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Our language (terministic screens) powerfully shapes or mediates our experiences—what is selected for notice, what is deflected from notice, and therefore how we perceive the environment. "Organic" apples generally are those grown and minimally processed without synthetic pesticides, fertilizers, artificial ingredients, or preservatives. "Conventional" apples are those sprayed, as in this image, with more pesticides than any other fruit or vegetable. How do these labels shape our perceptions and choices?

CHAPTER 3

Symbolic Constructions of Environment

Symbolic and natural systems are mutually constituted.

—Depoe (2006, p. vii)

I think people have this insatiable desire to point at and name things. "Oh, that's a . . ." or "What is that?"

—Whale tour boat captain (quoted in Milstein, 2011, p. 4)

As we saw in the in the last chapter, cultural perceptions of the environment may change as new voices and interests arise to contest or challenge prevailing discourses. The core of these challenges is a human process of communication, including symbolic construction and public negotiations. In this chapter, we want to build on our definition of environmental communication in Chapter 1 as both a pragmatic and constitutive vehicle for our understanding of and with the environment to establish a more in-depth perspective of how symbolic constructions and the environment are intertwined.

Chapter Preview

In this chapter, we introduce a symbolic approach to environmental studies in order to better understand the different ways in which "environment" is constructed and negotiated in the public sphere. To do so, we define several key terms:

1. A rhetorical perspective, particularly through the use of terministic screens and naming, helps remind us of the importance of language in shaping our world.

(Continued)

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2. The rhetorical situation is an effective way to analyze the ways we construct environmental exigencies, audiences, and constraints.
3. Tropes and genres are useful to interpret human dramas about the environment.
4. Communication frames direct our attention to certain meanings or stories about the environment and offer a guide for our understanding.
5. Dominant and critical discourses provide a means to analyze prevalent beliefs, values, and actions, as well as the voices that challenge these.

By the late 20th century, scholars such as Donna Haraway (1991), Andrew Ross (1994), Klaus Eder (1996b), Bruno Latour (2004), and Neil Evernden (1992) had begun to describe the discursive constructions that shape our views of the environment. Herndl and Brown (1996), in fact, argue that "environment" is

> a concept and an associated set of cultural values that we have constructed through the way we use language. In a very real sense, there is no objective environment in the phenomenal world, no environment separate from the words we use to represent it. (p. 3)

This **symbolic perspective** focuses on the cultural sources that construct our perceptions of the world.

This is not to suggest that there is no material world. Of course there is. Try holding your breath while reading this chapter, and you soon will be reminded how important clean air is to your ability to function. But it is through different symbolic modes that we understand and engage this world, infuse it with significance, and act toward it. Holding our breath to swim underwater for fun is quite different from holding our breath because the pollution in an area might cause an asthma attack. Deciding whether or not we should actively protect clean water and air is a decision we make daily that has material impacts well beyond our own bodies. As rhetorical scholar Stephen P. Depoe (2006), founding editor of the journal *Environmental Communication: A Journal of Nature and Culture*, bluntly put it, "Symbolic and natural systems are mutually constituted" (p. vii). The environment affects us, but our language and other symbolic action also have the capacity to affect or construct our perceptions of the environment itself.

The environment is something that we know, at least partly, through symbols. In Chapter 1, we discussed the pragmatic and constitutive dimensions of environmental communication. The history we reviewed in Chapter 2 also made clear that different choices are possible and that the discourses surrounding these choices construct diverse meanings for the worlds we know. As a result, some scholars adopt a more specifically rhetorical perspective to study the different language choices by which journalists, scientists, corporations, environmentalists, and citizens attempt to influence our perceptions and behaviors toward the environment. The remaining sections of this chapter aim to provide an even wider range of concepts from rhetorical studies.

A Rhetorical Perspective

The study of rhetoric traces its origins to classical Greek philosopher teachers such as Isocrates (436–338 BCE) and Aristotle (384–322 BCE), who taught the arts of citizenship to political leaders in democratic city-states such as Athens. The practice in these city-states was for citizens to speak publicly in law courts and the political assembly, where each citizen represented his own interests. (In Athens and other cities, civic speech was limited principally to native-born, property-owning, male citizens.) As a result, competency in public speaking, debate, and persuasion was vital for conducting civic business—war and peace, taxes, construction of public monuments, property claims, and so forth.

