

TALKING CORAL

5-MINUTE CORAL CONSERVATION
MESSAGE DESIGN



A DECISION SUPPORT
TOOL FOR MARINE
EDUCATORS AND
MESSENGERS ON-THE-GO



TALKING CORAL MESSAGE DESIGN TOOL

A RESOURCE FOR CORAL CONSERVATION EDUCATORS, MESSENGERS, AND CURRICULUM DESIGNERS ON-THE-GO

This decision tool guides you to create messages that will resonate with your audience and achieve positive visitor outcomes. It is designed to help you enhance the impact of your messaging, whether you are quickly engaging roving visitors or designing core messaging for formal programs.

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QUICK TIPS FOR EFFECTIVE MESSAGING



REVIEW THESE TIPS BEFORE USING THE TOOL:

ALIGN VALUES



Align messages with commonly held values and universal concepts. These could include community, health, safety, security, pride, love, family, or care. Avoid politically charged or polarizing language. **Do not assume that your audience's values mirror your own.**

BE POSITIVE, BUT REAL



The valence of your message refers to its emotional tone. It influences how people feel when receiving your message. Using negative framing, “doom and gloom”, or alarmist messaging can cause apathy or shutdown, particularly when it is not paired with a hopeful, solution-oriented message. Maintain a **positive** (hope, inspiration, action) or **mixed** valence within your messages to **balance urgency with a path forward.**

USE SOCIAL NORMS



Social norms are informal shared rules or expectations about what people typically do or what people approve of and believe is right. Invoking positive social norms, or sharing the behaviors of **what “other people” are doing or should be doing** to help, can inspire us to join the collective momentum and act.

REDUCE DISTANCE



Psychological distance refers to how far away an issue feels in time, space, relevancy, or certainty. Reducing the perceived distance between your audience and the conservation issue can help to spark action. Focus on local impacts and solutions, **create relevancy** by tying coral health to everyday life, and highlight credible evidence of the impacts that we can have on coral.

DETERMINE A THEME



A theme is a complete sentence that conveys the take-home message of your program. **It is more than just a topic, it conveys meaning.** Every activity, story, and fact shared during the program or experience should clearly connect to this theme.

Each of these tips, and more, are covered in much more detail in our messaging toolkit, “**TALKING CORAL.**” Find the full and abridged versions of the toolkit [HERE](https://safecoral.org) or at safecoral.org.

SAFE CORAL MESSAGING OUTCOMES



Below are the six desired messaging outcomes of AZA SAFE Coral communications efforts. These shared outcomes were collectively determined by SAFE Coral Program partners who participated in the outcomes development phase of the “Talking Coral” initiative.

Consider which outcome(s) you aim to achieve with your messaging.

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 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.

FIND YOUR CORAL MESSAGING STRATEGY



STEP 1:

IDENTIFY YOUR DESIRED OUTCOME

IS YOUR GOAL TO:	CONSIDER A(N):	WHICH IS BEST FOR WHEN:
BUILD KNOWLEDGE AND AWARENESS?	COGNITIVE OUTCOME	Audiences may be unaware or misinformed, or when personal relevance must be established.
SPARK AN EMOTIONAL CONNECTION?	AFFECTIVE OUTCOME	Audiences may have some awareness but lack motivation, empathy, or connection to the issue.
INSPIRE BEHAVIOR OR ACTION?	BEHAVIORAL OUTCOME	Audiences are already motivated and/or connected, but unsure of what to do, how to do it, or feel helpless despite caring.

