

Tyler Zehrung

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Professor de Onís

Communicating Unseen Processes: Psychology and Risk Communication in the
Naturaleza Ahora! campaign

Abstract: *This paper delves into an **environmental advocacy campaign** based in the Salem/Keizer school district and surrounding neighborhoods that was recently launched by the Straub Environmental Center. The campaign, titled *Naturaleza Ahora!*, embodies a measure of **exigence** that is reflected in its goals and strategies, and I investigate the composition of this exigence in an attempt to better understand patterns and methods of communication surrounding environmental justice. After discussing the rhetorical groundwork of the campaign, I explicate some of its specific tactics of **risk communication**, drawing on relevant and timely studies in the field of psychology that pertain to *Naturaleza Ahora!*'s **campaign goals** to support my analysis. As the bulk of the analysis is rooted in risk communication, I pause briefly to delineate binary foci within risk communication: **cultural rationality** and the **technical model**. I highlight Finally, in an effort to imagine the location of an overlap in our conceptions of these two foci, I make a move towards synthesizing the aforementioned studies in psychology with the cultural rationalities present in the *Naturaleza Ahora!* campaign. In doing so, I hope to communicate, accurately and with positive effect, the unseen processes of environmental justice discourse and its relationship to psychology as it pertains to the *Naturaleza Ahora!* case study.*

Keywords: Environmental advocacy campaigns, risk communication, cultural rationality, framing, exigency, goals, technical risk communication

As some of our community members may already know, the Straub center offers a number of student-centered outdoor education programs that strive to “help kids of all learning styles and cultural-economic backgrounds explore nature, discover science, and learn how to become environmental stewards.” For this report, I am going to delve into the rhetorical significance of *Naturaleza Ahora!* and discuss the ways in which the initiative, helmed by its Latino Engagement Team, communicates with its target audience. By the end of this report I hope that two separate but interrelated things will have happened - first, that you will have learned something regarding the rhetorical significance and situation of this campaign, and second, that I will have clearly and thoughtfully addressed the main question that drove my research, which was: *what methods of environmental communication does Naturaleza Ahora! use to engage with and persuade community members?* I draw heavily on key concepts from Media and the Environment, a 200-level service learning course at Willamette University taught by Professor Catalina de Onis, and from the University’s psychology database, which helped me to highlight relevant studies in the field of psychology that record the many and unique benefits that nature exposure has on children and adolescents.

Before diving into those studies and their relationship to *Naturaleza Ahora!*’s communication tactics, I will pause and take some space to discuss the campaign itself, and discuss some of the ways we can understand and define it in terms of environmental communication. I would strongly encourage the reader, if they have any questions that this report leaves unanswered, to visit *Naturaleza Ahora!*’s page at straubcenter.org, or email those questions directly to outreach@straubcenter.org.

To begin, I turn first to the most accessible and fundamental definition of *Naturaleza Ahora!* As a case study. It is an excellent example of an **environmental advocacy campaign**, for which Phaedra C. Pezzulo and Robert Cox give a concise definition in their book on Environmental Communication and the Public Sphere, calling it “a strategic course of action, involving communication, which is undertaken for a specific purpose.” *Naturaleza Ahora!* also meets the World Health Organization’s (WHO) definition of an advocacy campaign, and even fulfills the acronym ‘S.M.A.R.T.’ that the WHO includes in its manual on effective health-related advocacy campaigns, meaning it has a **goal** that is Specific, Measureable, Achievable, Realistic, and Time-bound. *Naturaleza Ahora!*’s ‘SMART’ goal is “to double the number of Latino students who participate in outdoor education over the next three years and help them develop social, academic, and workforce readiness skills through natural science education ... in nature.” We can begin to elucidate this goal and realize its attributes in light of its relationship to **cultural rationality**. Dr. Frank Fischer, a recognized writer on environmental politics, explains that cultural rationality is one of two ways that *environmental risks*, referring to any practice or trend that endangers certain environments and often the communities of marginalized groups therein, are communicated to those communities and any policy-makers involved, from the local to the federal level. Fischer says “[by] focusing on the opinions of traditional social and peer groups, cultural rationality takes unanticipated consequences to be fully relevant to near-term decision making and trusts processes over outcomes.” Specifically, *Naturaleza Ahora!* is using cultural rationality surrounding children’s exposure to nature and nature-based learning as a method of **risk communication**. It is important to note that the ‘risk’ being communicated in this case study is one for which there is not much “hard evidence” or