It was during this period that Aristotle instructed his students in the art of civic speaking when he defined **rhetoric** as "the faculty of discovering in any given case the available means of persuasion" (Herrick, 2009, p. 77). This art of rhetoric rested not simply on skillful delivery but on the ability to discover the resources for persuasion that were available in a specific situation. This draws our attention to rhetoric as a purposeful choice among the available means useful in accomplishing some effect or outcome. As a result, we can say that a **rhetorical perspective** focuses on purposeful and consequential efforts to influence society's attitudes and behavior through communication, including public debate, protests, advertising, and other modes of symbolic action (Campbell & Huxman, 2008). This definition also underscores rhetoric as a perspective that is social or publically oriented and contextual. By *contextual* we mean that, in addition to being publicly oriented, rhetoric also addresses *particular* situations, audiences, and concerns about the environment that are not universal. What might be relevant or compelling in one place with one audience regarding a particular topic might not be in another. (Consider, for example, how you might make an appeal to your parent or guardian to go on a trip abroad compared to persuading a peer.)

Although rhetoric traditionally has been viewed as an instrumental or pragmatic activity—persuading others—its use clearly has a second function as noted in Chapter 1: The purposeful use of language also helps to constitute our perception of the world itself. A rhetorical perspective, then, invites us to be sensitive to this deeper meaning, even as we identify the more pragmatic, available means used in communication about the environment. Let us now consider some of these rhetorical resources.

Terministic Screens and Naming

A recognition of this constitutive function appears within the field of rhetorical studies. For example, Kenneth Burke (1966) used the metaphor of screens to describe the way our language orients us to see certain things, some aspects of the world, and not others: "If any given terminology is a reflection of reality, by its very nature as a terminology it must be a selection of reality; and to this extent it must function also as a deflection of reality" (p. 45). That is, our **terministic screens** powerfully shape or mediate our experiences—what is selected for notice, what is deflected from notice, and therefore how we perceive our world. As a result, whenever we communicate, we actively participate in constituting our world.

One important dimension of terministic screens is **naming**—the means by which we socially represent objects or people and therefore know the world, including the natural world. The act of pointing and naming something out there in the world, as Milstein (2011) reminds us, is "a foundational act"; pointing and naming are "the basic entry to socially discerning and categorizing parts of nature" (p. 4). And in doing so, naming also indicates "an orientation" to the world and thus "influences our interaction with it" (Oravec, 2004, p. 3).

Consider, as an example, the massive loss of biodiversity we are experiencing globally. A few persist at calling this trend "natural" (assuming species always have gone extinct due to evolutionary trends), others an "act of God" (believing humans have little agency because God must have a plan that includes species going extinct), others believe it is due to a "climate crisis" (noting that mass extinctions have happened before but rarely turn out well for species wanting to survive them), and the list could go on. While some are aware of these labels as reflections of their value systems, others may not realize how choosing one terministic screen might deflect attention away from another.

Another striking example of the use of naming in a deliberate way was the successful campaign by a trade association that works with sewage treatment plants, the Water Environment Federation (WEF). WEF decided to rename sewage sludge as *biosolids*. In the process of treating sewage, a sludge-like material is typically left over. This substance (which sometimes contains life-threatening, toxic chemicals, such as dioxin) is often used as fertilizer on agricultural fields. As a result, many environmental and health groups have raised concerns about the risk from the chemicals found in sewage sludge.

Industry critic Sheldon Rampton described the efforts of WEF in the 1990s to coin another term for this toxic sludge "in hope of escaping its negative connation" and, in the words of a WEF spokesperson, "to win public acceptance for the beneficial use of biosolids" (quoted in Rampton, 2002, p. 348). The campaign also succeeded in having biosolids placed in the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*. A WEF official reported at the time that he was "pleased that the term 'sludge' will not appear in the definition of biosolids" (quoted in Rampton, 2002, p. 349). Today, WEF's website (www.wef.org) describes biosolids as "the nutrient-rich organic materials resulting from the treatment of domestic waste at a wastewater treatment facility."