STEP 2:

DETERMINE AUDIENCE READINESS

IS YOUR AUDIENCE:		THEY MAY HAVE:
JUST LEARNING WHAT CORALS ARE?	➔	LOW AUDIENCE READINESS
PARTIALLY INFORMED AND WANTING TO KNOW HOW TO HELP?	➔	MEDIUM AUDIENCE READINESS
READY TO ENGAGE WITH COMPLEX SOLUTIONS AND LONG-TERM ACTION?	➔	HIGH AUDIENCE READINESS

STEP 3:

NAVIGATE TO YOUR MESSAGING STRATEGY CARD

MESSAGES FOR COGNITIVE OUTCOMES.....	PAGES 8-11
MESSAGES FOR AFFECTIVE OUTCOMES.....	PAGES 12-15
MESSAGES FOR BEHAVIORAL OUTCOMES.....	PAGES 16-19

SEE NEXT PAGE FOR ADDITIONAL GUIDANCE

NEED MORE GUIDANCE?



HELP ON STEP 1 - IDENTIFYING OUTCOMES:

CONSIDER THESE GUIDING QUESTIONS:

How much **time** do you have with your audience?

What **accompanying resources** are available to you? (e.g., coral tank, media, props)

Why is your audience participating in this experience?

What is the single **most important goal** you hope to achieve?

REAL-WORLD EXAMPLES

QUICK ENCOUNTER OR STATIC EXHIBIT

With limited time, aim for a simple **COGNITIVE** outcome that establishes relevancy or an emotional (**AFFECTIVE**) connection to spark curiosity.

SUMMER CAMP OR CLASSROOM VISITS

With repeated opportunities to engage, build on prior **COGNITIVE** messaging and end with an empowering message (**AFFECTIVE**) paired with a feasible call to action (**BEHAVIORAL**).

TABLING AT A COMMUNITY EVENT

If the event is not conservation-focused, start with the basics. What is coral? Why are corals important (**COGNITIVE**)? Pair with vivid imagery to inspire awe (**AFFECTIVE**).

HELP ON STEP 2 - DETERMINING AUDIENCE READINESS:

Audience readiness refers to how **familiar**, **connected**, and **prepared** an audience is to engage with a topic. People at different readiness levels typically require different types of messaging.

ASK YOUR AUDIENCE:

“What brings you to the zoo/aquarium today?”

“What do you already know about coral reefs?”

“What are you curious about?”

ASK YOURSELF (USE ENVIRONMENTAL CUES):

Are you leading a program about corals specifically, or is coral conservation secondary to the primary purpose?

Are you in a primarily educational environment or entertainment environment?

Is your audience captive (e.g., summer camp participant) or non-captive (e.g., aquarium visitor)?



MESSAGING STRATEGIES FOR **COGNITIVE** OUTCOMES



LOW AUDIENCE READINESS

APPROACH

Conveying foundational knowledge to those who are unfamiliar can be challenging. If done correctly, your audience may be more ready and willing to receive important messaging in the future. If not, your message may not land at all. **Start slow.** Your goal is to form a simple connection that will stick. Focus on using **concrete concepts** and **relatable comparisons** where possible, and build their knowledge by **connecting new ideas to what they already know.**

SAMPLE MESSAGE

“Coral reefs are living animals that provide food and shelter for thousands of marine species. But when ocean temperatures get too warm, corals become stressed and can lose the tiny algae they depend on to survive - a process we call coral bleaching.”

ADAPT IT  For kids  Far from the coast  Near coral reefs  Longer interactions



“Corals are made up of teeny tiny animals called polyps, each about the size of an ant! Hundreds of thousands of them work together to build a coral colony. But these tiny living creatures can become stressed when ocean temperatures get too warm.”



“Corals are actually living animals, and they build reefs that support thousands of species. Even if you live far from the coast, healthy reefs still help support the seafood you eat and the vacations you enjoy. But warming temperatures can stress corals and damage the reefs they build.”



“Coral reefs are actually living animals that help to support marine life, fishing, tourism, and coastal protection in our region. But when ocean temperatures stay too warm for too long, corals can become stressed and lose the tiny algae they depend on to survive - this is called coral bleaching.”



