

# Big Society could threaten biodiversity conservation

February 13 2012, By Adele Rackley

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A study of the Moray Firth Seal Management Plan (MFSMP), in north-east Scotland, identified four key conditions for long-term success, three of which pointed to the importance of direct government involvement.

"There is a general assumption that public participation improves conservation processes," explains Dr. Juliette Young of the Centre for Ecology & Hydrology, who led the research. "But participatory processes don't happen in a vacuum - there are many other factors involved."

The importance of a local champion, someone who is recognised as legitimate, unbiased and open to hearing people's ideas, was highlighted in the research. But it also identified the importance of a 'crisis point' or situation in which all those involved felt directly affected, the

participation of decision makers, and the provision of financial and institutional support.

The move towards greater participation of local people in decision-making and management, outlined in David Cameron's vision for a Big Society, is not a new idea, and in environmental policy, public involvement is seen as fundamental to sustainable development. But despite the potential benefits, in practice identifying the right groups and enabling them to get involved is not straightforward.

Young carried out the research as part of her PhD studies. "The MFSMP was a good example to study because it was participatory from planning to implementation," she explains.

The MFSMP came about because of the need to balance seal and salmon conservation. The Moray Firth is a Special Area of Conservation (SAC) for bottlenose dolphins, harbour seals and Atlantic salmon; while conservation groups and tourist operators support this, the seals compete with local fisheries for the salmon and have a major impact on livelihoods.

When the Scottish government implemented a seal conservation order in 2002 it highlighted the need both to tackle declining salmon catches and protect the salmon SAC.

Young determined the most important elements for the success of plans such as the MFSMP through interviews with representatives from all the organisations involved, which included district salmon fishery boards, fishermen, local wildlife tourism operators and conservation groups.

As well as benefits of the local champion - in this case a scientist who had worked for the salmon fisheries board and was good at liaising with government - Young highlights the importance of the drivers for biodiversity management plans. In this case, the 2002 conservation order

was the crisis point by which all the local groups felt affected and understood the need to make changes - something that might not have occurred without direct government involvement. The Scottish government also ensured that the plan had a realistic and clear scope, so that any agreements reached could be implemented in practice.

The necessary long-term financial and institutional support has not yet been resolved. Though initially carried out by the Scottish government's Seals Working Group, stakeholders stressed the need for a local coordination group to represent them and help integrate scientific evidence into the plan, as well as to evaluate its success - something that will need financial support from government.

So while the involvement of local stakeholders is crucial for success, it's not enough by itself.

"The risk of getting it wrong is that the effects of conservation actions can be irreversible, not just for biodiversity but socially too," says Young. "If things don't work it's easy to lose people's trust. Without the right elements in place, well-intentioned plans could lead to situations where there is local pressure but no support. It can damage not just biodiversity but local relationships too."

The study's results have gone back to the interviewees, which included government advisors, and have led to policy recommendations at EU and national levels. The research is published in *Biodiversity and [Conservation](#)*.

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