FYI

Naming Water Cultures Versus Water Commodities

Below is an excerpt from a 2008 interview between media studies scholar Andy Opel and Vandana Shiva, a physicist, ecologist, activist, editor, and author of many books. In India, she has established Navdanya, a movement for biodiversity conservation and farmers' rights. The excerpt below is an answer Shiva provides to illustrate the stakes of naming water an economic commodity versus a culture.

Shiva:

When the awareness and consciousness of our living in the water cycle dies, that is when water culture dies. To me, water culture is the consciousness of water, the consciousness of being immersed in a water cycle, the consciousness of knowing that we are 70% water, and that the planet is 70% water, and to tread extremely lightly to ensure that water balance is not destroyed. Heightened water awareness creates water culture and water cultures build into them cultures like the sacredness of India's rivers. If Indians could have such a long-term evolution of civilization in the Ganges basin, it is because the Ganges was related to as a sacred mother nourishing the entire basin. The culture that creates is extremely different from the culture which sees water running into the sea as wasted and sees rivers as wild women to be tamed and creates the most violent technologies for rerouting rivers, imprisoning rivers and drying out rivers. That idea of control that develops technologies that disrupt the water cycle and impair the water culture goes hand in hand and are leading to the current thinking that water is just another commodity on the planet, you don't have to give it any special respect. And every right wing think tank that is promoting and supporting water privatization repeatedly states that water is just another commodity. (Shiva, 2008, pp. 498–499)

Constructing an Environmental Problem: The "Rhetorical Situation"

As we've just seen, we may be alarmed (toxic sludge) or reassured (biosolids) as a result of the selective naming that constructs the issue or problem at hand. We also might worry about global access to clean water or take for granted the idea that some can buy it bottled from a store. German sociologist Klaus Eder (1996a) explains that often it is "the methods of communicating environmental conditions and ideas, and not the state of deterioration itself, which explain . . . the emergence of a public discourse on the environment" (p. 209). This is particularly important when communication names an environmental problem. Political scientist Deborah Stone (2002) observed that problems "are not given, out there in the world waiting for smart analysts to come along and define them correctly. They are created in the minds of citizens by other citizens, leaders, organizations, and government agencies" (p. 156).

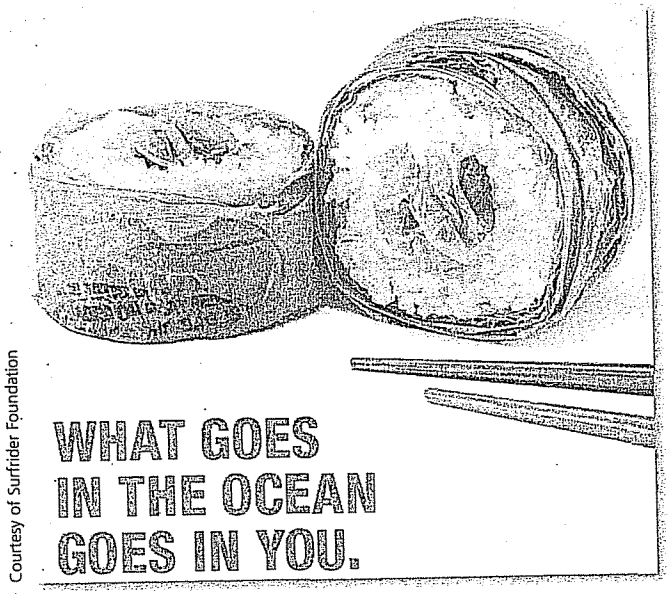
The symbolic construction of the environment arises from this ability to characterize certain facts or conditions one way rather than another and, therefore, to name it as a problem or not a problem. Such an ability also recognizes the *constitutive* function of communication we described in Chapter 1. It is for precisely this reason that questions of "how and why certain environmental issues become identified as 'problems'" are such an important part of environmental communication (Tindall, 1995, p. 49). For example, climate skeptics who don't believe humans have any influence on global warming deny it is a problem; instead, they attribute any warming to natural causes: "Climate is always changing. We have had ice ages and warmer periods when alligators were found in Spitzbergen" (Lindzen, 2009, para. 1).

