

Chatterpies, haggisters and ninuts could help children love conservation

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Weaving stories and intriguing names into children's education about the natural world could help to engage them with species' conservation messages, new research shows.

A team at the University of Birmingham carried out a study to explore the potential of species' [cultural heritage](#) for inspiring the conservationists of the future. Focusing on magpies, one of the UK's most easily recognised birds, the researchers presented schoolchildren with information about the birds, and then asked them questions about their attitudes to magpies and the [conservation](#) of the species.

Around 400 10- and 11-year-olds participated in the survey, which took place across a number of different schools in Milton Keynes, Buckinghamshire—a town typical of expanding urban areas in industrialised countries. Divided into four groups, the [children](#) were given either only cultural information about the birds, only scientific or both. A [control group](#) was given no additional information at all.

The children were then asked to fill in a questionnaire about the birds, in particular whether they thought it was important to protect magpies, and the reasons for doing so—for example, because it's the right thing to do, or so that more can be learned about the species, or because of their cultural heritage.

Nigel Hopper, of the University of Birmingham's School of Biosciences, is lead author on the paper. He explained: "Magpies feature strikingly in

folk stories, myths and rhyme—think, 'One for sorrow, two for joy', and so on. They're often portrayed as sinister creatures, bringing with them bad omens, or as cheeky thieves with an attraction to shiny objects. They also have dozens of quirky names attached to them. We wanted to see if using some of this wealth of cultural information could help magpies steal the hearts and minds of pupils and persuade them to engage with species' conservation."

The survey results showed that the students who were given only cultural information valued that information and regarded it as a reason to protect magpies. Children given only scientific information had less regard for cultural information and were less likely to agree that [magpies](#) should be protected on account of their cultural heritage. This suggests a diluting effect of [scientific information](#) on appreciation for cultural heritage information.

"Most people are not natural-born scientists," says Hopper. Our results suggest that using species' cultural heritage to first engage people's imaginations could be an effective way of ensuring a captive audience for important scientific messages around species' conservation. And because adults love stories as much as children do, species' cultural heritage has the potential to inspire a conservation ethos that lasts a lifetime."

Dr. Jim Reynolds, a senior author also at the University of Birmingham, added "We have questioned for a long time the optimum age at which to engage with the general public about conservation issues. Our study reveals that children even as young as 10 or 11 years old can assimilate quite complex information and use it to express strong personal opinions.

"We now wonder whether children even younger might already be holding strong conservation values. Our research indicates that the form of communicated [information](#) may be crucial in translating personal

interests and motivations into tangible and powerful conservation benefits. Get it right and the rewards for biodiversity conservation could be enormous."

More information: Hopper et al. (2019). 'Species' cultural heritage inspires a conservation ethos: The evidence in black and white'. *Conservation Letters*. [DOI: 10.1111/conl.12636](https://doi.org/10.1111/conl.12636)

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