

ENVIRONMENTAL COMMUNICATION AT THE PINAWA CHANNEL

Environmental Communication at the Pinawa Channel

Leslie Wilson

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Background

The Pinawa Channel is roughly 110 kilometres from the City of Winnipeg. For many years the Pinawa Channel has been a quiet location for locals to tube float, enjoy the sun and take in nature. In the summer of 2017 the Pinawa Channel tube float was announced as one of the top ten activities to do outside of Winnipeg by Travel Manitoba (Travel Manitoba, 2017). This media announcement increased visitors to the channel as any people came to Pinawa from Winnipeg to do the Pinawa Channel tube float. In the spring of 2018, a new business opened offering rental tubes, kayaks and canoes for use on the channel. One pub in the neighboring community of Lac du Bonnet is offering deals for patrons to be bused to the beginning of the channel and get picked up at the end with dinner specials back at the pub. In order to educate visitors looking to tube float, the Pinawa Community Development Corporation developed and implemented signage. This signage, as indicated in Figure 1, is posted at the Pinawa Channel parking lot.



Figure 1: Pinawa Channel Tube Floater signage (Photo taken by Wilson, L of signage developed by Pinawa Community Development Corporation, 2018)

While the signage is clearly written, it does little to incorporate a sustainability perspective. The communication theories, audience, metaphors, worldviews and effectiveness of existing signage will be discussed. In addition, suggested improvements to the signage will be presented in order strengthen sustainability perspectives.

Audience

This signage is geared towards an audience of channel tube floaters who are not familiar with the Pinawa Channel. Several visitors come to the channel from the neighbouring communities of Lac du Bonnet, Beausejour, Seven Sisters, the City of Winnipeg and the City of Selkirk. In addition to Manitoban visitors, international tourists visit the channel that stay at the Wilderness Edge Retreat hotel, which draws tourists from Japan, Russia, Europe and China to the Pinawa area.

As channel floating is a low exertion activity the audience is typically of various levels of fitness. It is an activity which all ages of people can enjoy so audience age varies widely. Many families are seen on the channel float but the popularity of the channel is gaining with young populations of those in their twenties and thirties, looking to escape the city and enjoy the sunshine. Unlike climbing or kayaking, this activity does not require expensive equipment. Rentals tubes cost roughly \$15 or tubes can be purchased for roughly \$20 and reused several

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times. In this respect, visitors to the channel are not limited by expenses that would come with other forms of outdoor activities. In addition, there is no admission fee to the Pinawa Channel.

Visitors are essentially looking for a relaxing experience on the water, a chance to slow down from the speed of everyday life, and experience a mini adventure in nature. There is a sense of adventure in trying something new in a place you have never been and there is a sense of adventure to be had on the tube float as well. On the tube float visitors may experience small rapids, getting caught in eddies, encountering wildlife or catching a glimpse of an aquatic species. That being said it is a safe adventure for even the faintest of heart that allows visitors to resign themselves to the lazy pace of the channel. Essentially the desires of the audience are to have a social experience, to relax and to enjoy the outdoor journey. The values of the audience toward the environment will vary substantially from one visitor to the next.

Communication Theories

Existing signage indicates a welcome greeting to channel floaters, the duration that channel floaters can expect to be on the water, the exit point as well as a plea not to litter while on the channel. The signage includes a diagram to indicate the exit point at the suspension bridge. The use of a diagram in the signage indicates the use of semiotics as a communication theory. Semiotics is based on semiosis which is the relationship between a sign, an object, and a meaning (Oregon State University, 2018). The intension of the diagram is to offer instruction on where to get off of the channel for those who aren't familiar. In past years, tourists have missed the exit point and called emergency services for pick up by the Pinawa Fire Department (Pinawa Fire Department, 2018). Recognizing this, the Community Development Corporation is

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attempting to educate the user on this particular aspect of the channel. This image is a basic black and white image indicating minimal thought towards the use of colour to enhance the semiotics of the image. Although this diagram offers directions to the audience it does nothing to enhance the sustainability perspective of the visitor.