An environmental problem, as discussed in Chapter 2, might be helpfully analyzed through three terms that define a **rhetorical situation**: (1) **exigency**, a set of

conditions that have been constituted as a "problem," grievance, or crisis that becomes marked by a sense of urgency; (2) **audience**, the people being addressed, their beliefs, actions, and larger cultural understandings; and (3) **constraints**, the cultural limitations and possibilities of the context.[1] For people making decisions about the environment, considering how an exigency is constructed and then addressed within a particular context is vital to how we make judgments and invent responses. We will revisit these terms in more depth when discussing advocacy campaigns in Chapter 8. For now, let us elaborate on rhetoric.

Tropes and Genres

The efforts of citizens, environmental groups, and others to educate, persuade, and mobilize draw on other resources of language as well. Rhetorical scholars explore a range of such resources—argumentation, narrative accounts, emotional appeals, tropes, and rhetorical genres—in websites, films, campaign materials,



Courtesy of Surfrider Foundation

Photo 3.1 Environmental advocates long have tried to create a sense of exigency about plastic pollution in the oceans. This ad by the Surfrider Foundation attempts to create a sense of exigency about the issue by appealing to people who eat sushi. Which rhetorical constraints does this ad address, or fail to address?

ads, and other communication in environmental controversies. Let's look briefly at two of these resources: tropes and genres.

Among the most ubiquitous resources of language are **tropes.** Tropes refer to the use of words that turn a meaning from its original sense in a new direction for a persuasive purpose. Tropes draw on a basic function of language itself. There is "no un-rhetorical 'naturalness' of language," 19th century philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche observed. "All words in themselves and from the start are, in terms of their meaning, tropes" (Mayer, 2009, p. 37).

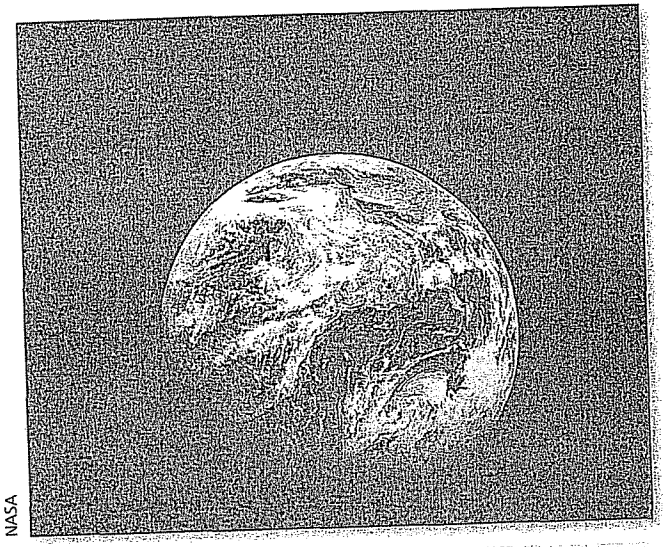
Over time, specific tropes have acquired familiar names, such as **synecdoche** or the part standing for the whole, as in references simply to melting glaciers to signal the wider impacts caused by global warming. Another common trope is **irony** or the use of language that is the opposite of one's belief, often for humor. The humorous online environmental news source *Grist* especially is adept at reporting on ironic events. For example, in a 2011 story by Christopher Mims on a solar-powered oil field, he notes that the project appears to be run on both "sunshine" and "irony":

> Basically, Glasspoint Energy is using the solar panels to make steam, which can help extract "heavy" oil from old fields. It's like using a knife to get the last bits of ketchup out of the bottle . . . if the knife were made out of anti-ketchup. (para. 2)

Metaphor, one of the major tropes, abounds in the landscape of environmental communication: Mother Nature, population bomb, Spaceship Earth, and carbon footprint are just a few examples. Metaphor's role is to invite a comparison by "talking about one thing in terms of another" (Jasinski, 2001, p. 550).