“Coral reefs are made up of tiny living animals called polyps that work together to build reef structures. These reefs provide food and shelter for thousands of marine species. But when ocean temperatures get too warm, corals can lose the algae they depend on to survive - a process called coral bleaching. What kinds of animals do you think might be affected if coral reefs disappear?”



MEDIUM AUDIENCE READINESS

APPROACH

If your audience has some basic coral knowledge already, like the fact that corals are animals or that they undergo coral bleaching from heat stress, you have an opportunity to **introduce systems thinking** and to **establish key cause-and-effect dynamics**. To accomplish this, connect the health of coral reefs to the lived experiences of the people most impacted by them.

SAMPLE MESSAGE

“Repeated marine heat waves are making it harder for coral reefs to recover between bleaching events. As reefs decline, fish populations, coastal protection, tourism, and food security can also be affected. This is especially true for communities that rely directly on healthy reefs.”

ADAPT IT



For kids



Far from the coast



Near coral reefs



Longer interactions



“Coral needs time to recover after it gets harmed by warm ocean water, but oceans are heating up so often that many reefs don’t get enough time to heal. When reefs are unhealthy, fish lose places to live, and people can lose food and protection from big ocean storms.”



“Even if you live far from the ocean, coral reef decline can still affect your quality of life. Healthy reefs support fisheries, tourism, biodiversity, and food systems that millions of people, including you, depend on. Marine heat waves are making it harder for reefs to recover from climate stress.”



“Repeated marine heat waves are making it harder for coral reefs in our region to recover between bleaching events. As reefs decline, our local fisheries, tourism businesses, shoreline protection, and ocean recreation opportunities are also affected.”



“Coral reefs can recover from stress events, but recovery takes time. Today, repeated marine heat waves are happening so frequently that many reefs are being stressed again before they fully recover. This can affect fish populations they support, coastal protection they provide, marine tourism economies, and even our food security - especially for communities closely connected to reefs. What kinds of changes do you think communities might experience if reefs continue to decline?”



HIGH AUDIENCE READINESS

APPROACH

If your audience has a command of natural history, threats, and relevant connections between reef health and human well-being, it becomes possible to introduce a more **nuanced, inquiry-based message**. Why is this challenge difficult and what solutions are realistic? You can **avoid oversimplified framing** (e.g., “recycling saves reefs”) and instead frame challenges as adaptive and multifaceted, acknowledging the uncertainty while still conveying optimism.

SAMPLE MESSAGE

Not all coral reefs respond to climate stress in the same way. Local conservation actions - such as improving water quality or reducing overfishing - can help strengthen reef resilience, but they cannot fully offset continued global warming. Scientists and communities are increasingly focusing on how to combine local management, restoration, and climate mitigation strategies to support reefs under rapidly changing conditions.

ADAPT IT  For kids  Far from the coast  Near coral reefs  Longer interactions



“Not all corals respond to climate stress in the same way. Some reefs may recover more easily because of local conditions, protections, and policies. Scientists are studying how reducing pollution and breeding stronger corals can help reefs become more resilient, even as climate change continues to warm the oceans.”



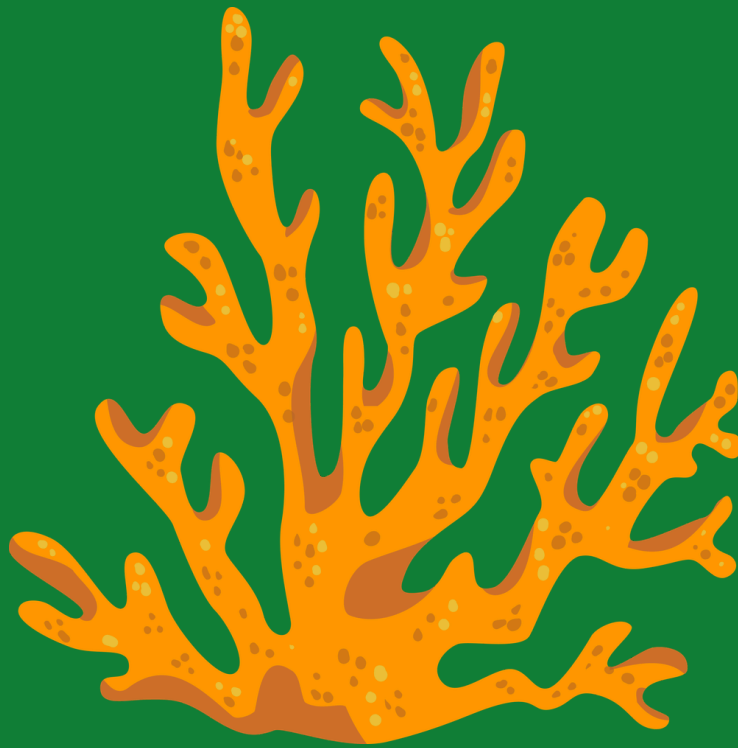
“Coral resilience is shaped by both local conditions and global climate systems. While local efforts can improve reef health, greenhouse gas emissions are increasing marine heat stress worldwide. Decisions made far from the ocean, including our energy usage and what we buy, all influence the future of coral reef ecosystems.”



“Not all corals in our region respond to climate stress in the same way. Water quality, coastal development, and restoration influence how coral recovers from bleaching events. In the AZA-Florida Reef Tract Rescue Project, zoos and aquariums are now propagating resilient corals. Still, we are navigating difficult questions about how local conservation efforts fit within the larger challenge of global climate change.”



“Not all corals respond to climate stress in the same way. Local conservation efforts can strengthen reef resilience, but cannot fully compensate for climate change. Scientists are debating how to prioritize restoration, adaptation, and limited resources under rapidly changing conditions. What kinds of strategies do you think might be effective for coral conservation?”



MESSAGING STRATEGIES FOR **AFFECTIVE** OUTCOMES



LOW AUDIENCE READINESS

APPROACH

To elicit awe and spark curiosity in audiences disconnected from coral conservation, lean on **emotionally activating language** and try to **add something unexpected** - a “Wait, what?!” moment. One way to do this is by invoking scale contrasts. Though it is our instinct to educate, it is more important here to prioritize **fascination over information density**.

SAMPLE MESSAGE

“An entire coral reef begins with tiny animals no bigger than an ant. And like ants, hundreds of thousands of these creatures work together to create habitats. These enormous worlds beneath the sea are so large they can sometimes be seen from space.”

ADAPT IT



For kids



Far from the coast



Near coral reefs



Longer interactions



“An entire coral reef begins with tiny animals no bigger than an ant. Just like ants building a colony together, millions of these creatures work as a team to build enormous underwater worlds filled with fish, sea turtles, and other ocean animals.”



“An entire coral reef begins with tiny animals no bigger than an ant. Together, millions of these creatures build massive underwater worlds that support ocean life, as well as seafood and places people travel from all over the world to experience.”



“An entire coral reef begins with tiny animals no bigger than an ant. Together, millions of these creatures build the underwater habitats that make our local waters so full of life, color, and movement.”



“An entire coral reef begins with tiny animals no bigger than an ant. And like ants, millions of these creatures work together to create enormous underwater worlds that can sometimes be seen from space. It’s incredible to imagine that some of the largest living structures on Earth are built by animals so small. Why do you think people are often surprised to learn that coral reefs are alive?”



MEDIUM AUDIENCE READINESS

APPROACH

Audiences with previous exposure to corals may be open to messaging that deepens their connection. Try to **move from admiration to relational thinking**. Be wary of drifting into purely cognitive/scientific explanation as you convey concepts like **interconnectedness**, which can elicit feelings of awe, curiosity, and care on its own.

SAMPLE MESSAGE

“A healthy coral reef is constantly alive with movement and cooperation. Fish clean parasites from other animals, corals glow with brilliant colors created by microscopic algae living inside them, and thousands of species depend on the reef at the same time - all within a living ecosystem built by the tiniest of animals.”

ADAPT IT



For kids



Far from the coast



Near coral reefs



Longer interactions



“A healthy coral reef is alive with activity and teamwork. Tiny fish clean larger animals like sea turtles, glowing corals depend on microscopic algae living inside them, and thousands of species share the same reef at once - all in an ecosystem built by animals so small that hundreds could fit across your hand.”



“A healthy coral reef is alive with movement and cooperation. Thousands of species depend on corals at the same time, from microscopic algae hidden inside corals to large fish that feed people around the world. It’s remarkable how many lives and livelihoods are connected to ecosystems that most people never see in person.”



“A healthy coral reef is alive with movement and cooperation. In our waters, fish, corals, and countless other species depend on one another in ways we are still working to fully understand. The reefs you know harbor immense levels of complexity and interaction.”



“A healthy coral reef is constantly alive with movement and cooperation. Fish clean parasites from other animals, corals glow with colors created by microscopic algae living inside them, and thousands of species depend on the reef at the same time - all within an ecosystem built by tiny animals. The more scientists study coral reefs, the more unexpected relationships they continue to discover. Which part of reef life do you find most surprising or fascinating?”



HIGH AUDIENCE READINESS

APPROACH

For familiar and connected audiences, affective outcomes can shift from awe and wonder to empowerment and responsibility. An existing fascination with corals invites **opportunities for reflection, humility, complexity, and nuance** regarding the responsibility we share for protecting nature.

SAMPLE MESSAGE

Some coral colonies today may have first begun forming before modern cities, airplanes, or electricity even existed. Scientists are still discovering how corals communicate with their microscopic partners, recover from stress, and adapt to changing oceans - levels of complexity we are only beginning to understand. What might we still have to learn from ecosystems that have persisted for centuries longer than many human civilizations?"

ADAPT IT



For kids



Far from the coast



Near coral reefs



Longer interactions



"Some coral colonies alive today may have begun forming before cars or electricity even existed. Scientists are still learning how corals work together with microscopic algae to survive in changing seas. Does knowing how ancient reefs are help you to think more about caring for living things that have existed long before you and me?"



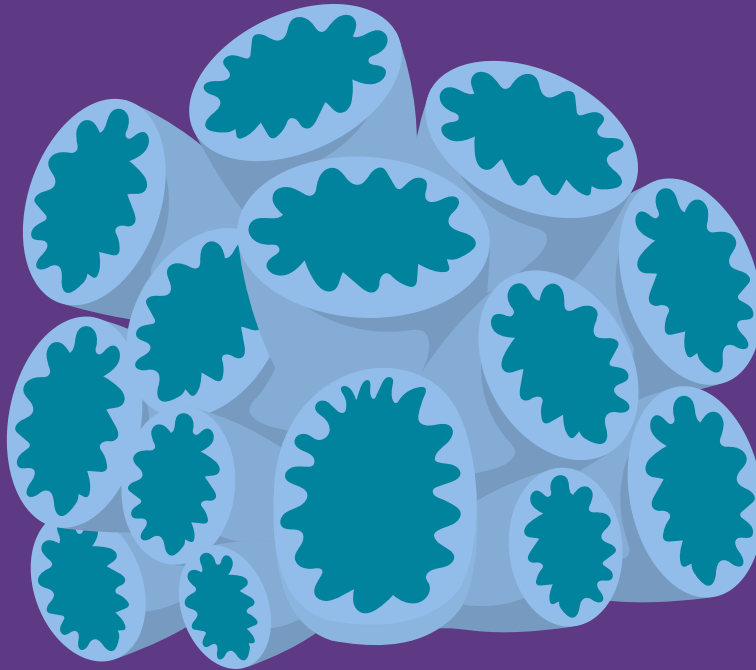
"Some coral colonies alive today may have first begun forming before many modern human societies existed. Scientists are still uncovering the remarkable ways corals adapt, cooperate with other tiny organisms, and support entire ocean ecosystems. Even from far away, our inter-connectedness with reefs shapes our lives on land."



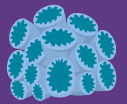
"Coral colonies in our region may have begun forming long before our communities & coastlines looked the way they do today. We are still discovering how corals can adapt to and recover from stress. Those connected to these waters can feel a deep sense of responsibility for what happens to our reefs, and how we can heal them."



"Some coral colonies alive today may have first begun forming before modern cities or electricity even existed. Scientists are still discovering how corals communicate with microscopic partners, recover from stress, and adapt to changing oceans - and we are just scratching the surface. The more we learn about corals, the more they challenge the idea that humans fully understand the living systems we depend on. Could connecting with our humility help to influence the way we care for the natural world? How so?"



MESSAGING STRATEGIES FOR **BEHAVIORAL** OUTCOMES



LOW AUDIENCE READINESS

APPROACH

For unfamiliar or unengaged audiences, the primary goal is to suggest a **low-risk, simple behavior** that is still helpful to corals. As you progress through audience readiness levels and further modify your message for specific audiences, the behaviors you suggest may change and increase in both complexity and commitment.

SAMPLE MESSAGE

“One simple way to protect coral reefs is to reduce single-use plastic whenever possible. Plastic pollution damages marine ecosystems and harms marine animals, even far from where the trash first enters the ocean. Choosing a reusable shopping bag or food container is a small action that can make a difference over time.”

ADAPT IT



For kids



Far from the coast



Near coral reefs



Longer interactions



“One simple way to help protect

coral reefs is to use a reusable water bottle or lunch container instead of throwing plastic away after one use. By keeping plastics out of the water, you are helping corals and other ocean animals like sea turtles and fish.”



“Even if you live far from the ocean, reducing single-use

plastic still helps protect coral reefs and marine animals. Trash from streets and rivers eventually makes its way to the ocean, which is why choosing reusable shopping bags or food containers makes a difference for corals.”

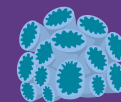


“One simple way to help protect local coral reefs is to

reduce the amount of trash and plastic that enters nearby waterways and beaches. Choosing reusable bags, bottles, or food containers helps to keep pollution out of the ocean and reduce harm to marine life in our region.”



“A simple way to protect coral reefs is to reduce single-use plastic. Plastic pollution harms marine ecosystems and animals, even far from where the trash first enters the ocean. Choosing reusable items instead of disposable ones may seem small, but when many people make the same change, the impact grows. What are some everyday items people use once and discard that could be replaced with reusable alternatives?”



MEDIUM AUDIENCE READINESS

APPROACH

With some audience readiness comes the opportunity to shift from encouraging one-time coral-friendly behaviors to **cultivating behavioral habits**. Connect the conservation reason for the behavior (e.g., reusable items reduce single-use plastic pollution on reefs) to **suggested planning steps** one could take to develop habits that encourage that behavior.

SAMPLE MESSAGE

“Coral reefs are affected by many everyday human activities. Choosing sustainable seafood, reducing single-use plastics, conserving energy, and supporting businesses with responsible environmental practices are all ways people can help reduce pressure on reef ecosystems over time.”

ADAPT IT



For kids



Far from the coast



Near coral reefs



Longer interactions



“Plastic pollution can harm corals and marine animals when trash enters the ocean. Keeping a reusable water bottle or lunch container in the same place every day - like in a backpack or by the front door - can make it easier to remember to use it each day.”



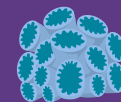
“Even here, reducing single-use plastic keeps trash out of waterways leading to the ocean and helps protect corals and marine animals. One way to cement these habits is to keep shopping bags in your car or near the front door so they’re harder to forget before heading to the store.”



