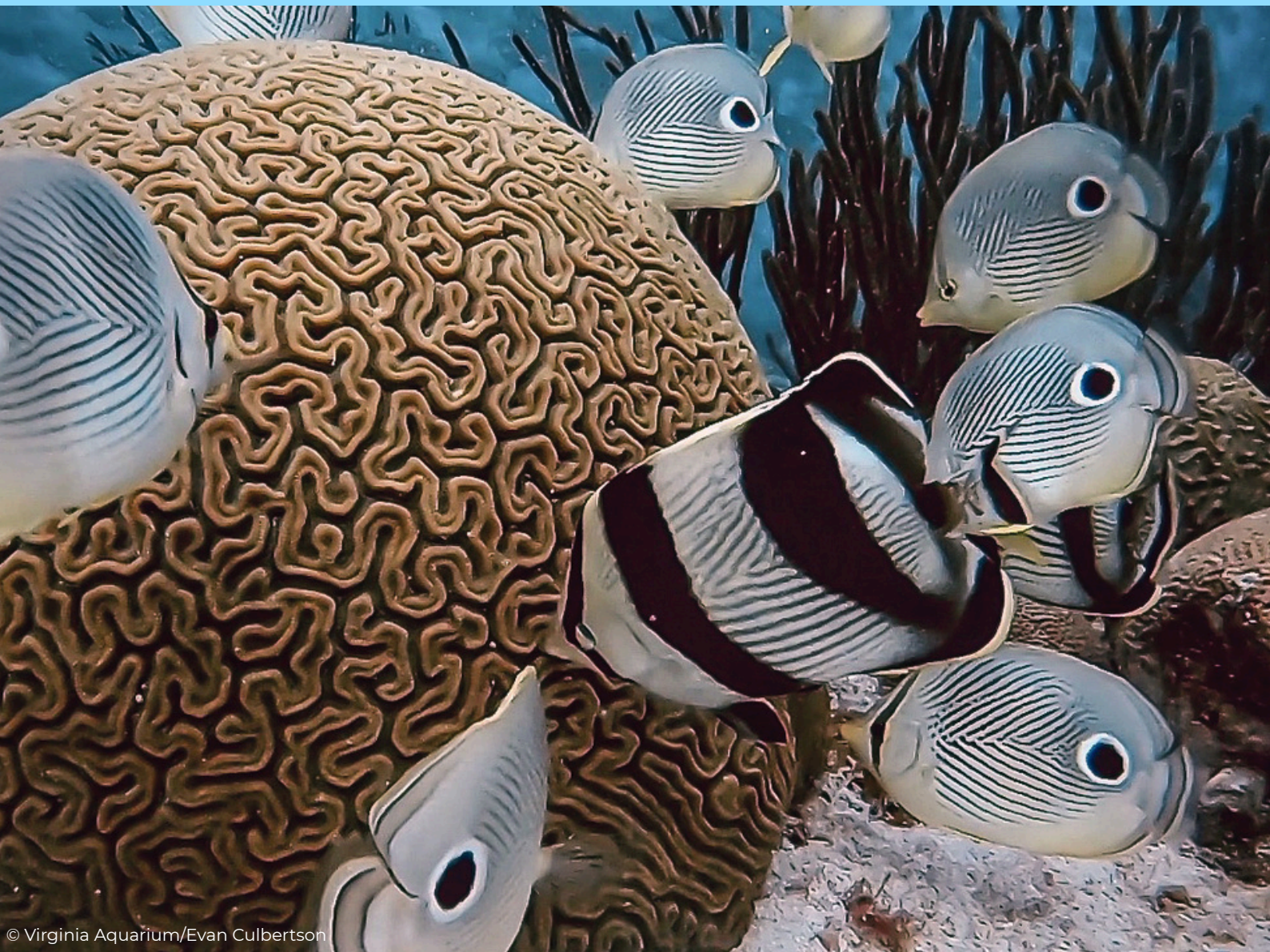# TALKING CORAL

The **abbreviated toolkit** for effective and impactful coral conservation message framing

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An introduction to conservation messaging and framing

A roadmap for designing and evaluating outcome-oriented messaging

And putting it all together for conservation impact!