Newer metaphors have arisen as scientists, environmentalists, and others bring attention to new problems. Chris Russill (2008), for example, identified climate scientists' use of "tipping point" as a metaphor to forewarn the public about irreversible and catastrophic occurrences if global warming continues.

In their efforts to shape public attitudes or agendas about environmental issues, advocates may turn to metaphors as a way of communicating their concerns or goals. For example, many environmentalists use the carbon "footprint" metaphor to help people grasp the impact of our choices (regarding transportation, home size, family size, diet, and more) on the amount of greenhouse gases emitted into our atmosphere. Calculators are readily found online for each one of us to consider these otherwise less tangible environmental impacts. Interestingly, oil companies also use the metaphor of a footprint to influence news stories. Consider, for example, the opening of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska to oil drilling. In 2001, as a vote neared in the U.S. Congress, oil company officials evoked this image to suggest that the drilling would have little impact on the environment. Touting advances in technology, industry spokespeople insisted, "With sideways drilling and other advances, the oil beneath the 1.5 million-acre coastal plain can be tapped with a 'footprint' on the surface no larger than 2,000 acres" (Spiess & Ruskin, 2001, para. 1). The *Anchorage Daily News* reported that the oil industry's footprint metaphor "proved to be a potent piece of rhetoric," implying that drilling would affect less than 1 percent of the coastal plain" (para. 18).



NASA

Photo 3.2 "Blue Marble" is the official name of the first photo of Earth taken from outer space (in 1972 by the *Apollo 8* crew on their flight to the moon). What does the metaphor of "marble" signify compared to other choices? What name would you give this image?

FYI Metaphor of Spaceship Earth

The practice of speaking of the Earth as a "spaceship" became widespread after astronauts took the first photos of it from space. The photos of the blue-green Earth against a dark universe invited a concern for the precarious existence of this small planet. U.S. Ambassador Adlai Stevenson famously evoked the metaphor of Spaceship Earth when he addressed the United Nations on July 9, 1965. He spoke about UN delegates traveling as passengers on "a little space ship, dependent on its vulnerable reserves of air and soil" (Park, 2001, p. 99). The metaphor was further popularized in the late 1960s by architect Buckminster Fuller (1968) in his *Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth.*

Economist Kenneth Boulding (1965) invoked the most prescient use of the Spaceship Earth metaphor in a 1965 address: "Once we begin to look at earth as a space ship, the appalling extent of our ignorance about it is almost frightening. This is true of the level of every science. We know practically nothing, for instance, about the long-run dynamics even of the physical system of the earth. . . . We do not even know whether the activities of man *[sic]* are going to make the earth warm up or cool off" (para. 7).

Second, environmental actors often rely on different genres to influence perceptions of an issue or problem. Though studied throughout the humanities, **rhetorical genres** are generally defined as distinct forms or types of speech that "share characteristics distinguishing them" from other types of speech (Jamieson & Stromer-Galley, 2001, p. 361). In the last chapter, for example, we observed John Muir's use of the genre of the sublime in his nature writing in the 19th century to evoke feelings of spiritual exaltation. Current examples of genres include *apocalyptic* rhetoric, the *jeremiad,* and what Schwarze (2006) has termed *environmental melodrama.*

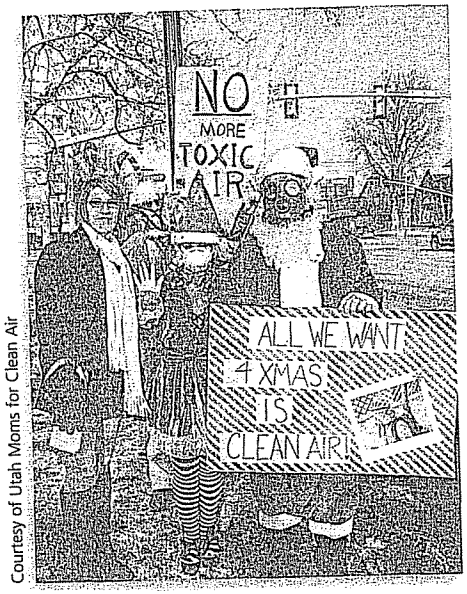
For example, Paul Ehrlich (1968) and Rachel Carson (1962), in their classic books *The Population Bomb* and *Silent Spring,* appropriated **apocalyptic narrative** literary styles to warn of impending and severe ecological crises. Literary critics Jimmie Killingsworth and Jacqueline Palmer (1996) explained that

