POSITIVE COMMUNICATION TOOLKIT

A guide to (re)framing conservation messages to empower action.

Developed in collaboration with

FRAMING MATTERS

CONSERVATION OPTIMISM

CONSERVATION OPTIMISM

A GUIDE TO CHANGING THE
CONVERSATION
TO CHANGE OUTCOMES FOR
CONSERVATION

A MESSAGE FROM THE TEAM

We believe that a planet on which both people and nature flourish is possible.

When it comes to the natural world, grim headlines abound. As we hear of forests burning and species going extinct, it can be hard to remain hopeful. However, amongst the stories of loss, there are also many inspiring stories of hope that are waiting to be shared, learned from and replicated.

Conservation Optimism is built on the belief that securing our planet's future hinges on as many people around the world as possible all stepping up to take action for nature. We aim to foster this action, in large part by helping to share stories from across the conservation sector – both stories of hope, triumph, and success, and stories of loss, difficulty, and failure -- in a way that inspires, entertains, motivates, and empowers.

We know that the way we frame issues is of critical importance to how they are received and acted upon by others.

Conservation Optimism is more than our online hub. It's a spirit and an ethos that many organisations are embracing as we all move forward to build a more effective, more inclusive, and more active future for conservation. To this end, we are working to build robust reciprocal relationships with those institutions, collectively called the Conservation Network of Optimists Worldwide or ConservationNOW, that uphold our vision.

We are in active dialogue with our over 70 members and working to develop content to support them and the conservation sector as a whole in the areas of need that they help us to highlight. When 70% of them told us that they needed help with framing their communication messages, we got to work and reached out to framing expert Ralph Underhill from Framing Matters. We invited our ConservationNOW members to join us for a special one-day workshop with Ralph to provide us with an intro to framing and to allow us to discuss some common pitfalls to move away from the doom and gloom narrative.

This toolkit was produced using examples shared by our members during the workshop. It will encourage you to think about why you are communicating and what the values and beliefs underpinning your messages are. Finally, it will provide you with some communication traps and will dive into how to avoid them.

We hope you find this toolkit useful.
The Conservation Optimism Team

WHAT IS FRAMING?

Our words and actions are key tools in conservation but we are not currently using them to their full potential.

This is where framing comes in...

[This intro is adapted from the Public Interest Research Centre's _Framing Nature Toolkit_ written by Ralph Underhill]

WHY FRAMING MATTERS TO CONSERVATION:

The goal of conservation is to help wildlife and our natural world thrive. To do this we need the support of decision-makers and the public. Research has shown that certain words and experiences are more likely to inspire and motivate people than others.

Therefore our language is integral to our goals.

It is time to subject the language we use to the same level of scrutiny as other traditional conservation activities, such as managing the water levels on our nature reserves or understanding the population trends of threatened species.

Our words and actions are key tools in conservation but we are not currently using them to their full potential.

Which is more motivating?

Due to the devastating bushfires that have destroyed much of Australia's nature reserves, koalas are now considered functionally extinct.

Koalas have been hard hit by the Australian bushfires, and these conservationists are working to come up with a plan for how to help save them.

WHAT IS FRAMING?

WHAT IS FRAMING?

Frames are related bits of information stored in memory, they are mental structures. These mental structures can be engaged by a single word, a phrase or an image, as long as it carries a clear set of associations and implies a way of viewing the world.

The sociologist Erving Goffman uses the metaphor 'life as a play' to describe how frames work, because they share much in common with theatre. Like a play, frames have some characters, locations, props, plotlines, relationships, emotions and drama.

They include words, images, characters, actions, relationships, emotions and—importantly—values. For more information, see PIRC's Common Cause for Nature.

FRAMES ORGANISE REALITY FOR US; THOSE WE HEAR MOST OFTEN BECOME OUR COMMON SENSE

What makes a frame? A frame is a mental structure. This mental structure can be engaged by a single word, a phrase or an image, as long as it carries a clear set of associations and implies a way of viewing the world. All words and phrases engage frames, but some are ambiguous or weak, while others have a strong relationship to one particular frame.

IMPORTANT: You are already framing!

In your work you are constantly framing things. When you choose one set of words rather than another it has implications— you activate certain associations and beliefs instead of others, these can either be helpful or work against your interests.

