

# Workshop

## The Visual Communication of the Environment in Theory and Practice: Nurturing Relational Perception

Joanna Boehnert  
EcoLabs, UK  
[JBoehnert@eco-labs.org](mailto:JBoehnert@eco-labs.org)

### Abstract

Image-makers have the unique ability to make invisible ecological processes and relationships visible, tangible and accessible. Within the context of an increasingly visual culture, images have potential to nurture the development of new perceptual capabilities and encourage relational perception. Graphic design is well suited to facilitate environmental learning since it can draw on a wide variety of visual strategies to display specific geographic spaces, ecological processes, abstract concepts and future scenarios. With design strategies, image-makers can reveal relationships, patterns and dynamics in complex systems. For these reasons, graphic design has exceptional potential to support relational perceptual practices and ecological literacy. This workshop will start with an illustrated theoretical introduction that will display and describe specific visual strategies to communicate environmental information. The session will be followed by an hour-long design critique (known in design schools and studios as the 'crit'). The crit is a foundational practice in design education for developing creativity, visual literacy, communication expertise and design skills. It will provide a setting for evaluating and refining individual samples of visual communication design in response to the objectives of each particular piece of work. It will give participants an opportunity to discuss specific examples of visual communication on the environment. The examples for discussion can be submitted [by email](#) by anyone interested in participating in this workshop.

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Image-makers have the unique ability to make currently invisible ecological processes and relationships visible. Within the context of an increasingly visual culture, images have potential to nurture the development of new perceptual capabilities and encourage relational perception. Graphic design is well suited to facilitate ecological learning since it can draw on a wide variety of visual strategies to display specific geographic spaces, ecological patterns and processes, abstract concepts and future scenarios. Julie Doyle argues that photography records circumstances of the past, so its usefulness in communicating ecological messages is limited to displaying damages already done (2009). My own work proposes that graphic design has greater potential to respond to environmental communication challenges due to its ability harness the communicative potential of maps, charts, diagrams, graphs, timelines, illustrations, network visualizations, data visualization, information graphics, controversy maps, giga-maps and systems oriented design to make complex information accessible, comprehensible and alluring. With design strategies, image-makers can reveal relationships, patterns and dynamics in complex systems. For these reasons, graphic design has exceptional potential to support relational perceptual practices and the ability to 'see systems' – nurturing both relational perception and ecological literacy (Boehnert 2012, 2014, 2016).

This workshop will start with an illustrated theoretical introduction that will review how images function to communicate environmental issues by drawing on design theory and communication theory. It will display and describe specific visual strategies to communicate environmental information. The introductory session will be followed by an hour-long design critique (known in design schools and studios as the 'crit'). This crit will give participants an opportunity to discuss ideas presented in the introduction and other relevant issues in relation to specific examples of visual communication on the environment. Participants in the workshop can submit samples for discussion.

The crit is a foundational practice in design education for developing creativity, visual literacy, communication expertise and design skills. The crit provides a setting for evaluating and refining communication and design in response to the objectives of a particular piece of work. Practice-based skills and design thinking are sensitive to nuances and concerned with aesthetics, metaphors and the ways meaning is constructed in various settings and social groups. The crit provides a reflective space to consider how a particular piece of work is understood, whether communication objectives are achieved and how the work could potentially be improved. Discussion at the crit is inevitably to some degree subjective but trained designers have a wide range of practices, tactics, strategies and knowledge that can be shared and developed in the context of the crit.

Practitioners will be invited to submit their own work for review. Others can submit other examples of visual communication of the environment. If you would like to submit an image for review please email Joanna ([jboehnert@eco-labs.org](mailto:jboehnert@eco-labs.org)). Please note that time to review work is limited so potentially there will not be time to talk about all submissions. Participants will leave the workshop with new theoretical concepts and visual literacy skills. This knowledge will help them critique images and inform the design and production of new visual communication on the environment. If you are interested in this workshop please sign up in advance and submit work for review by emailing Joanna ([jboehnert@eco-labs.org](mailto:jboehnert@eco-labs.org)). The workshop will be open for drop-in attendance as long as there is enough room (numbers will be limited).

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