> in depicting the end of the world as a result of the overweening desire to control nature, [these authors] have discovered a rhetorical means of contesting their opponents' claims for the idea of progress with its ascendant narratives of human victory over nature. (p. 21)

More recently, scientists such as James Lovelock have evoked apocalyptic images to warn of the potentially catastrophic effects of global warming on civilization. For example, Lovelock (2006) cautioned that "before this century is over billions of us will die and the few breeding pairs of people that survive will be in the Arctic where the climate remains tolerable" (para. 7). Yet reliance on apocalyptic rhetoric to address climate crises may generate feelings of hopelessness or erode one's credibility since many environmental catastrophes cannot be proven until it is too late to change course. Scientists therefore face a dilemma: How do you raise awareness of future, serious effects from climate changes—rising sea levels, regional conflicts, and so on—without causing depression or paralysis?

A similar genre to apocalypse is jeremiad. Communication scholar Dylan Wolfe (2008) draws on the genre of the jeremiad to sound an environmental alarm in Dr. Seuss's *The Lorax.* The genre, originally named for the lamentations of the Hebrew prophet Jeremiah, has been a recurring genre of American public address (Bercovitch, 1978). **Jeremiad** refers to speech or writing that laments or denounces the behavior of a people or society and warns of future consequences if society does not change its ways. *The Lorax,* of course, is a fable but one that is also a jeremiad in which the Lorax speaks for the trees, whose fate is imperiled by the Once-ler, a symbol of industrial capitalist society.

Other rhetorical critics such as Steven Schwarze (2006) and William Kinsella (2008) have analyzed the genre of an **environmental melodrama** to clarify issues of power and the ways advocates moralize an environmental conflict. As a genre, melodrama "generates stark, polarizing distinctions between social actors and infuses those distinctions with moral gravity and pathos" and is therefore "a powerful resource for rhetorical invention" (Schwarze, 2006, p. 239). Schwarze says that melodrama, by identifying key social actors and where the "public interest" lies, can "remoralize situations" that have been obscured by inaccuracies and "the reassuring rhetoric of technical reason" (p. 250). He offers the example of Bill Moyers's PBS



Courtesy of Utah Moms for Clean Air

Photo 3.3 Utah Moms for Clean Air draws on environmental melodrama by using the trope of motherhood and the symbolism of children in their campaigns. In December 2013, they launched a 12 Days of Christmas campaign to further moralize the horrible air pollution inversions residents have been facing annually. For more information see http://blog.utahmomsforcleanair.org/

documentary *Trade Secrets* (Moyers & Jones, 2001) about the health dangers of the vinyl chloride chemical industry:

> *Trade Secrets* shuttles between images of confidential company memos describing toxic workplace exposure in scientific language, and episodes of workers on hospital beds or widows tearily recalling their spouse's suffering. These melodramatic juxtapositions offer a clear moral framework for interpreting the actions of company decision makers. They characterize officials as being knowledgeable about toxic hazards in scientific terms, but utterly indifferent to the human suffering that resulted from those hazards. . . . Melodrama puts the inaccuracy of scientific language on display and highlights its potential blindspots. (Schwarze, 2006, p. 251)

As this example makes clear, melodrama can serve pragmatic purposes: public education and criticism of the chemical industry, for example. But it also illustrates rhetoric's constitutive function, a reordering of public consciousness and specifically the restoration of a moral frame in judging the actions of this industry. This reference to a moral frame brings up another rhetorical resource—the use of communication frames that mediate or affect our understanding of environmental concerns.