ARE YOU AWARE OF THE BELIEFS AND VALUES THAT YOUR MESSAGES ARE CURRENTLY ENGAGING?

Example: A word like 'school' doesn't seem particularly loaded, and yet it carries with it all sorts of associations and will bring to mind our personal experiences with the word and also the connections we make to popular culture (TV, film, etc). So if a friend says my new job is like "school", people can identify with what they mean. They are suggesting their work-place is strict and hierarchical, while if they said it was like a "holiday" it might suggest there is too little structure.

WHAT'S ALREADY IN PEOPLE'S HEADS MATTERS

What story or frame does your communication engage and reinforce?

Example: Let's take the word "farming"—what does it bring to mind? Most people get a picture of a jolly farmer and small holding of happy animals. Think about children's books, television programmes, toys and adverts for butter—these have been the main influences in forming the frame of "farming" in most people's minds.

When we say that farming is causing a problem we are bringing to mind small farms with happy animals and low stocking densities. We need a term that evokes the impact of modern farming, something like "industrial agriculture" or "industrialisation of the countryside".

For more information about framing, see PIRC's Framing Nature Toolkit.

?

WHY ARE YOU **?**
COMMUNICATING

Before creating any message it is important to ask yourself:

· Why am I doing this?
· Who am I trying to reach?
· What do I want them to do as a result?

1. THE OBJECTIVE

START BY THINKING ABOUT WHAT YOUR OBJECTIVE IS:

• What is the goal of your campaign and what is the goal of the specific communication? How do they fit together?
• Are you trying to change people's minds or encourage them to do something, like sign a petition or donate money?

2. THE AUDIENCE

THEN THINK ABOUT YOUR AUDIENCE:

• Who do you want to speak to?
• What do they already care about?
• How can you find out more about them?
• What do you want our audience to think, feel or do as a result of seeing your communication?

3. THE OUTCOME

FINALLY, THINK ABOUT IF AND HOW YOU ARE GOING TO MEASURE YOUR OUTCOME:

• What would success look like?
• How will you know you have been successful?
• Make sure the indicator of success matches the desired outcome. For example, if your goal is to change people's views on conservation, maybe the number of shares on a social media post is not a good outcome indicator. Instead, maybe you could survey people about their likelihood to take action after reading the message.

[This list is taken from *A Practical Guide for Communicating Global Justice and Solidarity* written by Framing Matters for Health Poverty Action]

THE VALUES & BELIEFS THAT UNDERPIN YOUR MESSAGE

Every message will engage values and beliefs to some extent.

Beliefs and values are important as they help determine how your message resonates with people, and in turn how well it motivates them.

SOME VALUES AND BELIEFS ARE ASSOCIATED WITH BEHAVIOURS THAT HELP WILDLIFE & THE ENVIRONMENT

We are all huge bundles of contradictions and hold many different and opposing beliefs and values. When we write a message we will be appealing to a certain set of values and beliefs, it is important to understand what these are, and more importantly whether or not they are helpful to us. (see PIRC's Common Cause for Nature)

Whenever you are reading something, there are always assumptions being made about you as the reader. You are constantly being asked to believe certain things for the message to work.

For example, let's take this headline:

'Albatross cops' fitted with radar detectors to spot illegal fishing. Birds were 'perfect candidates' for experiment, researchers say

This message is asking us to believe:

- That radar can spot illegal boats
- That illegal fishing is a problem
- That using living animals as spies without their consent is ok
- That "fitting" is better and more careful than attaching or sticking
- That researchers are an authority and should be believed
- That other candidates for the job were looked at
- That fishing can be illegal

Which of the above beliefs are helpful for us to reinforce? When we create a message we need to ask what beliefs are we reinforcing in our audience with this message and most importantly are these helpful. In the following section we will look at what might be helpful and unhelpful beliefs to reinforce.

VALUES

We know from the [research](#) that messages connect to values. Values are our underlying motivations, they are the things we care about and that drive us. Like beliefs, messages and phrases are also likely to engage values, and we must ensure that these are helpful for our cause.

It is not just the word used to describe the value that will activate it in the audience; phrases, images and experiences also all engage values in people. To give an example, the phrase "find somewhere out in nature and explore it" is likely to engage the values of curiosity and choosing your own goals.

