not taken seriously.

Although one might claim that these efforts had the potential to trivialize as much as they legitimized the study of environmental discourse, we certainly shouldn't complain when the Eastern Communication Association chooses environmental communication as the theme of its conference. Even so, a good number of conference attendees didn't seem to know what to do with the environment, how to frame or approach it as a legitimate topic, as worthy as feminist rhetoric and civil rights rhetoric as a topic for communication scholarship and attention. The "environmental thing," as it was often called, was amusing novelty to many, cute to others, and uncomfortable for some.

Some of this may be academically anchored in that although theory is necessary and profitable, the present needs of the environmental movement cry for applied wisdom and practical insights. We need the chicken and the egg at the same time. This challenge was brought into sharp focus near the end of a well-attended symposium entitled "Advice From the Environmental Experts: Suggestions for Empowerment." After the panel participants (PETA, Greenpeace, Rainforest Relief, and ZPG) each presented a summary of their missions and strategies, the representative from ZPG turned the symposium's title on the audience. She said, "We can talk about what we do, but the reason I came to this conference was because that here I knew there would be the communication experts. I want to know from you what you think will work the best or have the best results. What should we be thinking about in planning our strategies? Let's hear from you." After an eternal, uncomfortable silence, an audience

member spoke up, "There are several good theories and some excellent bibliographies that I'm sure many of the people here would be glad to provide to you." Well, enough said. A few of us met with the panel representatives later on for a rollicking, stimulating discussion, but that particular symposium lost its momentum.

The ECA conference planners must be applauded for showcasing environmental communication and nudging the speech-communication discipline toward embracing it as a legitimate and worthy area of study. It has been asserted that the modern environmental movement has had as far reaching impact on social and cultural values and behavior and legislative activity as has the civil rights movement. The ECA's Earthtalk Conference demonstrated the interest in and momentum for this topic.

Now, it is time to pursue the establishment of an environmental interest group within the Speech Communication Association. Watch the upcoming issues of *Ecologue* as Sue Senecah and Michael Netzley begin to organize this effort in time for the 1995 SCA Convention.

-Sue Senecah

Chronos

Announcements



1994 SCA Eco-Panel Alert

Have an idea for a panel? *Ecologue* will help you network with others to make it happen. Send your name, telephone number, address, e-mail address, and paper topic to Michael Netzley by January 7. He will quickly draft a master list which will be distributed to everyone on the list. You do the rest by the February 14 submittal deadline. Send information to:

NETZL001@MAROON.TC.UMN.EDU

You may also mail the information to the *Ecologue* P.O. box listed as the return address.

Ecologue
Box 14225
1311 SE 4th St.
Minneapolis, MN 55414

SEASONS GREETINGS



WA 1219