Communication Frames

The term *frame* was first popularized by sociologist Erving Goffman (1974) in his book *Frame Analysis*. He defined **frames** as the cognitive maps or patterns of interpretation that people use to organize their understanding of reality. A frame, then, is *constitutive*; it helps to construct a particular view or orientation to some aspect of reality. It also may be *persuasive*, because one frame might make a person's worldview more compelling over another's.

For example, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) recently put into place a new policy restricting the use of antibiotics in industrial farms to spur growth and weight gain in cattle, pigs, and chickens. A *New York Times* story reported that experts have warned the indiscriminate use of these antibiotics "has endangered human health by fueling the growing epidemic of antibiotic resistance" (Tavernise, 2013, p. A1). The story also quoted former FDA commissioner David Kessler: "This is the first significant step in dealing with this important public health concern in 20 years. No one should underestimate how big a lift this has been in changing widespread and long entrenched industry practices" (p. A1). By invoking a public health frame, the *Times* highlighted the possible danger to the public while downplaying the economic benefits of growth antibiotics to the agricultural industry. Framing the issue in this way enabled the newspaper to add its support for the FDA's proposed ban on these antibiotics.

Framing can shape or construct how we perceive both problems and solutions and attempt to persuade others of a particular perspective. As media and international affairs scholar Robert Entman (1993) explained, "To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient . . . in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described" (p. 56).

For example, President Obama has argued that clean energy initiatives in the United States will help to grow the economy and create jobs. The president used this job creation frame in his weekly address to the nation, speaking from a hybrid bus plant in Indianapolis:

> The clean energy jobs at this plant are the jobs of the future—jobs that pay well right here in America. And, in the years ahead, it's clean energy companies like this one that will keep our economy growing, create new jobs, and make sure America remains the most prosperous nation in the world. (Headapohl, 2011, para. 3)

On the other hand, the Institute for Energy Research (2010), a free market research group, invoked a jobs-versus-environment frame in the debate over U.S. energy policy. In a report on its website, the institute claimed a cap on greenhouse gas emissions from oil or coal-burning plants "would reduce U.S. employment by roughly 522,000 jobs in 2015, rising to over 5.1 million jobs by 2050" (para. 4). In each case, the competing uses of a jobs frame by President Obama and the institute construct different meanings for the public in the debate over energy policy and the economy, as well as attempt to persuade audiences of particular beliefs and actions as a result of a particular frame. We address frames more in Chapters 5 and 8.

Dominant and Critical Discourses

The rhetorical claims about a loss of jobs draw on a broader discourse in U.S. politics that asserts there is a trade-off of jobs versus the environment. This concept of *discourse* reminds us that rhetorical resources are broader than any single metaphor,

frame, or utterance. As we noted in the last chapter, a discourse is a pattern of knowledge and power communicated through linguistic and nonlinguistic human expression; as a result, it functions to "circulate a coherent set of meanings about an important topic" (Fiske, 1987, p. 14). Such meanings often influence our understanding of how the world works or should work.

When a discourse gains a broad or taken-for-granted status in a culture (for example, growth is good for the economy) or when its meanings help to legitimize certain practices, it can be said to be a **dominant discourse**. Often, these discourses are invisible in the sense that they express naturalized or taken-for-granted assumptions and values about how the world is or should be organized.

Perhaps the best example of a dominant environmental discourse is what biologists Dennis Pirages and Paul Ehrlich (1974) called the **Dominant Social Paradigm (DSP)**. Communication scholars would point out that a dominant social paradigm is a specific discursive tradition. As expressed in political speeches, advertising, movies, and so forth, today's DSP affirms society's "belief in abundance and progress, our devotion to growth and prosperity, our faith in science and technology, and our commitment to a laissez-faire economy, limited government planning, and private property rights" (Dunlap & Van Liere, 1978, p. 10). In everyday terms, this dominant discourse is recognized in references to free markets as the source of prosperity and the wise use of natural resources to build a strong economy, and so forth.