The following is a list of values that we know are connected to helpful environmental behaviours like cycling, recycling and supporting green policies. PIRC's Framing Nature Toolkit has exercises to help explore how to better appeal to helpful values.

A World of Beauty: beauty of nature & the arts
A World at Peace: free of war and conflict
Broad-mindedness: tolerant of different ideas and beliefs
Choosing Own Goals: selecting own purposes
Creativity: uniqueness, imagination
Curiosity: interested in everything, exploring
Equality: equal opportunity for all
Forgiveness: willing to pardon others
Freedom: freedom of action and thought
Helpfulness: working for the welfare of others
Honesty: genuine, sincere
Humility: modest, self-effacing
Independence: self-reliant, self-sufficient
Harmony: at peace with myself
Love: deep emotional and spiritual intimacy
Loyalty: faithful to my friends, group
Meaning In Life: a purpose in life
Privacy: the right to have a private sphere
Protecting The Environment: preserving nature
Responsibility: dependable, reliable
Self-Respect: belief in one's own worth
Social Justice: correcting injustice, care for the weak
Spiritual Life: emphasis on spiritual not material matters
True Friendship: close, supportive friends
Unity with Nature: fitting into nature
Variety: filled with challenge, novelty & change
Wisdom: a mature understanding of life

BELIEFS THAT MATTER FOR OUR MESSAGES

There are many different beliefs that could be helpful to reinforce in your audience. Each specific campaign or message might raise slightly different key beliefs. To understand what these might be it is key to try to focus on what you want your audience to think, feel and do as a result of your communication. Here are some examples of helpful and unhelpful beliefs in conservation.

✅ Helpful beliefs we want to engage:

1. CHANGE IS POSSIBLE AND HAPPENING

"The fortunes of the otter and the red kite have been completely turned around in the UK, these projects show that there are positive outcomes for our wildlife."

2. THERE IS A PROBLEM BUT IT IS SOLVABLE

"Destruction of habitat to create farmland is a major threat to much of our wildlife, but together we can make governments put laws in place to stop it"

3. MY ACTIONS ARE PART OF A BIGGER SOLUTION

"We can all play a part in trying to make governments and businesses address climate change and wildlife destruction."

Be careful not to confuse this with the unhelpful belief that "personal responsibility is the only viable action"

4. WITH OUR HELP, NATURE CAN RECOVER.

"If we all work together we can make sure nature recovers"

Be careful not to confuse this with the unhelpful belief that nature will sort itself out on its own, such as: "Nature is resilient" and "Nature will find a way"

5. EVERYONE CAN CONTRIBUTE IN SOME WAY EVERY ACTION IS MEANINGFUL

"No matter what your skills or experience there are ways in which you can help wildlife"

[Based on method developed in association with Public Interest Research Centre]

13

THE TYPES OF BELIEFS THAT WE ENGAGE MATTER.
TO ENSURE OUR MESSAGES ARE MOTIVATING WE WANT TO CONSISTENTLY REINFORCE CERTAIN BELIEFS, AND CONSISTENTLY AVOID OTHERS.

❌ Unhelpful beliefs we want to try to avoid:

1. THE PROBLEM IS JUST TOO BIG

"We have just ten years to address the huge issue of climate change, a challenge unlike anything humanity has faced before."

This can drive fatalism and is engaged when we overdo fear and exclude clear talk of proportionate solutions. To avoid reinforcing this belief we must make change seem possible - see opposite.

2. IT'S TOO LATE TO ACT

"We are on a knife-edge, scientists say that climate change is happening even more quickly than predicted. We must act now before it's too late."

We want to drive urgent action but must be careful we don't make it look like we have missed the boat. Instead, connect urgency to hope: "*The faster we act to address climate change, the better the future for our wildlife.*"

3. NOT DOING EVERYTHING 100% IS HYPOCRITICAL

"Either you are vegetarian or you are not, either you care about the environment or not, there are no half measures."

We need to point to the larger systemic changes, rather than reinforce the idea it is only our own actions that matter. "*While it is important we all take action, we also need to make sure governments and corporations make large scale changes.*"

4. YOU NEED TO MAKE BIG SACRIFICES

"If we are to survive you need to give things up and make substantial changes to your life."

Even if this is true using this language is unlikely to be helpful. Focus on what we will protect rather than the things we will lose.

5. I AM NOT PART OF THE CONSERVATION EFFORT

"Our organisation has been integral in the survival of this species."

