Motives behind the Willingness to pay for Biodiversity Conservation

A recent Spanish study investigates the relationship between public attitudes and the willingness to pay for biodiversity conservation. The results suggest that the role of affective factors is much more important than the role of ecological-scientific considerations when determining the willingness to allocate funds for conservation.

The EU is committed to the protection of biodiversity. Indeed there is a political commitment to halt biodiversity loss within the EU by 2010. Different institutional programmes, such as the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), recognise the importance of understanding the economic value of biodiversity for policy-making. Monetary valuation can provide useful information to support such policies by quantifying the economic value associated with the protection of biodiversity. In this regard, considering people’s attitudes towards biodiversity via environmental evaluations is important in order to understand the behaviour concerning biodiversity conservation, which in turn can help to develop efficient conservation policies.

Spanish researchers recently tested the hypothesis that human attitudes towards biodiversity play an important role in financial support for public conservation and assessed how these attitudes depend on the type of biodiversity user. More specifically, the researchers have examined how much different users are willing to pay (WTP) for biodiversity conservation. To this end, the researchers carried out an innovative survey (face-to-face questionnaires) among 649 visitors of the emblematic Doñana National and Natural Park. This study is one of the first to take into consideration some principles of human ecology and environmental psychology to explain the factors that influence our WTP for species conservation.

The results show that:
- 27.4% of the respondents were unwilling to pay to conserve biodiversity in the park for different reasons (e.g. conservation is already funded by national and regional governments, it is a responsibility of the government, etc).
- For those willing to pay, the annual mean WTP ranged from €23.2 to €30.8 depending on the method applied in the estimation. Local users were willing to donate higher amounts of money than non-local users.
- Factors that influence the decision to support conservation include the knowledge of the non-tourist value (i.e. the ecological value), the origin of the respondents and their age. In this regard the data suggests that young people are more involved in biodiversity conservation and also that the WTP amount declines with the geographical distance.
- Two main factors were found to determine peoples' willingness to invest in the conservation of certain species: a respondent's degree of familiarity with the specific species and the individual's understanding of the role that the specific species plays in the ecosystem.
- Individuals' attitudes to species and the choice of species targeted for financial support for conservation follow a similar trend.
- People are more interested in animals than in plants and in vertebrates rather than in invertebrates.
- Scientific considerations are relatively less important than anthropomorphic (affective considerations) and anthropocentric (utility and familiarity criteria) in determining both the human attitude towards species and the WTP to support biodiversity conservation.

Overall, this study shows that affective factors play an important role in explaining the support of individuals for biodiversity conservation, in particular when people have a limited knowledge of a species. Scientific considerations, on the other hand, appear when people are well informed. In view of the results, the authors conclude that the use of flagship species (those that are more common and well known) as a management instrument can be a useful strategy for biodiversity conservation. Furthermore, they highlight the importance of raising people's awareness of the value of biodiversity, including less attractive and unknown species.

For more information: Communication from the Commission “Halting the loss of biodiversity by 2010 - and beyond - Sustaining ecosystem services for human well-being” and the Action Plan to 2010 and Beyond (SEC(2006)621 final)

For more information on the Convention on Biological Diversity: http://www.cbd.int/default.shtml


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