Little evidence conservation organizations respond to economic signals

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A University of Tennessee, Knoxville, study finds that nonprofit organizations aiming to protect biodiversity show little evidence of responding to economic signals, which could limit the effectiveness of future conservation efforts.

The study is published this week in the academic journal *Ecology and Evolution*.

The relationship between economic conditions and conservation efforts is complicated. On the one hand, funding for conservation depends on a booming economy, which swells state coffers and increases membership dues, service revenues and philanthropic giving. On the other hand, economic growth is often perceived by conservationists as a threat to habitats and ecosystems because of more demand for raw materials and increased development, waste and pollution. Conservation organizations must balance these two conflicting forces.

"Employment, the stock market, a recession—they are all assumed to impact how conservation organizations do their work. But it is all talk and no data," said Peter Kareiva, chief scientist at The Nature Conservancy. "This is the first study I know that actually used hard-nosed analysis to find out how conservation organizations change their behavior, or not, in response to economic shocks."

Nonprofits like The Nature Conservancy play a critical role in managing society's overall investment in biodiversity. In the U.S. alone, nonprofit

organizations channel billions of dollars into efforts to conserve species and ecosystems. How effectively they manage these revenue streams depends on how well they cope with changes in the wider economy.

"Just as species have to evolve strategies to cope with feast and famine conditions in their environment, conservation nonprofits need to come up with strategies to deal with times of economic growth and recession if they are to achieve their conservation goals effectively," said Eric Larson, lead author of the study.

To find out just what strategies the nonprofits were using, the team examined conservation nonprofits' tax filings over a 10-year period that included a period of rapid growth as well as the 2008 recession.

What surprised them was how little evidence there was of responsiveness to economic conditions by these organizations.

"Conservation scientists pride themselves on developing strategic tools to help organizations prioritize ways to spend conservation funds. But as soon as we broaden the focus a bit to consider whole-organizational behavior, we see little evidence of strategy. Instead what we see is a sector that looks very much like it is just trying to muddle through," said Larson.

The authors also interviewed nonprofit leaders about organizational strategies. Their answers emphasized just how different conservation nonprofits are in how they try to deal with changing conditions. But once again, the researchers did not find that organizations employ orderly, proactive strategies to deal with changes in the economy. As one interviewee said, "In theory, we approach these issues strategically ... but in practice ... we're very opportunistic."

Larson and coauthors hope their findings encourage conservation

nonprofits to plan for and respond to fluctuations in the economy effectively, and inspire other researchers to investigate how the economy affects conservation organizations and biodiversity itself.

More information: A lack of response of the financial behaviors of biodiversity conservation nonprofits to changing economic conditions, DOI: 10.1002/ece3.1281