

# New studies aim to boost social science methods in conservation research

January 11 2018

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Scientists have produced a series of papers designed to improve research on conservation and the environment.

A group of researchers, led by the University of Exeter, have contributed to a special issue of the journal *Methods in Ecology and Evolution* to examine commonly used social science techniques and provide a checklist for scientists to follow.

Traditional conservation biology has been dominated by quantitative data (measured in numbers) but today it frequently relies on qualitative methods such as interviews and focus group discussions.

The aim of the special issue is to help researchers decide which techniques are most appropriate for their study, and improve the "methodological rigour" of these techniques.

"Qualitative techniques are an important part of the curriculum for most undergraduate, graduate and doctoral studies in biodiversity conservation and the environment," said Dr Nibedita Mukherjee, of the University of Exeter, who coordinated the special issue of the journal.

"Yet the application of these techniques is often flawed or badly reported."

Dr Mukherjee, of the Centre for Ecology and Conservation of Exeter's Penryn Campus in Cornwall, added: "In putting together this special

issue, we urge greater collaboration across the disciplines within conservation, incorporating rigorous use of qualitative methods.

"We envisage a future in which conservation scientists test, modify and improve these techniques, so that they become even more relevant and widely used."

The five papers in the special issue include one which examines the use of interviews as part of research into conservation decision-making.

It found that researchers do not always justify their use of interviews, or report on their use fully enough for readers to make informed judgements.

"While interview-based research might not always be reproducible, we should still leave the reader in no doubt about what was done," said lead author Dr David Rose, formerly of the University of Cambridge but now at the University of East Anglia.

Another [paper](#) looked at the use of [focus groups](#). Lead author Tobias Nyumba, from the University of Cambridge, said focus groups are often used but many researchers are "not particularly keen on the process, from planning, execution, analysis to reporting.

"This paper is, therefore, a must read if focus groups must form part of your research toolkit," he said.

A third paper looked at the nominal group [technique](#) (NGT).

Lead author Dr Jean Hugué said: "While [conservation](#) conflicts are on the rise worldwide, NGT provides a simple yet systematic approach to prioritise management options and could help reduce conflict."

This could inform the choice of criteria in the MultiCriteria Decision Analysis as observed by Dr Blal Adem Esmail in his paper.

Provided by University of Exeter

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