The signage is framed toward one specific group of recreational users of the Pinawa Channel. The signage is geared towards tube floaters only and largely ignores kayakers and those travelling by canoe. The duration of time required for the float is also specific to the channel floater as kayaks and canoeists would finish in far less time. In this respect the messaging on the sign is framed for only one portion of visitors to the channel. The messaging is framed to offer basic instructions to the visitors, without offering any additional information about the natural aspects of the area.

Worldviews and Metaphors

Existing signage explains basic ways the channel floater can use the channel and leave. In this respect the signage indicates a utilitarian attitude towards nature. Verhagen (2008) explains that this utilitarian attitude is associated with an anthropocentric worldview that consists of explicit and implicit concepts, assumptions and biases that place humans at the centre of the Earth. In this respect, the anthropocentric worldview indicates a believe that nature is an instrument for human needs and ends (Verhagen, 2008). The signage covers only basic instructions on how long the float time is, where to get out and not to litter. In this way the signage is very instructional toward how the human visitor can use nature and leave the area. While the signage indicates the need to avoid littering on the channel it does very little to

indicate other ways that the user interfaces with nature during the float experience. In this way, the sustainability perspective of existing signage is lacking.

This format for signage was likely done to show the viewer the basics of the channel float using the least words possible in order to cut down on costs. However, it leaves a very static, mechanistic message for the viewer. Although the sign does not explicitly indicate nature as a machine, it implies this by offering instructions to the user much like a sign at a carnival ride would. Schroeder (1994) explains that if we view nature as mechanistic or for entertainment purposes only, we risk losing wilderness areas as places of encounter, refuge and transformation. As a machine for entertainment, wild spaces may become a place where we consume the experiences we want and leave without really being changed by the experience or connected to it. This attitude reduces nature to a mechanistic system (Schroeder, 1994).

New communication concept

In order to build a greater sense of connectedness between visitors to the channel and nature a new set of images, metaphors and message are proposed. The images and messages proposed are intended to development a sustainability perspective in the audience and improve inter-relationships between people as part of the natural environmental and as part of the natural community. Although the main focus is improved signage, a wide range of media are suggested to improve current environmental communications. Improved signage would need to catch the attention of the audience and communicate a sense of community through effective language and use of semiotics.

Improved signage base

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Proposed environmental signage would be mounted on natural materials indicated in Figure 2. This would blend nicely with the surroundings and offer a natural feel to support the messaging on the new signage. To catch the eye of the viewer the signage backdrop fixed to the natural wood base would be a colourful panel that contrasts with the featured images on the signage. The colour panel will need to be eye-catching, remembering that the viewers attention will only be had for minutes prior to setting out on the tube float. Hansen and Machin (2013) state that color is very important to how meaning is created in environmental imagery.



Figure 2: Example of natural mount signage (Pinterest, 2018)

Improved theme and imagery

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The general theme of community is a common value that the public can easily relate to.

Community is what Hoggan (2009) refers to as a “big idea” or common value of which all members of the audience can relate. Lakoff (2010) indicates that information presented to an audience must make sense in terms of existing frames or they will be ignored. In this respect the audience needs to be able to relate to themes and images on the signage or the signage messaging may be ignored. The central image on the sign will be a web-like image with a circle in the centre that reads *Pinawa Channel Community*. Branching off from the centre circle will be a web of other circles, each containing an image of a member of the Pinawa Channel Community. The layout of this image is represented in Figure 3. This image will include actual photos of the Pinawa Channel Community of tube floaters, kayakers, the snapping turtle, bald eagle, bear, boreal forest, water and indigenous peoples.

