

Anoraks and Tauro-Scatology

During a lecture at University College, London in February, Barbara Young, Chief Executive of the Environment Agency, referred to the technical staff within her Agency as 'anoraks'. Knowing that Basil O'Saurus, the IEEM's very own Professor of Tauro-Scatology takes a keen interest in sartorial matters, we thought that he might like to comment on her use of imagery. What do you think, Prof?

Well, I can tell you that not all of the Environment Agency's technical staff were flattered.

Why was that?

I would have thought that it was obvious. An anorak conjures up images of a slightly overweight man with poorly developed social skills, too much facial hair, body odour problems and two or more pens sticking out of his breast pocket.

A geek, in other words?

Exactly. And, anyway, if we had to define the modern ecologist by an item of clothing, it would be a cagoule, not an anorak. This is a much better metaphor for the lifestyle we lead – rough, tough, go anywhere, do anything...

... lots of pockets, a hood, breathable fabrics ...

I think that you're taking my analogy rather too literally.

Okay. How about 'in touch with nature?'

That's more like it. But let's be fair: the cagoules (as we must now refer to them) are not averse to derogatory, clothing-related metaphors of their own are they? Use of the term 'suit' does not usually imply a healthy respect for good tailoring or for the benefits of going on expensive management courses, does it?

You're absolutely right. It usually implies that the recipient of the insult is too far removed from the coalface to have a great deal of understanding of the complexity of the problems they profess to manage.

Whereas, to turn the metaphors around, the suit's view of a typical 'cagoule' would normally be of someone who is too involved in the complicated details of the real-world to take a strategic view of a problem.

Someone whose preferred solution is scientifically realistic but too expensive and takes too long, in other words?

The modern public-sector definition of 'strategic' is, let's face it, knowing which corners can be cut without anyone noticing.

And do you have any solutions to this cultural divide that splits our profession?

Do you remember the 1990s idea of 'dress down Fridays'?

Vaguely. It was the bizarre idea that people worked better if they were allowed to wear casual clothes to work on a Friday. How does that apply to environmental management?

Us 'cagoules' relish our scruffy appearance, little realising how this contributes to the low esteem with which the 'suits' regard us. So, I have come up with the idea of 'dress-up Fridays'. Men turn up at work on Fridays wearing a suit and tie and women wear skirts and killer heels.

How will that help?

Probably not as much as the suits actually digging out their long-forgotten wellies and waterproofs and spending a bit more time in the field, but it does have one great psychological bonus.

What is that?

Stress relief. All the time we spend in front of the mirror practising tying our Windsor knots is time that we are not worrying about the imminent re-organisation.

Is a re-organisation imminent?

We're talking about the British public sector. Of course there is an imminent re-organisation.

One last question: is there any common ground between suits and cagoules?

There is cause for hope because both groups agree that the only etymologically-correct use of the term 'anorak' is to describe members of the IT support service.

What do the IT support staff say?

Let's just say that inappropriate use of the term in their vicinity can lead to servers going off-line for maintenance at critical times of the day.

Fair enough. Thanks again for your time, Prof.



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