

# EMPTY WORDS, EMPTY PHRASES

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We don't listen any more. Perhaps this is because words are very cheap and so many are thrown away each day. Our loss of critical listening skills leaves us vulnerable to manipulation by words which have no meaning but seem to describe a desirable situation. These empty words can evoke a strong, reflexive reaction just like the leg movement when the knee is stuck. In both cases the reaction is produced without the stimulus passing through the brain. Mining (and the other natural resources industries) are being beaten up by empty words. Our jobs, careers, companies and industry are at risk if we don't stop their use.

## EMPTY WORDS

Three examples of empty words are "healthy ecosystem", "harming the ecology" and "toxic release inventory." Once we take off the attractive wrappers, there is nothing inside these words. We need to demonstrate to the public and regulators that these words are empty. In addition, we need to demonstrate that policies and regulations based on these words are wasteful and guaranteed to fail. Their lack of substance also means that the overuse of these terms can be harmful. The harm would result from mistrust and disbelief when there is a real crisis.

Who could be against having, developing or protecting a healthy ecosystem? No one! In reality, there is no such thing as ecosystem health despite the unfortunate use of the term in scientific literature. Health is a concept applied to individual organisms, not to higher levels such as ecosystems. Even when applied to people, health has no consensus definition. Is someone partially paralyzed by an accident healthy or unhealthy? The word health is a social concept rather than an objective, measurable, scientific attribute of an ecosystem. There are no variables that can be measured to assess the "health" of an ecosystem.

To demonstrate the point try to describe an unhealthy ecosystem. There is no such thing. When a forest is logged, the ecosystem is different, but not less "healthy." People may prefer the big trees to stumps, but both systems are equally healthy. Logging just resets the natural succession that occurs within the ecosystem. Mining, too, alters the ecosystem, but does not make it "unhealthy."

Healthy is a manipulative way of saying socially acceptable without the discussion that goes with the term "socially acceptable." For some reason we have this disdain for making social decisions regarding our environment, so we camouflage social issues as technical issues. Unless we can remove this camouflage, our ability to rationally refute issues presented by project opponents will continue to be a frustrating, difficult task.

Many people do not know the meaning of words such as ecology and environment. That is why they are so misapplied. This same lack of understanding leads people to complain that a mining project "would" (note the certainty) "harm the ecology."

The word ecology means the relationship between a species and its environment, or the

relationships among one species and other living organisms. Without doubt, activities such as mining do have an effect on the environment. In many cases, the effects seen are no different than those produced by a wildfire, landslide, volcanic eruption, or other natural phenomena.

Wildfires are now accepted as an important part of the natural environmental cycle. However, wildfire can cause significant changes in the environment. Should we say that a wildfire "harms the ecology?" How can wildfire be both an important component of natural systems and yet "harm the ecology?" Yet the visceral response to this phrase is, "Don't allow any activity which would harm the ecology!"

What makes this phrase disingenuous is the assumption that nature is static. There is a widely held belief that populations and ecosystems do not change with time. On the contrary, wildfires, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions and tornadoes change the landscape all the time. And sometimes the change is quite dramatic as Mount St. Helens, Washington State, demonstrated on May 18, 1980.

Empty phrases are meaningless and loaded with emotion. Their use takes away the opportunity for calm, objective discussions of risk, time scales, degree of disturbance and the important ecosystem characteristics of recovery and adaptability.

## **VERBAL CONFUSION**

The recent requirement for the mining industry in the US to comply with the complex and costly reporting of the Toxic Chemical Release Inventory (TRI) regulations is based on some false premises. For example, that there are no differences in toxicity by chemical state or species (e.g. solid, liquid or gas; organic or inorganic), by organism exposed (species and age), by mode of exposure or any other biological factor. Having the components of fugitive dust measured on mine sites does not promote public health or safety. It does, however, open channels for frivolous and nuisance lawsuits.

The greatest danger from the continued use of these empty words and phrases is not economic. Rather, it is the potential loss of the public's trust in regulatory agencies and scientists. Crying wolf might cause the public to ignore warnings of real concern. And when supposedly responsible scientists support such empty words and phrase, the public loses confidence that there really are responsible ways to plan, operate, close and reclaim a mine, regardless of the mineral being extracted or the methods used. We cannot continue to sit idly by when empty words are being used to form legislation or while attacking mining projects. We need to become aware that what often sounds good and reasonable is actually nothing more than fluff to protect someone's interest.

It is time for the industry to point out that the environmental emperor is not wearing a new suit of clothes. He is naked and an embarrassment to us all.