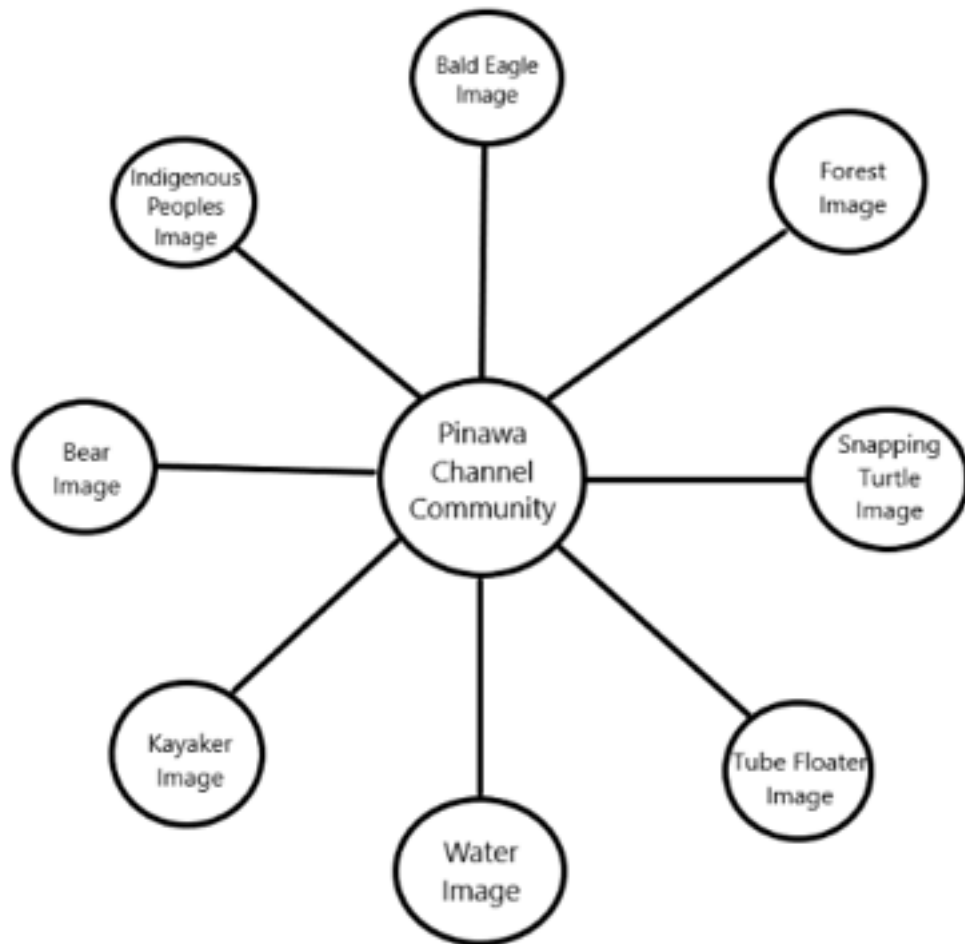


Figure 3: Pinawa community theme signage layout (created by Wilson, L)

This layout represents *nature as web* metaphor. Implicit in the metaphor of *nature as web* is the idea of biocentric equality or that each species of the community are equals and depend on one another (Verhagen, 2008). In this respect the common anthropocentric worldview of a hierarchy of species with humans at the top of the hierarchy is eliminated (Verhagen, 2008). Each circle in the web should be set out from the colourful backdrop to add three dimensional interest to the sign. As mentioned earlier, the images of each part of the web will be actual photos taken in the Pinawa Channel area. The presence of real photographs helps naturalize the image and heighten realism (Hansen & Machin, 2008). For the photos used of the tube floaters

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and kayakers, images should be of people smiling and enjoying the experience of tube floating and kayaking in order to evoke emotion in the audience. Visitors will be wanting a positive experience and will likely value this the most. Hoggan (2009) indicates that knowing the audience desires and framing your messages around these desires is the key to persuading your audience. In addition, all the faces of the wildlife species and humans should be looking in toward the centre circle to evoke a sense of community and connectedness to one another.

Although the images in the web will be raised out from the sign backdrop, the supplemental wording will be printed on the backdrop of the sign. Wording should be brief and offer one interesting fact about the image in the web of nature. For example, on the backdrop of the signage set back from the bald eagle photo would be an interesting fact about the bald eagle and that it depends on this community. For example, wording could indicate, “*The Bald Eagle is Canada’s largest bird of prey. The bald eagle’s source of food comes directly from the Channel you will visit today*”. Wording near the tube floaters in the web could indicate, “*Many people have visited this area as a part of nature and a part of this Pinawa Channel community. You can too. Read below for tips on a successful trip down the channel.*” This wording is positive and acts to share a vision that humans can enjoy the channel float while being in harmony with and as a part of nature. All wording on the signage should be easy for the general public to understand and relate with. As Hoggan (2009) explains, communications should avoid technical language or overly theoretical language. It is important to speak to the public in what Hoggan (2009) describes as a human voice or one in which the audience can relate.

