



Conservation goals must incorporate different cultural views

Conservation policy needs to take account of diverse cultural views about the value of different species, according to the results of a new study. Widely differing views of the relative importance of marine species – from algae to mammals – emerged when the researchers surveyed people across Europe.

Biodiversity in marine ecosystems is being lost at an alarming rate. In order to set conservation goals and prioritise efforts to slow the decline of biodiversity, policymakers must decide which species are most valuable, both to ecosystems and to people. The success of conservation programmes thus depends not just on a scientific understanding of the value of different marine species, but also on the value that society as a whole places on these species. In general, the bias towards well-recognised and charismatic species, such as mammals and birds, is thought to leave lesser known species vulnerable.

The researchers, working as part of the EU MarBEF network¹, investigated whether members of the public valued species similarly across Europe. They chose three coastal locations in which to carry out their survey – the Azores islands, Portugal, the Isles of Scilly, UK, and the Gulf of Gdansk, Poland.

Face-to-face interviews with a total of 1502 people were conducted. Each participant was shown a collection of images representing each group of species, which included species local to their region. They were asked about their willingness-to-pay to conserve different species, based on a hypothetical one-off payment to a 'conservation trust'. The researchers also assessed participants' general level of understanding of biodiversity.

From these interviews, the researchers were able to see quite significant differences in the way that people from these countries valued mammals, fish, birds, algae and invertebrates. For example, participants in the Azores valued fish more highly than participants in the Isles of Scilly, whereas those on the Isles of Scilly valued algae more highly than those in the Azores. In the Gulf of Gdansk, preferences were more clear-cut compared to the other countries, with mammals valued highest, followed by fish, birds, invertebrates and, lastly, algae.

Overall, most participants were aware of biodiversity issues and willing to pay to conserve biodiversity. However, the differences between countries suggested that people's conservation preferences were influenced by their associations with particular species in their own regions. For instance, in the Azores, scuba diving and fishing are important activities in both an economic and a cultural sense. This could lead local residents to place a higher value on fish.

The researchers say they have provided clear evidence of a social demand for conservation of marine biodiversity in Europe. In addition, although marine mammals were always highly valued, they were not valued as far above other species as the researchers expected. They suggest that the public are becoming more aware of the need to conserve biodiversity across a wide range of species. However, effective conservation policies should be consistent with social beliefs and values, which vary from country to country.

1. MarBEF (Marine Biodiversity and Ecosystem Functioning EU Network of Excellence) was supported by the European Commission under the Sixth Framework Programme. See: www.marbef.org

Source: Ressurreição, A. Gibbons, J., Kaiser, M. *et al.* (2012). Different cultures, different values: the role of cultural variation in public's WTP for marine species conservation. *Biological Conservation*. 145: 148-159. DOI: 10.1016/j.biocon.2011.10.026.

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Theme(s): Biodiversity, Environmental information services, Marine ecosystems

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To cite this article/service: "[Science for Environment Policy](#)": European Commission DG Environment News Alert Service, edited by SCU, The University of the West of England, Bristol.