

Public opinion in conservation: Does it matter?

October 25 2013, by Hamish Hastie



While scientists reacted differently towards threatened and endemic species conservation, the public did not. Image: The endemic magnificent coneflower (*Isopogon latifolius*), Credit: Arthur Chapman.

Public preferences and values must be considered if the use of systematic conservation planning is to attract public and policy support according to a recent UWA study.

Researchers at the Centre for Environmental Economics and Policy and School of Agricultural and Resource Economics looked at biodiversity conservation planning of the Southwest Australia Ecoregion Initiative (SWAEI) to see whether planning reflected what the general public wanted.

Systematic conservation planning is a method commonly used by conservationists to focus on the highest priority conservation values of a project.

The study used a Discrete Choice Experiment (DCE) to survey the public and conservation experts about their conservation preferences surrounding the SWAEI.

It found while both scientists and the public value conservation efforts in the SWAEI, the public placed less emphasis on wetland conservation.

It also found while scientists reacted differently towards threatened and endemic species conservation, the public did not.

The study suggests expert systematic conservation planning should incorporate public consultation using methods like DCE in order to gain the support of the wider community.

Lead author Abbie Rogers says while working in the area of [environmental economics](#), she noticed that the inclusion of public preference in the decision-making process wasn't done well.

"We live in a democratic society so the community has a right or point of view. It's usually public tax dollars that fund conservation initiatives," Associate Professor Rogers says.

"There are plenty of economic methods that look at what are the costs of managing a national park or something like that with actual dollars and costs associated but the problem is that doesn't account for the values that the community hold—the social costs or benefits from anything that you do in the environment."

A/Prof Rogers says if systematic conservation planning contains public

preferences using methods like DCE, it would enable conservationists and policy makers to see all the intangible values associated with the environment.

"The reason why we used this form of survey preference in particular is because there are some people that don't necessarily interact with the environment that still might have a value for it," she says.

"It's this intrinsic value which we term a non-use value, for example, you might still care about protecting polar bears or pandas even though you've never seen one.

"If you're aiming your [conservation](#) policies at something the public actually want you to do that should eventually lead to more successful policy."

Provided by Science Network WA

Citation: Public opinion in conservation: Does it matter? (2013, October 25) retrieved 16 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2013-10-opinion.html>

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