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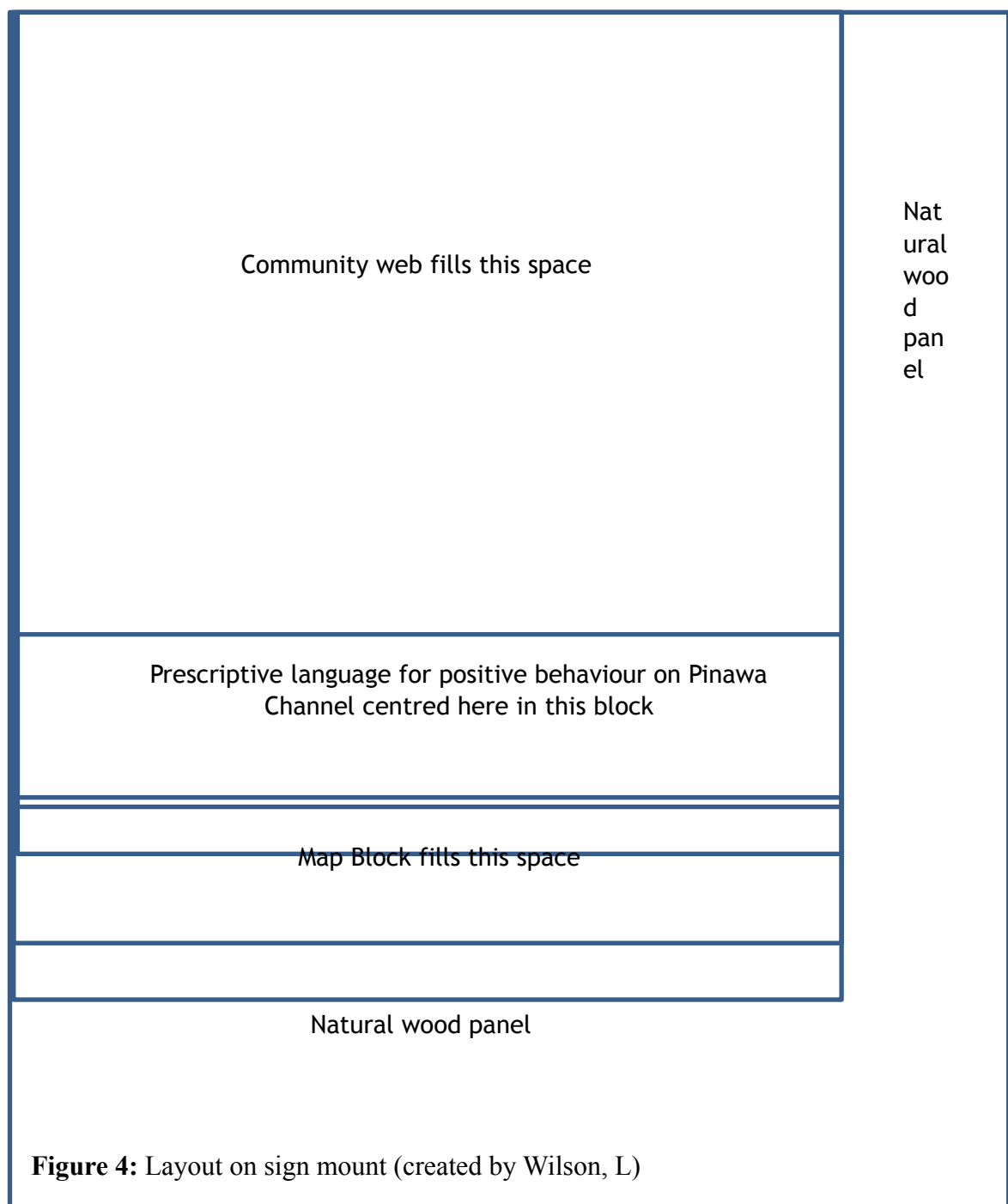
Finally, the channel route in a map that spans along the entire bottom of the sign will communicate the start and end point for the visitor. To keep with the realism theme of the images, an aerial shot of the area could be used for the map. This would remind the user that they are in a heavily treed area, surrounded by nature. Under the map, wording can indicate: *“Start your outdoor journey through the Pinawa Channel Community at the Diversion Dam and travel until you reach the Suspension Bridge”*. Use of the word community reinforces what Hoggan describes as big ideas that the public can relate to (Hoggan, 2009). The use of the words *outdoor journey* reinforces the desires of the audience. The map should indicate a start and finish icon for international users with limited English skills. Duration of the tube float and kayak/canoe trips can be indicated on the map.