Supporters and others not mentioned, organisation made to look like a lone hero.

Say instead: *"We did this together with our volunteers and supporters"* and make them part of things rather than an afterthought.

14

COMMUNICATION TRAPS AND HOW TO AVOID THEM

The animals on the following pages will help you identify and remember eight of the most common communication traps that weaken conservation messages.

These traps are not mutually exclusive; a message could be both an Angler Fish and a Robin.

[The first four animals are adapted from A Practical Guide for Communicating Global Justice and solidarity written by Framing Matters for Health Poverty Action]

PARROT

Repetition Trap

DON'T JUST REPEAT BACK WHAT THEY SAY

Instead of debating with the opposition, get on the front foot and repeat your key point. When Nixon famously said "I am not a crook" it made everyone immediately think "he's a crook". Instead, he should have said: "I am an honest man". When we repeat an opponent's unhelpful position, even to refute it, we are still reinforcing it.

FOR EXAMPLE:

Don't say *"The green revolution will not mean that people lose their jobs"* .

This introduces the idea that jobs might be lost, when what you want to do is focus on the idea that sustainable development is good for jobs.

Instead, say *"The green revolution will create jobs"*.

Don't say *"There is no debate about the climate science"* .

Don't connect climate science and uncertainty by introducing the concept of debate.

Instead, say *"The science is clear on climate change"*.

ACTION: Make a parrot list for the office and stick it on the wall or use weekly team meetings to highlight parrot traps you have seen.

SHARK

Contaminated & Contested Language Trap

AVOID PLAYING INTO NEGATIVE ASSOCIATIONS

Avoid using language that brings to mind unhelpful beliefs. Does the word or message evoke associations that are negative and unhelpful to us, like the movie Jaws created for sharks? Is there another word or a way of rephrasing our communications that evokes more helpful associations?

First, determine whether the message is contested or contaminated. If contested, we should think - can we work with the muddied meaning? Can we win it back? In answering this question, consider who is using the term and how likely it is for you to actually change the negative associations it has.

Contested: Contested messages may have some positive associations but have been muddied either by misuse or intentional attack, so we must tread carefully in order not to reinforce associations that are unhelpful.

Contaminated: is one that we should avoid using at all costs, as we can no longer win it back. This might be something like "bushmeat" or "wet market", where despite the technical meaning the public associations are so strongly negative that the term cannot be used with a positive or even neutral message.

FOR EXAMPLE:
Don't say: Human-wildlife conflict
Do say: Interactions between people and wildlife

ACTION: List contaminated terms and ditch them. When using a contested framing, question whether you can win the fight for it or if you should use another term.

CHAMELEON

Sanitising or Obscuring Trap

DON'T USE JARGON OR EUPHEMISTIC LANGUAGE

When the language we use is overly technical or euphemistic, it can make an issue sound less bad or damaging than it really is. We want our message to reveal what is hidden and make the impacts easily understood. Use emotive language that clearly states what the issue is and why people should care about it.

Take the term "biodiversity", for example. While it is a conservation science term that describes diversity rather than just abundance, it should be used sparingly in communications to the public because it is not a word that is well understood by a majority of people and can be confusing or alienating.

When talking to a wider audience, terms like "wildlife" and "nature" are likely to be more evocative and will probably bring to mind more helpful associations.

FOR EXAMPLE:

Anthropocene	Human impacts
Terrestrial life	Wildlife living on land
Land-use change	Habitat destruction
Hydrocarbons	Dirty fossil fuels
Fishing by-catch	Seal/dolphin/seabird/etc. deaths
Certain health risks	Risk of respiratory illness and cancer
Industrial agriculture	Farming with use of toxic chemicals
Climate change	Climate breakdown
Diffuse pollution	Damaging chemicals entering our rivers

ACTION: Replace verbal chameleons with clearer, more emotive, words and phrases.

ROBIN

Rose-Tinted Trap

POSITIVE ASSOCIATIONS THAT MIGHT NOT HELP OUR CAUSE

Sometimes we might want to challenge or criticise something, but the commonly-used words around it only have positive associations for people. This trap is known as the Robin. Although robins are fiercely territorial, their depiction in Christmas cards makes people think of them as placid.