Other discourses may question society's dominant discourses. These alternative ways of speaking, writing, or portraying the environment in art, music, and photographs illustrate **critical discourses**. These are recurring ways of speaking that challenge society's taken-for-granted assumptions and offer alternatives to prevailing discourses. In some ages, critical discourses are muted or absent, whereas in other periods, they may be boisterous and widespread. In our own time, critical discourses have proliferated in mainstream media and online, questioning dominant assumptions about growth and the environment. For example, we saw (earlier) the emergence of a new antagonism, opening space for a discourse of sustainability by scientists, environmentalists, and students on many campuses who are questioning the use of fossil fuels and calling for "climate justice" (see Photo 3.4).

Today, food also continues to be a contested topic, from dominant social paradigms of how to grow, produce, and consume which foods when, as well as critical discourses that attempt to challenge our taken-for-granted assumptions. In Italy, Carlos Petrini helped mobilize an international food movement in the late 1980s. Two events helped solidify the exigency that Petrini felt about Italian culture, food, and economy transforming in unsustainable ways. First, the opening of the first McDonald's fast-food store in Piazza di Spagna, a well-known piazza or public square in Rome, he argued, was a sign of increased multinational influence on eating habits and local economies. Second, the poisoning of hundreds of Italians in northern Italy, including the death of 19, as a result of cheap wine cut with methanol, underscored the high risk of becoming alienated from one's food sources and the laws that govern them.

James Ennis/Flickr

Photo 3.4 The growing movement on college campuses for divestment from the fossil fuel industry, and the call for "climate justice," is a direct challenge to the dominant (taken-for-granted) discourse undergirding U.S. and global energy policy.

Petrini has since helped foster an international, critical discourse that resists the dominant discourse of fast, cheap food. Petrini and his allies launched the **Slow Food Movement**, which promotes environmental sustainability through local food cultures by promoting "good, clean, and fair food." This movement has built an international coalition with La Via Campesina, a self-declared international peasant movement. La Via Campesina challenges dominant corporate-driven transnational agriculture in defense of small farmers and **food sovereignty**, the right of everyday people, farmworker unions, and sovereign countries to public participation in agricultural and food policy.

SUMMARY

In this chapter, we've described a perspective on communication that emphasizes the symbolic construction of our views about the environment. We introduced several rhetorical concepts in this chapter that bear relevance to environmental communication:

- A rhetorical perspective, particularly the use of terministic screens and naming, helps remind us of the important of socio-symbolic language in shaping our world.

- The rhetorical situation is a helpful way to analyze the ways we construct environmental problems, including exigencies, audiences, and constraints.
- Rhetorical tropes and genres are useful to interpret human dramas about the environment in ways that both persuade and constitute environmental attitudes and actions.
- Framing helps us to appreciate the ways in which language choices direct our attention and shape our views of certain topics or meanings.
- Dominant and critical discourses provide a means to analyze both prevalent and counterintuitive beliefs, values, and actions that sustain and challenge a culture's view of the environment.

While the examples in this chapter broadly illustrate socio-symbolic choices related to the environment, discourses are rehearsed, performed, and negotiated in concrete contexts in the public sphere. In the next chapter, we expand on this view of environmental communication by looking at visual and popular culture contexts.

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What do Herndl and Brown (1996) mean when they claim that "in a very real sense, there is no objective environment in the phenomenal world, no environment separate from the words we use to represent it" (p. 3)? Do you agree with this assertion?
2. Are apocalyptic warnings about global warming effective, or do such warnings create problems of credibility or paralyze action? How can scientists raise awareness of future, serious effects from climate changes—rising sea levels, deaths from prolonged droughts, and so on—without relying on some vision of catastrophic events?
3. There are many debates over food today, from whether or not we should reduce pesticide consumption to what we should serve kids at lunch to the rights of food producers to participate in shaping food cultures. We have noted terms such as "organic," "conventional," and "real food." What other words have you noticed in food debates? Which ones have moved you to take action or change your daily practices? Which do you find unpersuasive?
4. Since our understanding of the environment is *symbolically constructed* (by words, images, etc.), does that mean there is no inherently "right" or "wrong" view or attitude toward the environment? Where do our ethics of environmental behavior and attitudes come from?

NOTE

1. For more on the rhetorical situation, see Bitzer (1968) and Vatz (1973).