SAFE
SAVING ANIMALS FROM EXTINCTION
CORAL

Disney
CONSERVATION

HUMAN NATURE GROUP

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WHY MESSAGING MATTERS

THE AZA SAFE CORAL PROGRAM MISSION IS TO:

> *"Inspire and mobilize the AZA community to save corals from extinction."*

Saving corals from extinction requires more than scientific expertise – it requires connection. The way we frame and design our messages influences whether our audiences simply hear about coral decline or feel a personal connection and an inspiration to act. Thoughtful message framing helps us meet people where they are, linking coral conservation to values they already hold and to actions they can personally take. By intentionally designing messages around clear, pre-determined outcomes, we aim to ensure that *every sign, every story, and every interaction* moves our audiences closer to those outcomes – whether that's deepened understanding, a spark of wonder, or a commitment to change one's behavior.

Equally important is measuring the impact of these efforts. Evaluation tells us what resonates, what falls flat, and how we can adapt as social and digital environments evolve. Message design and evaluation are more than just communication tools - they are conservation tools, empowering the AZA SAFE Coral community to reach people meaningfully, inspire them to act, and continually adapt a collective strategy to conserve corals.

ABOUT THIS PROJECT

PROJECT GOAL

Provide guidance on how to best communicate with diverse audiences to achieve meaningful conservation outcomes for corals.
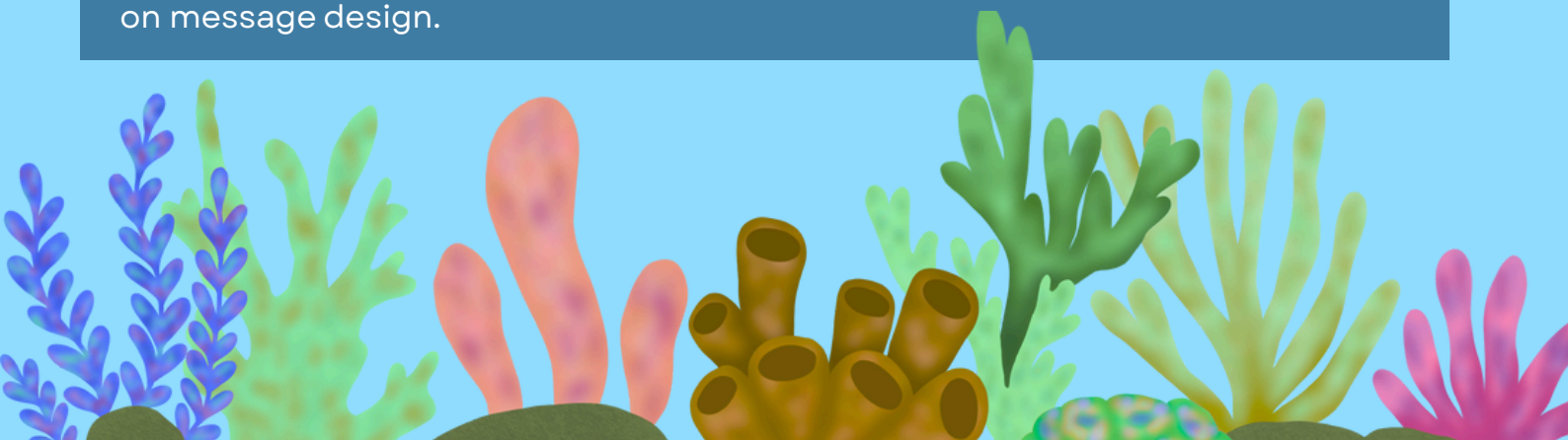
PHASE I - OUTCOMES DEVELOPMENT

The first phase of this project produced consensus-based outcomes that SAFE Coral messaging efforts are aspiring to achieve. Human Nature Group (HNG) distributed a feedback form to SAFE Coral program partners to generate initial ideas for a suite of messaging outcomes. We then facilitated an online workshop in September 2024 with 10 SAFE Coral program partners to achieve consensus on a set of six desired messaging outcomes. HNG sent out an additional call for feedback for those who could not attend the workshop and received nine responses.