In conservation, we often try to split farming into good and damaging categories, but the truth is even if we call it "wildlife-friendly farming" and "conventional farming" both will bring to mind similar associations. This is because almost all of us have been brought up with children's rhymes and books showing low impact, low-stocked farms with happy animals, and these are the associations many have with the term "farming". For most people, "farming" does not equate to the large scale monocultures farmed intensively, so we need to use a different term.

The Robin Trap is when we use these words and phrases that already have very strong and set positive associations in people's heads. Attempting to use this language to describe something as negative just doesn't work because the positive associations are too strong — this could include words like "charity" and "aid".

FOR EXAMPLE:

*Local fisherman* - maybe focus on large scale industrial fishing.

Farmers - damaging large scale food production.

Landowners/managers - it's not that owners and managers are thought of as uniquely good, but the ownership and management frames are strong and make people think of responsibility, which is something that you may not want to associate with some groups.

ACTION: When criticising something, if your audience feels positively about certain phrases, use a different term.

ANGLER FISH

Misdirection trap
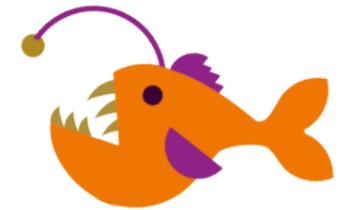
WHAT IS LEFT OUT IS AS IMPORTANT AS WHAT IS IN A MESSAGE

Whenever you create a message, ask yourself "what have I left out?" "What would I expect to see but is not there?" And "what would happen if I added ____?" Changing the focus can change what you are suggesting the problems and solution are.

Look at this sentence: "Ban straws, urge experts; plastic waste is killing sea life". What is missing here is how much of the problem straws and personal consumption are. How would the message look if we examined where most waste was coming from? Would that bring commercial fishing and other polluting corporate interests into the frame? This would then shift the solution and action from not just getting people to stop using straws (which is undoubtedly helpful) to wider large scale measures.

The Angler Fish Trap is important as it not only affects our external communications, but also impacts the way we discuss conservation problems within the sector, and the way we talk alters the solutions we come up with. Pages 52 & 53 of the Framing Nature Toolkit have exercises to help you switch the focus of your messages and check what you might be overlooking.

FOR EXAMPLE:

If we always focus on the poaching of elephants and rhinos we possibly place insufficient emphasis on the trade and use of ivory

If we focus on the Scottish wild cat mating with feral domestic cats we miss the fact that the population is being kept artificially low through persecution on grouse moors.

ACTION: Think about common conservation problems you face. How could you change the messaging to change the focus and bring in new actors? What might that do to the solutions you come up with?

COBRA

Threat Heavy Trap

BALANCE THREAT WITH POSITIVES AND ACTION

We need to include the problems we face in our messages, otherwise, people will not feel that we need to act. However, if we overdo the negative aspects we will simply paralyse people with fear. We need to balance threats with positivity and action.

Too often, conservation messages focus on what is being lost in an attempt to scare people into feeling or doing something, but fear alone is not effective in the long term. We must make change seem possible by listing past successes.

FOR EXAMPLE:

Don't say: "Hen harrier numbers face total collapse."

Instead, try: "While hen harrier numbers continue to decline, large scale projects like the successful reintroduction of red kites to the UK show change is possible." While the two species are not directly analogous the idea that a species focused project can be successful is.

Don't say "Chinstrap penguin populations are plummeting due to climate change," and leave the thought there.

If their populations are doomed, why should anyone care? Tell the truth, but do give a bit of hope so that people will still want to act.

Instead, try "While the charismatic and much-loved chinstraps are declining rapidly with climate change, in Zavodovski, their largest colony has survived the 2016 volcanic eruptions showing their ability to adapt if we help them to do so."

ACTION: Make a list/file of conservation successes you can draw on.

SLOTH

Passivity Trap

SAY WHO DID WHAT TO WHO AND WHY

When we write in a passive third person we can make the things happening seem inevitable and make our audience feel fatalistic. When we leave out the reasons that something has happened it makes us feel helpless. Make it clear why something has happened and how it can be changed.

FOR EXAMPLE:

Don't say "We are concerned by the lack of ambition in the biodiversity targets."

But what happens if we actually highlight why the failure has happened?

"Governments have put their own short-term interests first and bowed to business interests to water down biodiversity targets."