Action oriented messaging

Below the community theme web there will be an area dedicated to explaining the simple ways to keep this community of nature safe. This is an area where the Pinawa Community Development Corporation can mention proper handling of garbage which was a major environmental concern. Care must be taken when selecting the wording in this section. The American Psychological Association (2005) indicates that psychologists are finding even small variations in wording can shape behavior in a very powerful way. Winter (2000) suggests that prescriptively worded messages are more effective when aiming to deter poor environmental behaviours (Winter, 2000). Prescriptive messages are those that encourage positive environmental action by indicating approved environmental conduct and urging recreationists towards it. This would be opposite to proscriptive messages that discourage environmentally

poor conduct by urging against it. Winter (2008) suggests that those selecting framing of messages for signage should explore prescriptive wording where depreciative acts are targeted. In this respect rather than indicating “*Please do not litter. Garbage receptacles at exit point*” as signage currently indicates, phrasing can instead read: “*Please keep the channel litter free by using garbage and recycling receptacles at the exit point.*” This section of the signage, can also indicate additional ways the user can protect the channel community. Signage should indicate, the need to give wildlife space with prescriptive phrasing such as “*Please keep food away from wildlife and view them from a distance*”. Visitors can also be encouraged to use biodegradable sunscreens with prescriptive phrases such as, “*Please use biodegradable sunscreens to protect the water community*”. All of these phrases are positive and prescriptive. Hoggan (2009) suggests that communications should always accentuate the positive and avoid use of the words such as “don’t” or “no”.

Figure 4 indicates the layout on the sign mount. The Pinawa Channel Community web should take up the most real-estate on the sign, as it is the semiotic that best communicates the theme of community.



The new sign will need to be made larger than the existing signage is. Current signage stands roughly one metre high and is easy to overlook.

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Improvements through other media

There are currently several other forms of media for the public to view regarding the Pinawa Channel. Specifically there are two businesses in the town of Pinawa that rent out tubes and kayaks or canoes. Both of these local businesses have websites that sell the experience of floating or paddling down the river. One hotel website mentions wildlife you will see on the Channel float (Wilderness Edge, 2018). Species that are listed on the website include deer, turtles, otters and birds but no images or further context is offered. The Pinawa Community Development Corporation could partner with local businesses and allow the use of their graphic design from the improved Pinawa Channel signage for use on business web pages. The *nature as web* concept can be transformed into an interactive website concept where each image on the Pinawa Channel Community web is a clickable icon. Upon clicking the images the web user would be offered more information on each image they click on. For example, upon clicking on the tube floater image the information regarding prescriptive precautions to take could be listed. Existing websites represent an opportunity to supply more information to the public prior to them visiting to the Pinawa Channel.

The town of Pinawa develops a Discovery Guide that mentions the Pinawa Channel tube float (Pinawa Local Government District, 2017). The Pinawa Channel Community image and community themed wording on the signage could be used to frame this activity as an escape in nature where there must be mutual respect or connectedness to nature. Having this image repeated in various media also serves as a way to repeat these values to the public on more than one occasion. Hoggan (2009) explains that when it comes to communicating messages with the

public, repetition is important. Repeating a message several times allows the message to become more available in memory and the brain is wired to grasp easily recalled items of information as true or fact (Hoggan, 2009).

Conclusions

This communication analysis looked at existing signage for the Pinawa Channel. While the signage offered clear instruction to the recreational visitor, it offered no perspectives on sustainability. The overall anthropocentric worldview and nature as machine metaphor offered insights into how the signage can be changed. Improved signage was proposed that utilizes the nature as web metaphor and offers the visitor a more biocentric viewpoint towards the natural space they are visiting. The communication theories of framing and semiotics were proposed to capture the audience attention prior to their journey down the Pinawa Channel. In addition to improved signage, similar imagery was suggested for various websites and the Pinawa Discovery Guide that advertises the Pinawa Channel tube float.

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