“Pollution entering local waterways can eventually reach our reefs. One way to reduce impacts on corals is to make sure trash and fishing line never enters storm drains or coastal waters. Keeping a reusable cleanup bucket in your car or boat can help to turn a single reef-friendly choice into a regular habit.”



“Most of us want to reduce waste that can harm corals, but remembering new habits can be difficult at first. Behavioral scientists have found that habits are easier to maintain when they are connected to existing routines or visual reminders. For example, leaving reusable bags by the front door or storing them in the car can make them easier to remember. What kinds of reminders or routines do you think would work best for you?”



HIGH AUDIENCE READINESS

APPROACH

This messaging strategy, for familiar and engaged audiences, is different from just “promoting behaviors.” It’s about helping to develop **persistence, reinforcement, social support**, and **accountability**, all while preventing drop-off. Consider additional planning, skills, or other supports one may need to move from forming habits to sustained action - noting that these pathways will adjust for different behaviors.

SAMPLE MESSAGE

“To actively protect corals, you can take additional steps - like reducing air travel, voting for pro-environmental policies, participating in coastal cleanups or reef restoration, supporting organizations conducting coral research and restoration, and choosing tourism operators that follow reef-friendly practices. Long-term coral protection depends on turning concern into sustained action.”

ADAPT IT



For kids



Far from the coast



Near coral reefs



Longer interactions



“When we care about corals, we often keep helping in small ways over time. Joining a conservation club, participating in annual beach cleanups, or tracking personal goals like reducing plastic waste can help coral-friendly actions become part of who you are, not just something you do once.”



“Far from the ocean, it helps when coral-friendly choices are present in your daily routine. Some people commit to 1 or 2 actions they can sustain over time - like reducing meat consumption, choosing lower-carbon travel, or repeatedly donating to coral organizations. Stay connected through your local aquarium - distant reefs will feel more real and worth caring about.”



“Communities connected to coral reefs play an important role in protecting them. Volunteering regularly with coastal cleanups and coral monitoring programs or restoration efforts - and inviting friends or family to participate alongside you - helps sustain both coral-friendly action and long-term community stewardship.”



“Protecting coral reefs can feel overwhelming because many of the biggest threats are global. But we are more likely to stay engaged when we focus on actions we can sustain, celebrate progress along the way, and work alongside others who share our values. What else do you think helps people to continue taking action even when they know one person can’t solve the whole problem alone?”

CONCLUSION

Use this tool to refine your message, and then - **get creative!** Your best engagement techniques will bring the message to life. Remember to stay on target. All activities, facts, and stories should clearly connect to your theme and key message. Audiences can feel overwhelmed if given too many disparate facts and actions that don't tell a relevant story. Stick to the main message for a greater chance of impact.

This decision tool, and the accompanying Talking Coral messaging toolkit, were created by Human Nature Group in partnership with the Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) SAFE Coral Communications, Education, and Messaging (CEM) working group. We are grateful to Disney Conservation for funding this important work.

ABOUT THE CREATORS

HUMAN NATURE GROUP (HNG)

At HNG, we help organizations use evidence-based practices and make data-informed decisions 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.

AZA SAFE CORAL

The AZA SAFE Coral program aims to advance the following coral conservation initiatives: reef enhancement through coral restoration, coral production for future restoration, and development of public awareness and stakeholder engagement activities.

MORE FROM TALKING CORAL:



EXTENDED
TOOLKIT

ABRIDGED
TOOLKIT

ON-THE-GO
DESIGN TOOL

EVALUATION
TOOL

TO LEARN MORE ABOUT, AND TO IMPLEMENT,
OUTCOME-BASED CONSERVATION MESSAGING, CHECK
OUT THE “TALKING CORAL” SUITE OF RESOURCES

AVAILABLE NOW ON WWW.SAFECORAL.ORG