

## Caring for the Earth: a powerful slogan to be handled with care

Christo Fabricius, Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU) Sustainability Research Unit.  
<http://www.nmmu.ac.za/sru>; @christofab on Twitter

21 June 2016

Caring for the Earth (sometimes called Earth Stewardship) is a call to voluntary, unselfish actions, where everyone shows leadership and takes responsibility to promote the long term sustainability of one of the better planets: Earth. The meaning of 'Caring for the Earth', a slogan used world wide, depends on who you ask and when you do the asking. It is variously used as a guiding principle for sustainable living, a yardstick for better policies for a more sustainable world, a spiritual or meditation practice, a call for morality and citizenship, the secret to feeding the world, and a way to reduce unwanted environmental impacts.

Slogans are powerful. They can be transferred within society or from one generation to the next - similar to genes in biology or inherited wealth in economics. And some of these culturally transmitted habits or traits, called 'memes', can be very stubborn or sticky - they don't easily go away. Think of modern advertising slogans such as "*Just Do It*"; "*Have a Break...*"; "*A diamond is forever*" or "*It gives you wings...*". Many memes are harmless or even good, but some can have unwanted side effects.

Some memes can go haywire, like unguided missiles. The swastika, nowadays a symbol or meme for fascism, was (and still is) an emblem of well-being and good fortune in many cultures. It had only positive meaning, dating back 15 000 years, before the Nazi's assigned their own interpretation and propaganda to it. Another example of a meme gone haywire is "*Unity is Strength*" - a very sensible slogan until it became misused by the former South African government to unify whites against the 'total onslaught' - a so-called communist conspiracy against the South Africa's sovereignty. It will take more than a few generations to overcome the downstream disunity.

While not suggesting that Caring for the Earth has nearly the same potential for offensiveness or divisiveness as the swastika or apartheid had, early indications are that it could have several interpretations. The consequences may range from being positive to being potentially dangerous or even outright hazardous to Earth's sustainability. In the Garden Route one will find a card-carrying earth carer under every Milkwood or Wattle tree. Private protected areas, invasive plant clearing operations, beach cleaning campaigns and ecosystem restoration projects abound, supported by as many 'Friends-of' groups or forums as there are causes to fight for. Few places on Earth can boast such a concentration of earth stewards as this little strip between the Indian Ocean and the Cape Fold Mountains. But do they have similar interpretations of earth stewardship?

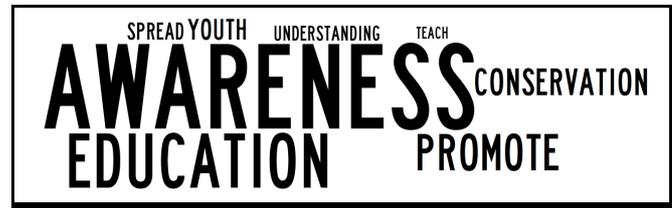
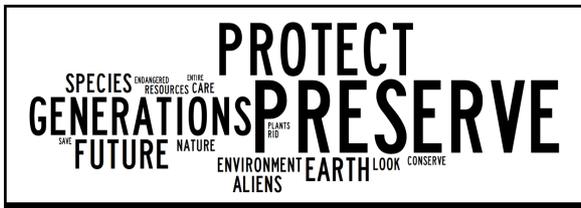
During an informal celebration we asked 34 affable supporters (members and non-members) of WESSA, an environmental NGO that includes '*Caring for the Earth*' in its motto, to write their personal interpretations of the slogan down on individual pieces of paper. We also asked them to list activities they regularly engage in - activities that give substance to their interpretation of Caring for the Earth.

The results showed that seemingly like-minded people who support the same environmental cause might interpret this slogan rather differently. Two fairly distinct groups emerged. We found that almost 60% of the audience had an all-embracing interpretation of Caring for the Earth. They see it as a collective mission where people look beyond our own interest, and where humans and nature are seen as part of the same system. Statements such as "*keep Earth alive for all of us*", "*sustainability of environment and development*" and "*fit in with the environment*" show that most People Caring for the Earth understand that it is everybody's responsibility. This is encouraging: collective choices is the key to avoiding a tragedy of the commons and invites participation. This interpretation went hand in hand with an understanding that Caring for the Earth is about living responsibly and treading lightly on the planet. "*Living with a light footprint*" and "*Limit our impact*" were typical comments, with *recycle, save water / electricity* and *limit population growth* as representative actions (**Figure 1**).



**Figure 1. An all-embracing interpretation of Caring for the Earth emphasises sustainability, treading lightly on the planet and limiting our ecological impact. (The relative size of a word indicates the number of times it occurred on cards in this category)**

On the other side of the spectrum (40% of responses), and with equally noble interpretations, were members who understood Caring for the Earth as a call to conserve and preserve nature. This grouping included interpretations such as *preserving all species, conserving endangered species, eradicating alien plants, stopping littering and preserving nature for the next generation*. Activities included protest action, campaigns to save endangered species, preserving wildlife, planting trees and bringing problems to the attention of the authorities. This group generally saw the solution as education and awareness raising, with comments such as “*promote awareness amongst the youth*”, “*spreading the message*” and “*educating / teaching others*” as examples of activities (Figure 2).



**Figure 2. A preservationist interpretation of Caring for the Earth emphasises conservation of species and natural ecosystems for future generations and focuses on awareness raising and education as solutions. (The relative size of a word indicates the number of times it occurred on cards in this category)**

This exercise, despite the small sample size, supports the hunch that commonly used slogans (or memes) such as Caring for the Earth can be prone to inconsistent interpretations. It seems most people caring for the earth in the Garden Route have a broad, inclusive understanding of Caring for the Earth. They see it as a lifestyle choice which they act out by reducing waste and using resources sparingly. They typically see the responsibility for achieving this as everyone’s, with themselves as part of both the problem and the solution.

Other people caring for the earth have a more nature-centric view with a focus on species preservation, eradicating problems and protecting the Earth against human threats. People in this category tend to believe in education, fund-raising campaigns, protest and awareness raising as the solution. The two groups are of course not as clear-cut as portrayed above; a person can definitely have a broad understanding of sustainability, be concerned about extinctions and be passionate about education and awareness raising.

Our quick survey showed that even supporters of the same environmental cause might differ in their understanding of a universal slogan. People assign their own meaning to memes, but actions are stronger than words. The activities and actions of environmentalists could therefore be more powerful than their slogan in influencing the stickiness (or otherwise) of a particular meaning. The way its slogan is understood and given meaning through action has important implications for an organization’s image, especially amongst its future members. ‘Caring for the Slogan’ is as much a collective responsibility and choice for environmentalists as Caring for the Earth is.