in-depth research, due in part to its immeasurable and intangible nature. Despite a paucity of traditionally recognized, “decorous” voices weighing in on the topic, cultural rationality posits that communities do not necessarily need experts to tell them that the unprecedented lack of exposure of children and adolescents to the outdoors may pose significant risks to the health and development of their younger members. Thus cultural rationality, as Fischer says, is a way of taking into account any “unanticipated consequences” and trusting the process over the outcomes. However, this is only one part of risk communication - the other would be whatever field of professionally-recognized experts might specialize in whatever risk is being communicated. In the case of global climate change, this would be the broad consensus of independent climate scientists and researchers un beholden to fossil fuel industry interests who agree on the existence and risks of anthropogenic climate change. This pole of risk communication is typically referred to as the **technical model**. *Naturaleza Ahora!* strikes a strong balance between these modes of communication in conveying its goal. For example, the web page for the campaign draws on studies which show that “Latino youth spend less time on outdoor activities than other populations and they have the highest media exposure: an average 13 hours per day of screen time”, effectively utilizing a technical tool (the studies) to reinforce an embodiment of their cultural rationale (their engagement with Latino youth in the Salem-Keizer area).

Taking the example above as a model for synthesis between the cultural and technical models of risk communication, I lift up a handful of studies recently published in various psychology journals and periodicals. The first study I’m going to highlight was published in 2016 by Nooshin Razani and five other researchers who were working with the University of

California San Francisco's children's hospital, Benioff Children's hospital. Their study was titled "Design and evaluation of a park prescription program for stress reduction and health promotion in low-income families: The Stay Healthy in Nature Everyday (SHINE) study protocol." This study showcased the successful integration of stress management counseling with the health benefits associated with nature-based activities and counseling. I highlight this study first because it's important to be aware of the stresses impacting *Naturaleza Ahora!*'s primary audience; in a country whose administration and head of state frequently employs staunch anti-immigrant rhetoric and policies, and in a community that is disproportionately affected by ICE raids, *Naturaleza Ahora!* is providing a vital service to Latino children and their families who are facing these stresses, creating a space that is community-informed (through the Latino Engagement Team) and may provide immeasurable benefits to children and their families. This study may be especially useful in investigating the myriad ways in which *Naturaleza Ahora!* supports and enables its participants. The next study was conducted by Ruth Ann Atchely and David Strayer, psychology professors from the University of Kansas and the University of Utah respectively. Their study, titled "Creativity in the Wild: Improving Creative Reasoning through Immersion in Natural Settings" examines the natural implications of Attention Restoration Theory, which argues that being "immersed in nature" can help our brains replenish a number of prefrontal cortex processes associated with things like problem-solving, multi-tasking, and selective attention. Ann Atchely and Strayer point out that in today's technology-rich, app-centric society, these mental functions are frequently used to the point of exhaustion, and this can drastically limit their functionality over time. This seems to fit *Naturaleza Ahora!*'s digitally-driven **framing** of the issue they are addressing; Latino youth have the least outdoor

interaction and an average of 13 hours of screen time per day, as the web page details. Ann Atchely and Strayer's study adds extra validity to *Naturaleza Ahora!*'s initiative in this regard. The final study was conducted by Michael Camasso and Radha Jagannathan through the State University of New Jersey. Camasso and Jagannathan developed what they called a Nurture through Nature, or "NtN", program and implemented a pilot of the program at one elementary school in New Brunswick, NJ over the course of 4 years. The researchers found that the NtN program, which is nearly identical to Straub's outdoor education programs on natural sciences, demonstrated a statistically significant advantage for NtN participants in science, and nearly in mathematics as well. This study shows that a program using almost the same exact methods as *Naturaleza Ahora!* provided significant benefits for elementary school students. Furthermore, the researchers framed their study as a model for intervention with students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, again very closely in conversation with the way *Naturaleza Ahora!* frames their initiative.

With all of these studies in mind, I ask the reader to direct their attention again to the case study as it exists in the world outside of the parsing of this report. I provide here a number of justifications that classify it as an environmental advocacy campaign: its diligence in laying out SMART goals and foresight in utilizing both the cultural and technical models of risk communication. I have brought up three prominent studies in the field of psychology that may supplement the technical communication of the campaign, and these studies have helped clarify nuances of the way *Naturaleza Ahora!* deploys the tactic of framing. Finally, I attune myself and the reader to the concept of **exigency**, a term that describes any sort of situation that is marked by a sense of urgency. *Naturaleza Ahora!* neatly realizes this, situating its call for immediacy in the

title of the campaign itself. I aspire for this report to be utilized as a staging ground from which the reader may reflect on exigencies, environmental or otherwise in their own community/communities. I also hope that this report has succeeded in being purely informative regarding *Naturaleza Ahora!*, what it is trying to do, how it is doing and communicating that, and why. I end this report with a reminder that the campaign and more information can be found at straubcenter.org.

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Naturaleza Ahora!/Nature Now! web page, located at straubcenter.org.
<https://www.straubcenter.org/naturaleza-ahoranature-now/>