PHASE II - DATA COLLECTION

In the second phase, HNG collected information to understand current coral conservation messaging strategies across SAFE Coral partner institutions. We conducted interviews with 13 program partners and solicited program materials from institutions that provide messaging on coral conservation. HNG also reviewed all SAFE Coral program partner institution websites for coral conservation messaging, and conducted a literature review of current peer-reviewed articles relevant to coral conservation messaging.

PHASE III - ANALYSIS, REPORTING, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Informed by Phase I and grounded in the data collected in Phase II, HNG synthesized all collected information to provide evidence-based guidance on impactful messaging strategies, resulting in (1) **this toolkit** for use by SAFE Coral partners and other engaged stakeholders, and (2) a **full report** containing an analysis of the data and more comprehensive recommendations and guidance on message design.

DESIRED OUTCOMES FOR MESSAGING

A virtual workshop with AZA SAFE Coral program partners yielded six distinct, consensus-based desired outcomes for coral conservation messaging efforts. These outcomes should guide future development of coral conservation messaging within the SAFE Coral partner and collaborator network.

COGNITIVE (KNOWLEDGE-BASED) OUTCOMES

Our audiences will know that corals are **important for the health** of people, wildlife, and the planet.

Our audiences will know that **climate change** is a significant threat to corals.

BEST FOR WHEN:

Audiences may be unaware or misinformed, or when personal relevance must be established.

AFFECTIVE (EMOTION-BASED) OUTCOMES

Our audiences will feel a sense of **wonderment**, **awe**, and **connection** with corals.

Our audiences will feel a sense of **responsibility** and **empowerment** to act to protect and restore corals.

BEST FOR WHEN:

Audiences may have some awareness but lack motivation, empathy, or connection to the issue.

BEHAVIORAL (ACTION-BASED) OUTCOMES

Our audiences will make **coral-friendly decisions** in their daily lives.

Our audiences will **learn** about corals and **share** ways to help protect them.

BEST FOR WHEN:

Audiences are already motivated and/or connected, but unsure what to do, or feel helpless despite caring.

THE MESSAGE DESIGN ROADMAP

This roadmap provides practical steps to help institutions design, test, and refine communication that achieves specific outcomes - empowering the AZA community to reach and mobilize people to save corals. This toolkit focuses primarily on *Step 3* - message design.
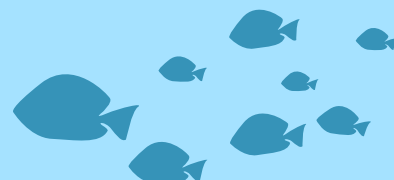
STEP 1:
SELECT DESIRED OUTCOMES

All messaging should have a **specific intended outcome**. Consider your audience and the context of the message (e.g., mode of delivery, messenger, location) to help you determine which outcome(s) might be appropriate for your situation.

STEP 2:
CONDUCT AUDIENCE RESEARCH

Messaging is often more impactful when it is **designed for a specific audience**. Audience research can help you understand and segment your audience into appropriate groups for targeted messaging.

STEP 3:
DEVELOP AND FRAME YOUR MESSAGES

There are many ways to frame a message, and your strategy should be informed by both your audience and the message context. This toolkit highlights some of the most effective **message framing concepts** used in conservation communication.

THE MESSAGE DESIGN ROADMAP

The roadmap does not end at Step 6. Rather, consider the steps as part of a cycle to design, test, implement, and adapt messaging as audiences and local context shift over time.
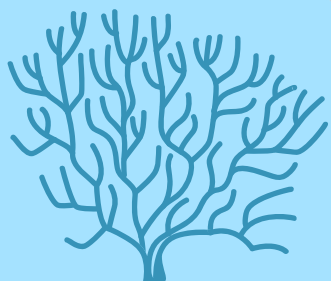
STEP 4:
CONDUCT PILOT TESTING

Small-scale testing (signage A/B tests, intercept surveys) will allow you to *adapt your messaging strategy* before full-scale implementation.

STEP 5:
ADAPT & IMPLEMENT

Refine key messages based on pilot results. Implement messaging and pair with interactive engagement methods and visuals for increased impact.

STEP 6:
EVALUATE OUTCOMES

Use evaluation methods (e.g., surveys, embedded observations) to *measure shifts* in knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors. Continue to evaluate, share learnings, and adapt.

MESSAGE FRAMING CONCEPTS

The way in which information is presented shapes how people interpret and respond to it. In conservation, message framing helps make complex or distant issues like coral disease or decline more relevant, relatable, and actionable to different audiences. Here are a few impactful message framing concepts:

FRAMING CONCEPT	TIPS
Values: Deeply held beliefs about what matters most. Formed from social influences and life experience.	Speak to values that are **most consistently held across populations** such as responsibility, care, or community. **Avoid** messages that **clash with pre-existing values** held by your audience.
Valence: The emotional tone of a message: positive, negative, neutral, or a mix.	**Negative framing** can sometimes erode motivation or cause emotional shutdown. **Positive framing** has been shown to be more effective. **Mixed valence framing** can also be used to adequately convey the seriousness of a threat while still encouraging hope and action.
Social norms: Our sense of what people like us do, and which actions and beliefs are socially accepted.	Norms have been shown to be among the strongest motivators of behavior. Emphasize **desired** common behaviors and social expectations. Pair with nudges, prompts, or demonstrations. **Avoid** highlighting the prevalence of undesirable behaviors.
Psychological distance: How far away an issue feels - in time, space, social relevance, or certainty.	Focus on impacts that are closer in time and space to your audience. Highlight **local** impacts, efforts, and solutions where possible. Increase relevance by linking impacts to **daily life**.

Framing is about **HOW** you tell the story.

EXAMPLES USING COMMON FRAMES

The messaging matrix below links each SAFE Coral desired outcome to a variety of framing approaches. Read across the rows to explore short sample messages for each outcome, and down the columns to see how various framing approaches - such as sense of place or generational framing - are utilized to create messages that resonate with your specific target audiences.

	PLACE-BASED (REDUCING DISTANCE)	NORMATIVE (USE OF SOCIAL NORMS)
COGNITIVE (Corals improve planetary health)	Just offshore, the FL Reef Tract buffers our coastlines and fuels our livelihoods.	Our guests often say they never realized how much they rely on coral reefs.
COGNITIVE (Corals and climate change)	Right offshore, warmer seas are stressing reefs that have thrived for centuries.	Our guests are learning how marine heat threatens corals reefs.
AFFECTIVE (Awe, Wonder)	Thousands of miles from the ocean in _____, corals are coming to life right here.	Here at _____, we are constantly inspired about what corals can do.
AFFECTIVE (Responsibility, Empowerment)	These are our waters. Small everyday choices keep them healthy.	Across the country, people are stepping up to defend coral reefs.
BEHAVIORAL (Coral-friendly actions)	What we do here on land flows to the sea. Choose native and reef-conscious.	Most folks leave with 1 coral-conscious habit to try at home - what's yours?
BEHAVIORAL (Share with others)	Reefs are part of our natural heritage. Tell your neighbors- actions matter.	People love sharing reef stories- join the movement and share what you know!

EXAMPLES USING COMMON FRAMES

	GENERATIONAL (TAPPING INTO LEGACY)	CONNECTION (LOCAL & GLOBAL LINKS)
COGNITIVE (Corals improve planetary health)	By advancing medicine, corals protect your children's future.	Healthy reefs support healthy seas, and healthy seas support us.
COGNITIVE (Corals and climate change)	Whether reefs endure warming seas depends on what we do now.	The same heat that scorches our cities reaches coral reefs.
AFFECTIVE (Awe, Wonder)	That moment of awe you just felt? Let's keep it alive for our families.	Tiny coral builders support this blue planet we all depend on.
AFFECTIVE (Responsibility, Empowerment)	Each generation makes a mark. Ours can be helping coral come back.	Your choices ripple outward, helping reefs seemingly far away.
BEHAVIORAL (Coral-friendly actions)	Each small choice today shapes the ocean that your kids will experience.	Even inland, our daily actions help reefs to breathe easier.
BEHAVIORAL (Share with others)	Your family's legacy can include saving coral by telling its story.	When you talk about corals, you connect others to the ocean.

This matrix is only a small sampling of the ways in which messaging can be designed for outcome achievement. You can use these message framing approaches as a starting point and further tailor your institutional messaging after conducting audience research.

💡 **See the full report for tips on how to craft your messages.**

STRATEGIC FRAMING

COASTAL AUDIENCES

EXAMPLE MESSAGE FOR COASTAL AQUARIUMS AND ZOOS

✨ "Our reefs are part of who we are. Protecting them keeps our coasts strong and our traditions alive."

- **Frame Used:** Local identity, sense of place.
- **Desired Outcomes**:
  - Cognitive - Know the importance of corals for people, wildlife, and planet.
  - Affective - Feel responsibility and empowerment.
- **Framing Construct**: Reducing distance — ties the global coral crisis to the visitor's home and community.
- **Support With**: Graphics that illustrate coral's connection to the local community; compelling imagery.

Refine this message with audience research, community observations, and/or additional strategic planning that:

Explores specific traditions and attributes of the community/audience to invoke in the message.

Identifies local products & businesses that, directly or indirectly, coral reefs help to produce and support. Incorporate these points of community connection into your messaging.

Determines the strength of social norms in the local messaging environment. Who are your audiences influenced by, and how can this be leveraged?

STRATEGIC FRAMING

COASTAL AUDIENCES

EXAMPLE MESSAGE FOR COASTAL AQUARIUMS AND ZOOS

✨ Here along our coast, the ocean shapes who we are. It provides food, shelter, jobs, and joy - and coral reefs are at the heart of it all. These vibrant underwater cities protect our shores, nurture countless species, and store carbon that helps stabilize our planet's climate. ***But our reefs are in trouble.*** Rising temperatures and pollution are putting centuries of life at risk. When you learn, share, and take action - whether by choosing reef-conscious products, choosing sustainable seafood, or inspiring others - you become part of the solution. Together, we can protect the reefs that protect us.

- **Frame Used:** Local identity, sense of place, mixed emotional valence, collective efficacy.
- **Desired Outcomes**:
    - <u>Cognitive</u> - Know the importance of corals for people, wildlife, and planet.
    - <u>Behavioral</u> - Make coral-friendly decisions.

Support messaging with other *engagement techniques* such as:

Encouraging institution staff to model desirable behaviors, such as carrying a reusable water bottle or discussing their sustainable seafood choices with peers.

Allowing guests the opportunitiy to share or 'pledge' how they will help support coral reefs.

Connecting guests to local water quality initiatives, beach/waterway cleanups, or shoreline stability projects.

STRATEGIC FRAMING

INLAND AUDIENCES

EXAMPLE MESSAGE FOR INLAND AQUARIUMS AND ZOOS

✨ "Someday your kids might ask what coral reefs looked like when they were still bright with life. Because of work happening here, you'll be able to tell them they still are."

- **Frame Used:** Generational/legacy.
- **Desired Outcomes**:
  - <u>Affective</u> - Feel responsibility and empowerment.
  - <u>Behavioral</u> - Share with others.
- **Framing Construct**: Mixed valence - balancing concern with hope.
- **Support With**: Graphics that explain the zoo/aquarium's role in coral recovery; 2-3 suggestions for audiences to share with friends and family.

Refine this message with audience research, community observations, and/or additional strategic planning that:

Explores audience demographics and values to determine the salience of family-oriented messaging.

Allows for the development of a strategy to adapt over the course of months/years. Update messaging with key milestones in coral recovery matched to local actions audiences can take.

Supplements the message with institutionally-specific information for audiences to share more broadly.

STRATEGIC FRAMING

INLAND AUDIENCES

EXAMPLE MESSAGE FOR **INLAND** AQUARIUMS AND ZOOS

✨ Even here in ___, our actions reach the sea. The water that flows through our neighborhoods eventually finds its way to the Atlantic Ocean - and the reefs beyond. Florida's coral reefs are losing color and life, but through the Florida Reef Tract Rescue Project, we are helping to restore these underwater forests, one coral at a time.