Similarly, statements like "Each year, 120 million trees in tropical rainforests are lost to the clothing industry" tell us that bad things are happening but not what is causing that and how it can be changed. Adding details can help our audiences know where to turn to make changes.

"Each year, 120 million trees in tropical rainforests are cut down to make popular fabrics like rayon, viscose, and modal for brands. Checking labels for sustainable fabrics and supporting clothing brands that have pledged to use sustainable wood products can help save trees."

ACTION: Bring the actors into the frame, explain why things have happened and who benefited.

VAMPIRE BAT

Typecasting Trap

DON'T USE CHARACTER ROLES WITHOUT QUESTIONING THEM

Creating set roles for people might not always be as helpful as we think. Painting a person or wildlife as a helpless victim might have many unintended consequences. We don't want people to feel pity for animals, we want them to have empathy. Try and always have images of inspiring wildlife to accompany any you have showing persecution or destruction. Likewise, if you want someone to change then don't present them as a villain.

What do you want the person to do? Is that role helpful to that goal?

FOR EXAMPLE:

"Bloody skull all that's left of rhino poacher trampled by elephants then eaten by lions at Kruger National Park in South Africa", there is no poetic, karma-like justice in this terrible accident and this kind of headline often forgets that there is a man with a family behind the *"poacher"* title.

"Horrifying pictures show mutilated African elephant murdered by ivory poachers in Botswana" in certain areas of environmental conservation and associated threats, there is an increasing use of military/emotionally loaded vocabulary with *"murderers"*, *"war"* against poaching and trade against *"defenceless"*, often romanticise *"victims".* This is usually used for sensationalism and it detracts from the root of the problem or from working with those people in finding solutions.

ACTION: Steer clear of villains and victims unless you have a clear purpose in mind that suits the roles.

ANIMAL TRAPS AT A GLANCE

Parrot
REPETITION TRAP

Don't just repeat your opponents' language! Arguing against something using the same terminology is likely to reinforce ideas we are trying to avoid.

Shark
CONTAMINATED & CONTESTED LANGUAGE TRAP

Some words or phrases have too many negative associations, use an alternative.

Chameleon
SANITISING OR OBSCURING TRAP

Jargon, euphemism or acronym can make something sound less emotive and therefore less of a problem. Don't say biodiversity loss, say the destruction of wildlife.

Robin
ROSE TINTED TRAP

Words and phrases that have very strong and set positive associations in people's heads shouldn't be used when being critical use an alternative term.

Cobra
THREAT HEAVY TRAP

Don't overdo threat! We must make change seem possible by listing past successes.

Angler Fish
THE MISDIRECTION TRAP

What is left out of a message is just as important as what is in it. Changing the focus can change what you are suggesting the problems and solution are.

Sloth
PASSIVITY TRAP

When we write in a passive third person we can make the things happening seem inevitable and cause our audience to feel fatalistic. Make it clear what is happening and why.

Vampire Bat
TYPECASTING TRAP

Creating set roles for people might not always be as helpful as we think. Painting a person or wildlife as a hero or helpless victim might have many unintended consequences.

Credits

TRAPS
A blog on the first 4 animal traps with links to the poster at the end.

FRAMING
The Framing Nature Toolkit is full of exercises and examples about how to frame more effectively, although focused on nature the findings apply to all issues.

Framing the Economy includes a worked example of the computer program metaphor to describe the economic system.

Also check out the Framing Equality Toolkit created with ILGA-Europe.

Lastly on international issues there is A Practical Guide for Communicating Global Justice and Solidarity.

BELIEFS
Blog on beliefs, with an exercise and of this guide gives examples of sentences that engage helpful and unhelpful beliefs.

How do we frame our way out of this mess, talking to campaigners about the beliefs that are important to avoid and reinforce.

TESTING
Blog on testing and link to PIRC guide.

VALUES
The Common Cause Handbook has many of the studies referenced in this toolkit.

Common Cause for Nature has a slightly simpler explanation of values.

The WWF/Scope study No Cause is an Island by Common Cause Foundation.

RESOURCES FROM PUBLIC INTEREST RESEARCH CENTRE, COMMON CAUSE FOUNDATION, & HEALTH POVERTY ACTION

POSITIVE COMMUNICATION TOOLKIT

SYNCHRONICITY EARTH

FRAMING MATTERS

UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD