

Simple, no-cost ways to help the public care for the commons

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Researchers from University of Wisconsin-Madison, New York Institute of Technology, University of Iowa, and Cornell University published a new paper in the *Journal of Marketing* that examines whether it is possible to make people feel as if the property is theirs—a feeling known as psychological ownership—and how this affects their stewardship behaviors.

The study, forthcoming in the *Journal of Marketing*, is titled "Caring for the Commons: Using Psychological Ownership to Enhance Stewardship Behavior for Public Goods" and is authored by Joann Peck, Colleen Kirk, Andrea Luangrath, and Suzanne Shu.

Maintaining the natural environment is a pressing issue. The intentional care of [public goods](#), such as publicly owned parks, waterways, drinking water, and air quality, has become increasingly difficult. For example, for [public parks](#), it has become more challenging during the pandemic as park services are reduced while the number of people spending time outside has increased. It is widely acknowledged that property that is publicly, versus individually, owned tends to be more neglected by its users—a phenomenon known in economics as the tragedy of the commons.

The most extreme solution to a tragedy of the commons problem is to convert common property into private property so that a single owner has responsibility for its care. As Peck explains, "We wondered whether it is possible to instead make people feel as if the property is theirs—a

feeling known as psychological [ownership](#)—without any change to legal ownership. The hypothesis is that people who feel as if they own a public resource might be more likely to engage in stewardship behaviors."

Leveraging psychological ownership, the researchers developed a series of actionable interventions that managers of public goods can implement to elicit feelings of ownership in users. Four experiments tested this hypothesis.

The first study was at a public lake with kayakers. Floating trash was set in the water where kayakers would see it. As visitors rented kayaks, half were asked to create a nickname for the lake before entering the water. Using binoculars, the researchers observed whether the kayakers tried to pick up the planted trash. Kayakers who gave the lake a nickname felt more ownership of the lake. Most importantly, they were more than five times as likely to try to pick up the planted trash (41% vs. 7% of the other kayakers).

In the second study, participants imagined taking a walk in a park. They were shown a sign at the park entrance that said either "Welcome to the Park" or "Welcome to YOUR Park." Participants who saw the "YOUR park" sign felt more ownership and responsibility for the park, were more likely to pick up trash, and would donate 34% more to the park (\$32.35 vs. \$24.08).

The third study tested yet a different way to elicit psychological ownership to see if it could increase actual donations. This study involved cross-country ski renters at a state park. As they rented equipment, they received a map. Half of them were asked to plan their route on the map in advance. The prediction was that this investment of time might increase the skiers' psychological ownership of the park and thus increase their donations through the addition of \$1.00 to the rental fee. As expected, skiers who planned their routes and therefore felt more ownership donated to the park 2.5 times more often than those who did

not plan their routes. They also reported being more likely to volunteer for the park, to donate in the future, and to promote the park on social media.

The fourth study explored whether managers of public goods may be unintentionally discouraging stewardship behaviors. Many parks tout their attendance numbers, but the intuition was that an attendance sign with a large number of people on it might diffuse users' feelings of responsibility. Research participants imagined they were visiting a park and saw either a "the park" or "YOUR park" welcome sign. Then half of them imagined seeing an attendance sign that read "This week, you are visitor #22,452". (Many U.S. parks have over a million visitors annually, so we designed an attendance sign that included an appropriately large number.) Participants were given money for participating, but also had the option to use some of that money for an anonymous donation to the park. As in the prior studies, individuals who felt more ownership of the park donated more to the park. They were also more likely to say that they would volunteer to help the park, including picking up trash. However, these effects were reduced when participants imagined the attendance sign, which possibly suggested the feeling that these other people would take responsibility for the [park](#).

"This research has implications for consumers, organizations caring for public resources, policy makers, and for-profit companies by demonstrating that simple interventions based on increasing psychological ownership can enhance stewardship of public goods. The actionable interventions we designed and tested to increase [psychological ownership](#) are inexpensive, novel, and flexible solutions that successfully motivate individual stewardship behaviors" says Luangrath. By fostering visitors' individual feelings of ownership of a public resource, visitors will feel more responsible for it, take better care of it, and donate more time and money for its benefit.

More information: Joann Peck et al, Caring for the Commons: Using Psychological Ownership to Enhance Stewardship Behavior for Public Goods, *Journal of Marketing* (2020). [DOI: 10.1177/0022242920952084](https://doi.org/10.1177/0022242920952084)

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