By sharing what you learn about coral rescue and inspiring others, you help protect a living legacy that *connects us all*. Together, we can make sure future generations inherit healthy rivers, healthy coasts, and thriving reefs.

- **Frames Used:** Generational/legacy, mixed valence, reducing distance, collective efficacy.
- **Desired Outcomes**:
  - Affective - Feel responsibility and empowerment.
  - Behavioral - Share with others.

Support messaging with other *engagement techniques* such as:

Highlighting how your local region's scientists, volunteers, conservationists, and community members are helping coral reefs.

Creating interactive displays showing how water moves across the landscape to reach coral reefs.

Engaging guests after they leave by suggesting they 'adopt' a propagated coral and sending updates on its journey.

These messages are examples only; we encourage you to try your hand at crafting your own messages based on the concepts introduced in this guide!

A NOTE ON CLIMATE CHANGE MESSAGING

Connecting corals to climate change is a key desired outcome of AZA-SAFE Coral messaging efforts. However, communicating about climate change can be challenging. Here are some tips to consider to engage your target audiences with climate change messages:

AVOID PERCEPTIONS OF POLITICALLY-CHARGED MOTIVES

Using *alternative language* to describe the impacts and results of climate change (such as "heat stress" or "marine heat events"), rather than using the term itself, may help to avoid your message being perceived as ideological - helping your audiences to receive your message and get on board.

AVOID CRISIS FRAMING AND GUILT-BASED LANGUAGE

The use of alarmist language, as well as evoking guilt, has the potential to cause emotional shutdown in your audiences. This can have unintended consequences and reduce the likelihood of behavior change.

PRIORITIZE LOCAL PLACE-BASED MESSAGING

Don't focus solely on climate change messaging *at the expense of* local place-based messaging to manage local stressors[1]. Climate change can feel like an existential and overwhelming threat, not just to corals, but to humanity. Audiences may feel more empowered to tackle smaller and more local components of the climate crisis.

💡 **There is an entire group of communication professionals dedicated to providing professional development on climate change communication. For more information, check out the National Network for Ocean and Climate Change Interpretation (NNOCCI).**

Climate change is overwhelming. How can we make it less existential and more actionable?

LIFE AFTER THIS TOOLKIT

LEARN MORE

Read our ***Extended Toolkit & Full Report*** on this project, and stay up-to-date on current trends in conservation messaging by following organizations such as:
- North American Association for Environmental Education (NAAEE)
- National Association for Interpretation (NAI)
- National Network for Ocean and Climate Change Interpretation (NNOCCI)
- Advancing Conservation through Empathy for Wildlife Network (ACE for Wildlife)

SUPPORT RESEARCH AND EVALUATION EFFORTS

There is a lack of coral-specific research and evaluation regarding messaging use and impact. While relying on evidence from more general conservation messaging studies is useful, pilot testing and evaluating coral messaging strategies is our best opportunity to learn about and design more effective and impactful messaging,

Advocate for funds for in-house expertise or partner with external evaluators to conduct formal evaluations of your messaging efforts. Share the results broadly (e.g., through the AZA Social Science Research and Evaluation SAG) to help your fellow community members. Conduct informal evaluations, such as visitor observations, comment cards, or program audits to continue to refine your messaging.

STAY IN TOUCH WITH HUMAN NATURE GROUP

We would love to stay in touch and learn about how you have implemented and/or evaluated your messaging strategies, and how we can further support AZA and the coral conservation community.

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WHO WE ARE

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WHAT WE DO

At Human Nature Group, we empower organizations to make informed decisions using evidence-based practices to create a brighter future for both people and the planet. We specialize in crafting people-centered solutions to environmental challenges through **social science** and **behavior change, strategic planning,** and **evaluation.**

In practice, this looks like supporting environmental and conservation organizations to:

- Design behavior change campaigns and strategies to improve outcomes for people, planet, and wildlife
- Conduct impact evaluations of programs and projects
- Facilitate strategic planning and development of desired outcomes
- Conduct social science research, including audience research

SPONSOR

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