

It's the way you say it: how using the right words can cut environmental conflicts

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Ecologists have developed a new "tool" that could in future help prevent costly and acrimonious environmental conflicts such as campaigns against culling problem populations of charismatic animals and arguments over genetically modified organisms. The tool, published online this week in the British Ecological Society's *Journal of Applied Ecology*, involves a novel use of computer-aided content analysis and is based on the recent environmental conflict surrounding hedgehog culling on the Outer Hebrides in Scotland.

Unlike other areas of science, where success is judged solely on scientific excellence, applied ecology also seeks to translate this science into policy and practice, which requires engagement with broader social issues.

According to lead author Dr Tom Webb of the University of Sheffield: "Policy decisions about conservation or exploitation of natural resources are beset by controversy, as stakeholders such as lobby groups, managers, researchers and advisers have fundamentally different values and aspirations concerning our relationship with the natural world. Resulting conflicts between stakeholder groups incur considerable costs in time, money and damaged public relations, and so we need to develop new approaches to natural resource management that seek to understand stakeholder values and so reduce the likelihood of conflict."

To help reduce these conflicts, Webb and his co-author Dr Dave Raffaelli of the University of York used content analysis – a language

analysis technique often used by social scientists, but almost unknown among ecologists. They examined almost 500 documents produced by stakeholders and the media in response to the proposed cull of hedgehogs on Benbecula, North and South Uist in 2002. (Hedgehogs were introduced to South Uist from the mainland in 1974 in an attempt to control garden pets. From there, they spread to North Uist and Benbecula and the hedgehogs are strongly implicated in the subsequent significant declines of several shorebird species.)

Content analysis revealed fascinating differences in the language used by different stakeholders. According to Webb: "We found that different groups really are speaking a different language when it comes to this issue. The pro-hedgehog lobby wrote about killing and animal welfare issues and used emotive or informal vocabulary, whereas the pro-bird lobby used more scientific language and vocabulary concerning wildlife and the Hebrides. Interestingly, media coverage of this controversy tended to use language similar to that of the pro-hedgehog groups. Our results show how content analysis allows differences in focus between stakeholder groups to be highlighted in a quantitatively rigorous way, and that this can encourage a dialogue to develop in which all stakeholders are at least addressing the same issues. As such, it has great potential to reduce the likelihood of disagreements over natural resource management decisions degenerating into costly and damaging conflicts."

Source: Wiley-Blackwell

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